**Exporting surpluses**

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN 2021-11-11

SEQUELS are best avoided, unless one is a Steven Spielberg. He followed his hugely successful natural horror film Jaws with three sequels. Margaret Mitchell`s novel Gone with the Wind (1936)showed signs of ageing when resurrected in 1991, as Scarlett, a sequel by Alexandra Ripley. Peter Frankopan`s The New Silk Roads (2018) retreads his earlier blockbuster The Silk Roads (2015).

Had he patented the phrase, Peter Frankopan (professor of global history at Oxford University) might have made as much money from its ubiquitous use as Steve Spielberg has from his franchises. Instead, he published a weaker sequel that appears to have been written in response to an academic imperative or a publisher`s deadline.

Mr Frankopan`s sweep is nevertheless Gibbonesque: `The Silk Roads [are] so central in fact, that it is not possible to make sense of what today and tomorrow have in store without taking the region lying between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Pacific taken into account.

Every country lying on the Silk Roads will find mention in his book. However, it focuses primarily on the `binary antagonisms` between a dyslexic United States with its `haphazard, erratic and contradictory` policies and China`s consistent aim to be (in Dr Kissinger`s words)`the principal adviser to all humanity`.

Frankopan believes that `the sun rising in the east does not mean that it is setting in the west. Not yet, at least`. He adds that warfare nowadays has an `evolving character`; it no longer `has to go bang`. Frankopan quotes a British general who analysed modern warfare as an unstable mix of `energy, cash, corrupt business practices, cyber-attacks, assassinations, fake news, propaganda and good old-fashionedmilitaryintimidation`.

Applying that to Afghanistan, Frankopan helps one understand why the West was so reluctant to leave a country whose `vast mineral wealth ... has been estimated as being worth not billions, but trillions of dollars`.

Relying on a report of the US Geological Survey, he enumerates: `Afghanistan may hold nearly 60 million metric tons of copper, 2,200 million tons of iron deposits, 32,000 tons of mercury, millions of tons of potash, [and] huge reserves of rare earths such as lithium, beryllium, niobium, and caesium.

Rare as these may be, the most precious resource on our planet will remain water especially in heavily populated areas in Asia and Africa. Climate change will compound the crisis. Future wars will be fought over water, and in water.

For China, protection of the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca are vital to its commercial interests, especially when `40 per cent of all China`s trade` passes through those waterways. China`s inordinate invest-ment in our Gwadar is not a gamble. Gwadar is being developed to be `a new Shanghai, an access point linking China to the world beyond`.

Any book on the new Silk Roads must include an assessment of President Xi Jinping`s One Belt, One Road strategy, and within it, CPEC. A Sino-expert has observed flippantly that the OBOR is `the Baskin Robbins of partnerships, of fering flavours for everyone`. Pakistan has tasted all but a few highways, railways, transmission lines from Matiari to Lahore, hydropower plants in KP and AJK, a solar power plant at Bahawalpur, wind power ones in Sindh, and coal-based plants at Sahiwal, Port Qasim, Hub and the open coal mines at Thar.

Its numerous coal-based projects fly in the face of previous COP exhortations and President Xi Jinping`s latest undertaking to COP26 to `foster a green, low-carbon and circular economic system` and to `rein in the irrational development of energy-intensive and high-emissions projects`.

Anyone with trillions of dollars to spend inThird World countries should expect to lose before he can win.

Frankopan reveals that `Chinese officials themselves recognise that 80 per centof the money ploughed into Pakistan, half that invested into Myanmar, and a full third that is expended in Central Asia will probably be lost`.

Peering into the future, Frankopan foresees `the single most important question mark hanging over the Belt and Road not only in Pakistan but elsewhere too is how China deals with situations where major projects run into trouble or when restructuring of loans is necessary`.

Even scholars like the heavily qualified Dr Frankopan are entitled to moments of levity.

He tells us that `China`s rise has presented extraordinary problems for donkeys and donkey breeders from Central Asia to West Africa`. Because donkey hides are a key ingredient in a Chinese medicine called ejiao, demand for ejiao has halved the population of donkeys within China, forcing it to source from elsewhere. Donkey-rich countries have banned the export of their donkeys to China, creating a black market in donkey hides.

What could be a better way for Pakistan to reciprocate China`s CPEC largesse than by exporting our surplus donkeys from, say, Islamabad? The writer is an author.

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