

Thomas Fingar, ed.. *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 360 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-9763-4.



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The idea of the “great game” had its origins in Anglo–Russian competition for influence in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. The term, of course, acquired greater currency after the British writer Rudyard Kipling used it in his 1901 novel, *Kim*, in which the young protagonist, an orphan, becomes involved in a life of intrigue and espionage. After that it lost most of its significance in the study of the international politics of South and Central Asia. It saw a brief revival when the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan in the late 1970s and the United States mustered and armed local opposition to dislodge the Soviet forces and the puppet regime.

The book under review applies the term to the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) goals and interests in these two adjacent regions in an era when it has emerged as a major power. Since the publication of this volume the PRC has witnessed a slowdown in its breakneck pace of economic growth. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future it will remain an actor of some consequence in both regions. That said, the title of the volume is a bit

of a misnomer because India, the country that has the greatest misgivings about the growth of the PRC’s influence in Asia, can do little to contain it. The PRC’s substantial economic prowess has all but checkmated India’s ability to affect the course of political choices of the principal states in the region.

Apart from the somewhat misleading title the book suffers from an affliction that is common to most edited volumes. It has a number of invaluable contributions which offer useful discussions of the PRC’s multifaceted involvement in the two regions while focusing on two central concerns: national security and economic development. However, it is far from clear how these topics cohere in any organic fashion beyond reflecting the PRC’s ambitions and accomplishments in these two areas at a time when its material capabilities were at an apogee.

It is beyond the scope of this brief review to comment on every chapter in this volume. Instead, the discussion will be confined to a few

salient chapters. To that end, Thomas Fingar's discussion of the PRC's goals in South Asia constitutes a very clear, succinct, and dispassionate account of what it has sought to achieve in the region. The only shortcoming of this analysis is the failure to consider the extent to which the Sino-Indian rivalry has extended into the Indian Ocean and beyond. The chapter by Paul Kapur on the India, PRC, and US triangle provides an equally deft survey of the intersection of the interests of the three powers in the subcontinent. It also provides a careful analysis of the sources and prospects of the Indo-US strategic partnership. The only issue that Kapur correctly identifies but then elides is the problematic role of Pakistan in the Indo-US relationship. He squarely recognizes that the US-Pakistan relationship has placed distinct limits on the Indo-US strategic partnership. However, he proffers no possible strategy for overcoming this source of near-perennial distrust in the bilateral relationship.

Not all chapters, however, are equally sound. Syed Rifaat Husain's discussion of the Sino-Pakistani entente celebrates its robustness and attributes its success to the existence of mutual trust. However, two important limitations mar his analysis. His discussion of the ebbs and flows of the US-Pakistan relationship relies on a very selective use of the historical record. Every imagined and real US slight toward Pakistan is carefully noted while Pakistan's own failures to uphold its commitments to the United States are glossed over. The more important failing of this chapter is his refusal to discuss a foundational feature of the Sino-Pakistani strategic nexus: namely, a shared hostility toward India that emerged after the Sino-Indian border war of 1962.

The very fraught Sino-Indian relationship is the subject of Srikanth Kondapalli's chapter. It provides a competent survey of the evolution of the relationship. It focuses on a series of issues that have much salience and have hobbled any significant improvement in relations. In this con-

text, it is intriguing to note that Kondapalli's analysis shows that Indian efforts to reassure the PRC that it had no interest in participating in any possible American effort to contain its rise elicited no reciprocal response from Beijing.

Finally, Igor Torbakov provides an intriguing account of Sino-Russian competition in Central Asia. His analysis suggests that Russia is reluctantly but inexorably adjusting to its relative economic decline while the PRC is in the midst of exploiting its increasing economic clout. The strength of this chapter lies in its adroit use of the historical record of both states in the region, its deployment of useful theoretical arguments, and its granular knowledge of the complex politics of the area.

Despite the uneven quality of the chapters this is nevertheless a volume that should be of interest to those whose professional concerns focus on the critical role of the PRC in two regions that lie athwart each other in Asia.

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