



The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry

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BOOK REVIEW

The uncertain future of Afghanistan: terrorism, reconstruction, and great-power rivalry, edited by Nian Peng, Khalid Rahman, Singapore, Springer, Indo-Pacific Focus series, 2024, 207 pp., index, \$ 139.99 (£ 110.44) (Hardcover), ISBN 978-981-97-2408-6

The book *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry* provides an overview of the situation in Afghanistan and South Asia, where the U.S., China, and Russia are engaged economically and in security matters. It also examines the terrorism threats in Afghanistan that could jeopardize regional stability and security. Afghanistan remains a focal point for regional countries and great powers seeking to advance their influence due to their geopolitical and geoeconomics interests. The book offers a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Afghanistan and the challenges it faces, including inclusive governance, human rights, security and terrorism, the economy, relations with regional countries, and Afghan migration. These challenges facing Afghanistan are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. In the context of terrorism and stability, the book highlights the historical Soviet-Afghan war and the role of the 'Afghan Jihad', which led to the emergence of Al-Qaeda as the champion of Afghan Jihad and a global terrorist outfit with anti-West agendas. Furthermore, the book discusses major terrorist groups such as Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Al-Qaeda. While some of these groups remain adversaries of the Afghan Taliban, others are allies of the Taliban regime. The book also examines the efforts of regional and extra-regional countries to develop a comprehensive approach to Afghanistan's challenges, offering policy recommendations for China to lead regional efforts in economic, security, and trade domains.

Chapter one serves as the introduction to the book. In Chapter two written by Azam assesses five major reasons for the failure of the Afghan peace process, including ideological divisions, the presence of foreign forces, the engagement of multiple actors, spoilers, and a trust deficit (pp. 12–27). On (p. 15) Azam argues that Pakistan fulfilled its promises to the U.S. in negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban in Doha. Azam further contends that the self-assurance of a military victory diminished the chances for negotiations and a political settlement. Similarly, in Chapter two, the author draws a strong comparison between Iraq, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, noting that the Afghan Taliban are seen as Islamist and authoritarian, unwilling to share power or recognize Afghanistan as a democratic and pluralistic society, and failing to adopt an inclusive structure that represents all Afghans. Azam argues that democracy significantly diverges from the Pashtunwali and Islamism of the Taliban. This view contrasts with other scholars

who regard Pashtunwali, particularly the Jirga system, as embodying democratic values (e.g. the 2002–2019 Jirgas in Afghanistan, which contributed to the establishment of Afghan constitution in 2004). These scholars believe that the Taliban's ideology is more inherently Islamist and less influenced by Pashtun values. Also, in Chapter two, Azam emphasizes the role of criminality, corruption, and mafias within the Afghan republic, which bolstered the Taliban's opposition by portraying the Afghan republic as entirely dependent on the West and a puppet of foreign powers and lacks credibility for delivery security to Afghan public. On (p. 20), Azam rightly points out the American failure, noting that their extra-judicial killings in Afghanistan allowed the Taliban to seize the opportunity to gain more support from the rural population. American objectives in Afghanistan extended beyond military goals to include securing energy interests in Central Asia and allying with India in South Asia. Multiple actors were involved in the Afghan negotiations, including the Afghan government, US-NATO, and the Taliban, each with their own strategic objectives, preventing a unified approach. The clashes among various state actors further fueled the war in Afghanistan, with each pursuing competing interests. For instance, the US, China-Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia-Qatar, and India and Pakistan all vied for influence in the country, seeking outcomes that were entirely exclusive.

As Azam argues, 'Afghanistan became one of the worst victims of geography and geopolitics'. The trust deficit among warring parties has been a significant barrier in negotiations. Major foreign actors engaged in Afghanistan, including the US-NATO, Pakistan-India, Afghanistan and China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Pakistan-US, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, all suffered from mutual distrust. This lack of trust paralyzed the peace process, where Afghans played a lesser role compared to regional countries and the US. The Americans never trusted the Taliban due to their close ties with Al-Qaeda, and similarly, they did not trust the Afghan republic. The US had its own approach to the conflict, which was to withdraw as soon as possible and abandon Afghanistan, reminiscent of their actions during the Soviet Union's disintegration in the 1990s, leaving the country to various warlords who fought in a civil war. The Taliban had no intention of sharing power with the Afghan republic or any third party in Afghanistan, aiming instead to seize control entirely.

Chapter three of the book delves into the challenges confronting the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban's governance and social order are weakened by their lack of constitutional legitimacy, which impedes ordinary Afghans, particularly the youth, from pursuing progress and development. The Taliban are characterized as an ideological and religious-political entity that is incompatible with the modern democratic political systems of the contemporary world. Additionally, Chapter three notes that the Taliban have made no attempts to convene a Jirga for the formulation of a constitution or any other national-level mechanism. The exclusion of non-Taliban individuals from the system remains a major issue, with hardliners staunchly opposing the freedom and political participation of non-Taliban Afghans. This chapter also underscores the Taliban's human rights violations, particularly in restricting girls' and women's rights to education and employment. These violations remain a critical issue and a source of pressure

on the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the author recommends that the Taliban regime address these human rights issues to gain the confidence of the majority of Afghan people and the international community.

On the security and terrorism, the chapter delves into Taliban strong amity with the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) also known as Daesh. However, the Taliban are somehow unclear on their connection with the Al-Qaeda that has historical ties with the Taliban especially its founder Osama Bin Laden. Meanwhile, neighboring states including Pakistan, China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have serious observations on the terrorism and terror outfits, especially Tehreek-e-Taliban, East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other regional groups. While the author has rightly point out these threats present to the regional countries. However, it has delimited the counter-terrorism assistance (Weapons and technology) to the Taliban and close cooperation with the Taliban regime on these terrorists' threats. It's important to note that Taliban will not target groups that were their allies against US-NATO and Afghan republic as they would be inviting problems for their governance and security in the country. At the same time the Taliban have reiterated that they will not allow any terror groups to threaten regional countries from Afghan soil.

On (p. 38), the authors argue that the US prohibited transactions to Afghanistan through banks due to objections to designated Taliban figures in the top management of the Da Afghanistan Bank (Central Bank of Afghanistan), measures which have had a crippling effect on the Afghan economy. Despite this, the Taliban regime has not been formally recognized by any state in the world. For better economic performance and socio-economic development, the recognition of the Afghan government would be crucial. This could potentially boost regional transit trade arrangements and connectivity projects such as the CPEC extension, TAPI, CASA-1000, Trans-Afghan Railways (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan), and other critical projects.

On (p. 40), the authors argue that as the Taliban insurgency grew and intensified over the years, the Taliban developed linkages and shared resources with other militant and terrorist groups, particularly those aligned with their goal of ending the presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. The authors further states that ISK fighters established sanctuaries in various Afghan provinces, especially those bordering Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries. However, the author has not provided substantial sources for this assertion. Islamic State Khorasan has no territorial control in Afghanistan, and their sleeper cells have been consistently targeted by the Taliban. While ISKP remains a threat not only to Afghanistan but also to regional countries, addressing this issue will require a regional approach.

The chapter also highlights the formation of the TTP and its relations with the Afghan Taliban. The author incorrectly suggests a close linkage between Islamic State Khorasan and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as the former is considered a foe by the latter. Both the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban have stated that Islamic State Khorasan is Khawariji (dissenter) in Islam. Both the Afghan/Pakistani Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan struggle for operational capability and recruitment. While the Afghan Taliban run a state, TTP recruitment has been

higher compared to Islamic State Khorasan along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The issue of the TTP, with Pakistan accusing the Afghan Taliban of providing shelter to the group, has strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. While Pakistan has asked the Afghan Taliban to take military action against the TTP in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban have instead relocated TTP members to other parts of the country (p. 43).

It is important to note that military action against the TTP by the Afghan Taliban could strengthen the ranks of ISK, as many Afghans and Pakistani Taliban members might join Islamic State Khorasan, potentially embroiling Afghanistan in a civil war that would impact the entire region, including Pakistan. In this context, the Taliban are acting as rational actors, seeking to avoid new conflicts and the onset of another civil war, given Afghanistan's long history of conflict. The Taliban regime has consistently encouraged the Pakistani government to engage in dialogue with the TTP. On one occasion, the Afghan Taliban even mediated talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government.

The authors also highlight the issue of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is considered a threat to China's autonomous region of Xinjiang. China's approach to addressing the ETIM in Afghanistan has been cautious, pragmatic, and gradual. China aims to prevent both India and the US from reestablishing their presence in Afghanistan as they did before 2021, using it against China. China perceives that instability in Afghanistan could jeopardize its investment projects in the region, as an unstable Afghanistan could become a haven for anti-China forces. The authors do not compare the approaches of China and Pakistan regarding the Taliban, noting only that China's approach to the ETIM issue is more realistic than Pakistan's approach to the TTP.

This chapter on the terrorism threat to regional countries is somewhat ambiguous and does not provide a comprehensive analysis from the viewpoints of Afghan scholars. While the authors label many terrorist groups as present in Afghanistan and threatening regional countries, they limit the discussion on counter-terrorism assistance to the Taliban in targeting these groups in a manner that avoids descending Afghanistan into a new civil war. The issue of terrorism in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan is complex, and regional countries have failed to come up with credible solutions. Although the Afghan Taliban remain ideologically friendly to Al-Qaeda and other terror groups, it is evident that they have learned lessons from the 1990s and will not allow these groups to freely operate in Afghanistan.

Chapter four, written by Yu Hong Fu, analyzes the non-traditional security threats present in South Asia as a result of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. These threats have the potential to spill over into other countries, especially in Central and South Asia. The chapter highlights that Afghanistan's geographical location and prolonged conflict with both domestic and foreign actors have deeply affected surrounding areas. The return of the Afghan Taliban to power in Afghanistan is expected to result in cross-regional linkage effects, with academic and policy circles concentrating on issues of terrorism and geopolitics. Specifically, there is concern about the impacts of the Afghan Taliban's return on transnational terrorism, the reactions of key foreign

countries to the new Taliban regime, and the international community's success in urging the Afghan Taliban to adopt more flexible and pragmatic policies.

This chapter also delves into the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) as a threat to Afghanistan and regional countries, particularly with their global caliphate dismantled in Iraq and Syria, and their struggles to recruit members in fragile countries such as Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda has historically maintained a friendly relationship with the Taliban, and vice versa. This argument is supported by the killing of Zawahiri in Kabul by US operations termed 'over the horizon'. Terrorism scholars widely noted that Al-Qaeda began pursuing more limited strategic goals, emphasizing localism and incrementalism, an approach commonly referred to as 'controlled pragmatism' and 'strategic patience'. However, this chapter does not provide substantial policy recommendations to effectively engage the Taliban in overcoming these security and terrorism threats.

In Chapter five of the book, Hamid Nasri assesses the post-9/11 objectives and the consistently failing policies of the US-led NATO in Afghanistan. Over the past two decades, the United States expended over a trillion dollars in an overt effort to nation-build in Afghanistan, establish national institutions, counter insurgents, stabilize electoral politics, uphold human rights, and prevent the Taliban from regaining control of Kabul. However, the covert objectives of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan included increasing its influence in the South Asian region, maintaining control over the strategic 'Cockpit of Asia', monitoring resurgent Russia, the 'rogue' state of Iran, and nuclear-armed Pakistan, as well as encircling the rising power of China.

In Chapter six, Xin Yi Qu and Nian Peng analyze the extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Afghanistan, considering it advantageous not only to Afghanistan but also to China and Pakistan. However, they note that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of BRI, faces obstacles in implementing projects and establishing a safe investment environment in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Chapter seven, Najimdeen Bakare analyzes the Russian engagement with Afghanistan from a theoretical framework, considering historical perspectives such as the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and their recent interactions with the Afghan Taliban. This chapter addresses critical questions including the primary considerations of Russia's policy towards Afghanistan, the evolution of this policy since 2001, Russia's strategy for engaging with the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and whether neighboring countries like Pakistan should exercise caution regarding Russia's renewed interest in Afghanistan.

Chapter eight, written by Muneeb Yousuf and Nazir Ahmad Mir, provides an overview of India's engagement with Afghanistan before and after 9/11, as well as the Taliban's reemergence in the country. The U.S. removal of the Taliban opened a political space for India to reengage in Afghanistan and participate in post-Taliban state-building efforts. Over the years, India has employed a soft power approach through developmental projects in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's resurgence, supported by Pakistan, has once again challenged India's interests in the region. The subsequent U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the Taliban's return, backed by Pakistan, have raised significant security concerns for India. This

chapter also assesses whether there have been any changes in the Taliban's policies.

In Chapter nine, Khalid Rahman explores Pakistan's relationship with the U.S. after 9/11 and the emergence of new threats. Pakistan faced challenging policy decisions. Cooperation with the U.S. in its war in Afghanistan – a neighboring country with which Pakistan shared historical, religious, cultural, and ethnic ties – was fraught with risks due to the global context and Pakistan's political and economic constraints. Total opposition to the U.S. or remaining neutral was also deemed imprudent for similar reasons. Consequently, Islamabad chose to ally with the U.S., but the nature and scope of this cooperation continually shifted due to various push and pull factors that emerged during the war. This alliance was fraught with difficulties and was never smooth. This chapter examines the foreign policy challenges Islamabad confronted in the post-9/11 era, considering the ambiguous objectives of the war. It also evaluates the prolonged U.S. war and categorizes the cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan into six distinct phases.

Chapter ten, authored by Hideaki Shinoda, focuses on Japan's assistance to Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era and after the Taliban regained power. Japan's policy positioned it as one of the top financial donors to Afghanistan after 2001. Japan has been deeply engaged in the 'reconstruction' of Afghanistan through initiatives such as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), the 'Ogata Initiatives', and the development of 'Ring Roads', particularly in the early stages of reconstruction. However, the sentiment towards Afghanistan after 2021 is likely to negatively impact Japan's overall commitment to international peace-building efforts. The perception that Japan may lack a clear policy guideline for effective peace-building activities continues to create anxieties among those involved with conflict-prone countries. Afghanistan holds significant importance for Japan, and a critical question after the fall of Kabul in 2021 is whether Japan can afford to resume its readiness to contribute to international peace-building efforts in the near future. The book concludes by providing a comprehensive analysis of the conditions in Afghanistan related to terrorism, economic development, security, and the regional approach and great power rivalry.

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