

India's Afghan Muddle: A Lost Opportunity

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The book provides a brief history of Afghanistan from ancient times to year 2014, and brings out the strategic interest of world powers in the country. It highlights that Afghanistan has seen considerable turmoil, upheavals and external forces battling for strategic control since the 1970s. In 2001, this culminated into an 'international war against terror' post the 9/11 attacks in the US by Al Qaeda, the leaders of which were then sheltered by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Though the world responded by creating a coalition force led by the United States (US), despite all efforts over the past decade and a half, the situation has not fully stabilised till now. On the contrary, the US announcement of 2009 (to pull out her troops by 2014–16) created a major setback for the peace process. Today, Afghanistan faces the greatest challenge to her security, stability and development as her own security forces are not as yet fully geared up to face the diverse and disturbed security situation.

The author feels that while India has provided aid and assistance for developmental projects (soft power), she has not been bold enough in projecting her 'hard power' in Afghanistan. New Delhi should not miss the opportunity now, as she has a very good chance to do so, post the US withdrawal of 2014–16.

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The book is divided into six chapters covering a brief history of Afghanistan; the internal and external problems faced by the country; India's Afghan policy at each stage of Afghan history (specially post-1947); present regional complexities; and the US–India–Afghan matrix. The interests and roles of major world powers in Afghanistan, especially Pakistan, Iran, China, the US and Russia, have been covered. However, topics are not necessarily in the same order, but the main theme of need for India to project her 'hard power' in Afghanistan is brought out consistently and emphasised.

The author feels that India has major strategic interests in Afghanistan. Besides historical links, Afghanistan provides connectivity and a trade corridor for India into the Central Asian region and connectivity to the Central Asian States (CAS) of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which has been blocked due to Pakistan's refusal to grant transit rights. Also, the Islamic fundamentalists and terrorist groups operating from Pak-Afghan border region—supported by Pakistan Army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), prominent amongst them being the Haqqani Network, Taliban, Al Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), besides others—are operating against the established Government of Afghanistan. These groups also have links with terrorist groups in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and in India. Previous experience indicates that these groups and their affiliates have the potential of being diverted by Pakistan to create more trouble in India. Though this potential threat has been identified by the US also, she has been unable to (or unwilling to) control Pakistan to dissuade them from operating in Afghanistan. It is due to this reason that while earlier America considered Pakistan as a partner in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, now it considers her as the cause. Also, America feels that post-2014, India can play a major role in stabilising the security situation in Afghanistan as the present leadership in Kabul has more trust and faith in the Indian government.

India has enjoyed friendly and warm relations and deep cultural connections with the people of Afghanistan since ancient times. Even post-independence, most of the ruling governments in Afghanistan have had friendly and warm relations with India, as Kabul does not face any fears from India. In recent years, New Delhi has extended financial and development aid to the country, both bilaterally and through regional and international arrangements. She has also given grants for building institutions and infrastructure—\$1.2 billion for

projects like roads and the parliament building in Kabul—and in the educational field—5,500 Afghan students are studying in India, most on scholarships. India is the fifth-largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan, after the US, the United Kingdom [UK], Japan and Germany. Military assistance has also been given, primarily in training courses—100 officers. Today, Afghanistan is the second-highest recipient of India's foreign aid, next only to Bhutan. However, India has been reluctant to provide weapons and equipment required by Afghan security forces, who are still struggling to maintain peace and stability in their country.

Pant brings out that India is one of the important regional powers that has the economic and development capacity to become a major world power. However, her Afghan policy has often been a 'supportive one' to Iran, America and Russia, and she has mainly applied her 'soft power' till now. He opines that till now New Delhi may have been cautious of adopting a more bold policy towards Kabul due to American advice; the US had been banking on Pakistan to ensure stability in Afghanistan, enabling the Western troops to pull out peacefully without creating a power vacuum in the country. However, the US has now realised that Pakistan is 'not a solution but the cause' of turmoil in Afghanistan, as she has failed to reign in the terror groups operating from her territory against Afghanistan. Thus, America would like India to play a more dynamic role in securing Afghanistan's stability. This will also ensure that the terrorist groups operating from Pakistan's soil against Afghanistan are defeated, hence eliminating and reducing their potential to create threat to India. India is already assisting Iran in building the Chahbahar Port, rail links and roads which will also provide connectivity to Afghanistan, thus bypassing Pakistan.

So far, India has been only providing military contingents for United Nations (UN) missions abroad. However, due to unstable security conditions in Afghanistan, New Delhi had sent her paramilitary forces—the Indo-Tibetan Border Police—to provide security cover to her men and material employed on development projects and the embassy in Afghanistan. They have all performed admirably, with restraint. Thus, New Delhi should not hesitate in meeting requests made by Afghanistan for supply of military assistance. It is well established that a strong and secure Afghanistan is of strategic interest to India. India has the economic and military power and she should be bold in projecting her 'hard power' by providing military aid and assistance. This would also enable India to

achieve her ambition to become a world power and enhance her prestige in the region.

The book concludes that thus far India has missed opportunities due to an unclear and coherent foreign policy towards Afghanistan, and has been satisfied by using her 'soft power' only. Now that the US-led coalition forces are pulling out, post-2014, Afghanistan is seeking military aid from India—an opportunity which she must not let go. Thus, besides using her 'soft power', India should also project her 'hard power' in Afghanistan.

The author points out that Narendra Modi, on taking over as Prime Minister in 2014, had sent a very positive and bold message to the region by inviting heads of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations to his swearing-in. However, soon thereafter, India declined to supply military hardware and assistance to Kabul. The book brings out the efforts being made by Pakistan to create 'strategic depth' for her, by having control over the people ruling Kabul. India should assist the democratic regime of Afghanistan to defeat Pakistan's ambitions, which is in the interest of regional peace.

The book provides an insight into the prevailing security environment in the region, especially as it relates to Afghanistan post-2014–16. It recommends a more bold and dynamic role for India in regional issues. This book is recommended for libraries of institutions relating to International relations and strategic subjects. Those seeking to understand the nuances of India-Afghanistan relations and India's Afghanistan policy would also find it interesting.