



RCAS Commentary

Book Review: Afghanistan's Rocky Road Ahead: What Needs to be Done?

Pervaiz Ali Mahesar

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, Pakistan

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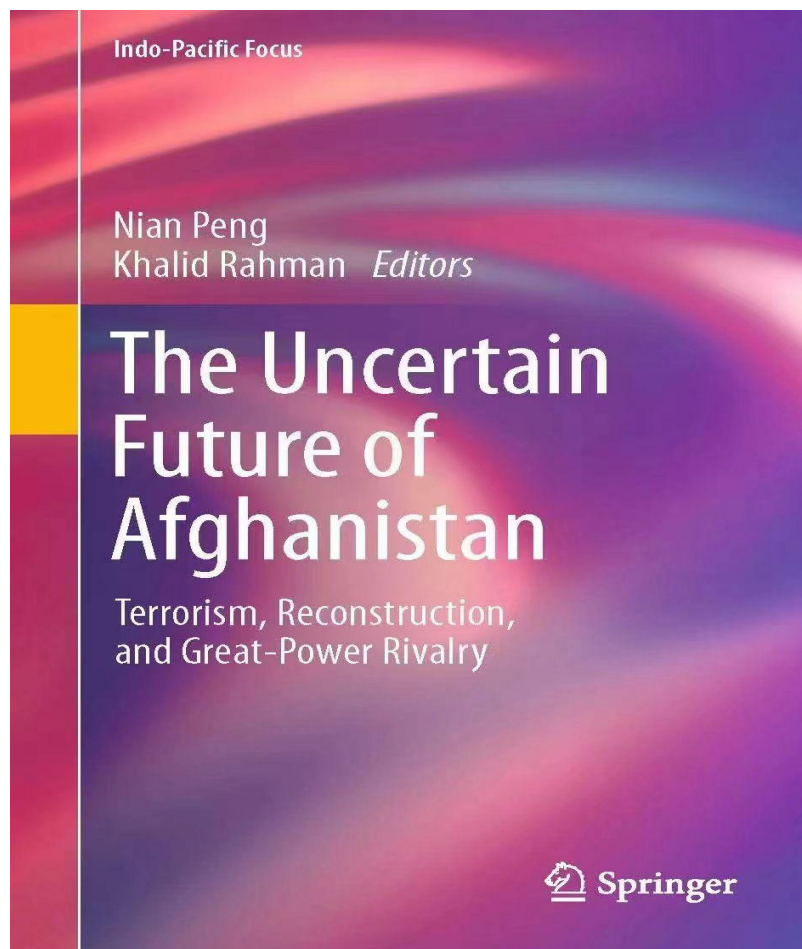
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Address: 1507B, EASTCORE1, No.398, Kwun Tong, Kooloon, Hong Kong
Ph: 00852 2397 7886|Email: hkrcas@163.com|Web: www.rcas.top

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Afghanistan, a landlocked country, has been steering tumultuous geopolitical upheavals for decades. Anarchy, chaos, and uncertainty have loomed large in Afghanistan. Since the horrific terrorist attacks in America, Kabul has become a focal point for the western world. Indeed, this book '*The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan-Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry*', under review is not the first to explore Afghanistan; numerous other books and articles have provided readers with insights from various perspectives. This book is an addition to the already existing literature on Afghanistan and brings together Chinese and Pakistani experts. In the following sections, I review briefly the impressions of various Pakistani and Chinese scholars given in different chapters.



▲ The title page of RCAS new book of Afghanistan.

This book focuses on how Afghanistan's future has remained uncertain and what has been the position and role of the Afghan Taliban, America, China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran.

In the introduction, the writer shifts blame for Afghanistan's uncertainty to foreign intervention and divisions within Taliban ranks. Furthermore, he explains that external factors, such as China-US geopolitical contestation and India as a key stakeholder, increased their role with America's exit from Afghan land. America adopted a carrot-and-stick policy for the Taliban by engaging and putting economic sanctions on Afghanistan. In this geopolitical tumult, New Delhi intensified its efforts to rekindle its relations with the Taliban and evade entanglement with Pakistan and China. At the domestic level, Afghanistan saw an increase and renewal of terrorism (Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K)) and civilian protests after American withdrawal, which multiplied challenges for the Afghan government.

The writer offers a succinct explanation in chapter two and suggests how to conduct peace negotiations and also identifies the reasons behind their failure to restore peace and stability in the region. The efforts for negotiating peace were conducted at various times, including in 2005, 2011, 2015, and 2016. Despite putting a lot of time and energy into turning the tide of evolving challenges, these peace negotiations failed to deliver. The writer identifies the causes of its failure: first, the ideological divide; second, the presence of foreign forces; third, a multiplicity of actors; fourth, a trust deficit; and fifth, spoilers (page 12). Further, the writer clarifies the difference between peace negotiations and peace agreements. The author asserts: "When peace negotiations fail, no peace agreement emerges, leading to war (or civil war)." Further, it is clarified that "lack of trust, timing, improper communication, domestic violence, military stalemate, hope for victory, and ambitious leaders" (p. 14) contribute to the failure of peace efforts.

Interestingly, the writer examines a few significant challenges in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. With the establishment of Taliban offices in Doha in 2013, the era of US-Taliban rapprochement began in February 2020. The Afghani youth bulge has doubled in two decades, from 19.68 to 40 million. The author cautions that failure to tackle these challenges could potentially undermine Afghanistan's peace and stability. Although the Afghan Taliban was partially successful in bringing peace and stability to some parts of Afghanistan, while challenges were enormous, for instance: lack of domestic cohesion, constitutional framework, geopolitical, economic, human rights, and migration. In addition to this, the threat of terrorist groups also existed. Indeed, terrorist groups such as the ISKP, Al-Qaeda, Dawesh, TTP, ETIM, and IMU posed a significant threat to Afghanistan. After all, the 20 years of radical insurgency against the US-led alliance in Afghanistan were not easy; it not only affected the Taliban's outlook and way of thinking, but also brought them into the global media spotlight following their participation in the Doha

peace process from 2013 to 2021. The writer identifies two important challenges faced by the Afghan interim government: first, the Taliban governance style was not acceptable to an international community. Secondly, America imposed sanctions on Afghanistan. Despite these challenges, Afghanistan also managed economic interaction with the regional countries. The most important among these trans-Afghan connectivity projects were: TAPI, CASA, IPI, BRI, and CPEC. The growing influence of China in the Central Asian region, which includes states such as Pakistan and Iran, has expanded the reach and significance of Afghanistan in the region. The writer suggests that Beijing should play an active role and enhance cooperation and coordination in the region among different stakeholders. The Shanghai Cooperation is also one of the leading examples for enhancing strategic cooperation and connectivity in the region through BRI trade and investment. (p.58)

The writer crisply explains Taliban rule in Afghanistan, as well as security threats and regional response. In this chapter, Yu Hong Fu delves into the idea that the return of the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan could potentially create cross-regional linkages. Understanding the significance of the situation and China's increasing interest in the region, the writer illustrates China's active role in fostering a "Community of Shared Future." China has demonstrated its role, activism, and pragmatism in bringing Afghanistan into the regional framework with a focus on economic cooperation and regional integration. The Chinese writer also notes that political instability and security pose challenges. These factors have significantly impacted Chinese trust and confidence. However, economic investment requires peace and political stability at the domestic level. With caution and care, the writer concludes that stakeholders in the region have a long-term interest in Afghanistan. Hence, these states need to have a collective, cohesive, and long-term approach towards Afghanistan.

It argues how America pursued its policy after 9/11 and how it failed to bring about change and prosperity in Afghanistan. After the world witnessed the horrific attack on the New York twin towers on September 11, 2001, Washington made a decision to launch an attack on Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. After spending trillions of dollars and engaging in more than sixteen years of conflict in Afghanistan, the United States was forced to withdraw quickly from the war-torn region, leaving many unanswered questions. The writer identifies hidden motives of Washington in Afghanistan, such as increasing its influence, watching Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and encircling China. Furthermore, the writer succinctly states: "Despite lavish expenditures and the loss of innocent civilians, the US has terribly failed to achieve its overt or covert goals, thereby destroying peace and stability in the region." America failed due to its lack of understanding of Afghan culture, tribal politics, and the underestimated power of Al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, "due to their negligence and confusion, the Taliban received ample time to reorganize and reemerge" (p: 83). Although America had also developed an Afghan National Army, they faced resistance and a trust deficit. Hence, there was less progress on this front.

The writer delves into the launch of the Chinese project, the Belt and Road Initiative, and its engagement with Afghanistan in chapter six. Has this project made any progress, and what are the challenges it faces? The writer identifies five areas in which more focus is required: infrastructure development, political stability, and addressing security challenges. Furthermore, the writer suggests the need for coordination in formulating a relevant policy, creating a free moment for trade along the border, providing aid, ensuring the connectivity of various projects, and enhancing people-to-people exchanges. Afghanistan can benefit from the Chinese projects only when there is political stability, internal cohesion, policy coordination, and peaceful relations with its neighbors.

Further, the writer looks at the Russian engagement in Afghanistan and explores its future. Russia had invaded Afghanistan before 1990 and had a significant influence in the region. America, realizing the threat from growing communism, tried to contain Russian ideology. Russia is deeply involved in Afghanistan, both individually and through collaboration with India. In chapter eight, the author scrutinizes the relationship between India and Afghanistan and concentrates on the resurgence of the Taliban. Analysts often highlight India's policies and its geostrategic interaction with the Afghan Taliban. In particular, New Delhi began to feel threatened after the resurgence of the Taliban in the 1990s. While making sense of the security challenge, India saw a growing wave of militants and insurgents in Kashmir. But after the United States exited Afghanistan, India showed interest and adopted a "soft power approach" in terms of socio-economic engagement in Afghanistan. Pakistan-India relations have seen less rapprochement. It's interesting to observe that the amount of unofficial and illegal trade surpasses that of official trade. Despite repeated efforts to move towards friendly relations, the India-America nexus has consistently made the situation more vulnerable, risky, and uncertain. In fact, apart from traditional and non-traditional security threats to India-Pakistan relations, the Taliban or Afghan factor has loomed large in their relations.

In conclusion, the editor highlights the role of New Delhi in Afghanistan and explains how the former has felt threatened by Taliban-Pakistan nexuses. Indeed, India has made significant investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure development, but China-Pakistan factors have complicated these socio-economic interactions. While sensing the re-emergence and regrouping of the Afghan Taliban, India began to de-limit its engagement and, at the same time, opened the doors for humanitarian assistance. The editor concludes that India needs to adapt to the emerging challenges in Afghanistan.

In fact, this edited book offers ideas and perspectives on Afghanistan and its uncertain future. The book traces Afghanistan's history and succinctly identifies factors shaping Afghan uncertainty. It also examines the role of stakeholders like Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and India. In addition to this, it discusses the Afghan situation before and after

the attacks on twin towers in New York, as well as the great power rivalry between China, India, Russia, and America in Afghanistan. Finally, it elaborates on challenges faced by Taliban-India relations. However, this edited book does not focus on the great power rivalry over Afghanistan and its future prospects. Rather, it focuses more on India, Pakistan, Russia, and China in Afghanistan. We found some of the chapters to be repetitions of the previous ones. In fact, this edition adds to the literature on Pakistan-Afghan relations, strategic relations, and great power politics. It is worth reading for students of International Relations, International Politics, Political Science, Defense, and Strategic Studies.

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About Author

Dr. Pervaiz Ali Mahesar is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. Email: pervaiz.mahesar@usindh.edu.pk.