

## Two Decades of US–Taliban War in Afghanistan by Major General Samay Ram, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), New Delhi, Sabre & Quill Publishers, 2022, pp. 162, Rs 899

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In August 2021, the world was stunned by dramatic visuals of Afghan civilians running along and attempting to cling to a US Air Force (USAF) C-17 aircraft taking off from the Kabul airport in a desperate bid to flee from Afghanistan that had fallen to the Taliban. Just a month before this, in the first week of July 2021, the last of the American troops left Bagram Airfield, which had been the nerve centre of American-led military operations in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years. Post this, observers raised concerns about the Ashraf Ghani-led government and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces' (ANDSF) ability to counter the imminent rise of the Taliban. On 8 July 2021, during a press conference at the White House, a journalist posed a question to the American President Joe Biden to ask whether the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was inevitable. Responding to this, President Biden stated that the Taliban with a strength of 75,000 fighters stood no chance against the 3,00,000 strong ANDSF, which was both well-equipped and possessed an air force. He further affirmed that he completely trusted

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ANDSF's capability as it was better trained, equipped and competent in combat than the Taliban.

Ironically, within a month of this press conference, major Afghan cities and towns fell into the hands of the Taliban one after the other like a house of cards. Finally, on 15 August 2021, the Taliban's blitz concluded with the fall of Kabul and Ashraf Ghani fleeing the country, signalling the collapse of the Western-backed Afghan regime. Witnessing this sequence of events, the global community was left pondering over some pressing questions:

1. Why had the US failed to neutralise the Taliban despite their two-decade-long military presence in Afghanistan?
2. How did the Taliban with primitive military capability prevail over a superpower?
3. What were the factors that had led to the swift collapse of the Western-backed democratic Afghan regime post the American withdrawal?
4. What does the future hold for the Afghan people and the new Taliban regime?

Maj. Gen. Samay Ram (Retd) not only answers these intriguing questions precisely in his book *Two Decades of US–Taliban War in Afghanistan*, but also presents them in a manner that can be easily understood by the common reader. Furthermore, what makes the book unique is the author's perspective that is shaped by his personal experience as a Military Attaché in the Indian Embassy in Kabul during the turbulent years of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

The book consists of 18 chapters, which are divided into three parts. The first part of the book successfully deciphers the complex socio-cultural and ethno-religious dynamics of the Afghan population, thus enabling the reader to understand the rationale behind Afghanistan's violent history. The second part educates the reader on the reasons behind the swift collapse of the Western-backed Afghan government through a detailed scrutiny of various shortcomings of the US's longest military campaign. The final part of the book envisages the plausible challenges and threats to the Taliban regime, enabling the reader to speculate on how instability in Afghanistan may likely affect India's national security.

The first part of the book encompasses the first three chapters in which the author covers Afghanistan's historical background, geopolitical significance and the socio-cultural characteristics of its population. The first chapter presents a detailed historical timeline of the key events that have shaped Afghanistan. The second chapter explores the geographical significance of

Afghanistan and how the nation historically served as the gateway through which invaders such as Alexander and Babur came to India and South Asia. The third chapter focuses on the culture of the Afghan population that has been historically resistive to the rule of foreign powers such as the British Empire and the Soviet Union. As a result of this, the author states that Afghanistan's history has been written in blood and cites this as the reason why the country has been called 'the graveyard of empires'.

The second part, comprising chapters four to thirteen, covers the period when Afghanistan was under the control of the US and its NATO allies. This is the most extensive part of the book and gives a holistic analysis of the various facets of the US–Taliban war. The chapters cover the reasons why the US invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime, which then withdrew to safe havens in the mountainous terrains of the Afghanistan–Pakistan (Af–Pak) border. The US's efforts to hunt down the elusive Osama Bin Laden have also been covered in great detail. According to the author, the eventual killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 enhanced the scope of war and the US augmented its objectives to include backing nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. For this, the US engaged in supporting the democratically elected Afghan government and the strengthening of the ANDSF. Meanwhile, the Taliban began to reorganise and re-equip themselves to subsequently initiate their offensive against the US and its allies, luring them into a long-drawn counter-insurgency war. In the author's opinion, the US wanted to avoid such a long-drawn war of attrition. After fighting for over a decade, it realised that they were fighting a war with no end. This eventually led to the US handing over the responsibility of the security to the Afghan government and extending an offer for a negotiated settlement to the Taliban. Part two of the book elucidates the various challenges faced by the ANDSF in their fight against the Taliban. According to the author, the ANDSF having been left alone to fight their own battle began to disintegrate under the pressure of the relentless Taliban attacks, which in due course led to their defeat. The author's assessment points out the various reasons why the ANDSF and the US failed to win the war. One of the major reasons cited is the US's continued trust in Pakistan as an ally despite knowing fully that it was playing the dubious role of supporting the Taliban.

The third part of the book consists of chapters 14–18 and deals with the resurgence of the Taliban and how they part by part captured the whole of Afghanistan. Taliban's swift offensive and subsequent capture of Kabul has been covered in detail by the author. He states that the Taliban has brought Afghanistan back to the Dark Ages by enforcing their oppressive and regressive

policies, which were earlier seen during their rule between 1996 and 2001. Chapter 14 discusses the Taliban government's efforts to engage with the international community to seek recognition to receive international aid and improve its financial position. Chapter 15 elucidates the threats to survival of the Taliban government that emanate from various sources. Chapter 16 highlights the efforts made by some nations in the region to form and support an 'all-inclusive government'. The final chapter ends with a review of the current situation in Afghanistan and makes a prediction of future scenarios that are bound to affect both the Afghan government and its people.

Afghanistan has always been a crucial part of India's security calculus, not only because it is situated in our neighbourhood but also because what happens there directly affects our security environment. Taking this into account and with Afghanistan once again being pushed into a turbulent and uncertain future, it is important for the Indian strategic community and the general public to understand its probable implications for our national security. It is in this context that this book assumes significance as an important piece of literature that analyses various facets of the US–Taliban war in Afghanistan.

Overall, the author has comprehensively covered all the nuances of the US–Taliban war in Afghanistan and presented it in a manner that is easy to comprehend. The book is of immense value to the officials of the Ministry of External Affairs who are posted in the Embassy of India in Kabul and the military leadership engaged in counter-insurgency operations. The book will certainly be a valuable addition to the libraries of various academic organisations and research institutions.