

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward

Dr Huma Baqai and Dr Nausheen Wasi (Eds) (Islamabad: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, 242 pages)

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The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has gained more prominence after the withdrawal of the US military from Afghanistan. The country, once again, has gained importance, where regional and extra-regional powers are eager to play their role. On 30 August 2021, US-led NATO military forces withdrew from Afghanistan, and the Taliban became the official political face of the country. The US war in Afghanistan cost the lives of 240,000 Afghan people and 2,500 American soldiers and USD 2.3 trillion in military expenses. But, everything is not hunky-dory for the Taliban either. They are facing many challenges regarding their legitimacy, recognition, and humanitarian crisis in the country. Such is the authors' analysis in the book "*Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward.*" It comprises twelve chapters, including an introduction, *Chronology of Afghanistan Conflict and Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations 2001 to 2021*, and a preface by Dr. Jochen Hippler, Country Director Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), and Pakistan. The book, in a broader context, addresses four themes: Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the peace process in Afghanistan, politics of proxies, and conflict management.

The contributions are well-researched and provide essential inputs to academics. Different chapters provide invaluable analysis of Afghan politics, governance, and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations on a

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micro and macro level. The introduction of book gives an overview of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power. The intellectual discourse observes Pakistan-Afghanistan relations through a historical perspective, economic potential, and integration. It also discusses proxy wars, border terrorism, the role of regional and extra-regional powers in the Afghan peace process, and sheds light on options for Pakistan based on crisis management and conflict resolution mechanism

The first part of the book addresses the broader theme of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, which includes five chapters: (i) *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Emergence of the New Nation States and the Search of Identity* by Hameed Hakimi and Zalmay Nishat; (ii) *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Towards a New Horizon* by Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry; (iii) *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations* by Bettina Robotka; (iv) *Cultural, Religious and Economic Integration: Future of Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations* by Ali Maisam Nazary; and (V) *Pakistan-Afghanistan Economic Relations: Basis for Cooperation* by Vaqar Ahmed. It comprises contributions of scholars from Pakistan and Afghanistan, where authors from both sides have provided their perspectives on bilateral ties. Authors have analyzed the bilateral ties through historical, economic, cultural, and religious perspectives. The historical conflict between both states has eroded their potential for growth and stability. Still, now available options are to intensify the cultural integration - pave the way for regional integration - and jointly hold the hands against radicalization. Ali Maisam Nazary argues, "A Strategic cooperative partnership between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the only win-win situation that can be achieved through cultural, religious, and economic integration and end the 74-year rift between the two states" [page 88].

Hameed Hakimi and Zalmay Nishat added Pakistan's security approach towards Afghanistan in the context of its experience of Indian aggression that often shapes Pak-Afghan relations. Authors have agreed that Kabul and Islamabad need a new approach towards their ties to benefit from changing global geopolitical and geo-economic order. Scholars from both states, especially Vaqar Ahmed, stressed engaging in TAPI, CASA-1000, and China's BRI project rather than in conflicts. Bettina Robotka argued that both states should throw away historical baggage and territorial nationalism. Robotka and Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry have proposed a win-win approach for both states in a globalized and interconnected world where Pakistan and Afghanistan should engage with China, Iran, and Russia for their economic development. On the theme of Pak-Afghan peaceful ties under the crisis management and conflict resolution mechanisms, Moonis Ahmar proposed some valuable options in his chapter *Conflict Management Mechanisms in Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations*. He highlighted Pakistan's efforts for peace in Afghanistan and has outlined its positive role in conflict transformation.

The book deals with the peace process in Afghanistan in a very comprehensive manner that contains three chapters which include: (i) *Afghanistan Peace Process: Missed Opportunities* by Maleeha Lodhi; (ii) *Afghanistan peace Talks: Envisioning a Political Settlement* by Shabnum Nasimi; and (iii) *Afghanistan peace process and Involvement of Outside Powers* by Zahid Hussain. The authors stressed that both neighbors could take advantage of the presently unfolding discourse as a missed opportunity. Zahid Hussain factored in the stakes of China, Russia, Iran, and Central Asian Republics (CARs) in the Afghan peace process based on their security and economic perspectives. Maleeha Lodhi has highlighted Pakistan's stance on the peaceful settlement of the Afghan crisis. She has adopted a scenario-based approach that emphasizes the possibilities of peace in Afghanistan after US withdrawal. The best

scenario approach, according to Lodhi, is that the exit of foreign troops compels the war-weary Afghan parties to negotiate and ask for humanitarian assistance from the international community to save Afghanistan from economic collapse [page 160]. Furthermore, if war is prolonged in Afghanistan, that would have negative impacts on Pakistan.

Shabnam Nasimi has compared the Afghan peace process with the Bonn agreement of 2001. She argues that the Afghan peace process serves the interests of the Taliban while the Bonn agreement of 2001 served the interest of the US. She added that the international community has been raising an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned plan, but the Doha peace talk was not inclusive, were some elite decided the country's fate. She believed that the Doha agreement would have no impact if it lacked implementation from both parties. All three chapters have a debate on the peace process in Afghanistan, but none of them talks about efforts comprehensively made by Pakistan. Pakistan not only took measures for peace and stability in Afghanistan but also suffered due to the spillover effect of conflict in the neighborhood.

Two chapters are dedicated to proxy politics between Pakistan and Afghanistan: (i) *Proxy Politics – Working towards Dead End* by Mushtaq Muhammad Rahim and (ii) *Politics of Proxy Wars and Terrorism* by Rahimullah Yusufzai. Muhammad Rahim has viewed Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in proxy politics as having mutually hurting agendas. He has drawn a biased view of Pak-Afghan relations by questioning the Durand Line. Afghan writer also alleged Pakistan for playing the double game by supporting the US in 2001 and backing Afghan jihad. He writes, “US used the country [Pakistan] routes for the US logistic and military supplies. However, covertly, Islamabad continued to pursue its proxy politics against the newly established government of Afghanistan. Pakistan offered sanctuaries to the

Taliban, similar to the 1970s-80s along the Durand Line. It allowed them to re-launch militancy across Afghanistan” [page 127]. Author, by neglecting Pakistan’s peace efforts in Afghanistan, conversely wrote, “The menace of extremism and radicalism used against Afghanistan has turned its face towards Pakistan” [page 129].

Whereas Pakistani writer Rahimullah Yusuf Zai in his chapter *Politics of Proxy Wars and Terrorism*, gave a brief analysis of proxy wars and outrightly rejected the Afghan perspective on them. He highlights that bilateral relations are dominated by Afghan grievances and Pakistan’s sensitivities and securitization. He has cited several statements of Afghanistan’s previous government’s leaders bashing Pakistan, showing the depth of emotional animosity against Pakistan. Despite calling the Durand line border a line of hatred between two brothers by Afghan officials, Pakistan refrained from passing any reciprocal comments. Yusuf Zai was of the view that Pakistan funded the establishment of schools, hospitals, healthcare, roads, and various faculties in universities in Afghanistan. Afghan officials ignored most of the developmental projects in Pakistan, and were not even officially inaugurated. Concerning security concerns, the Pakistani writer added, “Pakistani Taliban and their allies and Baloch separatists have been enabled to have sanctuaries in Afghanistan and plan attacks against Pakistan” [page 144]. Furthermore, the Indian RAW, in cooperation with the National Directorate of Security (NDS), supplied weapons to anti-Pakistan militant groups to destabilize Pakistan. Although the two authors hold contradictory views, both agree to take advantage of opportunities unfolding now and develop stable ties through regional integration and trade promotion.

A chapter on *Governance, Nation-ness, and Nationality in Afghanistan* by Omar Sharifi discusses the ethnic factor of Afghanistan “Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan were always open to cross-ethnic

alliances and felt no obligatory solidarity with their co-ethnics at the national level. For them, politics was approached like an arranged marriage, not a love match, so practicalities were more important than primordial affiliations which are key to ethnic nationalism” [page 74]. The author pitches that, even before the invasion and interference of extra-regional powers, Afghanistan had failed to include all ethnic groups in the government. This geo-ethnic factor and less inclusive leadership of Afghanistan impacted its relationship with Islamabad.

The compilation is interesting to read and contains well-researched chapters. The last chapter, *Chronology of Afghanistan Conflict and Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations 2001 to 2021* by Wajahat Rehan, provides information in detail about developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the past twenty years. The reader may find some information outdated and irrelevant, as it lacks updates about the post-US withdrawal scenario. Several chapters of the book were finalized before the Taliban took control of Kabul. However, the book provides a historical picture of Pak-Afghan relations from a broader perspective that is informative for historians, decision-makers, foreign policy experts, and peace and conflict studies students. While compiling the book, the editors have adopted a balanced approach by incorporating views from Pakistan and Afghanistan.