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Book Review: Falling Terrorism and Rising Conflicts: The Afghan Contribution to Polarization and Confrontation in West and South Asia

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BOOK REVIEWS

Hooman Peimani, *Falling Terrorism and Rising Conflicts: The Afghan Contribution to Polarization and Confrontation in West and South Asia*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 160 pp. Cloth, \$64.95; paper, none.

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Since the attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the United States has deployed or reinforced military forces in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, and most of the Arab Persian Gulf countries. What is the impact of the new U.S. involvement in South and Central Asia? This book offers a remarkable answer. Two competing alliances are emerging in Asian and global politics: the U.S.-Pakistani alliance is confronting an emerging entente of Russia, Iran, and India, with some affiliation of China. At the core of the rising structure is the assertion that the primary goal of the United States in Afghanistan and the region is not the elimination of terror groups but "certain strategic objectives, including expanding and consolidating [the U.S.] political, economic, and military presence in South and West Asia" (p. 3). These include control over the region's oil and gas resources and containment of China and Russia from the region. The latter countries and other regional countries allied in the war on terror are in it mainly for other interests, including using the war as a cover to violate human rights at home.

For the Americans, "a stable and pro-American Afghanistan [will act] as a springboard for them in South and West Asia" and "will make the Pakistani route to export Caspian oil and gas a feasible option" (p. 119). This is in Pakistan's interest as well, and both countries wish to block Iran and Russia from making inroads in Central Asia. Both countries also have an additional interest in containing India, which the United States considers "a potential long-term source of threat" (p. 120).

The resulting expansion of the American forces in the region "signifies an emerging hostile American foreign policy" and "will surely contribute to the worsening American ties with Iran, China, and Russia" (p. 83). Despite tension over the Caspian Sea, Iran and Russia also have a number of other common interests. These include keeping Pakistan in check, preventing a U.S.-India alliance, and accessing India's large and growing market. India will maintain strong ties with Iran and Russia because India's "interest in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan is welcomed by Iran and Russia as it slows down the expansion of both Pakistan and the US there" (p. 131). China is in this camp because of a common interest in containing the United States, its friendly relations with Iran, and because China's growing ties in Central Asia "are not developing in a manner to jeopardize Iran's long-term interests" (p. 132). Still, because the Chinese are in competition with India and Russia over dominance of

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Central Asia, have extensive trade ties with the United States, and closely support Pakistan, China remains only an "affiliated" member of the Iranian-Russian-Indian entente.

The book offers an alluring account of the foreign policies of the actors involved in Central Asia in recent years, but the "story" offered to explain these relations is only weakly supported with broad assumptions and anecdotal evidence. For instance, the thesis rests critically on what we are told is the now "quite clear" fact that the U.S. presence in Central Asia will last much longer than needed to quash the Taliban and al Qaeda. But there is no evidence offered that actually makes this fact clear (pp. 126-127). We are told that the U.S. military presence in the region is disproportional to merely stabilizing Afghanistan; there are quotes of American military and congressional leaders stating their government's determination to stay. But there is no evidence that suggests that the U.S. motive is anything other than to secure a stable Afghanistan without terror groups; even the author predicts a return to civil war in the country (pp. 82-83).

Nor is obvious counter evidence addressed, such as the fact that the United States sought no expansion in the region until after the September 11 attacks. Instead, we are supposed to accept that "American political and economic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus" are "well-known" (p. 82). Whatever these interests are, they are not documented in the book. Elsewhere we are told that "the US has used its economic power and influence to limit China's economic and military advancement" (p. 91). But no specifics are offered, and this flies in the face of the substantial U.S. subsidization of Chinese economic growth by way of its enormous trade deficit with that country. Instead we are told that "a growing number of Americans see [China] as a future economic and military threat" (p. 92). For India, it is never clear why the United States considers it a potential long-term source of threat other than the circular reasoning that the United States is allied with Pakistan. For Russia, we are told that the "Western countries have every reason to prevent the rise of Russia as a fully-fledged superpower" and that this is "quite clear in the pattern of economic assistance" (p. 39; see also p. 95). But the evidence that is supposed to make this "clear" shows that in 1999 Russia received about twice the amount of aid Poland received, a new NATO ally (p. 95)—and one is left wondering why the Western countries give any aid at all to Russia if they wish to contain it.

With only anecdotal evidence, the credibility of the thesis rests on the standing of the theory underpinning it. But the theory is never made explicit; we are told instead what will happen, and why, with a sense of certainty. We learn that the United States and Pakistan emerged as "natural allies" and of the "natural" tendency for friendship among Iran, India, and Russia (p. 87); we learn that Iran "will remain a dissatisfied state," and in the long run, Iran and Russia "will surely find reasons for conflict" (pp. 130-131, italics added). And so on. It is evident, however, that the story is based on strong realist or neorealist assumptions (Waltz, 1979). For instance, sustaining the thesis are the assertions that "Iran, India, Russia, and China have sought to consolidate the emerging multipolar system," "an objective also shared by the EU," which "has been seeking to establish itself as a powerful pole" (p. 134). Countries and even

regions are anthropomorphized and assumed to be in perpetual competition. What is never clear is why countries should fear each others' economic expansions into Central Asia and also why sometimes they do not. For instance, we are told that China's growing ties in Central Asia "are not developing in a manner to jeopardize Iran's long-term interests" (p. 132), but Pakistan's growing ties are. And India's interests in Central Asia are not extensive enough to create conflict with Iran and Russia (p. 131). Why not? Sometimes constructivism enters the plot (Wendt, 1999), as countries confront one another because, as they feel stronger, "the old pattern of hostilities may well emerge" (p. 111).

Even realists comfortable with the assumption of perpetual competition over economic expansion (even if it sometimes does not happen) may not be convinced with the application of realist assumptions to the region. Drawing on the evidence offered, a wide range of power configurations other than the two poles seems plausible. Rather than Iran-Russia-India with China versus the United States and Pakistan, why not predict an emerging India-U.S.-Russia alliance versus China-Pakistan-Iran? It is difficult to see what Pakistan gets out of the alliance with the United States; it had domination over Afghanistan before it allied with the United States, and everyone has the option of allying with the United States for economic assistance. Both Russia and the United States have conflicts with Iran. And both India and Russia have plenty of reasons to ally with the United States: Both countries have large markets and need U.S. investment, both have a more evident interest in containing China, both confront radical Islam, and all three countries are democracies. One can just as easily suggest a U.S.-China-Pakistan versus Russia-India-Iran configuration. All of these seem entirely plausible based on the evidence offered in the book.

Nevertheless, the book is a refreshing read in many ways. Foremost, one can learn of the region from a regional, not U.S.-centric, perspective. For instance, one can learn of Iranian and Russian fears not only of instability in Afghanistan but also of the latter's renewed exportation of opium. In addition, many of the sources in the book are from the region. In this way, the book offers a nice introduction to current politics and issues of South and West Asia, one not starting with the perspective and concerns of the United States or the West. The book also offers a review of the basic facts of Afghanistan's recent history, including tribal politics and regional involvements in the country up to 9/11, followed by a more extensive look at Afghanistan today. Further research supporting the book's conclusions, particularly the specifics of how countries are seeking to expand in Central Asia, could render the intriguing thesis more compelling.

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