

BOOK REVIEW

***The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics.* Andrew Small.
London: Hurst & Company, 2015. Pp. 319.**

As the US pivots towards the Asia-Pacific, China, its principal nemesis in the game of contemporary international geopolitics, has focused its attention towards South, Central and West Asia, a region that has traditionally been the bastion of the US and its European allies. The Chinese move towards this region has, and is being constantly strengthened by such ambitious plans as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). And of late, the reported Chinese role in garnering willingness of the Afghan Taliban to begin negotiations with the government of President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul, perhaps even in Beijing, besides the choice of other avenues such as Doha, Dubai and Islamabad. With China willing to play a political role in Afghanistan, its traditional “all weather friend” – Pakistan has now expressed a commitment to encourage the Afghan Taliban to talk peace with the Ghani government. Encouraged by the Chinese willingness to play the role of a mediator, Pakistan officials accompanied a delegation of the Afghan Taliban in late 2014 and early 2015, for at least two rounds of reported talks with Chinese officials.

Over six decades of Pakistan-China relations have come full circle, as Andrew Small contends, in a ‘friendship forged by war’, title of the first chapter of a fascinating book “The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics” published by Hurst and Company, London in January 2015.

Small's book, based on six years of extensive research, interviews and observations both in China and Pakistan, is an authoritative account of a relationship that has remained enigmatic for other states. The two countries, with dissimilar political and economic systems, brought together by geopolitical circumstances, have forged a resilient alliance. Their strategic partnership is underpinned by futuristic economic projects such as the Karakorum Highway (KKH), the Gwadar port at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

(CPEC) linking north western China through Pakistan to the markets in the Middle East and beyond, in Europe (Chapter 5).

Another aspect of this envious relationship has been the military and nuclear cooperation (Chapter 2/Epilogue) between the two countries that has formed the basis of China's strategic cooperation with Pakistan ever since the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 and 1971. Although China and Pakistan have never been treaty allies, the strength of Pakistan-China relationship has hinged on Beijing's support for Pakistan's military and its nuclear program. As Small explains in Chapter 2, "If military relationship lies at the heart of China-Pakistan ties, nuclear weapons lie at the heart of the military relationship." (p-29) Consequently, with an obvious India-centric focus of both the countries, close collaboration in an area of high sensitivity has built a level of trust between the two militaries that a more conventional security partnership might never have delivered. Just as the American strategic generosity in terms of an agreement for the transfer of civilian nuclear technology is seen as an investment in its own geopolitical well being, China's agreement to develop Pakistan civilian nuclear capability is seen as an asset to China, particularly in terms of reinforcing Pakistan's balancing role in relation to India.

As Small points out, "China's policy sees a strong, capable Pakistan as an asset to China in its own right." (p-3) Consequently, the two countries have been able to build a level of trust that not even the contemporary threat of terrorists has been able to undermine.

To highlight the abiding strength in Pakistan-China relations brought by the drastic changes in international politics, Small quotes Chinese General Xiong Guangkai as saying that "Pakistan is China's Israel." (p-1)

As a policy researcher at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington, perhaps Andrew Small could not help but write through a Western prism. He meticulously chronicles the periodic problems that could have potentially roiled Pakistan-Sino relations. He begins his book with a dramatic prologue that would immediately appeal to the western readers - the raid of the Lal Masjid "vice and virtue" squad

in June 2007 on a Chinese massage parlor in Islamabad, and the abduction of seven Chinese staff along with two Pakistanis .

Much of Small's narrative focuses on the issues that may have caused serious mismatch of expectations or created uneasiness between the two allies, for example the Chinese workers at Gwadar being targeted by Baloch militants, and north western borderlands of Pakistan being the main religious and economic outlet for the Uighurs - the proponents of Muslim extremism in China's north-western province of Xinjiang (Chapter 4). Yet, "it is to Pakistan that China looks for a long-term political solution there", as well as in Afghanistan (Chapter 6), where today, as the American footprint diminishes, China is pumping in tens of billions of dollars' for projects that are no longer just "pipe dreams".

However, with all the opportunities and bonhomie, Small cautions that there are reservations on part of Beijing in its dealings with Pakistan. As one Chinese official pointed out to him, "The strategic decision to expand investments in Pakistan has been made, by the political leadership and the military, but there are still real practical difficulties ... if terrorists attacks continue, the corridor will be impossible to realise" ... "We still think the railway line (over the Khunjerab Pass) is ridiculous, but that's not to say it won't happen." (p-172). Small, however, admits that because of a high degree of confidentiality surrounding bilateral decisions and transactions between the two states, it is difficult for researchers to gauge the full depth of Pakistan-China relations, despite occasional variance in the perspectives of the two countries.

Small concludes that the most obvious security issue that Beijing faces is to its east where the strategic competition with the US largely plays out in the Asia-Pacific, and will test China's capacity and intentions as a super power (p-178). Nevertheless, there are threats emerging on its north-western border with Pakistan in the form of the new generation of militant groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that posed a greater problem for China's economic ambitions. These groups, unlike their predecessors, will have no qualms about taking on China. How the two countries navigate the challenges

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posed by these groups, will be a true test for Pakistan-China friendship that has remained unshaken for more than six decades.

Small underscores that “Pakistan is a central part of China’s transition from a regional power to a global one.” He believes that as China launches ambitious trade and infrastructure initiatives towards Central, West and Southwest Asia, Pakistan is “set to be the greatest beneficiary.”

The book is interesting and riveting read with extensive notes and bibliography (pp. 189-319) that will be useful for students, researchers, analysts and policy makers preparing to deal with the course of Pakistan-China relations over the 21st century.

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