



The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan

Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry

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The Uncertain Future of Afghanistan. Terrorism, Reconstruction, and Great-Power Rivalry is an interesting book that comprises ten chapters and in the first one, the editors introduced the remaining nine chapters. Experts from different regions with rich and current data threw light on the future of Afghanistan in a well-organized manner. It is an exciting voyage of understanding the enigma that is Afghanistan. It is an enriching narrative of the push and pull factors that influenced political developments in Afghanistan in the 21st century. After the withdrawal, the US imposed economic sanctions to pressure the Taliban for concessions and also engaged them to prevent Afghanistan from swinging to China. India lost much of its influence in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. In September 2023, China became the first country to formally name a new ambassador to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. The book has analyzed the domestic politics and perspectives on the foreign relations of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Azam delineates the ups and downs of Afghanistan's peace negotiations in the 21st century and identifies several factors such as ideological divides, the presence of foreign forces, trust deficit, and the diversity of actors and

spoilers that doomed the peaceful settlement of Afghanistan's imbroglio. The author says that efforts for peace and reconciliation started at least as early as 2005 when the German intelligence service and the British established contacts with the Afghan Taliban. Eventually, the Doha Accord was signed on 29th February 2020 nevertheless it neither paved the way for the honorable exit of NATO nor saved the US-supported Government of Ashraf Ghani.

Mansoor and Tahir tackled the issue of the Taliban's challenges after regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021 and highlighted the foreign policy priority areas of the interim government. The chapter reviews the level of threat due to the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. It also brings to the limelight the efforts of Afghanistan under the Taliban to create conducive conditions for a focus on economic growth, trade, transit, and infrastructure for promoting regional economic integration and connectivity that can bring lasting stability to Afghanistan. The authors opine that the proactive role of China will gradually increase stability in Afghanistan and prepare the ground for mega investments in connectivity projects under the BRI and by other global and regional investors.

Fu deals with Afghanistan under Taliban rule, focusing on security threats and regional response. After regaining control in 2021, the Afghan Taliban continued to crack down on hostile armed groups inside Afghanistan. It also throws light on the pragmatic approach of China towards the de facto Taliban government in Afghanistan. China's most important interest in Afghanistan is to ensure security and stability. In addition to preventing terrorism from spreading to Xinjiang, China prefers to view Afghanistan through the prism of regional connectivity. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) focuses on strengthening economic ties and improving connectivity with Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe. Besides, it agreed at the end of 2017 to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan. In the end, Fu opines that key foreign countries have long-term common interests in the stability of Afghanistan and that the Afghan Taliban is currently the only indigenous force capable of bringing stability to Afghanistan.

Nasri collected relevant data to augment his viewpoint on the issue of US post-9/11 objectives and policy in Afghanistan. The US launched a war on terror and attacked Afghanistan on October 07, 2001, and left Afghanistan in September 2021. Overtly the US tried to 'build' an Afghan nation, develop national institutions, counter the insurgents, smoothen electoral politics, ensure respect for human rights, and not allow the Taliban to get control of Afghanistan again. Nevertheless, the covert objectives of the US's presence in Afghanistan were to enhance influence in the South Asian region, control the 'Cockpit of Asia', keep an eye on resurgent Russia, the 'rogue' state of Iran, nuclear-armed Pakistan and encircle rising China. Nasri concludes that the US has failed to achieve its overt or covert goals during its occupation of Afghanistan.

Qu and Peng in Chapter 6 analyzed China-Afghanistan Relations and the BRI with a focus on progress, challenges, and prospects. The Taliban after regaining power in Afghanistan tried to

strengthen relations with China. After the US withdrew, China deepened its engagement with Afghanistan at various levels. Through participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Taliban aimed to strengthen Afghanistan's economic and social progress. China safeguards its substantial investments and infrastructure projects associated with the CPEC in Pakistan. Afghanistan's support of the BRI ensures the stable development of both the BRI and the CPEC. China regards Afghanistan as a crucial piece of the larger puzzle that connects the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. The authors conclude that the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan could be advantageous for both China and Afghanistan as part of the BRI.

Bakare in Chapter 7 discussed Russia's engagement in Afghanistan pre- and post-2001. The NATO invasion of Afghanistan renewed Russia's strategic interests in the region. The author explains how the United States succumbed to strategic fatigue / hegemonic overstretch. Bakare delineates Russia's Afghan policy through Russia's NSS and FPCR documents. Afghanistan is paramount to Russia's geostrategic positioning. The chapter concludes that Russia does not pose any form of immediate or direct threat to the region's security; instead, the regional players stand to gain from cooperating with Moscow.

Yousuf and Mir explain India-Afghanistan Relations and the Return of the Taliban in chapter 8. India's policy towards Afghanistan is analyzed in light of developments in the post-NATO invasion of Afghanistan. India got space in Afghanistan when NATO occupied Afghanistan in 2001. Given the past policy of the Taliban toward India, the return of the group remained a challenge for India.

K. Rehman objectively analyzed Pakistan's Policy towards Afghanistan after the NATO invasion. It tackled the issue in a very organized way and elaborated on how Pakistan adjusted its policy in the context of global and regional

developments. In the wake of the 9/11 incident, Pakistan faced hard policy choices. Islamabad became a US ally, but this cooperation was considerably influenced by the push and pull factors arising during the war. The chapter categorizes the cooperation between the US and Pakistan into six phases and looks at the chaotic endgame in Afghanistan, the challenges faced by the Taliban government, and policy options for Pakistan in the rapidly changing scenario.

In the last chapter, Shinoda analyzed Japan's Policy Towards Afghanistan since 2001. Japan's involvement in Afghanistan was outstanding in its history of overseas assistance. Japan is intensively engaged in the "reconstruction" of Afghanistan through

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), Ogata Initiatives, and Ring Roads. The author says that Japan would have to find its role in a very modest manner after the harsh lesson in Afghanistan. Since Japan has lost ambitious goals in Afghanistan, it will opt for more realistic approaches to crises in the future.

The book is full of current and relevant data about the crisis in Afghanistan. It discussed the issue in the light of national interests of different countries. There are typos for instance on page 109 Sar-i-pul is written as Sarpur province. The rich data and objective analysis make the book a must-read for understanding contemporary Afghanistan.