

War and State-Building in Afghanistan: Historical and Modern Perspectives

edited by Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy,
London and New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. XII + 302, INR 6,960

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War and State-Building in Afghanistan deals with one of South Asia's most turbulent states, Afghanistan, and its socio-political and military conditions. This book also traces the processes that have shaped the geopolitics of Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been occupied by the Mughals, British, Soviets, Americans and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The book looks at their efforts at counter-insurgency (COIN) operations in the last five centuries ranging from 1520 to 2012. During the Cold War era, Afghanistan was a centre of conflict of the great/big powers of the world, and that instigated the profit mechanism of these great powers to show their calibre in international power politics. Unlike most of the recently published military histories of Afghanistan, the present volume consists of a political and military narrative of Afghanistan's conventional and unconventional warfare, which has continued over the last five centuries. The editors along with a host of experts in Afghan studies, by applying wide-ranging sources, examine why repeated initiatives have failed to remove instability in the country (p. 17).

This volume introduces new historical perspectives on how NATO activity has helped to strengthen the war and state-building politics in Afghanistan. In doing so, this edited collection addresses three debates

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ISSN 0976-1004 print

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Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 10, No. 2, April–June 2016, pp. 143–146



in the field. These are: COIN and its existence in the nineteenth century imperial campaigns in the colonies; how far the minimum force is able to overcome the present-day COIN in Afghanistan; and finally, how the stability and instability paradox can be linked with the evolution of Afghan state formation (p. 1).

The first two essays, namely, 'Continuity and Change in Asymmetric Warfare in Afghanistan: From the Mughals to the Americans' and 'Great Mughals, Warfare and COIN in Afghanistan, 1520–1707', describe the COIN operations and the subsequent changes in warfare, logistics, transport and military technology in Afghanistan from the Mughals to the Americans. These two chapters also examine the strategic dynamics of asymmetric warfare in this region (pp. 29, 53). It is a truism that while considering insurgency and COIN in Afghanistan, one requires to know the cultural characteristics, historical factors and physical geography. They also explain why the Mughals and the British followed diverse COIN strategies for maintaining their sway in Afghanistan (p. 71).

John Ferris in his essay entitled, 'Counter-insurgency and Empire: The British Experience with Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier, 1838–1947', argues that Britain hardly practised any COIN operations in this region; rather, they were interested in the North-West Frontier only as a place that could be a threat to them (p. 83). As a result, the British always maintained a minimum force philosophy in this region (p. 95). In Chapter 4, Pavel Baev in his essay titled, 'The Conflict of War and Politics in the Soviet Intervention into Afghanistan, 1979–89', argues that Soviet/Russian COIN against the mujahideen, in contrast to the Mughals and the British, had been quite successful at the operational and tactical levels (p. 113). He also argues that the Soviet COIN, by all means, had been brutal. It is said that when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the United States (US) lost all interest in this region. The Americans refocussed on the region when Osama bin Laden (the Taliban leader who was backed by Pakistan) established networks of training camps in Afghanistan.

Anne Stenersen in the essay entitled, 'Al-Qaeda versus Najibullah: Revisiting the Role of Foreign Fighters in the Battles of Jalalabad and Khost, 1989–92', describes the war and tension between the Al-Qaeda and the Najibullah government between 1989 and 1992. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 created a favourable ground for the Afghan-Arab terrorist group called Al-Qaeda. This essay also analyses the mujahideen's war-fighting strategies and the Afghan

government's response in it (p. 131). Rob Johnson in his article titled, 'The Afghan National Army and COIN: Past, Present and Future Reconsidered', deals specifically with the historical evolution of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and its role in maintaining internal stability, war strategies and COIN operations against the foreign invasion (pp. 161, 183). It is argued here that the ANA has crucial role in the Afghan politics and the changing environment of warfare of the West has also influenced it.

Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud, Karsten Friis and Harald Havoll in their essay entitled, 'Revisiting COIN: The Stakeholder-centric Approach', seek to develop a revised theory of COIN in the context of Afghanistan and compare it with the Western approaches in this respect (pp. 198, 206). They also argue the population-centric and enemy-centric approaches to COIN and try to understand their strengths and limitations. Ivan Arreguin-Toft in Chapter 8 entitled, 'The Country as a Whole: Imagined States and the Failure of COIN in Afghanistan', traces the role played by the NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in undertaking COIN in Afghanistan and state-building processes, which, in turn, is an issue of greater political and diplomatic debate. In the last chapter, Kristian Berg Harpviken in his essay entitled, 'Heart or Periphery? Afghanistan's Complex Neighbourhood Relations', emphasises on the troubled neighbourhood of Afghanistan. It is argued here that the regional security complexes (RSCs) have their impact on Afghanistan. Its relations with South Asian countries, the Persian Gulf region and Central Asia have much to offer for policymakers, political and military strategists and diplomats in the twenty-first century, and those will help to build ideas in the international relations as well.

This volume takes a long view of about five centuries regarding the political and military condition of war in Afghanistan and offers varied and valuable perspectives on the relationship between war and the state in modern Afghan history. According to the editors, this volume is a synthesis of published works and archival materials, which are limited in number. Most of the authors have mainly used the translated version of primary materials. Barring some typographical errors (pp. 14, 21), some minor criticisms can be offered here. While describing the events in Afghanistan, the editors could have written about the historical and economic evolution of this region. This reviewer must agree here that the popularity of new socio-cultural history and the changing dynamics

of international relations worldwide have also left an impression on the present work. Both the editors and authors are well aware of the new genre of research in military history and have proved their worth in the military studies of Afghanistan in particular, and South Asia in general.

The editors deserve compliments for their very interesting volume, which will definitely adorn the shelves of books on politico-military history. The volume is recommended for reading by a wider readership interested in the emerging historiographical forays in the sphere of military history and the troubled history of Afghanistan. According to this reviewer, it is their empirical forays which will bring them close to the new genres of military history scholarship, as represented by Barnett R. Rubin, Stephen Tanner, Rob Johnson, Larry Goodson and Kamal Matinuddin.¹

NOTE

1. Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2002; Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, New York: Da Capo Press, 2002; Rob Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: Culture and Pragmatism, A Critical History*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011; Larry Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of the Taliban*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001; and Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001.