

***The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*, Thomas Finger, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).**

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There are numbers of volumes on the ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia highlighting the dominant role of certain powers. The rising China attracts the attention of academics around the world. However, it refutes all such claims of becoming a dominant power in Central and South Asia. It is also of prime concern to see how China’s neighbours view its policies and priorities and see why it is not a dominant power.

The book under review, *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*, edited by Thomas Finger, a Shorestein Distinguished Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, explores the reciprocal nature of relations between China and its neighbouring countries in South and Central Asia. The volume examines policies, geography, culture, history, resource endowments and levels of development in these regions and sees how they affect the Chinese national priorities, policies and issues at the time of its activism.

There are 13 chapters in the book that deal with the Chinese policies toward a number of regional countries. Finger himself has contributed three chapters. He asserts that China attempts to see that no power in South Asia seeks an alliance to upset China’s interests in the region. He is of the view that in South Asia, with the exception of India, there is a low level of China’s threat perception, compared to the high-level threat perception in Central Asia since 1978 till date (p. 8). He is of the view that China saw South Asia having little potential to contribute to its development, but perceives the region as a security threat.

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The inherent security threat comes from India not because of its own capabilities but because of New Delhi's relationship with Moscow (p.16). Fingar says that in order "to address this perceived threat, China:

- i Maintained its special relationship with Pakistan to complicate New Delhi's defence planning and thereby reducing the direct threat from India and;
- ii Strengthened its relationship with the US to counterbalance the Russia and its partner India," (p. 16).

In his chapter, S Paul Kapur looks more closely at the Indian perceptions and management of its relations with China. India considers the China threat much seriously and relates it to Pakistan. India relies on the US to reduce the type of threat it receives from China. India does not want to be either anti-China and at the same time, not to be subordinated by the US.

Hu Shisheng summarises the Chinese perceptions of India's rise and its implications for China. He is of the view that India will not be in a position to overtake China or be a part of anti-China alliance. He suggests that China and India should cooperate rather counter each other.

Srikanth Kondapalli also examines the relations between China and India, which he thinks are marred by pessimism, where China is considered to be a most crucial security threat. He sees China containing India's rise. Pakistan is the only country that has a long history of cordial relations with China.

Syed Rifaat Hussain depicts the origins of China-Pakistan special relations and sees why it endures despite changes in the international system. He argues that the relationship was more than an alliance, where China has always realised Pakistan's security vulnerabilities and its reasons to acquire nuclear weapons. He is of the view that for China's future economic development, Pakistan has become an important trading route under China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative, signalling a shift from security to economy. He thinks that China does not merely want Pakistan to be hostile to India and refrain from close alignment with the US.

Swaran Sigh focuses on the domestic factors of change in China's approach toward the smaller states like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar. These countries appreciate the engagement of China in their development priorities.

Huasheng Zhao narrates China's strategic thinking since 1991 at the time of the Soviet disintegration. He says that China's priority was to safeguard its own interests in Central Asia at that time and it continued with its modernisation programme to subside unrest and uneven development in its own region. He is of the view that China's interests in Central Asia will keep growing as its oil and gas imports from this region will continue to rise and the region will play a significant role in China's Silk Road Economic Belt.

Sabstien Peyrouse looks at China's engagement with the Central Asian states. These states were desirous of solving border disputes with China along with energy development and water management. These states, he points out, are apprehensive of the Chinese interests and are highly pessimistic about long-term relations with China (p. 234).

Igor Torbakov says that China would not like to play the role of a big empire in the Central Asia, although they fear China's hegemony. It is true that the Soviets are out and the Chinese are in, but China is not seeking hegemony.

Saman Kelegama says that China's smaller neighbours in South Asia such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka welcome strengthening economic relations and political understanding. They seek the Chinese economic cooperation in the form of investment in their respective countries to seek development, create new jobs and gain other benefits. These states also see China's role to counterbalance India's influence in the region, he argues (p. 209) and says that these countries welcome China in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

In a combined chapter, contributed by Vivek Arora, Hui Tong and Christina Constantinescu, the authors argue that China and South Asia combined possess a huge population and they will be home to the global economy. China may move from a vast supply of low-cost workers to a labour-shortage, giving leverage to South Asia (p. 300).

The volume excludes the Maldives Island but includes Myanmar in the region of South Asia. As such Afghanistan is not a South Asian country except for the purpose of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). One hopes that these anomalies would be ratified in the next edition. As a whole, the volume is illuminating, readable, and gives fresh insights into China's relations with the South and Central Asian countries. Figures and tables drawn in the book make it rich in information and analysis. The volume is well-documented and will be a useful source of information for researchers interested in China's relations with these countries.