
Central Asia: Geopolitics, Security and Stability. A. Patnaik. Taylor & Francis. 2016. 237 pp. (ISBN-13: 978-1138640023)

Ajay Patnaik in “*Central Asia: Geopolitics, Security and Stability*” provides not only a full account of differing and sometimes conflictual geopolitical views of all of the major powers involved in Central Asia, but also looks in great detail at the relations between the Central Asian states and these major external powers. He argues that terms and narratives such as “The New Great Game” or “Grand Chessboard,” have all been formulated by external powers to the region in order to give prominence to their specific geopolitical interests and strategies. However, Patnaik stresses that the newly independent Central Asian nations have been able to keep the delicate geopolitical balance of power in the region, free from political manipulation and subsequently, avoiding major conflicts over many contentious issues. The author believes that the narratives invented by external powers to the region imply the strategic and even helplessness of the Central Asian states. In contrast, the reality on the ground shows that most Central Asian states are quite assertive in their strategic choices. The volume, after providing a detailed analysis of the overarching concept of geopolitics, connects skillfully to the Central Asian context.

All of the major powers, Russia, China and the US, have presented their geopolitical involvement in the region in geo-economic terms by formulating alternative Silk Road strategies or Eurasian integration projects, such as ‘One Road One Belt’, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), or the Shanghai Cooperation organization (SCO). Evidently, the Central Asian states benefit from all these economic integration strategies, engaging with external powers through various strategies ranging from neutrality, to multi-vector policy, to shifting strategic partners. The book critically looks at the argument that Russia’s growing involvement in Central Asia is driven by neo-imperialistic ambitions. To the contrary, Patnaik argues that the Central Asian leadership perceives benefits for itself to have Russia as the pre-eminent power in the region. From that point of view, Russia is not a hegemon, but a geopolitical balancer whose soft power and leadership in the Eurasian integration process have contributed to regional stability. Moreover, the book also discusses whether the West’s geopolitical pluralism is in essence a search for pivotal regional states to contain Russia. Consequently, Russia has emerged as a balancer in Eurasia, against external security threats and other non-military, non-traditional challenges.

Stability in Central Asia depends mostly on the cooperation level of the regional states rather than on the role of external powers. The threat of terrorism and Afghanistan’s stability are some major issues that require extensive regional cooperation. A major argument is that security in the region could be sustainable if there were intra-regional cooperation. Despite limited interstate cooperation and many other contentious issues, the region is still free from major conflicts and wars, due to the fact that the Central Asian states have been able to enjoy greater strategic autonomy in their dealings with external powers. The author discusses the roles played by other regional powers such as China, Iran and Turkey in India’s Silk Road strategy. The book is a great addition to the fast growing field of Silk Road Studies and will

benefit scholars and researchers of international relations, political and strategic studies, area studies, and Central Asian studies, as well as the general reader.

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