

## **Tightrope Walk**

Amanullah Khan (Islamabad: Khan Publishers, 2017, 227 pages)

**Reviewed by Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema & Baber Ali\***

Pakistan-United States relations faced multitude of ups and down since the establishment of their diplomatic relations but more so from the 1960s onward when Pakistan started improving its relations with the People's Republic of China. Both states became members of the anti-Soviet military alliances i.e. SEATO and CENTO, with diverse objectives: Pakistan sought security against India and the US sought to use Pakistan's territory and geostrategic location against the former Soviet Union. Pakistan-US relationship has been called a marriage of convenience that occasionally broke down; first time after the 1965 India-Pakistan war when the US imposed arms embargo apparently against both states, but that only affected Pakistan since India was not importing major arms from the US.

The book is a well-written and distinctly readable account of Mr. Ammanullah Khan's professional responsibilities, associations and working under various US ambassadors and diplomats; beginning with Mr. Edward Ingraham, Counselor for Political Affairs, and Ambassador Henry Byroade in 1973 to Ambassador Nancy Jo Powell in 2003. Mr. Khan joined the US Foreign Service in 1973 and was appointed as a political advisor.

Khan also shares his early childhood tragic experience in this book. His sixteen closest family members were brutally murdered by "Hindu Dogra Marauders" including his mother, sisters, young nephews and nieces when they shifted from Kashmir to Pakistan in the midst of migration at the declaration of independence of Pakistan 1947. It's

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absolutely inspiring to read how boldly he recovers from that trauma of his early life.

The title of the book, *Tightrope Walk* appears an attempt to justify himself performing an almost impossible and diabolical role of being professionally honest to his US pay masters and simultaneously loyal to his country, Pakistan. Khan vividly describes the toughness of life as a person who chooses to be an honest and dedicated employee at the US Embassy and a patriotic citizen of Pakistan.

The book begins with a discussion on Indian Occupied Kashmir. Starting from 1947, it describes the turmoil of Kashmir and the injustice that led to its separation and distressful struggle for Pakistan. The later part of the book discloses the author's disconcerted and unsettled times, and reveals his restlessness and quest for tuneful and serene life. Thereafter, a detailed and comprehensive account of his personal experience at the US embassy in Islamabad has been flourished in the book.

Khan does not paint his job as bed of roses with ideal luxurious settings. He has been working in the US embassy under the constant watch of intelligence agencies which was psychologically stressful for him. In such an environment, it was an arduous task for him to convince his superiors to act upon his advice especially during the strained periods in Pak-US relations.

Besides the incidents and events, the book provides deep insights into the US policies and mindset of the US diplomats who are virtually considered at par with gods by the vast majority of Pakistan's political elite, which stoops to the lowest possible to beg ministerial positions in Pakistan from the US diplomats. He referred to a Muslim League Cabinet Minister whispering to author 'Khan Sahib, I sincerely hope you are sending good reports about us to your bosses in Washington' (Page No. 78, Ammanullah Khan). Mr. Khan called it the intellectual bankruptcy of our ministers. While mentioning the hypocrisy of politicians, the author

claimed that 'I am witness to what they said in public and how they behaved in private. There was a world of difference between their public and private postures.' (Page No. 139, Ammanullah Khan)

This book also explicitly underlines the changing US position on Pakistan from the time when Pakistan rapidly developed its nuclear weapon program to the nuclear explosions of 1998. His conviction that Pakistan would have been better off without carrying out nuclear explosions and becoming a nuclear weapons state in 1998 seems to be largely influenced by the US policy, no matter how subconsciously and despite the claims to the contrary ingenuity of his position. The author mentions that he used to beg the Pakistani ministers 'Look, time is not in your favour. For God's sake, do not go nuclear. What you are doing will lead the country to a total disaster' (Page No. 95, Ammanullah Khan). In his opinion, Pakistan's policy was dangerous, unnecessary and uneconomical. While discussing the US policy towards Pakistan, Mr. Khan mentioned that 'Pro-India lobby had more influence on the Capitol Hill. They became the determining factor of the US policy toward Pakistan' (Page No. 98, Ammanullah Khan).

However Khan's exoneration of the US government and its diplomats in the US Embassy, Islamabad, from general allegations of destabilizing Z.A. Bhutto's government in 1977 appears deliberate despite his sharp analytical skills. Mr. Khan mentioned that 'In my own view Bhutto was a very smart man but every smart man sometimes makes costly mistakes' (Page No. 44, Ammanullah Khan).

However, despite the enormous appeal and beauty of this book, somehow there are certain aspects which demand a rather critical approach. From the very first chapter, the reader commences to wait for a justification of the title which makes the reader to keep reading inquisitively. Till the end, the interest of the reader is upheld while waiting. It eventually does not meet the reader's expectations. Owing to the omission of key developments and moments from Pakistan's political

history, one finds that the climax is missing. The post-retirement part is not articulated well enough to make readers stick to the reading, thereby creating ambiguities. Countless letters of appreciation and numerous awards conferred on him by different US ambassadors in Pakistan are so recurring that it gives an impression of considerable self-praise. Khan keeps advising to both Pakistan and United States to change their policies for improvement of mutual relations, which is a recurring theme in the book.

Nonetheless, the book brilliantly highlights the social construct of Pakistani mindset and social inequalities, inhuman life and miserable picture of the system imbued with nepotism, hypocrisy, and materialism. Author also discusses the multiple aspects of poverty and the poorer financial status of most of the population, particularly people in the rural areas.

Author chooses a lucid and simple writing style to maintain interest in the narrative and impart maximum information to his readers. His highly eloquent skills of penning down various events make them come alive in the minds of the readers in graphic succession. His 30 years at the embassy provided him with an opportunity to work with a number of ambassadors and diplomats who all had stories to share which are well-articulated in his book. Khan also sheds light on inconsistencies of private and public life of high-ranking people in Pakistan. Over all, this book is a well-written memoir on the history of US-Pakistan relations through Mr. Khan's prism where he shared his first-hand knowledge of diplomacy.

# Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses



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