

**Book Review**  
**By**  
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**Myra MacDonald, *Defeat is an Orphan - How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War* (India: Penguin Random House, 2017), 313**

The underlying premise of *Defeat is an Orphan: How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War* is how Pakistan, though a nuclear armed state since 1998, lost every time it tried to compete with India and push through its interests. A journalist who covered South Asian affairs for about three decades, the author shines light on the rivalry between India and Pakistan. She explains in detail the events starting from the 1998 nuclear tests; the Kargil war, military standoffs in 2001-2002 and 2008, the dynamics of the countries' involvement in Afghanistan, the problem of Kashmir, militant attacks on Indian soil, failed prospects of peace and the internal dynamics that governed the relationship between the two neighbours.

Although this is a book of history, the author has been unsuccessful in remaining neutral and providing an impartial account of the events she has undertaken to describe. The author's speculation is obvious in many instances. An important such case is the presenting of the Kashmir issue as illogical and irrelevant to relations between the two neighbours. Ms. Macdonald makes the same mistake that many foreign watchers of South Asia make, that Kashmir is an irrational and unreasonable objective, and not a prime interest of the Pakistani state. This is evident throughout the book. She portrays President Musharraf as a military leader who championed the Kashmir cause for personal glory, rather than motivation to

resolve the long standing problem, which could consequently pave the way for lasting peace in South Asia.

Right from the outset of the book, there are some flawed assumptions. The author holds that India's quest for nuclear power was driven more by its consideration of threat from China than Pakistan, and that "India refused to see itself in direct competition with Pakistan, preferring to pair itself with a neighbor of comparable size, namely China." It may be pointed out that China and India are not comparable in size or other elements of national power. However, she subsequently claims that a desire for regional hegemony on India's part coupled with troubled relations with Pakistan influenced the former's policies "far more...than it cared to admit."

Ms. MacDonald repeatedly asserts that the nuclear power status of Pakistan made it careless and overconfident about its policies vis-à-vis India. For example the Kargil operation, she deems, was "far ambitious than the Indian occupation of the passes above Siachen had been" and that Pakistan "simply did not think it through", and put too much stock in its nuclear capability, thinking it would succeed. Such a thinking, however, was present on both sides of the border. In 2000, the Indian defense minister said that New Delhi had realized that the possibility of fighting limited conventional war under the nuclear umbrella remained real. He said at a national conference that "We were able to keep Kargil War limited primarily due to nuclear as well as conventional deterrence." According to the author's analysis, in Kargil as well as in other crises that broke out between the two countries in the future (besides in its overall relationship with India), India's diplomacy served it better in the long run.

The second important theme of the book is the fundamental issue of Pakistan's identity, which the author chooses to term

“insufficiently imagined”<sup>1</sup>, and claiming that Pakistan became “a prisoner of its identity.” However, the author contradicts herself towards the end of the book, claiming that Allama Iqbal’s prediction that the Muslim country would flourish if social democratic principles were to be adopted was proven wrong “not because of any inherent problem with Islam....but because of the nature of the Pakistani state.” As an extension of this, another thesis in the book has been how Pakistan’s policies pertaining to intervention (esp. in Kashmir and Afghanistan as well as support for militancy) were ideologically driven. Additionally, the author also makes conjectures about the Islamic identity of the Pakistani state in the light of its pursuit of national policy. For example, in the context of Kashmir, she writes that Pakistan’s desire for acquiring Kashmir was driven by a “millennial ambition to prove Muslim rule superior to Indian Hindu rule.” This and similar other assertions are not based on authentic sources. The author also underplays India’s role in the 1971 war, wherein it militarily intervened and played a major role in dismemberment of Pakistan. She does not bring into discussion the trauma caused by 1971 war to the Pakistani nation which had pushed it to pursue nationalistic policies, and that in the event of the fall of Dhaka, identity became a significant tool of nation-building in Pakistan, which was then still a young country.

*Defeat is an Orphan* is about a particular narrative, and though not lacking in information, it by no means shows a complete picture of Pakistani foreign policy aspirations, motives and even choices in the post-1998 period. For instance, despite the fact that the chapter on Kargil gives a compelling account of the conflict, in which the author draws on former President

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<sup>1</sup> Coined by Salman Rushdie

Musharraf's own account of the war as well, she failed to highlight how Pakistan's actions in the Kargil reflected its utter desperation regarding non-resolution of the Kashmir issue.

The book is extensively referenced, but a glance at the list of notes at the end of the book shows that the sources used in some chapters are selective and not many Pakistani sources are cited. Moreover, the book's literature is drawn a great deal from the author's independent primary research, e.g. email correspondences and personal interviews with some important players dealing with defence and foreign policies of India and Pakistan. This serves as both an advantage and a drawback. The advantage is credibility. The disadvantage is that the author's interpretation of data is coloured by her personal biases. Moreover, such sources at best can be relied upon to project a country's policy positions and personal opinions, but may not necessarily present an accurate picture of events.

The reading of some chapters shows that the author has tried to fit a partial viewpoint into her broader narrative. In many instances, the author misses a crucial point of view of one side in her telling of the greater, more comprehensive reality. As an illustration, in the chapter on Kashmir titled "in the Name of the People – A Short History of the Kashmir Dispute from 1846 to State Elections in 2002", the author is critical of Pakistan's narrative, writing that "the history of the Valley would be communalized by the Pakistan to paint a picture of Muslim inhabitants oppressed by Hindu rule," whereas the history of the Valley goes back many decades, and was overwhelmed by foreign rule that was not limited to Hindus, but also to Sikhs, British and Muslims themselves. The history of Pakistan, however, starts from the mid-twentieth century and it is therefore only natural that Pakistan built upon the Muslim element of that history. Moreover, the fact remains that the

Partition criteria guidelines, when the British decided to leave the subcontinent, had laid down that princely states which had a majority of Muslims in population will join Pakistan if their territories were contiguous to the newly created state of Pakistan. Similarly, states with Hindu majority would join India.

The theme of the book, as discussed earlier, is the 'blunders' Pakistan committed over the course of its history, made one faulty decision after another, and faced a defeat in what she calls the "Great South Asian War". It may of course be argued that the "war" is not over yet and that history is still incomplete. *Defeat is an Orphan* however provides an insight into the western outlook of the rivalry between the two South Asian neighbours and would also likely be instructive for Pakistani policy makers.

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