

***China's Strategy toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress.* Scobell, Andrew., Ratner, Ely., and Beckley, Michael. US: RAND Cooperation, Santa Monica.**

Ume Farwa\*

China's economic and diplomatic clout has been increasing in the Central and South Asian region, particularly since 2011. However, at present, its influence remains modest but, in times ahead, it is likely to grow more influential. In this context, *China's Strategy toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress* analyses China's strategy towards the two regions and its possible impact on the interest of the US. Authored by the eminent scholar of Strategic Culture theory, Andrew Scobell, Senior Fellow for China Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, Ely Ratner, and Fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Michael Beckley, this study is a part of RAND Cooperation's larger project to explore the possible future challenges for the US Air Force in the regions. Viewed mainly from the perspective of Strategic Culture, it is a critique on the Chinese interaction with the region and its implication for the US security interests.

The publication has five chapters. While chapter one is a brief introduction of the study, chapter two and three discuss the drivers of China's Central Asia strategy and the execution of the study respectively. Analysing China's policy towards Central Asia, the report outlines four main factors. First factor is Beijing's insecurities and its national objective of achieving domestic stability and safeguarding national unity. Second, China's strategy towards Central Asia is driven by its desire to maintain stable and secular governments in the states in order to sustain peace in its Xinjiang province. A third element is to enhance China's influence and counter other powers' influence carried out mainly through Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Fourth factor is China's economic interests in the region and to improve its energy security.

Chapter four evaluates China's policy towards South Asia by analysing Beijing's engagement with Pakistan and Afghanistan only.

---

\* *The book reviewer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

The authors, in this chapter, suggest that Beijing has a limited but significant level of influence in Pakistan, whereas, in Afghanistan, the influence is very modest. It maintains that China is uneasy over the possible spill-over of instability in Afghanistan into the adjacent countries, including Western China. Beijing's Afghan strategy is driven by the fears of Islamic extremism and Afghanistan, being embroiled in insurgency and turmoil, is at the heart of these fears. China is apprehensive of the possible spill-over effect of Afghan insurgency to its western province, Xinjiang.

This report considers Pakistan as a geopolitical lynchpin of China's South Asia policy. Yet it holds that with improving Indo-China ties, Pakistan becomes a liability rather than asset in the times of Indo-China troubled relations. Subtracting India from Pakistan-China-India triangle, Beijing's close cooperation is founded on three main security interests: Ensuring the Chinese security by cutting ties of Uighurs in Xingjiang and radical extremists in Pakistan; Balancing India and diversifying China's economic opportunities and trade routes.

In the concluding chapter, "China's Empty Fortress and US Strategy" the authors view China's strategy as a means of deceiving its enemies into thinking that an empty fortress is full of ambushes, which induces enemies' retreat. The authors maintain that Beijing's strategy towards the regions is not the empty fortress strategy rather the Chinese are masking their frailty by projecting a bold image of their strength. Beijing's strategy is not going to harm the US security interest in the regions any time soon in the future.

One of the major shortfall of the study is that it does not consider economy as one of the pivotal factor of China's strategic calculus. Excluding economy while assessing Beijing's strategic calculus is only a misperception. Although this research report uses a wide array of primary and secondary resources, the authors' take and analysis is a little biased. It is based on the conventional anti-Chinese approach prevailing in the many quarters in the US, which erodes the authenticity and credibility to take this as a reliable and unbiased source of reading China's strategy towards South and Central Asia.