

## South Asia

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### **Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan**

Steve Coll. New York: Penguin Press, 2018. \$35.00. 784 pp.

*Directorate S* is a welcome addition to the already considerable literature on US involvement in Afghanistan from the past couple of decades. It picks up the threads where Steve Coll's previous book, *Ghost Wars*, left off, covering the period 2001–14.

Coll tells a good story. Each chapter reads a bit like an article for the *New Yorker* – which, not incidentally, publishes a good deal of his work – and features arresting detail about people and places, as well as sudden shifts back and forth between the big picture and what the principal figures in the book were doing or thinking. He starts with the assassination of the Afghan guerrilla commander Ahmed Shah Masood, two days before the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, and traces the story of the CIA's relationship with the key players in Afghanistan – notably Hamid Karzai, who later became president of the country. All kinds of relatively minor players in this large drama become unforgettable characters. One suspects that researching the book had the same impact on Coll himself: he adds an epilogue about how some of these bit players wound up, which adds to the tragic quality of his story.

The second half of the book shifts gears slightly, and is built around the way the American leadership mishandled its relations with Karzai and the mercurial ties between the US and Pakistan, especially Washington's relationship with Pakistan's principal intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). I was especially fascinated by the build-up to the ultimately abortive efforts to organise negotiations between the US, the Afghan government and Taliban representatives. This material draws upon an impressive array of interviews in the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan. This alone makes *Directorate S* worth reading.

This is a depressing book, however. It is a tale of opportunities lost and systematic misunderstanding among Americans, Afghans and Pakistanis. Coll chronicles Richard Holbrooke's skill in navigating the US bureaucratic jungle, which contrasts with the way he bungled his relationship with Karzai and the ill-fated 2009 Afghan elections.

Perhaps the most fascinating feature of the book is the portrayal of Pakistan's dealings with Afghanistan and the United States. For readers unaware of the history of suspicion between Afghanistan and Pakistan, this book will be a

good corrective. And while Coll faithfully recounts the efforts made by US and Pakistani officials to cultivate a strategic partnership, a stray phrase in the final chapter paints a darker picture: 'The ISI proved to be a formidable adversary' (p. 667).

In the end, this is a cautionary tale about the perils of deep involvement with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Regarding the former, Coll sketches out one more failure to remedy the country's problems with foreign intervention. As for Pakistan, the wall-to-wall, 'whole of government' relationship Holbrooke hoped to build was more than either government could sustain, and the significant gap in US and Pakistani strategic objectives reasserted itself.

**The Billionaire Raj: A Journey Through India's New Gilded Age**

James Crabtree. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018. \$28.00. 416 pp.

James Crabtree was Mumbai bureau chief for the *Financial Times* for five years, and, like others who have reported on India's rapidly changing society, became fascinated by the characters he ran across. It is a rollicking good read, but with a serious policy message not far below the surface.

Much of the 'new India' literature focuses on the emerging middle class. Crabtree's book, as the title suggests, revolves around those he refers to as India's 'robber barons'. The name is a familiar one in US history from the late nineteenth century, a period called the 'Gilded Age', which featured huge economic growth, great and expanding inequality, and glamorous excess – think Cornelius Vanderbilt and the extravagant mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, where the American robber barons summered.

The coincidence is not accidental. Crabtree examines the 'Bollygarchs' – business tycoons whose spectacular houses dot the Mumbai skyline, and whose businesses and extravagant lifestyles reveal their sense of entitlement to whatever they can get their hands on. The principal names are familiar ones: Dhirubhai Ambani and his feuding sons, with their 27-story residential skyscraper; Gautam Adani, with his empire of infrastructure and his close political ties; and more. He also writes of the political power brokers who lubricate the political system with crony capitalism and outright corruption. The third section of the book looks at the vulnerabilities of the political systems (and the businesses) that result. At least one of the Bollygarchs, Vijay Mallya, had a spectacular fall, but even for those whose businesses thrived, debt was a systemic problem. Each of these three focal points, as Crabtree points out, had an analogue in the American Gilded Age.

Milan Vaishnav's *When Crime Pays* goes into far greater depth on the nexus between crime and politics. But Crabtree, partly because his focus is more economic, has a more pointed judgement on what the biggest problem for India is: corruption. He sees corruption and the limited ability of the state to enforce its own rules as a combined recipe for underperformance. He acknowledges that moving from a 'deals-based' to a 'rules-based' model of capitalism will be slow and difficult. And yet, to return once more to the Gilded Age analogy, he sees in the American movement from that age into the Progressive Era a reason for optimism about India's future.

**The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace**

A.S. Dulat, Asad Durrani and Aditya Sinha. Noida: HarperCollins India, 2018. £24.50/₹799.00. 344 pp.

When *The Spy Chronicles* came out in May 2018, it was an instant sensation. Two former intelligence chiefs – A.S. Dulat, of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and General Asad Durrani, of Pakistan's ISI – gave an extensive interview about the book to a noted journalist. To add to its appeal, the Indian government denied Durrani a visa to attend the book's launch in Delhi, and the Pakistani government banned him from leaving Pakistan, opening an inquiry into what he had written.

All this was undoubtedly good for book sales. *The Spy Chronicles* is very much worth reading, but for different reasons. As other reviewers have noted, it is not crammed with new revelations. The chapter that compares Pakistan's ISI and India's RAW is of course articulated with a casual air that is not altogether convincing. The picture it paints of the different bureaucratic environments in which the two intelligence services operate was perhaps the most fascinating part of the book. Durrani spent his career worrying about how much to tell his civilian leadership, saying at one point that 'we are still not fond' of the democratic ways of doing things. Dulat relished the times he had served a strong, civilian prime minister; he notes in particular that prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee enjoyed being briefed. Dulat claims to have had an easier time coordinating with India's other agencies than Durrani did with Pakistan's.

Dulat claims that the RAW's biggest intelligence failure was its inability to turn any ISI officers. Interesting, but we will never know the real story. Durrani's corresponding claims are easier to validate and have the ring of truth: he speaks of Pakistan's failure to anticipate the Indian attack on East Pakistan in 1971, and its failure to understand the staying power of the 1990s-era uprising in Kashmir.

The two spooks spend much of the book agreeing with each other, and there seems to be a degree of affection between them. Neither has much respect for CIA assessments.

The most sensational statement is Durrani's claim – with which Dulat agrees – that Pakistan had helped the United States to locate Osama bin Laden, whom the US raiding party then killed. There are many stories in circulation about this episode, including one (from a Pakistani press person) that the US offered to give Pakistan public credit for helping, and received no answer. This book gives no details that would bolster the authors' story, and there are plenty of details in the public domain that would point in the other direction, including the very mixed messages coming from the top levels of the Pakistani government during the first few days following the operation.

The most tantalising passages have to do with Kashmir. The authors agree that Kashmir is the key issue between the two countries, which is Pakistan's firm position, but heresy in India. Durrani stays close to his government's goals on Kashmir, but diverges on tactics. Dulat, who spent many years as an intelligence official in Kashmir, argues strongly – as he did in his memoirs – that India had damaged itself badly by not being willing to talk more purposefully to credible Kashmiris. Dulat comes across as the one who knows the territory better. He makes a good case, but, once again, one is left wondering why he was not able to convince his government to move further in that direction.

Those who have lived in India or Pakistan will enjoy the occasional lapses into the local vernacular. But that should not stop others from reading this book. It is an easy read, and an enjoyable one, which gives the reader a good feel for how those on the front lines of this durable dispute think about one another.

**The People Next Door: The Curious History of India–Pakistan Relations**

T.C.A. Raghavan. Noida: HarperCollins India, 2017.  
₹699.00/\$27.99. 360 pp.

I usually greet new books about India–Pakistan relations with a mixture of eagerness and apprehension. When I hear praise about a book on this fraught subject from friends in both countries – especially when the author is a retired diplomat from one of the countries who served many years in the other – it gets my attention. *The People Next Door*, by T.C.A. Raghavan, former Indian high commissioner in Islamabad, is almost alone in my experience in achieving this kind of cross-border acclaim.

Raghavan traces one of the world's most chronically vexed relationships from the partition of the subcontinent to the present. This slim volume covers

the wars, negotiating efforts and other major events. Raghavan also goes into considerable detail on some features that are less well known: the political environment in both India and Pakistan in which these events took place, and the personalities that played particularly important roles. There's no escaping the sense that much of the history of this exasperating relationship is an endless, recurring loop. But the focus on both local and global politics, and on what made the national leaders of both countries tick, explains the moments of optimism that punctuate the story, and makes the crash of the few promising negotiating efforts doubly disappointing.

Two things make this an unusual book. Firstly, as a couple of my Pakistani friends have noted, Raghavan manages to articulate Pakistan's anxieties about India in general, and working toward peace in particular, with great skill. It is not easy to put oneself in the shoes of the leadership of a rival country, but Raghavan has done it, which makes his book a valuable contribution to the literature.

The second distinctive feature is the way in which he sums up the seven decades he writes about. He concludes with an epilogue that tells the story of the most hopeful, and most depressing, period of India–Pakistan ties: the rule of president Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan. This period started off on the heels of Pakistan's decision to send troops into Kargil, on the Indian-administered side of Kashmir, a decision that, more than any other single event, wound up costing Pakistan whatever international sympathy it had previously enjoyed on the Kashmir issue. It culminated with Musharraf presenting some of the most creative and far-reaching proposals for moving toward a Kashmir settlement – only to have them effectively ignored in India and then rejected in Pakistan.

Raghavan concludes that the main ingredients of the India–Pakistan tangle have remained the same since partition, but that the environment has changed so much in that time that one cannot keep looking to the same old solutions. One change that he highlights to useful effect is economic: India has moved ahead, especially since 1990, while Pakistan, which started out with a higher growth rate, has lost ground in relative terms. The old issues seem to keep their salience – but one cannot help wondering if solving them will not ultimately require both sides to let go of their partition-era goals and motivations.

**Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia**

Moeed Yusuf. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.  
£52.00/\$65.00. 304 pp.

Moeed Yusuf has written a finely drawn description of how India, Pakistan and the United States interacted during the three crises that followed the nuclear

tests which put the South Asian nuclear arsenals on the public stage. He examines the Pakistani government's decision to send troops and infiltrators into the Indian-controlled side of the former princely state of Kashmir in 1998 (the Kargil crisis); the crisis that followed the bombing of India's parliament and the Indian government's decision to mass troops along the border and Line of Control with Pakistan in 2001–02, sometimes called the 'twin peaks' crisis; and the three-day attack by Pakistan-based militants on Mumbai in 2008, which left more than 100 dead and riveted the world with pictures of masked gunmen in the corridors of Mumbai's most iconic hotel. In all three, the United States became involved without being asked. It played each crisis 'down the middle', pressing harder on the country that had instigated hostilities but not choosing a 'client'. In each case, peace and the status quo ante were restored, although Pakistan's promise to prevent terrorist infiltrations into Indian-controlled territory proved to have a fairly short shelf life. And in the two cases where Pakistan sought to bring about Kashmir negotiations, its efforts failed.

As I recall these three crises, and the preceding one in 1990 when I was still a serving US diplomat, actual or imminent nuclear capability in India and Pakistan eliminated any interest on Washington's part in the legitimacy of Pakistan's claims to Kashmir. One can argue, based on China's lack of receptivity to Pakistani overtures during the Kargil crisis, that even the Chinese shared this perspective.

The author is certainly correct that the presence of a powerful international 'broker' in these negotiations makes the standard Cold War-era two-party model wholly inadequate for predicting risks and behaviours. One of his key findings is that, with even a small risk of nuclear war, the United States was prepared to downgrade its other competing foreign-policy interests and focus on restoring peace. Yusuf demonstrates convincingly that India and Pakistan were negotiating and messaging not just with one another but also with the United States, and that their equities with the US were a critical element in the restoration of peace.

This book includes important lessons for future negotiators. It illustrates the value of trying to discern patterns in a complex scenario, but also the limitations of trying to establish a broadly valid theoretical framework. After the 2001–02 crisis, the authors of one study frequently cited in this book cautioned that one should not assume that future crises would follow the same pattern, and that US officials could not be confident that their playbook would continue to work. Yusuf devotes a chapter to speculating on how these patterns might play out in a crisis in another part of the world – the Middle East or Northeast Asia. He specifies that his theory assumes regional nuclearisation and global unipolarity

(pp. 157–8). In other words, it was written specifically for US intervention in a regional nuclear crisis. Is the United States still a ‘unipole’? Will it be one in 20 years? And would a different unipole see its interests in the same way? Therein lies the main weakness of the theory.

That is not a problem Yusuf can solve, however. Officials like me made many of the same assumptions that he sets forth, not only during these three crises but during the 1990 war scare that preceded India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear tests. We would have benefited from the clarity and rigour he brought to this examination of the strategies and motivations in play in each of those cases. I hope tomorrow’s negotiators will read this book.