

# Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum— A Review

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A review of Stephen P Cohen's work on India and Pakistan is no easy task. A reviewer wrote in 2003, that it was an experience "more than a little 'jarring'. For it becomes evident soon enough, that his writings on India, although strewn with all the correct phrases, are twisted just enough to give any Indian reading his work, that strange feeling you get when you try and read something using your wife's glasses"<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is something which dawned on me after watching Steve Cohen over a protracted period of over four decades. I realised that every one commenting on the writings by Steve was looking through the conceptual lens of political science or strategic affairs on Southern Asia when he actually has transgressed into the rarefied atmospherics of a cultural historian with his present book – much like what A L Basham became after writing *The Wonder That Was India*. Over this long period of gestation, a certain amount of "Cohenism" has taken shape, which will remain as his unique signature discernable to place Cohen as one of the most prolific chroniclers of events in South Asia. Cohen, thus, has carved out an important place amongst the international intellectual and academic milieu. However, seeing the critical evaluation of his work since 2003, whether this status will be acceptable or appreciated by the

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upcoming young Indian scholars of international relations, international security and political theory or the academia in general is questionable. Very briefly, Steve, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has been formerly Professor of History and Political Science, in the Department of Political Science, and Director of the Programme in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security.<sup>2</sup> He was Member, Policy Planning Staff, US Department of State, Scholar-in-Residence, Ford Foundation, New Delhi. Currently he is a Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution.<sup>3</sup>

A strong conviction and opinions with certain biases but supported by an impressive array of writings, deep knowledge on Indian subcontinental affairs, proximity to the Indian and Pakistani decision-making elites at the highest levels, plus untiring efforts to groom a whole generation of South Asian experts of Indian origin now positioned in some of the most coveted academic positions in the US and across the world have made Steve Cohen not only the doyen of US Asian studies but also recognised as the most important representative of the American viewpoint on South Asian politics.

### **Quest for Theoretical Construct**

One can easily say that in terms of academic writings of a historical nature, institution building and grooming future scholars, Steve Cohen has gone over the shoulders of many of his past and contemporary US expert colleagues in Asian studies recognised internationally. Theoretically, the buck stops here, as the rigours of international relations theory or those of political theory are absent from being applied in his work. His worldview is contestable and appears to be rooted in the past of the Cold War era. Hence, missing is the contemporary bridge to bring the realm of ideas and the domain of public policy together to make the output either policy relevant or policy oriented to influence non-US decision-makers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is good to remind ourselves about what an American

scholar stated not long ago that “theory can never replace experience and judgement but it catalyses both.” Cohen’s attempt to “explore the reasons for the enduring rivalry between Pakistan and India with suggestions as to how it must end”<sup>4</sup> and his attempt to apply the modified and modern application of Westphalia’s principles to achieve normalisation is a weak theoretical application to solve the complex international security situation embedded with a well established antagonistic relationship between India and Pakistan. Complicated by territorial and identity issues that have divided the two countries for 66 years and, hence, the prediction that it may continue for the next 34 years, may make the US play a more active role in the affairs in South Asia in general and perhaps more particularly in the post Afghanistan situation. Cohen’s style of documentation method of not providing a bibliography and only footnotes and indexing without being synchronous to the footnotes makes it a very laborious and tedious process to make out as a reviewer as to what important references may have been missing. I make this point particularly because the important area of research investigation undertaken by Navnita Chadha Behera’s edited volume on *International Relations in South Asia*, has not been referred to, commented on, or incorporated, to indicate the Asian point of view in terms of international relations theory applicable to India-Pakistan relations.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, it is very colourful to make the presentation more fashionable by comparing the scoring of a century in cricket with the India-Pakistan relationship to undergo a time factor of 100 years to inch towards a possible solution with the intervening period to represent a “muddling through model” for the US to take advantage of, to support Pakistan and contain India simultaneously. If Pakistan could not maintain the unity and integrity of a nation state carved out of the two-nation theory which disintegrated with the evolution of Bangladesh within 24 years of the creation of Pakistan in 1947, then where the this surety that Pakistan will even exist as Pakistan after 36 years from today? The argument is without any legitimate application of even Western international relations

theory for analysing the making and organisation of nation states. In a single sweep, without any theoretical construct of *realpolitik* which can be played by a fairly powerful India toward Pakistan which has today come close to be classified as a “failed state”, Cohen articulates as to how “nuclear weapons, minority and victim psychology, and outside powers come into play in both regions”. Hence, all of Cohen’s writing is not enveloped within the strong domain of Western international relations theory but has taken recourse to a narrative method, which is persuasively logical to further the cause of US national interest at the global level. Yet he tries to balance off, by stating early in his book, “For India and Pakistan, the first rule of holes is to stop digging. For the United States, its relationship with each of these two nuclear powers is arguably much less important than the relationship with each other.”<sup>6</sup> This balancing act of Cohen has almost given a spiritual dimension to his introspection on the India-Pakistan relationship. J L Khayyam Coelho observes, “Dr Cohen has reached the happy state of a ‘South Asia’ analyst’s *nirvana*, where right wing Pakistani commentators call him pro-India while others see him as pro-Pakistan and where some Indians see him as anti-Indian and some as pro-Indian. He even has a smallish constituency in both India and Pakistan that see him as pro-India and pro-Pakistan.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Context**

There is a contemporary quote of the Dalai Lama which when extended explains the behaviour of any two neighbouring nation states. His Holiness, while giving a lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on the relations between “Science and Religion” stated “If you know of a boy and his girlfriend who cannot live with each other, but cannot do without each other, then you are closer to understanding the relationship between Science and Religion.”

The India-Pakistan relationship is equivalent to the relationship between science and religion in which “science” is India, emphatically

professes to be secular, where more often a Muslim President and a Sikh Prime Minister are administered the oath of office by a Hindu Chief Justice, where the Service Chiefs of the armed forces as well those of the top intelligence organisations have been from all the communities and not to forget the judiciary – something unthinkable in Pakistan. As a cultural historian, Cohen also has created a more universal secondary identity as a political or strategic analyst. He has become what A L Basham wrote in the very first page of his book *The Wonder That Was India* by calling himself a “*mlechya*” i.e. “outsider”, not in a negative sense but representing an intellectual from outside the *varna* system prevalent in India, trying to decipher the India-Pakistan relationship for the past 50 years. He must have been elated when he wrote *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to Nation Building* and equally distraught as he saw the decay of the political system, administrative organisation and civil society in Pakistan, giving way to the military in Pakistan to hold charge of the State of Pakistan through a series of military coups. His present book under review, which I consider will become a classic in terms of recording the cultural, political, social, geopolitical and geoeconomic history of India has yet failed to remove his disappointment to comment that “it is surprising that no authoritative history of India-Pakistan relations yet exists.”<sup>8</sup> Reading between the lines, Cohen is suggesting that it is the responsibility of the intellectual, administrative and political communities of India and Pakistan, who have not paid sufficient attention, to contribute toward nation building, internal stability, and intra-state relationship or reduce the trust deficit between the two neighbours.

The very notion of imposing Voltaire and Daley quotes puts one in an uncomfortable position of using them as a unit of analysis for examining the Indo-Pak relationship. You cannot find answers, explanations or solutions to the complex Indo-Pakistan relationship having a deep cultural and civilisational praxes, dating not to the legacy of the British Raj but to the period from the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD after the reign of Harshavardhan,

then through the Mughals in India. It was the period of the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD that the Hindu mind became subjugated to the Muslim domination culturally far more than during the British period. However, Aurangzeb's orthodoxy was really responsible for the disintegration of the Mughal Empire. The British took advantage not only of the religious polarisation but of the incapacity of the Muslims to incorporate the scientific temper and absorb the role of enlightened education of the post industrial era, something which Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was acutely aware of, and, on the other side, the willingness of the Hindu mind to accept the Western education system, learn English and get exposed to Western philosophy. This aspect has been brought out well by Richard Park in one of his classic articles, "Why Treat India Seriously" in which he narrates, while addressing the young officers of the US Army undergoing training in the military academy, the story of one day in the life of Prafulla Kumar Roy of Calcutta in post independent India,

Without doubt, Cohen has emerged as one of the most sensitive American cultural historians, next only to A L Basham, who has tried to understand the contemporary temporal history of the Indian sub-continent in the post 1947 period. While Cohen's fulcrum contextually is pivoted in Indo-Pakistan relations, he may not have been able to pay attention fully to the other five actors in the region, including why and how Bangladesh's animosity towards India is growing in the same way and has the potential to evolve into a similar situation as existing today in the Indo-Pakistan relations. However, while taking a holistic view of the present work, the content and the context of writing this book is not only timely but puts on record the phenomenal research conducted by Cohen and his research team, comprising research assistants and interns. There is a lesson to be learnt, especially by the Indian academics, for when they are in teaching institutes, the quality of their research is questionable and the teaching unaccountable and when they are in think-tanks, their research lacks the razor sharpness or formulations which should be

policy oriented and their teaching acumen is reduced to nothing since they do not lead a team of young researchers nor teach them how to do quality research. Both the content and the context of the book to study the India-Pakistan relationship become more holistic when one reads Cohen's "Acknowledgment" page that indicates how good research is to be organised.

### **The Content**

The book comprises seven chapters covering 196 pages corroborating 356 footnotes with an average of a little less than two footnotes per page. This is sufficient by taking into account what Cohen records in the very beginning of his presentation that though "a vast literature exists on specific issues between the two states....this is not that book" to incorporate all that "but an attempt to explain, why and how these two states have remained hostile." Hence, for the purposes of this book, the corroborating references are quite adequate, being case specific.

Chapter one on "Context" records the chronological history of the relationship between India and Pakistan in the past and on to the present, the events leading to partition in 1947, the unprecedented loss of human lives during partition, the nature and degree of hostility evolved in the process, the handling or mishandling of the Kashmir issue which became the focus of intense rivalry between the two countries then and continues even today, creating a major trust deficit. The overall relationship between the two countries in the post 1947 is well documented. Cohen shows how four major post independence crises have greatly affected Indo-Pakistan relations and how after the exit of the British, the structure of the subcontinent was then debated.

Chapter two is a detailed study about specific disputes between the two countries. They relate to identity, absence of trade and three most geostrategic issues related to Kashmir, water and the Siachen Glacier. As Cohen notes, the "absence of a normal relationship... makes the disputes

over them more puzzling.<sup>9</sup> Each of these issues has been paid attention. Maps given in this chapter are helpful as a primer to the students to understand the areas of dispute. Disputes, especially related to water have been comprehensively treated. On Siachen, Cohen notes two facts. First, its occupation has cost the Indian Army enormous casualty, mainly due to inclement weather and frostbite – which is a fact. Second, that the “general in charge of the operation in the world’s highest battlefield has since expressed public remorse over his action.”<sup>10</sup> The issues of nuclearisation and Islamic extremism have been just glossed over rightly because they can be an independent project to deal with. Nonetheless, the indication of them being part of the conflict is surely essential to indicate which has been done.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the contemporary conflicts between India and Pakistan. Regional competition is highlighted. Cohen observes that Pakistan’s internal cohesion is rapidly changing with the likelihood of collapse of the state. However, Cohen observes that “vivisection of Pakistan by India as in 1971, has to be ruled out now that both countries have nuclear weapons.”<sup>11</sup> Chapter 5 explains the continuity of hostility between India and Pakistan. Cohen tabulates various categories to account for the India-Pakistan rivalry. He classifies them into culture, a civilisation, state identity, Kashmir, realist explanation, identity and creating an ‘other,’ etc. Chapter 6 deals with the various attempts made already to normalise relations. Special emphasis has been put while explaining the role of TRACK II, unofficial attempts and back channel efforts to initiate secret talks “to ease global fears of an imminent nuclear holocaust,<sup>12</sup> and the role of Brijesh Mishra, the then National Security Advisor and Tariq Aziz, Advisor to President Pervez Musharraf to reopen the back channel has been recorded. Cohen confesses, “Although it is difficult not to be pessimistic in this instance, looking ahead may suggest opportunities (and costs) that are omitted in the usual narrative.”<sup>13</sup> Chapter 7, on “American Interests and Policies” is prescriptive to place the



India-Pakistan relationship and its fallouts within the ambit of American foreign and national security perspectives. Cohen discusses recent US policies towards India and Pakistan, Towards a Comprehensive South Asia policy, the necessity for the US to recognise the importance to ensure normalisation of the relationship between the two nuclear states in South Asia without the colonial past, or be too deeply involved in the process of normalisation. Cohen advises that the US must recognise “the Line of Control in Kashmir as the *de facto* and perhaps *de jure* boundary.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Is the India-Pakistan relationship confusing and a difficult problem or question, or has the question been asked for amusement or to depict a riddle. Obviously, Cohen never has the last in mind. India and Pakistan have been victims of a colonial past, been affected by the Cold War politics, and historically been antagonistic to each other, with each having its own perceptions about the other. However, Cohen’s documentation of the history of India-Pakistan relations and analysis may ultimately prove his prediction to be right i.e. the possibility of an enduring rivalry for the next 36 years without arriving at a permanent normalisation. Cohen is cautious to spell out a long-term role for the US in South Asia. He is almost “fishing” when he suggests that the Line of Control in Kashmir be converted as the permanent border. He also advocates by some logic of his own that while resolving Siachen, China should be involved in the process. He should know that no Indian government would ever accept such a proposition.

Cohen does not at any point of time recognise the supremacy of civilian control in India as compared to military control in Pakistan. His support towards Pakistan comes out clearly in this book. The book is also a remarkable balancesheet of India-Pakistan relations and will serve as a primer for all students of South Asia, on the one hand, and a useful compendium for scholars to refer to, on the other. He indicates that

the trust deficit can only be overcome if the elites of both the countries first, reshape the public opinion in their respective countries and second, engage with each other constructively to bring about stability in the region. Lastly, as I have stated earlier, Cohen's worldview is not only weakly realist but unable to extract itself out of the 1960s' vision of South Asia. It is hoped that this book attracts serious reviews and debate that is yet to take place.

## Notes

1. For a detailed but somewhat severely critical analysis of Stephen P Cohen's writings, motivation and analytic framework on South Asia, see J L Khayyam Coelho, "Stephen P Cohen: South Asia Analyst: A Review", available at <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MONITOR/ISSUE6-1/Cohen.html>
2. Stephen P Cohen, Marvin G Weinbaum and Harold A Gould were known as "Trimurti" of South Asian Studies; Weinbaum a specialist on the political economy of Afghanistan and Pakistan and Gould, a social anthropologist focussing on India with a classic article on "The Rickshawalas of Lucknow."
3. For more details about Stephen P Cohen's bio, see <http://www.brookings.edu/Cohen's> seminal contribution to South Asian strategic studies remains embedded in his book co-authored with Richard L Park *India: The Emerging Country* (New York: Crane Russak, 1979).
4. Stephen P Cohen, *Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2013), p. 11.
5. See Navnita Chadha Behera, ed., *International Relations in South Asia: Search for an Alternative Paradigm* (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2008).
6. Cohen, n. 4, p. 14; however, at the book launch discussion, Ashley Tellis gave an opposite argument and stated that the "... character of US relationship with India and Pakistan individually is more important than the character of the relationship India and Pakistan have with each other and the quality of their bilateral relationship."
7. Coelho, n. 1, p. 2.
8. Cohen, n. 4, p. 4; also see Sharin R Tahir-Kheli, *India, Pakistan and the United States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1997); Stanley Wolpert, *India and Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation* (University of California Press, 2010).
9. Cohen, n. 4, p. 33.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 53; there is no corroborating evidence to accept this statement.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
14. *Ibid.*