

**Book Review
By
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Bruce Riedel, *Avoiding Armageddon: America, India and Pakistan to the brink and Back* (The Brookings Institute Press, Washington D.C, USA, 2013), pp. 231

The book titled "*Avoiding Armageddon: America, India and Pakistan to the brink and Back*" is written by Bruce Riedel who is a renowned American foreign policy expert on South Asia and Middle East. The author has previously served as a career officer in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and more recently as chairman of Strategic Review Committee on Afghanistan and Pakistan in President Obama's first term. The author is currently serving as director of Brookings Intelligence Project.

This book aims to highlight two issues. One is the historical experience of the United States in its dealings with South Asia, particularly its two major powers India and Pakistan. The second issue is the impediments United States policy faces in dealing with its war in Afghanistan and stabilizing Indo - Pakistan relations, and what should be the US approach towards South Asia in future. This is also apparent from the title of this book.

In this book, Riedel takes the reader back into the history of the experience of successive US administrations starting from the days of the British Raj all the way to its partition and subsequently the era of Cold and Post Cold war.

The fundamental message of this book is that stability of India - Pakistan relations remains central to United States interests in South Asia, and that Pakistan needs to modulate its behavior as it remains the source of instability in South Asia. The success of US policy in South Asia, according to Mr. Reidel, will largely depend on its ability to help forge an agreement between Pakistan and India based on resolution of their long standing border disputes on existing ground positions.

To achieve these objectives, Mr. Reidel argues that United States should build strong coalition within Pakistan in order to change its Indo-centric mindset, particularly of its security establishment.

Reidel starts his book with an interesting mix of historical and contemporary events that builds the context of his analysis throughout the chapters and recommendations for US policy makers. First, the traditional Pakistan bashing with regards to Mumbai terror attacks as the author goes on to detail the events of Mumbai attacks in his opening chapter. Although there is nothing new in his description of the event but the context Mr. Reidel tries to build for the book is that Pakistan is the epicenter of terrorism not only for India but in the entire region, including Afghanistan.

Second theme of the book relates to the historical evolution of United States and Indian subcontinent under the British occupation. Mr. Reidel draws an interesting comparison that as United States was moving towards independence from the British Empire, Indian subcontinent was moving towards British occupation. It was to be a long bloody struggle before the subcontinent got its independence. Mr. Reidel argues that United States had pressurized Churchill to give independence to the Indian subcontinent although it was not until 1945 that Britain decided to partition the subcontinent.

Reidel concludes that two outcomes were significant as the result of the struggle for independence that would later define the US relationship between India and Pakistan. One was the birth of Indian nationalism i.e. maintaining autonomy at all costs, and second was the vulnerability of Pakistan from a larger hostile neighbor.

In the subsequent chapters, the author describes the experience of different US administrations in their dealing with India and Pakistan in pre and post Cold War eras. Mr. Reidel accurately summarizes the relationship between United States and India as historically being difficult and adversarial as several attempts to “gain” India on United States side were frustrated by Indian rulers and politicians. The relationship with Pakistan on the other hand has been quite easy to manage as Pakistan was willing to act as a bulwark against the Communist threat.

Given the regional and global changes in the post- 2001 situation, the author describes the efforts of US president George W. Bush as significant and laudable, in building a strategic partnership with India. He rightly describes these efforts as continuation of former US President Bill Clinton’s policy in his two

administrations. Pakistan's existing relations with US, according to Bruce Reidel, have plunged to all time low given its role in facilitating Taliban's rise in Afghanistan before and after 2006, thus complicating US policy in this region. Mr. Reidel has also offered some recommendations for US policy makers. He argues that US should organize itself first on the bureaucratic level to deal with South Asia as current settings of looking at Pakistan in relation to Afghanistan, and not South Asia is flawed. Reidel recommends the creation of a separate South Asia bureau in National Security Council and rest of the executive branch in the administration. He adds that a new Indian Ocean command should be created so that US military should have a holistic view of South Asian region.

Riedel has criticized late ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who was President Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) from 2009 to 2011, for connecting Pakistan with Afghanistan rather than South Asia as a whole. These inter-departmental struggles between the State Department, Pentagon and CIA also have been described in detail by Vali Nasr's in his latest book *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*.

Mr. Reidel recommends that US should work with Pakistan to change its Indo-centric mindset and play an active back channel role to take India – Pakistan peace process forward with a focus on resolving Kashmir issue on the basis of territorial *status quo*. Stabilization of India – Pakistan relations, argues Reidel, is fundamental to US interest which are anchored around energy, security and countering growing radical Islamism in South Asia.

This book is an American perspective on its relationship with South Asian region in the present political circumstances. So disagreements will only be natural when the book is read in India and Pakistan.

There are several accounts on which Mr. Reidel should review his understanding of the region. One of them is the Mumbai attacks in November 2008. Latest revelations of a member of Special Investigating Team (SIT) of India's Central Bureau of Investigation accusing Indian governments of "orchestrating" the terror attack on Indian Parliament, and the 2008 Mumbai attacks are startling. In the presence of this official information, the probability of Mumbai attacks being a false flag cannot be ruled out entirely. Mr. Reidel should analyze this information and perhaps he can reach a different conclusion. Moreover, AK -47 is not a standard Pakistan army item as mentioned by the author.

Second, the impression that one gets while reading about the 1971 Indo – Pakistan war is that US was a source of consequential help to save the dismemberment of then East Pakistan. This is historically and factually wrong. Notwithstanding Pakistan’s own flawed East Pakistan policy, US acted when it was too late. It did not play a role in pressurizing India to close training camps organized by it on its soil and stop supply of weapons and money to Muktibahani insurgents fighting against the Pakistani forces there, prior to the attack of Indian forces on East Pakistan.

Third, recent slowdown of Indian economy along with increased inflation and depreciated currency, vast poverty and insurgencies are evidence enough to show that India’s supposed rise as a global power may not be imminent. While reading this book, one cannot dismiss the impression of this being a part of recent US literature which aims to placate and even flatter India’s intelligentsia.

At a policy level, many in Pakistan share the belief that United States is subsidizing Indian growth to build it as a counter weight to China and counter Islamism. Mr. Rediel’s policy recommendations clearly reflect this policy thinking within United States which aims to reduce Pakistan’s political position in South Asia so that India can then be free to focus its diplomatic and military potential in areas where Washington desires.

Contrary to what Mr. Reidel suggests, it is impossible for Pakistan to sit on the table with India for a peace process that is premised on United States and India’s interests.

However, this is a well written book which must be read by academic researchers, practitioners of policy and strategy in the fields of security, foreign policy and more importantly the observers of US-Pakistan and US – India relations.

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