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Kristian Berg Harpviken & Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: A Rock Between Hard Places. Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity

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Reviewed by Ronald Hatto

Sciences Po Paris

Afghanistan, a small country situated in a mountainous region of Asia, is not supposed to attract international attention. At the same time, it has become known as the “graveyard of empires” because of its supposed capacity to defeat the British and the Soviet empires in the 19th and 20th centuries. After the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 and the alleged links between the Taliban regime in Kabul and the hijackers, the response of the Bush Jr. administration came rapidly. Afghanistan was submitted to intensive air strikes followed by the deployment of a multinational military force. The Taliban regime rapidly crumbled and international actors started to discuss the best way to rebuild a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Can the “international community” succeed where great powers like Great Britain or the Soviet Union failed? Probably not! Why? Because the fate of Afghanistan does not rest with the Afghans alone.

This, in a nutshell, is one of the main arguments of the authors’ analysis of Afghanistan’s security situation. While Afghanistan may not solely be the victim of interference of its neighbors, its inherent instability tends to attract them to interfere in its internal affairs. The authors are able to show that Afghanistan’s security is highly dependent on the perceptions of the states surrounding it. That is why the book is not exactly about Afghanistan, but rather about the role of this small country in the broader picture of regional security. Three Regional Security Complexes (RSC) are examined in relation with Afghanistan: South Asia (mostly the India-Pakistan relation), Middle East (centered on Iran and Saudi Arabia), and Central Asia (involving numerous competing middle and small powers). From a security perspective, the problem is that Afghanistan is in the middle of the three RSCs. That explains why the internal dynamics of each region have an impact on Afghan security. In all the RSCs, different actors struggle to influence the foreign policy of the states and this makes a positive evolution towards Afghanistan difficult, especially from the South Asian (India-Pakistan) and the Middle Eastern (Iran-Saudi Arabia) RSCs point of view.

To develop their arguments the authors rely on geopolitics, a state-centric and macroscopic approach, to analyze the situation of Afghanistan and the three regions under examination. More precisely, they base their work on Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver’s book *Regions and Power* published in 2003; this book in itself an extension

of Barry Buzan's earlier work entitled *People, States and Fear*. Even if the authors insist on the fact that Buzan and Wæver's approach favors a multilevel analysis, their approach is mostly macroscopic and this may bother researchers with a more anthropological or ethnographic background. What is more, non-state actors are not really present in the volume. Apart from that, the authors are quite effective in presenting the main trends in the security of the three regions in relation to Afghanistan and vice versa. Apart from the introduction and the concluding chapter on Afghanistan, the core of the book comprises three chapters studying the RSCs. These chapters are all based on a common structure of five sections: the security dynamics within the regions; the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy; the role of global powers (China, Russia and the United States) in the regions; the place of Afghanistan in the regions' security dynamics; and the impact of regional security dynamics on Afghanistan's security. The book is well written and offers a clear structure that makes it accessible to a large audience.

The main originality of Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh is found in their argument that, contrary to what Western states and donors were promoting for the future of Afghanistan, by making it a regional hub based on approaches named Heart of Asia or the New Silk Road, it should be returned to its neutral status, rather than be placed at the centre of the three RSCs. Neutrality served the interest of Kabul for many years during the twentieth century, and may insulate it from the interference of regional and global powers in the future as well. In effect, even if Afghanistan is not an integral part of any RSC it is nonetheless surrounded by them, and their distinct conflictual dynamics. Unfortunately, even its peripheral status does not protect Afghanistan from regional security dynamics, making it the unwilling host of conflicts and tensions rooted within each of them. The India-Pakistan relation is particularly detrimental to Afghanistan's security and stability. The authors defend neutrality as a pragmatic and realistic way to bring peace to Afghanistan. The ideal scenario would be to bring an end to the tensions within each of the surrounding regions that drive neighbours' engagement in Afghanistan. But the prospect of solving all the regional tensions being rather weak, a more realistic solution, as far as ending foreign countries interference is concerned, would be to give Afghanistan the status of a neutral state. This neutrality should be guaranteed by a negotiated commitment by all the neighbors of Afghanistan. Once neutral, the Afghan government could work bilaterally with its different neighbors to address or solve common concerns. Among the topics that can be usefully addressed bilaterally are shared resources, and border controls. With all their efforts at defending the idea of Afghan neutrality, Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh's conclusion demonstrates how difficult it will be to implement this scenario and how much neighbouring states will probably continue playing a central role in Afghan security.

For a relatively short book (around 150 pages excluding the index and the bibliography), the authors have succeeded in presenting the main security problems in three regions and in Afghanistan. But as there is no such thing as a perfect book, some critiques are in order. First of all, where are the maps? An analysis based on geopolitics and examining regional security should offer the reader a way of visualizing the importance of certain hotspots. If we exclude the cover, the book has no map. For this kind of work, this is inexcusable. Another presentation problem is the absence of page numbers in their in-text citations; the reader would like to go and check for herself if what is reported is accurate or not, or just to deepen the

analysis, a task made impossible as Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh never indicate the pages even when they use direct quotes. On a more substantial basis, among the things missing in this book is the role of United Nations (UN). The authors seem to be aware of the problem, as they end the book by highlighting the potential of the organization in stemming the negative influence of Afghanistan neighbors. Finding only two paragraphs on the potential role of the UN in a book on Afghan security is rather surprising, especially since according to the authors, "[...] the need for, as well as the realism of, a sustained UN commitment seems well-founded." (p. 159)

This idea can also be subject to challenge, when UN peace-building operations are examined. The UN has been present in Afghanistan for many years with a team of civilian personnel, but has been unable to stabilize the country or rebuild its governance apparatus. If the international community decides to mount another multinational task force to rebuild Afghanistan it would have to adopt the same division of labor as in the recent years where the UN took care of civilian tasks while the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was responsible for order and security. A new peace-building structure could include the UN as the civilian component and a new ISAF style force based on a larger cultural and geographical pool of contributors. For example, the neighboring states could provide some of the troops in order to stabilize Afghanistan but also to make sure that their potential rivals are not taking advantage of the situation. The participation of the various regional powers in a future multinational force for Afghanistan would take into account what the book mentioned in passing: the fact that states fear regional hegemony much more than global superpowers. As the authors argue on page 100, states tend to balance against threats much more than global power. These threats are assessed in terms of geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions but also in terms of ideological terms. That is why, involving the UN alongside troops coming from various external countries, including those neighbouring Afghanistan, could possibly have a stabilizing effect. If one look at archrivals India and Pakistan, they have shown that they are quite capable of working together in UN peacekeeping operations all around the world. Having military personnel in moderate numbers in an Afghan peace-building operation may allow distrustful states like Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Iran or Pakistan vis-à-vis India to keep an eye on what they are really try to do on the ground. Of course personnel from the members of the Security Council should also be present to demonstrate the commitment of the international community in the recovery of Afghanistan.

All in all, Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh have written a short but highly stimulating book on Afghanistan and the three Regional Security Complexes surrounding it. The analysis is clear and comprehensive and the quality of the presentation makes it an easy read for a diverse public interested in this strategic regional subsystem. Through their volume the authors are trying to propose a viable solution to allow this small rock between hard places – Afghanistan – to recover a deserved peace and stability. They offer one possible political solution aiming at bringing peace to this small country but the road will no doubt be long and bumpy.

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