

Battle for Pakistan is required reading for students of Pakistan and professionals who deal with this byzantine nation of immensely talented but—to this observer—strangely insecure inhabitants. The nation’s stability is essential not only for Pakistan but for the region and the rest of the world.

China’s Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia

By Daniel S. Markey

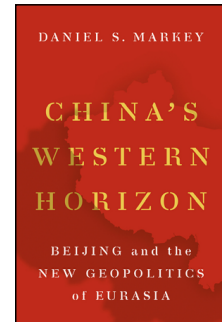
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During the past two decades, great-power rivalry for the United States meant intensifying competition with China. This rivalry for many American military professionals focused on the military realm, especially in the Western Pacific maritime domain. Yet, in recent years there has been greater awareness that the US-China rivalry entails competition in multiple realms. As the *2017 National Security Strategy* observed, bilateral rivalry with China also includes economic and political competition. This reality underscores China’s much-hyped “Belt and Road Initiative”—an ambitious and extensive effort to expand its economic presence and enhance its political influence worldwide.

China’s Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia makes important contributions to our understanding of the processes and outcomes of China’s unprecedented and growing involvement in countries far beyond its western borders. This timely volume examines Chinese activities in three regions, focusing on a single country of particular importance to each region (Kazakhstan in Central Asia, Pakistan in South Asia, and Iran in the Middle East), and explores in detail the interactions between these countries and China.

The dominant Belt and Road Initiative narrative in the United States portrays China as the malevolent economic colossus consumed with waging “debt-trap diplomacy,” duping defenseless and gullible governments worldwide into signing predatory loan agreements to finance desperately needed infrastructure projects in these developing states. In a variant of this narrative, Beijing bribes local elites to mortgage their country’s future. The logic undergirding this narrative is that China fully intends for these governments to default on the massive debts, ensuring Beijing will own, or at least control, these countries.

China’s Western Horizon is a valuable corrective to this one-sided narrative. Countries such as Iran, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan are far from helpless or gullible and often hold significant sway over Chinese decisions and actions. Markey recounts the origins of the Gwadar port project in Pakistan. Contrary to conventional wisdom in the United States, China neither initiated the project nor propelled it forward. Almost 20 years ago, then Pakistani President Musharraf aggressively lobbied



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Beijing to invest in Gwadar, and China reluctantly acceded. According to Markey, “Gwadar may eventually serve a variety of Chinese goals, but the port was initially the product of a Pakistani effort launched for Pakistani reasons” (ix).

Markey effectively captures the domestic dynamics in Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Iran. He is especially adept at analyzing Pakistan’s internal workings and illuminating how the array of governmental and societal actors shape the outcomes of negotiations between Beijing and Islamabad. He also deftly maps the geopolitical landscape in the three regions showing local competitors within each region as well as external great-power rivals. With his extensive knowledge of South Asian dynamics, Markey also provides readers invaluable insights into three key dyads—China-Pakistan, China-India, and Pakistan-India. He concludes that Beijing’s growing influence and involvement in the subcontinent could likely produce the “worst of all possible worlds” by generating greater instability in an already tumultuous region (79).

Moreover, Markey’s nuanced discussion of the soft competition between Beijing and Moscow is fascinating and on point. While China-Russia ties may be the best they have been in many years, underlying tensions persist, and Central Asia lurks as the issue most likely to bring these tensions to the surface.

The final chapter outlines implications for the United States and offers policy recommendations. Markey’s assessment is ominous. South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East are all “primed for greater Chinese involvement, less reform, and more geopolitical competition” (156). Moreover, “Beijing shows little appetite for assuming responsibility for the many existing conflicts within and among Eurasian states” (164). This assessment means Chinese actions are unlikely to contribute to stability in many countries and may prove destabilizing for others.

Whether other great powers will be willing to assume responsibility for these regions is not clear. In the coming years, American military professionals should anticipate heated debates inside and outside the Beltway regarding the appropriate role and military posture for the United States on the Eurasian landmass. Markey’s primary advice for US policymakers is worth restating: acquiring “a clear grasp of local histories, interests and relationships will be essential to advance America’s specific . . . interests in Eurasia” (189).

China’s Western Horizon is a tour d’horizon and should be required reading for anyone grappling with the enormity of America’s China challenge—whether they sit in Carlisle Barracks, Camp Smith, MacDill Air Force Base, the Pentagon, or elsewhere.