

Review - Afghanistan, Pakistan and Strategic Change

Written by Wali Aslam

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Afghanistan, Pakistan and Strategic Change: Adjusting Western Regional Policy
Edited by: Joachim Krause & Charles King Mallory IV
London and New York: Routledge, 2014

The United States is set to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan after over a decade of involvement in the region. Afghanistan has very recently held a successful first round of presidential elections, setting the stage for a new face to assume the leadership of the country after thirteen years of President Hamid Karzai in power. Accordingly, this book edited by Krause and Mallory is a very timely contribution to the literature on Afghanistan, as well as on the wider region. In the context of international disengagement with Afghanistan, the book addresses three questions: 'What has gone wrong in the past with regard to Afghanistan and what strategic adjustments are needed?'; 'Is Pakistan a strategic ally of the West, or has Pakistan become a strategic problem?'; and 'What are the possible future scenarios and policy options, and what does strategic readjustment really mean?' The book is, therefore, divided into three parts, with each part addressing each one of these questions. The key topics this book addresses include: the prospects of peace and democratic transition in Afghanistan; militant Islam in South Asia and how it features in Pakistan's engagement with the West; the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) withdrawal from the country and its impact on Afghanistan and the wider region; and a critical evaluation of the Western involvement in the region since October 2001.

What has gone wrong with Afghanistan?

The first part of the book examines what has gone wrong in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001. In the first chapter of this part, entitled 'Not too little, but too late: International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) strategic restart of 2010 in light of the coalition's previous mistakes,' Schroeder argues that the international community's initial engagement with Afghanistan lacked any long-term plans concerning political and physical reconstruction of the country. The Western policies at the time were mainly focused on the Afghans living in urban areas, thereby neglecting around seventy-five per cent of Afghanistan's rural residents. While there was some initial progress in the country during the first three years after the invasion, a sizeable number of Afghans were untouched by that progress, and for them the Western involvement brought no tangible improvements to their lives. The difficulties of reaching the rural population given the lack of infrastructure, such as mountain roads, did not help in involving the rural population in the plan to establish a stable and democratic Afghanistan. It is no surprise, therefore, that the population in these rural areas contributed greatly to the Taliban cadres, once the insurgency in Afghanistan picked up speed in 2006. Furthermore, as Schroeder argues, the Western powers were also reluctant to dispatch ground forces to Afghanistan's distant corners to ensure stability and order in the aftermath of the invasion in 2001. Instead, they relied on local militia leaders and their fighters to act as legitimate security forces in these areas. This ill-thought-out strategy had the effect of dragging the international community into the tribal politics of Afghanistan. This in turn led to the favouring of certain tribal leaders, thereby attracting others' jealousy and setting the stage for further divisions within the country towards the end of the decade. These newly powerful tribal leaders might prove an additional hurdle in the prospects of peace in the aftermath of the US departure from the region.

Though there was much initial goodwill on the part of the international community at the invasion's outset, this did not prove very helpful in the absence of a clear and coherent strategy for Afghanistan at that time. The US was only able

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to present a formal strategy after President Obama's arrival in the White House in 2009; the new administration outlined its AfPak approach in March 2009. This was done roughly three years after the insurgency had taken root in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the surge of troops promised by Obama's strategy never fully materialised on the ground, because not enough troops were sent to the country to run full-scale counter-insurgency operations. The surge of troops in Afghanistan, therefore, became a story of 'too little and too late'.

In Chapter 3, entitled 'Prospects for transition in Afghanistan', Cordesman further highlights the lack of coherence in America's post-invasion plan to stabilise the country. The new constitution of the country, as he argues in this chapter, also did not help in this regard. Though the constitution was drafted by Afghans, it was heavily influenced by a number of Western governments. The constitution encouraged an over-centralised government run from Kabul, depriving the country's provincial and district-level governments from receiving aid and development packages, leading to an increasing sense of resentment among them for the central government. The constitution also facilitated corruption: whilst the international community's attention shifted to the central government at large, a small number of the elite members of the Afghan central government machinery became ever richer, leaving very little for their constituents, government departments, and other areas of the country.

Overall, the first section of the book contains many rich empirical details. Any reader interested in a first-hand account of what went wrong in Afghanistan after the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom will not be disappointed. The section competently highlights the key failures of the Western policy towards the country (and the region) in the aftermath of the invasion in 2001. These failures led directly to the rise of the Taliban insurgency in 2005/6. If the Western approach towards the country had been better planned from the start, the outcome of the intervention in the country would have been different in 2014.

The role of Pakistan

The second part of the book studies the role played by Pakistan in destabilising Afghanistan. Brasher and Ganguly in Chapter 6, entitled 'Militant Islam in South Asia: past trajectories and present implications,' present a detailed sketch of how militant Islam took root in the region and how the state of Pakistan colluded with some of the groups as proxies to counter India's conventional supremacy in the subcontinent. This chapter provides a lot of useful detail concerning a number of militant groups in Pakistan and their possible links to the insurgency in neighbouring Afghanistan. Some of these groups include Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba.

Fair examines the role of Pakistan in destabilising the region in Chapter 7, entitled 'U.S.-Pakistan relations: ten years after 9/11,' by taking a closer look at US-Pakistan relations since 2001. She argues that successive US administrations have dreamt of a strong longer-term relationship with Pakistan, on the assumption that the two countries share common interests in the region. Fair asserts that in the years after the invasion of Afghanistan, the US over-relied on the Pakistan army to deal with terrorism in the region, without fully realising that the Pakistani state did not share the Americans' views of who were friends and who were foes. Pakistani security agencies did help the US apprehend some major al-Qaeda figures, but they did not cut off their alliances with a number of other militant groups, such as the Haqqani network – in fact, these groups were provided sanctuary by Pakistan to launch attacks on the international forces in Afghanistan. Fair, in this chapter, states that the US should abandon the hope that there can be a fundamental shift in Pakistan's views towards the region. It should instead recognise that Pakistan is unlikely to abandon its reliance on Islamic militants in South Asia to help fight its proxy wars. In such a scenario, the US should focus on building a more 'transactional' relationship with Pakistan, expecting the country to fully deliver on each transaction and putting forth consequences if this transaction is not completed. This, she argues, will be a more realistic and possibly successful approach to adopt in the given circumstances, in which there is a serious lack of trust between the two – a gulf that is likely to be widened in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the region this year.

The future outlook for the region

The third section examines the situation from a wider regional perspective. It states that, although there has been

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much discussion of the new 'great game' in the region, there is little likelihood that other regional great powers, such as Russia and China, would be very interested in a post-2014 Afghanistan. However, the chapters argue that India and Pakistan are likely to be very involved in the country to settle their decades-old rivalries with each other. A future Afghanistan may fall under the control of three different entities: Pashtuns supported by Pakistan, a new form of Northern Alliance supported by India (and perhaps Iran), and a very weak central government with its control limited to Kabul and the surrounding area. Ultimately, the authors of this section argue, responsibility will fall to the Europeans and Americans to deal with the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan later this year. A successful resolution to some of the problems concerning domestic instability, drug trafficking, and misgovernance in Afghanistan requires three components: an internal reconciliation process; a regional commitment and partnership to have a neutral and stable Afghanistan; and an international commitment from the country's global partners to not abandon the country as they did in the 1990s (if their commitments towards Afghanistan are genuine).

Tadjbakhsh points out in Chapter 10, entitled 'Internal and regional preconditions and assumptions for peace in Afghanistan,' that Western powers have recently tried to integrate the Taliban into the local political process, without realising the need for internal reconciliation before they are accepted by the rest of the Afghan political community as a legitimate political actor. A successful internal reconciliation is likely to be the most challenging problem, given the lack of cohesion among the various Taliban groups and the absence of a strong and unified central government as a key partner in the process. Much will depend on the strength of the central government in being able to assert its authority. Another crucial factor in that regard will relate to the issue of legitimacy, namely how much the Afghan people consider disparate groups to be legitimate partners in this venture. Longer-term regional cooperation on Afghanistan may also be possible, but it will require a more robust international commitment from Afghanistan's global partners to be able to bring India and Pakistan to the negotiating table and thereby encourage them not to make Afghanistan the stage for their proxy wars. Such an agreement will not be achieved in the near future, unless the two respective countries are seriously willing to bring it about. Hence, an international commitment and application of pressure, in particular by the US, will be critical in kick-starting any process.

Afghanistan continues to be a country of surprises. The latest of these is the execution of a successful first-round of presidential elections. Once completed, these elections will mark the first peaceful transfer of democratic power from one government to the other in the country's history. There were apprehensions that the Afghan elections might not take place at all and, even if they did, they would be marred by violence. However neither of these scenarios has materialised so far. Such fears about the outcome of the electoral process in Afghanistan lie in our lack of understanding of Afghan society. For example, the country is often regarded as the land of tribes, an 'artificial' state where differences between ethnic groups (mainly Pashtuns, Uzbeks, and Tajiks) are too numerous to let all Afghans become one nation. It is also said that an attempt to impose a cast of a post-Westphalian nation-state onto the country will be futile. However, as Dobbins in Chapter 4, entitled 'Launching an Afghan peace process,' argues, the tensions between the different ethnic groups in Afghanistan are often exaggerated by those outside of the country. Yet the history of these tensions stretches back only a few decades – unlike, for instance, the conflicts among Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks that can be traced back over a millennium. Afghanistan's various ethnic groups tend to identify more strongly with the nation of Afghanistan than with the country where their brethren might be in majority (for example, Uzbekistan in the case of Uzbeks). They do not want to leave Afghanistan to live elsewhere. This acceptance of Afghanistan being a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country does not garner much acknowledgement outside its borders. For Afghans, the case is not over whether they belong to the state of Afghanistan, but how much say they have in the governance of the country, what share of the patronage they can get that comes with it, and how they are affected by the corruption in the system. The Afghan conflict is not about collective national identity but rather, as emphasised by Dobbins, power sharing.

Though this book's contribution is invaluable in shedding light on Afghanistan and the wider region in this current and critical year, some of the analysis is slightly dated and does not incorporate recent changes, in particular the run-up to the most recent elections. However, the authors cannot be blamed for this, given the rapidity with which the situation changes in this region. There are also some elements of repetition that could have been avoided. For example, the role played by the Pakistani state in supporting certain insurgent groups to target international forces in Afghanistan was discussed in multiple chapters. Finally, some of the chapters contained too much statistical and empirical information on Afghanistan for the average student reader. Such contributions are useful for academic

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readers who already possess a good understanding of the region, but may not be best suited for quiet, bedside reading by an under- or post-graduate student. Having said that, the book will be of much value for advanced-level research on Afghanistan's internal politics and the wider region. The section on Pakistan can further provide a useful introduction to those not very familiar with the problem of Islamic militancy in South Asia and with Pakistan's foreign policy dynamics.

Overall, the major contribution of the book is in highlighting how little we as outsiders actually know about Afghanistan (and, to some extent, Pakistan). One key lesson from the book is that if we want to deal with the challenges relating to Afghanistan, we must get to know the country far better than we do currently. That will involve understanding the country in all its dimensions. It would be helpful if we tried to see the country as it is and not how we think it is – and, as the book highlights, there are major discrepancies currently between the two perceptions. An inability to face and challenge these discrepancies has resulted in short-sighted policies that offer *ad hoc* solutions to the problem and not a long-term strategy that benefits all involved, particularly the people of Afghanistan.

About the author:

Dr Wali Aslam is Lecturer in International Relations, Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, University of Bath. His research lies at the crossroads of International Relations theory, international (particularly Asian) security, and United States foreign policy. Dr Aslam's recent book is entitled *The United States and Great Power Responsibility in International Society: Drones, Rendition and Invasion* (Routledge, 2013). Email: w.aslam@bath.ac.uk.