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PhDr. Thesis (Rigorózní práce) Evaluation:

**Sandilya, Hrishabh. *The US' AF-PAK Strategy and Its Implications for India*. Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of International Studies, Prague, 2011, 96 pp.**

Our colleague Hrishabh Sandilya has chosen to explore a topic, which is extremely important both for its current implications for the security situation in South Asia as well as for its impact on the future of this entire region. The war in Afghanistan, and the role that the United States, Pakistan, India and other regional and non-regional actors play in this conflict, has been vigorously discussed and contested over the last ten years. It is clear that the United States, up to this date, has been the main decider on issues of how the war against Taliban and Al-Qaeda is going to be run, and thus any major shifts and changes in American policy have been closely followed and scrutinized by the other actors involved. As the United States will most likely reduce its presence in the region over the next several years, however, the importance of especially India as the stabilizing force in the region will grow. It is thus imperative for the United States to secure the cooperation of New Delhi, and one of the ways to achieve this goal could be to reassess its long-standing support for Pakistan, India's arch rival. The author of this thesis seeks to analyze how the AF-PAK strategy of the United States under the Obama Administration has changed the American policy in the region and consequently, what impact it could have on the geostrategic situation in South Asia and on the standing of India, Pakistan and other countries in the regional security system.

As the author correctly admits, the topic he has chosen to study is a rather contemporary one, and thus it is necessary to use a wide array of sources – not only scholarly publications, but also newspaper articles, other media sources etc. I would say that with the sources available, he has done a good job in outlining and presenting the salient points in an comprehensive and logical fashion, while at the same time putting them into a theoretical framework, which helps to explain the motivations, strategies and actual moves of the main actors, i.e. the United States, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and also Iran.

The author has chosen to divide his thesis into several parts. The introduction states the research questions of the thesis, offers a review and analysis of the sources available, and presents the theoretical framework (or perhaps, it would be more correct to say, some of the theories applied) and the structure of his work. He then proceeds with analyzing the AF-PAK strategy itself (Chapter 2), the role of Pakistan (Chapter 3), the role of India (Chapter 4), and the possible future scenarios in Afghanistan and in greater South Asia (Chapter 5). Each of these chapters is divided into sub-sections, where issues such as the interests of individual actors, their priorities and objectives, and their recurrent fears are analyzed in more detail and sometimes in great depth.

If we look at the factual content of thesis and its analysis, I would say that the author addressed all the main problems and issues that should have been covered in a thesis like this. In my opinion, some of the information is repeated perhaps unnecessarily – for example, the case of the hijacked Indian Airlines plane is mentioned at least four times (pp. 42, 54, 67, 75). On the other hand, sometimes the author seems to assume that the readers already possess an in-depth knowledge of the subject he writes about and thus does not explain some of the

terms/problems/events he mentions in the text (for example, I would at least briefly explain, perhaps in a footnote, what the main causes and results of the Kargil War in 1999 were, p. 67; I would elaborate more on who was Sardar Daoud and what was his role in Afghani politics, pp. 39–40; it would be helpful to go into more detail about the London Conference on Afghanistan in 2010, pp. 2, 18, 22, 26 – why did it take place, who were the participants etc.; a footnote may be added to explain what exactly is the SAARC and why was it important for Afghanistan to be invited to join, pp. 69–70). In some cases, I would also definitely include specific dates or facts, such as when the author writes about “Zia’s decade long hold on power” (p. 41); on page 39, the author mentions that “Sardar Daoud returned to power in Kabul” without saying when he had held power previously and when his return had actually happened; the same is true for the Najibullah Government (pp. 66–67), where I miss the year when Najibullah had come to power. When describing the Pakistani strategy of opening consulates in Afghanistan as a way of countering Indian advances in the country (p. 55), it would be appropriate to say where specifically these consulates were actually open. Similar examples could be found throughout the entire text. I am of course quite aware of the fact that the topic of the thesis is rather broad and it has not been possible to include all details, but in some cases I believe that the readers who are not well acquainted with these issues might “get lost” in the text and find it difficult to read.

The other thing I would like to point out is that while the thesis is well researched and many of the arguments are supported by ample evidence and factual base, sometimes there are points which are debatable, both in the long-term view and in the light of the current situation. For example, on page 15, the author states that the White Paper of the White House “... laid out five clear and achievable goals for the US in Afghanistan”. Since this is not a quotation, it has to be assumed that the author himself considers these goals “achievable”, which in my opinion is a very optimistic view, not so much supported by the realities on the ground (as the author actually points out, directly and indirectly in other parts of his thesis). On page 47, he writes that “Pakistan is now recognized as the global headquarters for the Al-Qaeda”. While this was true in 2009, the recent US assessments of the Al-Qaeda structure and operational capabilities show that the organization has been dealt a number of serious blows in Pakistan and that perhaps its Yemeni branch now poses the greatest threat (and perhaps could be called the “Al-Qaeda HQ”).

Finally, as a historian who is (perhaps too strongly) focused on proper referencing, I feel the need to mention three specific problems I have encountered in the thesis. The first of these, in my opinion the more serious one, is that while the author’s reference apparatus is done in a consistent fashion (according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*), he very seldom, actually almost never (with several exceptions), includes specific pages of the monographs/scholarly articles he is quoting from in his footnotes. This might make it difficult for a person who would seek verification of anything quoted.

I would also definitely prefer that the sources (bibliography) at the end of the thesis were organized not only alphabetically, but also divided into sub-categories – primary sources, monographs, articles in scholarly journals, working papers etc. While this might seem as an undue formalism, it is what we, at least at our institute, usually expect from final theses.

The third problem is that sometimes, precise figures or statements which appear in the text are not referenced at all. To provide some examples: p. 25, figures about literacy rate and HDI in Afghanistan; p. 29, the information that the US has given Afghanistan \$17 billion in military aid since the beginning of the intervention; p. 69, the information that India would provide another \$50 million in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan; p. 82, the assertion that “... some within the Indian military establishment have argued...” that it might be necessary to place “boots on the ground” in Afghanistan.

As I am not a native English speaker myself (although I do frequently write in English), I do not wish to spend too much time on evaluating the linguistic aspect of the thesis, which, after all, is not as important as the other ones. I would only mention here that I would sometimes use punctuation (especially commas) and also capital letters in a different way than the author. For example, I would not capitalize words such as Nineties (e.g. p. 59), Century (e.g. p. 57), South (of Afghanistan, e.g. p. 22), Independence (e.g. p. 39). Overall, however, there are very few grammatical errors in the text and as far as stylistics is concerned, the thesis is written in a vivid, easily readable fashion.

In conclusion, I would say that the author has definitely demonstrated that he possesses a very good understanding of the subject he has chosen to write about. In the last chapter he also offers, based on different sources, qualified predictions of the alternative future scenarios in Afghanistan/South Asia and recommendations for the Indian foreign policy. Overall, the thesis is logically structured and covers a number of very important and interesting issues. Yet, for many readers it might be difficult to follow as many things are mentioned only very briefly, without being explained or adequately set into the context of the topic studied. Some of the arguments that the author makes would also, in my opinion, warrant to be supported by stronger evidence or more precise referencing of other sources.

The thesis meets the formal requirements expected of such papers, but there are some problems which I have mentioned on the previous page. While these problems do not prevent the thesis from being successfully defended, avoiding them would have definitely made the text better. Despite these objections, however, I do recommend Hrishabh Sandilya's thesis for defense.

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