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Paradoxical Pakistan

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The Idea of Pakistan

Stephen Philip Cohen (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004)

Pakistan was fashioned by visionaries who dared history and turned it upside down. The creation of a major state while the idea of Pakistan was still emerging was an astonishing accomplishment. Pakistan was also the first postcolonial state that broke into two. Since partition, in the uncoupling of its shared past with India, Pakistan has lost its way. The original project has been transformed from living history into remembered myths. The men of steady resolve who created Pakistan would be dismayed by what it has become. This key U.S. ally in the global war on terror is a nuclear armed state occupying the international spotlight. Because it is so important, those who need Pakistan and other sympathetic doubters worry about its future. Stephen Cohen's book thus serves as a vital aid to both policymakers and scholars. Yet it is more than that. The doyen of South Asia specialists in the United States, Cohen has impeccable credentials. He has authored, coauthored, or edited ten books on South Asia and has taught at the University of Illinois, Georgetown University, and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He has also served on the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff and is currently a senior fellow for foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington. In 2004, Cohen was named by the World Affairs Councils of America as one of the 500 most influential people in the field of foreign policy.

Cohen calls his book a "double biography" — one on the idea of Pakistan and the other on the state of Pakistan. Unlike *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani's classic social history of a similar name which addresses India's multiple identities, Cohen's book deals primarily with a flesh-and-blood Pakistan, a faltering bastion with a far from assured future, yet with internal

cohesion and vitality. Yet, Cohen does bring alive the tension between the idea and reality. The idea that Muslims were a separate nation that must have a homeland fortified against Hindu hegemony always lurks in the background, as if mocking the state that strayed from its original purpose. This theme— Pakistan's inability to live up to its founders' ideals— permeates the work.

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