

Book Review

Talbot, Ian. *The History of British Diplomacy in Pakistan*. 245pp., Routledge 2021

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The establishment of diplomatic relations between the newly independent government and the erstwhile colonial power is an important if neglected part of the decolonisation process. How does the former colonial power 'let go' while protecting its strategic and business interests; how does it use its accumulated knowledge to report on political developments in its erstwhile possessions and to share this knowledge with its allies, and how do the newly independent state's elites respond? Ian Talbot's new book on the history of British diplomacy in Pakistan provides an important case study of all of these topics. The book is equally valuable in the way it uses the specifics of British diplomacy to illuminate the broad historical canvas of international history and in so doing sheds new light on it, even if some areas remain shaded. Diplomats and politicians on both sides had to take account of regional conflicts while simultaneously accommodating the pressures that arose from the Cold War. Talbot, who has written prolifically on the history of Pakistan and knows the region extremely well, is a good guide to the issues at stake. He makes extensive use of British archives which can, within the twenty-year rule (which won't be fully implemented until 2022), be remarkably revealing, and also makes frequent reference to American diplomatic records, including those made available through Wikileaks. Interviews with retired British and American diplomats who served in Pakistan are a further source of information (although only referenced in the footnotes and not in the bibliography). Slightly surprisingly, he was not able to conduct similar interviews with Pakistani diplomats and officials to test their view of the relationship.[1]

The earliest British envoys to Pakistan (designated High Commissioners by virtue of the country's membership of the Commonwealth) were mostly former colonial officials who had extensive experience of the region. The very first, Sir Laurence Grafftey-Smith, had in fact worked primarily in the Middle East, an interesting choice given later debates over whether Pakistan would see itself as belonging primarily to the Middle East or to South Asia. His successor, Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, although a London-based civil servant, had for seven years been Principal Private Secretary to the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow and believed in entertaining the Pakistani

elite on a grand scale. Next in line was Sir Alexander Symon, who had started out as a clerk in the India Office in London (and who, most unusually, had never been to university). Like Laithwaite, he knew all the key figures in the Pakistani state, especially the army. So good was his relationship with Iskander Mirza that the latter was willing to share copies of cabinet meetings with him. Only with Sir Morrice James' appointment in 1961 did the job pass to someone without a strong pre-1947 background in South Asian matters. After his time in Pakistan he went on to become High Commissioner to India and eventually Permanent Secretary of the Commonwealth Relations Office. Equally importantly, the heads of the Deputy High Commission offices were drawn from the same pool of former colonial officials as James' predecessors. The first head of the Dhaka office, a key role, was Leonard Coke Wallis, an ICS officer who had served in Bengal in the 1920s and spoke Bengali fluently.

A constant issue in UK diplomacy towards both India and Pakistan was Kashmir, that great and still not wholly understood failure of late colonial statecraft. The very first concern after 15 August 1947 was to ensure as far as possible the safe evacuation of British nationals from the area. Later in the book Talbot turns to the joint US-British effort in 1962-1963 to bring about a settlement of the Kashmir question. While the events surrounding the Sandys-Harriman mission are familiar in general outline, he shows what a major contribution was made by Morrice James. His good relations both with Sir Paul Gore-Booth, High Commissioner in New Delhi, and with his American counterparts ensured that there was good communication on the British and American side, even if the talks themselves were doomed to fail. An important aspect of Talbot's analysis is to emphasise the different perspectives of the two outside actors. The US was first and foremost concerned with cold war politics and saw the issues in global terms. Its relations with Pakistan, Talbot argues, were construed in primarily transactional terms. American concerns were first to prevent Pakistan drifting away from the West and into China's orbit, and second to allow India easy access to Ladakh in case of a renewed Chinese incursion, while on the British side, inspired more by sentiment, there

was a greater concern to maintain harmonious relations within the Commonwealth. In political terms, this meant an American preference for partition of Kashmir more or less along the ceasefire line, while the British also thought in terms of an internationalisation of the state. There was a similar divergence between the Foreign Office, more in tune with US concerns, and the still separate Commonwealth Relations Office.

After the failure of the 1962 mediation, relations between India and Pakistan again erupted into war in 1965. An initial series of skirmishes in the Rann of Kutch was brought to an end by an agreement to submit to arbitration (although the question of Sir Creek was left unresolved). Talbot shows again how Morrice James' diplomatic skills and good relations with leaders on both sides paved the way for the mediation process. It was not enough, however, to prevent the Pakistani side from embarking on the military adventurism of Operation Gibraltar. Here too, Talbot credits James with playing a major role in persuading Ayub Khan to accept a UN-sponsored ceasefire, even if the subsequent mediation took place in Tashkent under Soviet auspices.

In 1965, and then again during the 1971 war, Britain and the US were forced, whether they liked it or not, to take sides between India and Pakistan. In 1965 Harold Wilson famously claimed that he had been misled by a group of pro-Pakistan officials in the Foreign Office into blaming India for escalating the initial clashes into full-scale war, although Talbot doesn't name names. In 1971 the US followed a Cold War logic by sending an aircraft carrier group into the Bay of Bengal, to Mrs Gandhi's great annoyance. The British position was more nuanced. An initial attempt at neutrality, partly driven by the High Commissioner's dispatches which failed to convey the grim realities of what was happening in East Pakistan, was replaced by a condemnation of the atrocities taking place there. This led to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's decision to take Pakistan out of the Commonwealth, a decision only reversed in 1989, although this made little difference on the ground. The situation was in any case changed by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent Western support for the resistance. But what became very clear was that in strategic terms the US had displaced the UK as the leading diplomatic partner for Pakistan.

From the 1980s on, relations have been dominated and in some cases severely tested by concerns over nuclearisation and risks of war between India and Pakistan on the one hand and the rise of Islamist militancy on the other. Although the UK continued to play a role, it was clear that at the moments of greatest tension, in 1999 over Kargil, in 2001-2 and again in 2008 after the Mumbai attacks, it was US intervention that was crucial. British diplomats also played some role in Pakistan politics through its efforts to facilitate Benazir Bhutto's return from exile. Talbot is especially interesting on the details here, especially the role of Sir Mark Lyall Grant and his meetings with her in Dubai and in London (in Harrods coffee shop!).

Within this broad narrative arc of diplomatic history, Talbot provides fascinating insights into the world of 'everyday diplomacy'. Penny-pinching bureaucrats in London failed to understand the situation on the ground, making life difficult, especially in the earlier period. For several years after 1947 the High Commission and its staff were housed in temporary facilities and in the diplomatic posts outside Karachi had to make do with hotel rooms. Although Runnymede, the present Deputy High Commission site in Karachi, was acquired in 1950, the main High Commission buildings were elsewhere in Karachi until the eventual move to Rawalpindi and then Islamabad in the 1960s. Entertainment was of course a major part of the High Commissioner's job, with the day-to-day burden of planning menus etc falling to the wife. Curiously, within South Asia, Pakistan shares with India the dubious distinction of never yet having had a female High Commissioner or Ambassador from the UK, unlike Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the other countries of the region.

As well as protection of British nationals at times of conflict or heightened tension, consular concerns have included dealing with complex cases of citizenship following the British Nationality Act 1948. In recent years the focus has shifted to dual nationals, large numbers of whom are resident in Pakistan and whose status at moments of crisis would raise questions of responsibility. Relatedly, Talbot discusses the more recent role of the High Commission in helping British Pakistani young women brought to Pakistan and forced into marriage. Promotion of British trade with Pakistan and protection of commercial interests has also fallen to the High Commission, even if today the UK has fallen behind Pakistan's other trade partners. On the military side, Pakistan has looked much more to the US and China. While development aid was until very recently administered separately through the DfID country office, its aims were broadly correlated with overall UK policy.

While diplomats have specific goals to achieve, they are also responsible for the general image of the country they represent. This is what is usually termed 'public diplomacy' or the promotion of 'soft power'. By means of schemes such as the Chevening Scholarships and through the work of the British Council British envoys to Pakistan have aimed to promote positive images of the UK. Talbot emphasises their success in using social media. But effective public relations can only go so far in limiting the damage caused by restrictive and convoluted visa rules and by news reports in Pakistan of Islamophobia in the UK. The asylum given to Altaf Hussain is a further example of the complexity of the postcolonial relationship.

To date all High Commissioners and Ambassadors to Pakistan have been from conventional Anglo-Saxon backgrounds but this will most likely change in the future as diplomats with Pakistani heritage rise through the FCDO ranks. Already there has been a Pakistan-heritage head of DfID in the country. A significant absence from Talbot's work is the role played by locally recruited staff, many of whom have worked for long

periods at quite senior levels and thus provide continuity. They must surely have contributed to the political and economic reporting role of the mission. One other absence from the book, understandable perhaps, is the role of intelligence operatives working under diplomatic cover, although Talbot mentions the case of Raymond Davis, whose activities created great embarrassment for the US in Pakistan, and refers to cooperation between MI6 and ISI in relation to planned Islamist attacks in the UK.

Talbot's account (although the index and the punctuation would both have benefited from more effective copy-editing) shows us how varied the life of the diplomat is: grand entertaining and attendance at public events to boost the image of the UK; detailed reporting on political and economic trends that may or may not go beyond what is freely available in the media; consular work; acting as confidential messengers between governments. On occasion, though, as he shows on several occasions, the most skilled diplomats are able to bring together all these strands to make an independent contribution to the course of international relations. But, especially perhaps when they represent the former colonial power, they are not miracle workers, as the continuing tensions in South Asia evidently demonstrate.

[1] Cp. the interesting review of Talbot's book in *Dawn* by Maleeha Lodhi
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1619087/ties-of-sentiment>
