



RCAS Commentary

Afghanistan's Tightrope

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About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

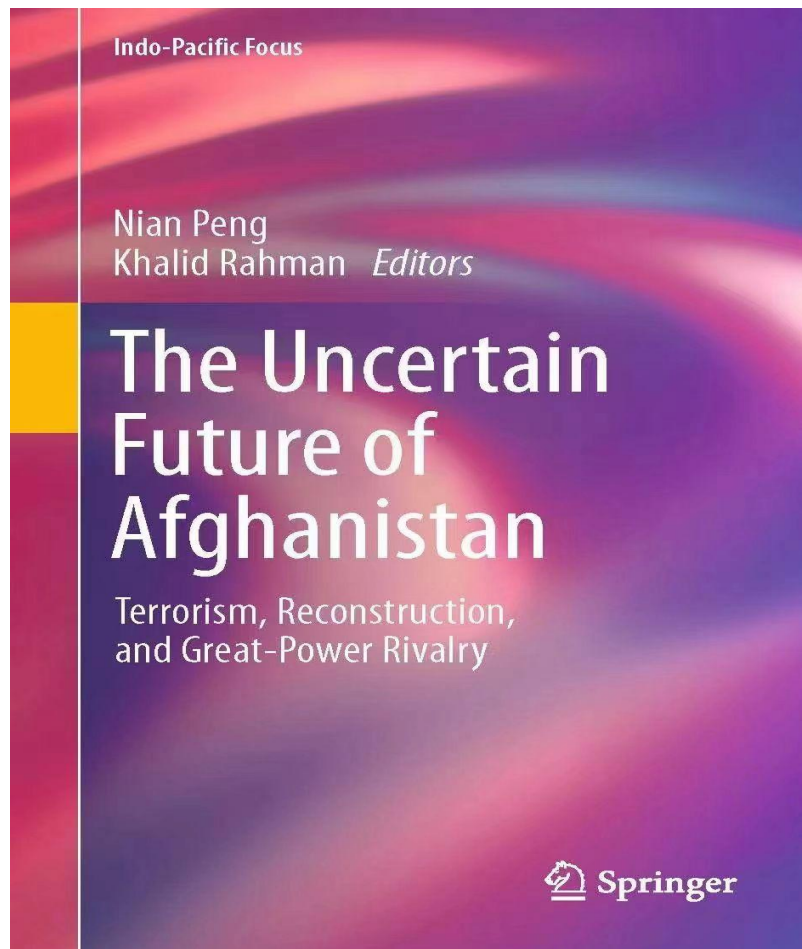
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Afghanistan confronts numerous challenges both at home and abroad, despite having emerged from four decades of conflicts and civil wars and with aspirations of a peaceful and prosperous future among its people. *The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan: Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry* examines the nation's foreign and domestic policies.



▲ The title page of RCAS new book of Afghanistan.

It discusses the main concerns facing the Taliban government, including peace negotiations, terrorist attacks, collaboration on the Belt and Road Initiatives and the approaches used by major powers and neighbouring nations to engage with the new Afghan government, often referred to as Taliban 2.0.

By combining perspectives from government officials, academics and think-tank specialists from China, Japan and South Asian states, the book contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

The contributors come from various disciplines, addressing security issues and regional reactions, primarily focusing on Afghanistan's relations with China, India, Japan, Pakistan, Russia and the United States. The US-Taliban peace negotiations failed for several reasons, including ideological differences, a lack of trust and the involvement of numerous stakeholders and spoilers.

Mansoor Khan and Tahir Khan note that the non-recognition of the Taliban government presents political and legal challenges to launching an ambitious programme and agenda for economic integration and infrastructure development. Currently, capacity limitations severely impact Afghan state institutions. One of the primary reasons for the slow progress of China's economic investments in Afghanistan is the ongoing tensions between the US and China.

There is still much to be done to effectively combat the terrorist organisations operating out of Afghanistan. Relations with Pakistan have deteriorated. However, economic interaction between Iran and Afghanistan has grown. China has attempted to separate the agenda for economic cooperation from political and security issues.

Yu Hong Fu from Shanghai International Studies University observes that terrorist attacks in Pakistan have continued since the Afghan Taliban assumed power, with only a brief interlude. The neighbouring countries of Afghanistan are engaging more actively and positively with the new Taliban government. The Taliban may be able to address global concerns if they cooperate and communicate constructively.

Currently, the Afghan Taliban are the only indigenous force capable of stabilising Afghanistan. It may be crucial for Afghanistan's neighbours to collaborate in exploring ways to support the Afghan Taliban in bringing about change that is more inclusive, open and moderate.

Mairaj ul-Hamid Nasri highlights the disastrous US approach in Afghanistan, noting that the US lost more than 2,400 soldiers and spent over a trillion dollars on its longest conflict. As the number of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan increased, the Afghan National Army-lacking sufficient training, funding and a professional attitude – faced significant challenges.

When the UN secretary-general suggested a 'political settlement,' the US chose to escalate hostilities. Despite repeated acknowledgements by American officials, including President Obama and various generals, that the war in Afghanistan could not be won, the fighting continued.

Xin Qu and Nian Peng point out that China prioritises promoting the growth of human capital through policy coordination, financial aid, people-to-people exchanges and professional training programmes, in addition to developing physical infrastructure. China is interested in accessing Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources. However, China has adopted a cautious approach to implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the country, recognising the significant risks involved. The future of the China-Taliban relationship and the BRI in Afghanistan will be heavily influenced by the global economic slowdown, geopolitical tensions, and the Taliban's ability to effectively govern and address these challenges.

Najimdeen Bakare observes that the Soviet Union's exit from Afghanistan did not entirely diminish Russia's influence in the region. Russia's ongoing relationship with India has served as the primary means of engagement with successive Afghan governments. The US invasion of Afghanistan prompted Russia to develop strategic interests in the area, making it crucial for Russia to reassert itself both economically and strategically. While relations between Russia and the Taliban were previously tense, Russian policy shifted due to the Taliban's growing influence. Russia is now mending fences with Kabul. The author concludes that cooperating with Moscow will benefit regional actors.

Muneeb Yousuf and Nazir Ahmad Mir of a New Delhi think tank remark that during the first period of Taliban rule, New Delhi withdrew its missions, a decision influenced in part by the close cooperation between the Taliban and Pakistan's security institutions. India appears to have decided to limit its involvement in development and humanitarian initiatives for now while keeping other options open for the future.

Khalid Rahman notes that Pakistan has been walking a tightrope with its post-9/11 policies in Afghanistan. As the US-Taliban conflict dragged on, Washington began complaining about Pakistan's perceived shortcomings. Throughout the 20-year campaign, Islamabad appeared to be in a constant state of delicate balancing. With a renewed sense of self-assurance, groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and the Islamic State reemerged, acquiring modern and sophisticated US weaponry left behind by American soldiers. Consequently, the past two years have seen an alarming rise in terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

Hideaki Shinoda examines Japan's approach to Afghanistan after 2001 and notes that the country's initial motivation was a desire to maintain alignment with the United States. After 2009, both nations expressed a desire to withdraw from Afghanistan sooner rather than later. By that time, Japan had reverted to its customary low-key approach to international security matters.

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About Author

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