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Review of *The Great Game in the Buddhist Himalayas: India and China's Quest for Strategic Dominance* by Phunchok Stobdan

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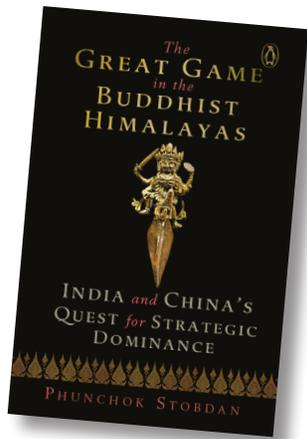
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The Great Game in the Buddhist Himalayas: India and China's Quest for Strategic Dominance.

Phunchok Stobdan. New Delhi, Vintage Random House, 2019. 312 Pages. ISBN 9780670091393

Reviewed by Noé Dinnerstein

The author states from the onset that “[t]his book is an attempt to provide an overview of the political and strategic process at work in the Buddhist Himalayas. While trying to understand the various intricate issues in the region, an attempt has been made to trace the Tibetan factors that impinge on India. The book is mostly about identifying critical points that are important for evolving a sound Indian policy towards this strategic Himalayan region.” (p. vii). As noted in the author profile on the back leaf,

Ambassador Phunchok Stobdan is a distinguished academician, diplomat and author, and an expert of foreign policy and national security. He is a known authority on Central and Inner Asian affairs. He last served as India's ambassador to the Kyrgyz. He has previously served in the National Security Council Secretariat and been director of the Center for Stra-

tegic Studies in Jammu and Kashmir. He is the founding president of the Ladakh International Centre, Leh, and has been senior fellow at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, as well as distinguished fellow at the United Services Institution.

The author does not purport this to be an academic work, but rather is intended as a narrative and analytical account. He relies on official sources, as well as vernacular media reporting. His own years-long experience with conferences, seminars, and discussions in the region has informed his analysis, as well as the fact of his being a native of Buddhist Ladakh in the region.

Sparing no one's preconceived narratives, he very carefully chronicles the geo-politics, and how it has been tied into Himalayan Buddhism and the inter-sectarian rivalries that have shaped the history of the region. He describes nesting and conflicting hegemonies—Indian, Tibetan, British, Chinese, American, etc.—and how they have played out in what Stobdan describes as a version of “The Great Game,” to paraphrase Rudyard Kipling. In this case the central theme is Tibetan hegemony in the region as exerted by the Gelugpa Ganden Phodrang administration, bolstered primarily by the Qing Dynasty, and subsequently by its successor, the People's Republic of China.

He observes that in spite of Tibet's conquest and subjugation by the PRC, and the subsequent Tibetan Diaspora, the Gelugpa hegemony has continued, and has been used as the proverbial camel's nose into the tent of India's territorial integrity in Himalayan Buddhist border regions such as Ladakh, Sikkim, and

Arunachal Pradesh, as well as buffer states such as Nepal and Bhutan. This sectarian hegemony, frequently conflated with geo-political struggle, includes Gelug attempts to exert control of other sects in the Himalayan region, especially regarding the incarnation of *tulkus* as heads of monasteries.

One major issue is the assertion of Tibetan suzerainty over the Tawang area of Arunachal Pradesh. The author states that “Tibetan officials are known for repudiation as per political expediency. The Dalai Lama's government initially signed the Simla Convention on 3 July 1914 to define the border between Chinese Tibet and British India drawn up by Sir Henry McMahon, but in practice it never ratified the McMahon Line on the pretext of Beijing's non-acceptance of it. In fact, at various points in history, the Tibetans opted in favor of taking protection under Beijing against British India's efforts to deal with them directly.” (pp. 113-114). He goes on to point out that these ambiguities are intertwined with issues of Tibetan autonomy versus subjugation. He further notes of the Dalai Lama that, “upon reaching India, he refused to recognize India's sovereignty over Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh. After four decades of his stay in India, the Dalai Lama, while touring Tawang in 2003, said, “Arunachal Pradesh was actually part of Tibet” (p. 112). However, after losing any hope of reaching an agreement with China, the Dalai Lama finally was compelled to accept India's claims (pp. 112-13).

The modern Tibetan narrative, cultivated by Buddhist lamas, is observed to have shaped policy, both in India and the United States. The author's chronicles contradict this blithely idyllic narrative. He cites more balanced viewpoints such that of Tibetologist Donald S. López,

Throughout the book, the ambassador painstakingly constructs a detailed chronicle of interactions throughout the region, constantly searching for a strategic policy by which India might be guided

Dinnerstein on The Great Game in the Buddhist Himalayas: India and China's Quest for Strategic Dominance.

Jr. who stated in his 2018 update of *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. (Chicago, Ill.; London : University of Chicago press)

Nor was Tibet, in Georges Bataille's phrase, "an un-armed society." Tibet did not renounce armed conflict when it converted to Buddhism in the eighth century, or in the eleventh century, or under the fifth Dalai Lama. The fifth Dalai Lama assumed temporal power over Tibet through the intervention of his Qoshot Mongol patron, the Gushri Khan, whose troops defeated the king of Tsang, patron of the Karma Kagyu. Tibetan armies fought against Ladakh in 1681, against the Dzungar Mongols in 1720, in numerous incursions into Bhutan during the eighteenth century, against invading Nepali forces from 1788 to 1792 and again in 1854, against Dogra forces invading Ladakh from Kashmir in 1842, and against the British in 1904. (pp. 8-9).

Throughout the book, the ambassador painstakingly constructs a detailed chronicle of interactions throughout the region, constantly searching for a strategic policy by which India might be guided. The frustrating complexities are palpable, as he grapples with diplomatic realities. Sadly, he feels that India's

lack of engagement with Buddhism as a whole, and Himalayan Buddhism in particular, has ceded control of the discourse to China. "But having played this game for too long, India has failed to grasp the dynamic interplay between the Tibetan plateau and the political landscape that is the Indian Himalayas. As mentioned earlier, understanding the Tibetan polity requires more than bureaucratic bean-counting!" (p. 267).

His final assessment pulls no punches:

Clearly then, India has so far either had no independent Tibet policy of its own or been highly dependent on Western assessments, or New Delhi had weighed heavily in the Dalai Lama's thinking. Instead of relying on knowledge rooted in Indian experiences, especially on the statecraft carefully evolved during the British period, India's policy objective for the Himalayas and Tibet is subservience to US policy goals. The time has come to change that. (p. 268).

This book is an arduous read, but is clear in its stated goal, and lays out the facts in a cogent manner. For any serious students of Asian geopolitics this is a necessary education, courtesy, not of a theorist, but of someone seriously involved in the hard work of real-world diplomacy.

Noé Dinnerstein is an ethnomusicologist, musician, and Adjunct Assistant Professor

of Music at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY. His recent research has focused on traditional songs in Ladakh, situating them historically and culturally in the Himalayan crossroads, noting broader relationships in the region. He holds a PhD in ethnomusicology from the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY).