

## South Asia

Teresita C. Schaffer

---

### **In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan**

Seth G. Jones. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

\$27.95. 428 pp.

Seth Jones set out to understand the phenomenon of insurgency, and specifically to determine what factors contributed to the rise of Afghanistan's insurgency. His book is a good read, breezily written, with peppy quotes from the many officials and personalities he interviewed, arresting biographic vignettes whenever he introduces a new personality, and a wealth of information and lore on Afghanistan and US involvement there after 11 September 2001. But it is really an introduction to Afghanistan for the general reader rather than a study of what makes insurgency tick.

Jones joins a long list of authors who have recounted, with conviction and detail, the strategic blindness of the US leadership about its Afghan mission, the visceral opposition to 'nation-building', and the impact of the Iraq War on the complex and maddeningly difficult campaign in Afghanistan. He illustrates in some detail how senior US officials seemed to realise they were going off track in 2003–06 but were unable to correct the situation, either because of bureaucratic problems or because of the overwhelming influence of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Jones interviewed all the major personalities – though I was somewhat frustrated that he chose to illustrate the strategic shortcomings of the United States by quoting the opinions of senior officials rather than by supplying more concrete data on how things were going wrong.

The material on the anatomy of insurgency is the best part of the book. It occupies relatively few chapters; I wish it had been expanded. In a nutshell, he argues that Afghanistan's problem has been one of governance – its absence as the insurgency got started, and the inability of either the Afghans or their foreign friends to supply it to a sufficient extent once the military engagement began.

For the reader who has not visited Afghanistan and who is looking for an introduction, however, perhaps the most valuable features of this book are the vivid descriptions of both the terrain and the personalities. Afghanistan is dry, craggy and dramatic. It has been at war in some fashion for 30 years now. Even before the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Afghan people had a well-developed taste for being left alone; the war has surely intensified that tendency.

The long conflict has led Afghanistan's neighbours to treat it as a playground, probably the single greatest obstacle to stabilising the country and the region. Jones's account of Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours is very critical of

PROOF

Pakistan's long-standing effort to give itself 'strategic depth' by supporting a friendly or even pliant regime there. He is equally sympathetic to Pakistan's fears of Afghanistan becoming an Indian cat's paw; his research may have focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and he may not have sought out as many sources in India. Neither Jones nor anyone else has devised a way of reducing the profile of Afghanistan's neighbours in its troubled internal politics. Whoever can bring this about will have taken a key step toward the brighter future that, as Jones reminds us at the end of his book, the Afghan people surely deserve.

**Seeds of Terror: How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al Qaeda**

Gretchen Peters. New York: St Martin's Press, 2009.  
£24.99/\$25.95. 320 pp.

Gretchen Peters tells the compelling and chilling story of drugs and their complex linkages with the Afghan government and insurgent movements in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like much of the history of this region, it is a tale in which actors – in this case Western governments – gave priority to resistance to the Soviet invasion or anti-terrorism, only to find that failure in their secondary policy goals, in this case containing the drug menace, came back to bite them. It is, alas, a narrative with few good guys, and more than its share of con men and bumbler.

Peters's story starts just before the Soviet army's exit from Afghanistan. Its origins actually go back further – as early as the 1970s, narcotics were a major issue in US–Pakistan relations. In those days, the Pakistanis regarded narcotics as an 'American problem', and only after narcotics trafficking and use were well entrenched did they recognise that this was their problem too. In those days, Pakistan and Afghanistan together were the second-largest supplier in the world, after the southeast Asian 'Golden Triangle'. Today, Pakistan's production has been much reduced (though the trafficking continues), and Afghanistan by itself supplies upwards of 90% of international supply.

Peters traces the drug trade through different governments of Pakistan and different regimes and warlords in Afghanistan, and she describes how US and international attention went up and down as the drug issue had to compete with other things for high-level attention. The fact that some of the drug lords in the Afghan resistance movement and later in the Afghan government were also 'good fighters', in the estimation of their backers, further muddied the picture.

Perhaps the most agonising part of her story is the section covering recent events. The tension between those who would fight narcotics by destroying the crop and those more concerned with 'alternative livelihoods', in the prevailing

jargon, is palpable. Peters explains with unusual clarity the complicated relationships between supply and price in this particular part of the economy. The price mechanism practically guarantees that anti-narcotics work will suffer from the law of unintended consequences. This is particularly true of any plan that relies on crop destruction. Unfortunately, that is the technically easiest remedy to apply.

Peters has researched her story well, though there are a few sloppy spots (she quotes one US official three times, for example, with a different title each time). She is candid enough to acknowledge that her work is stronger on diagnosis than on prescription. But the book is well worth reading and pondering. The narcotics problem is almost certainly going to be with us for some time to come. This eminently readable account should be a wake-up call.

### **India: The Emerging Giant**

Arvind Panagariya. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.  
£21.99/\$39.95. 514 pp.

Arvind Panagariya, one of the most meticulous students of the Indian economy, has written and lectured extensively about India for decades. This book, he explains, was intended as an analytic account of the successes and failures of the Indian economy since the 1950s. It provides both a carefully drawn argument and a wealth of material.

Panagariya is an India optimist, but despite the book's title, it does not fall into the 'gee-whiz-India' genre. Summarising a long and complex set of arguments, he contends that India is poised to sustain high growth into the indefinite future, provided the government makes a few key policy reforms.

Panagariya believes that India needs to focus primarily on growth. Equity is important, but he argues persuasively that policies aimed at equity at the expense of growth have produced neither, and that the reduction in the percentage of India's poor has taken place during periods of high growth. He also argues strongly for India's continued economic integration with the rest of the world. A fascinating comparison with South Korea bolsters this argument. Interestingly, he believes that among the market-oriented reforms introduced in 1991, the one that really turned the tide of India's economic performance was the de-licensing of much of India's industrial investment.

These parts of his argument are in sync with the analysis preferred by most economists in the developed world and in India's modern sector. What makes Panagariya's analysis stand out is the care with which he musters a half-century of data in support of his arguments.

India's economic growth has been one of the signal developments of the last two decades, and carries with it the potential for transforming not just India but

Asia and the global economy. Panagariya's book was published before the worst of the financial crisis hit. If his analysis is correct, however, India's growth over the longer term is one of the factors that may help the rest of the globe pull through today's wounded economy without too much disaster. The book is a remarkable resource for the serious reader interested in understanding how and why India pulled out of its economic slump, and how and why it has a shot at continuing its dynamic emergence. It includes ample references and a good discussion of the different analyses of India's record that are current among economists. It is also far more readable than many serious works of economic analysis.

We still lack, however, a book that explains these subjects to the general reader. In this case, the introductory chapter summarises the basic argument in terms that non-economists will appreciate, but the rest is rather technical. It is not fair to criticise a book for not being something the author never intended it to be. However, one can hope that some future author will take up the challenge of demystifying the transformation of the Indian economy, and the policy constraints that still limit that transformation.

PROOF

**Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia**

William B. Milam. London: Hurst & Company, 2009.  
£16.99/\$35.00. 276 pp.

William Milam, who served as US ambassador to both Bangladesh and Pakistan, has looked at both countries side by side in an attempt to understand why both have had such troubled politics and such uneven economic performance. Three themes dominate the book: the problem of the army and politics, the challenge of instituting democratic governance (as distinguished from democratic elections), and the difficulty of defining what Islam means in both countries' national life and identity.

Both countries started out together, as two wings of Pakistan separated by 1,000 miles of India. But the comparison is instructive. In all three areas, they have struggled with the same basic problems: poisonous and confrontational politics in which the winner takes all, an army periodically (and in Pakistan's case, chronically) unwilling to let civilians govern, and the tension between politicians' wanting to harness Islam for their political benefit and their discovery that some manifestations of political Islam can grow to the point where they menace the institutions of the state. In all three areas, Pakistan's problems are more acute than those of Bangladesh. The Pakistan army's political roots are far deeper; Pakistan has only once, in 2008, changed a government by election; and the hold of Islam on Pakistan's national identity, together with the divergent

views of what Islam means in that context, go back to the days of the partition of India. Bangladesh's homogeneous ethnic makeup and pan-Bengali culture have contributed to its somewhat easier ride, but Milam correctly points out how it too has 'flirted with failure'.

Milam includes only one chapter on the countries' economic and social development – somewhat surprisingly for an author with such strong economic credentials. The most valuable part of that chapter, to my mind, is the comparison between Bangladesh's world-class non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their much weaker counterparts in Pakistan. The irony is deeper than Milam lets on. The father of the Bangladesh NGO movement, Akhtar Hameed Khan, came from West Pakistan but was unable to get his ideas adopted at home. He is still revered in Bangladesh. The subject of India, meanwhile, also gets fairly short shrift. It is arguably not central to his argument, but it is certainly a major preoccupation of both governments.

This is an excellent look at Pakistan and Bangladesh for anyone who wants to understand more clearly the problems of governance that threaten to engulf one of the most volatile regions in the world. It is well written (though sloppily proofread – Milam deserved better), clearly argued, and thought-provoking. Milam was unlucky in his timing. The state crisis that afflicted Pakistan, with the local Taliban seizing and holding territory and the army responding late and hesitantly, was only starting to take shape when he finished his manuscript. In Bangladesh, a new civilian government was elected after he finished his epilogue. Developments since then underline the validity of his argument, and the importance of paying more attention to institutional development in these very large and troubled countries.

#### **India and Counterinsurgency: Lessons Learned**

Sumit Ganguly and David P. Fidler, eds. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009. £70.00/\$115.00. 251 pp.

Counter-insurgency is generating much angst and even more instant experts nowadays. This useful and thought-provoking book fills an important gap. India's experience is little known and even less understood – not just in Europe and North America but, as a couple of the essays collected here make clear, even in India. The received wisdom in much of the world is that the major 'school' for counter-insurgency was the British experience in Malaya right after the Second World War. This volume adds to the weight of evidence that while the Malaya experience can teach us something, it is fundamentally misguided to turn one example, from a country whose sociology, history, economics and ethnic composition are not replicated in other trouble spots, into a textbook.

The editors organise the book insurgency by insurgency, with three chapters covering two different insurgencies in India's ethnically mixed Northeast, five devoted to India's other, better-known domestic insurgencies (Kashmir, Punjab, and the diffuse 'Naxalite' movement, loosely connected with the Maoist uprising in Nepal, that has spread violence through central India), two on India's ill-fated engagement in Sri Lanka, and the final two on India's counter-insurgency doctrine. By and large the strongest contributions are written by practitioners, predominantly military officers who have done counter-insurgency work in troubled areas and who convey well the granularity and ambiguities involved in this kind of warfare. The academic chapters, intended to pull the lessons of this experience together, are perhaps inevitably more abstract and less compelling.

A few lessons really stand out. Firstly, it's all about people – the ordinary people who live in troubled areas and their most fundamental needs and aspirations. Secondly, the military response needs to build on the local situation. Even tactical approaches that crop up in one example after another – such as the 'grid' approach, under which small units have responsibility for well-defined bits of territory, or the vitally important practice of schooling junior military officers in taking charge and then giving them plenty of scope for initiative – differ from one place to another. Thirdly, the military is only one tool, and is useless unless combined with others, such as a savvy political approach that recognises the legitimate aspirations of the people. Fourthly, non-government actors, such as civil-society organisations and NGOs, especially local ones, can contribute a great deal (though one author notes that they can also benefit under certain circumstances from a continuation of conflict). Fifthly, these campaigns have all taken a long time: a sobering observation.

Perhaps the most stunning lesson is how hard it apparently is to pass on lessons learned, even within one national army. Each of these accounts suggests that the Indian officers responsible for counter-insurgency reinvented the wheel for each campaign, only belatedly 'going to school' on the other insurgencies India had dealt with.

The final chapter, which compares India's counter-insurgency doctrine and experience with those of the United States, is a bit unsatisfying. The author concludes, correctly, that the major differences are largely explainable by the fact that all US counter-insurgency work has been outside the home country, whereas most of India's has been domestic – in other words, conducted against fellow Indians. But the impact of a domestic setting compared to an international one is worth more rigorous analysis than that provided here, for both Indians and Americans.