

The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform.
Thomas Fingar. Stanford University Press. CA, 2016. 360 pp. (ISBN: 9780804797634)

The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform, a compilation of essays edited by Thomas Fingar, presents a nuanced and refined account of recent developments regarding Chinese economic, political and strategic engagement in South and Central Asia. As Fingar notes in his introductory chapter, the book offers new ways of examining the evolution of political and economic dynamics in Asia. It significantly upgrades our understanding of China's conduct in the international arena, particularly the interactions among China and the countries of South and Central Asia.

Fingar first of all traces the evolution of China's security related perceptions and policies affecting South and Central Asia from the debut of the Reform movement in 1978 until the present, through two distinct phases, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the 9/11 attacks. Paul Kapur's chapter looks closely at Indian perceptions of India-China-US strategic relations. Evidently, China is becoming an important element in India's strategic calculus. This is not surprising in light of China's size, population and gross domestic product. For both China and India, their shared borderline of 3,380 km is the longest land frontier that each has with any neighboring state.

In Chapter 4, Hu Shisheng recapitulates Chinese perceptions about India's rise and its implications for China. He argues that, due to vulnerabilities endemic to the country's socio-economic milieu, India would find it difficult to overtake China; consequently, it would not constitute a serious threat to Chinese security. He characterizes India's rise as not threatening to China's interests in the eyes of the Chinese.

In Chapter 5, Srikanth Kondapalli examines Sino-Indian relations from an Indian perspective. He argues that Indians see China as actively trying to constrain the rise of India. The author also places greater emphasis on obstacles to cooperation and on Indian efforts to protect Indian interests from the consequences of China's policies in the region. Syed Rifaat Hussain, in Chapter 6, analyzes the origins of the unique relationship between Pakistan and China and asks why and how the relationship has endured despite numerous changes in the international system and China's relationship with India. He argues that this relationship will continue because of mutual trust and China's sensitivity to Pakistan's security dilemma.

In Chapter 7, Swaran Singh focuses on the domestic drivers of change in China's approach along its southwestern frontier. He argues that the cross-border engagement through the infrastructure and transport projects initiated by China has created opportunities for influence in the region. Zhao Huasheng's chapter focuses on the evolution of Chinese strategic thinking vis-à-vis Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. He examines the rationale behind the Chinese geopolitical concerns and economic engagement in the region.

Saman Kelegama's section contends that most of the smaller regional states welcome China's greater interest and involvement for both economic and political reasons. Equally, he asserts that China's economic engagement through infrastructure projects and trade are mutually beneficial for all sides. Sebastian Peyrouse, in his part, examines various issues such as energy development, water management and the consequences of opening borders, and he claims that although there are a number of economic benefits from Chinese involvement in the region, there is also suspicion and uncertainty about China's ultimate intentions.

Igor Torbakov, in his chapter, describes the current Russian strategic approach vis-à-vis Central Asia. He puts forward the argument that the competition for influence between Russia and China in the region, constrains Chinese venues and empowers the Central Asian countries. The author indicates that although Xinjiang is a gateway for China to extend economic and political power into Central Asia, it also opens up the ethnic and religious vulnerabilities of Xinjiang through the historical and cultural ties between those adjacent regions. Finally, Vivek Arora, Hui Tong and Christina Constantinescu, in their chapter, explore the economic dimension of China's engagement with South Asia. They show that cross-border integration in the region is increasing and Chinese engagement is a major factor in a process in which there are far more complementarities than direct completion.

This rewarding volume challenges the orthodox view of Chinese foreign relations and provides insights into how Chinese strategic thinking interacts with the goals and actions of other countries in the region and by doing so it deepens the reader's understanding of China's perceptions, priorities, and policies. The book has immeasurable value for China Studies and it will benefit scholars and researchers of international relations and strategic studies.

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