The Afghan Conundrum: Regional Answers?

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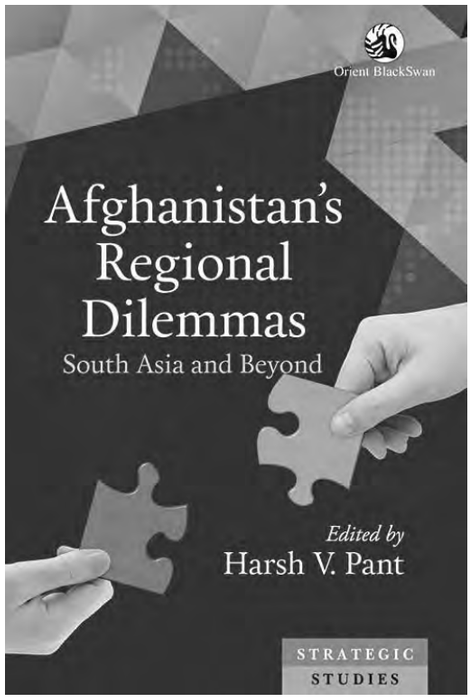

AFGHANISTAN'S REGIONAL DILEMMAS, SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND
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Historians, political commentators, journalists have all, almost uniformly, depicted an objectified Afghanistan: it is played upon by external powers, not a player. A 'great game' has, since at least the nineteenth century, been played out by these powers, but Afghanistan itself is not supposed to have agency.

That phrase was first used by a British intelligence officer, Arthur Conolly, in 1840, in a letter to a colleague. He commended it, called it also a noble game, a grand game whose essence was that Britain, Persia and Russia would work together, cooperate to free Afghanistan from the ambitious clutches of the Emir of Bukhara. Two years later Conolly was caught by the Emir, who had his head sliced off. But the phrase lived on, popularized years later by Rudyard Kipling but now meaning the opposite, not great power cooperation but rivalry for influence in Afghanistan. Thence it developed a taken-for-granted quality, that the Afghans themselves have little say in the way that rivalry plays out. That idea needs correction.

Add to this the regional perspective. It was the great expanding empires that vied for position; the smaller regional powers find no mention and, of course, there weren't any at that time, just tribal chiefs and warlords; but now there are several regional powers with varying interests in the future of Afghanistan, so they have to be included: the Central Asians (CARs) after the demise of the Soviet Union, Iran after the revolution, Pakistan, a rising China (not to mention the Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia, which had a lot to do, but this book does not include those).

As the title suggests, Harsh Pant's book tries to make these two corrections. The task is made easier by contemporary developments. The US has lost both interest and inclination to wield power in this part of the world, though it has agreed for the time being to maintain a small contingent of troops. But it no longer wishes to risk American lives to promote peace and stability; its goal is only to keep the Taliban out, and it may eventually compromise even on that. That leaves Afghanistan to its own efforts; as Pant approvingly quotes President Ghani in the introduction, Afghanistan has to own its problems and solve them; where it needs to reach out, that has to be to the regional powers, to India and China, to Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asia. Pant also lauds the Istanbul Protocol of November 2011, signed five months after the US announced final plans for troop withdrawal. There it was agreed by these neighbours to cooperate in countering terrorism, drug trafficking and insurgency in Afghanistan and the neighbouring areas. There are real problems here, since each regional partner to the Protocol has its own interests in mind, and many of these are mutually conflicting, while each of them also has only limited capabilities.

The seven succeeding chapters examine the regional powers, often conflicting interests as also the problem faced by Afghanistan: to avoid becoming a theatre where these are played out.

The chapter on Pakistan asks the key question: why does Pakistan participate in the international campaign against the Afghan Taliban, while at the same time accommodating their civil and military leaders on its soil. The standard reply is that it's the India factor, but Khalid Nadiri asserts here that is only one aspect. Two others are the historically rooted domestic imbalances within Pakistan, and its contentious relations with Afghanistan. As for the former, the three critical features are the militarized nature of foreign policy making, ties between military institutions and Islamist networks, and the more recent rise of grass roots violence. Despite public disavowals of support for the Taliban, as well as being part of the US campaign, the reality is that Pakistani actions against that group have been limited in scope. On the latter there is a long record of Pakistan's interference in Afghan politics which diminishes the prospects of cooperation between the two. There is, to compound this, a historical legacy of mistrust between the two as well as Islamabad's suspicion of India's actions and influence in Afghanistan, seen to be directed at undermining Pakistani policy there. All this analysis ends on a sad note. A settlement of all these intermeshing conflicts can be achieved with greater civil control over the military as well as greater diplomatic efforts between Kabul and Islamabad: a consummation which, no matter how devoutly we wish it, shows no sign of being fulfilled.

The next piece, by Sourish Ghosh, covers India's 'difficult transition' in Afghanistan, meaning the transition of policy from dealing with the nerve centre of global terrorism, to now a neighbour that is friendly and where soft power is needed to build ties. Ghosh rightly points out, and with surprise, that India remained neutral on the Pashtun problem which was of so much concern to Afghanistan, and then the latter took a neutral stand both during the 1962 Chinese aggression and the 1965 India-Pakistan war (and in 1971, though the author does not include that). In later times, the international community and the Afghan government have acknowledged the indispensable role played by India after 2001, and though there have been ups and downs the conclusion has to be that in the changing dynamic of the ongoing Afghan scenario it is crucial for India to continue its cooperative efforts with Iran, Russia, the CARs to maintain influence in Afghanistan. It is also necessary to start a dialogue with Pakistan, which is a crucial factor in India's Afghan policy. In fact India should either reach out to Pakistan, or, if that doesn't work, take necessary measures so that they are left with no other option but to cooperate.

It is in the nature of the situation, of course, that such measures probably don't exist, but the author does not spell out that gloomy prognosis.

Then we come to Afghanistan as agent with its own set of preferences. Avinash

Paliwal refers to existing literature which, in keeping with tradition, locates external powers, now primarily India and Pakistan, as the key players. In contradistinction, it is Afghanistan, he asserts, that has its own set of independent policy preferences and takes the decisions. He has the advantage of primary sources in nearly a dozen interviews with the main Afghan actors, including senior officials, ministers, governors, Taliban leaders and other Afghans who have been involved in decision making. There are two from Indian intelligence, though no one from Pakistan, so we must presume some bias. Nevertheless this article goes a long way to demolish that traditional story about the 'great game' being the only story worth telling. Rooted in its hostility to the Durand Line and support for all Pashtuns to be together, Afghan policy has still had a camp which wished to promote 'measured' diplomatic engagement with Pakistan, prioritizing that even over India; Pashtunistan as a political issue has little resonance with this camp. After 2001 the position of this camp weakened; Pakistan's averse advocacy became institutionalized. Thereafter, events influenced the strengthening or weakening of, in the authors' useful categorization, advocacies of different persuasions. Over the years after 2001 Pakistan continued to cultivate centrifugal forces, wanted to weaken the state, while India wanted a strong state, so the Indian advocacy gained. Then after the 2009 elections President Karzai decided to give more power to the warlords and to reach out to the Taliban, which caused concern to India and the Indian advocacy. The US decision to withdraw troops further enhanced Pakistan's position when Ashraf Ghani as President showed himself firmly rooted in the Pakistan-friendly camp; many analysts thought India had been effectively sidelined. However India continued to consolidate its position with those who had doubted the wisdom of this process and, of course, now, though that is too recent for the author to have noted, that consolidation has paid off: Ghani is firmly in the India advocacy or camp.

In sum, and this article succeeds in proving the point, there is a need to focus more on how Afghans view their environment rather than on how the external powers see Afghanistan.

The next section goes beyond South Asia. With China Afghanistan has historically had a relatively underdeveloped political, economic and security relationship. This changed with the 1979 Soviet invasion. Afghanistan became a focus for Chinese security concerns. China provided a majority of all the arms and ammunition given to the Mujahideen groups for a decade. Then from the 1990s Afghanistan, became a fertile base in the rise of Islamic militancy, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement which targeted the Xinjiang region. After 2001 China did develop some economic interests but these were limited. In and after 2011 'rebalancing' saw an array of bilateral/trilateral and multilateral meetings hosted by China and even cooperation with the US in Afghanistan's development. So now China is more engaged, values a stable outcome and is prepared to deal with whatever constellation of forces emerges in ensuring that end, once US withdrawal is complete—contrast Pakistan which is content to sustain conflict there.

Next comes Russia with a long history of relations, arguably one, even if not the most important source of most of the problems faced by Afghanistan and its neighbours today, especially the spread of radical Islamism. Russia's present priority is stability there and in the wider CARs; it is concerned that with the withdrawal of international forces there may be a further deterioration, but it is also concerned to regain its position as the predominant power in the CARs.

For Iran, writes Amir Kamel, the driver of policy towards Afghanistan, as for all foreign policy, is to ensure that its revolutionary and Islamic interests are protected in the environment left over after the drawdown of international forces after 2014. It seeks the security of its own political regime, which might come under some threat with the growing strength of the Taliban, which of course will be further facilitated by that drawdown, but its revolutionary aims also demand, and this is repeatedly affirmed, the withdrawal of all foreign forces. There may therefore be some significance in the bits and pieces of evidence that Iran-Taliban cooperation may happen. Iran has also increased its economic footprint after 2001. Friendly relations with President Karzai have been reinforced with a Strategic Iran-Afghanistan agreement as well as one of July 2013 allowing Afghan use of Chahbahar Port to access the Persian Gulf (with the help of India). Iran has also provided credits to the Afghan private sector and helped develop power transmission lines in the Afghan provinces bordering Iran. Overall there has been a considerable expansion of trade ties and of the economic relationship generally.

The last chapter, on the CARs, highlights the three problems faced by them from developments in Afghanistan and their possible exacerbation after the withdrawal of ISAF: the rise of non-traditional threats including religious extremism and terrorism, given that three of the CARs have ethnic and linguistic affinities with minorities in the neighbouring Afghan provinces; the increase in drug production and trafficking to Russian and European markets, a major source of sustenance for the Taliban; and the proliferation of arms, given that the region is already awash with weapons. However the CARs are also the hub for trade and transit infrastructure projects and have also developed substantial economic interests in Afghanistan. All agree that regional cooperation is the best and only way forward; but, for the time being, the perception among the CARs seems to be that the environment is likely to deteriorate further.

Given the constantly changing situation on the ground, the daily reports of gains and losses by government forces and the Taliban, the sheer unpredictability of events even a few weeks into the future, it was always going to be difficult to find innovative perspectives. Most authors here stay with the tried and tested Afghanistan-as-object view. Despite the broader aims of the book, which was to launch correctives, and the pointers Pant himself has identified in his introduction, six of the seven authors remain within the traditional framework.

Paliwal is the exception, with the advantage of a large amount of primary source material from interviews with leading Afghans from a variety of different persuasions. That's refreshing and original. One is thankful for it. But the total flow of source material out of Afghanistan is a trickle; one can hardly expect more from a country enmeshed in war. So we can expect that such innovative writing will be rare until peace returns.

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Awarded

Manorama Jafa, a writer of books for children in English and Hindi, the founding Secretary General of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), the Indian Section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), since 1981 who was awarded the Padma Shree in 2014, has been 'conferred the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays, in recognition of her outstanding contribution' for 2016. The Autumn Imperial Decoration is the highest civilian award given by the Japanese Emperor.