

**A Rock between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an  
Arena of Regional Insecurity**, by Kristian Berg Harpviken and  
Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2016, pp. 160, £25.00

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The book, *A Rock between Hard Places*, is the result of research carried out by K.B. Harpviken and S. Tadjbakhsh, independently and jointly, with encouragement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. In this book, the authors have examined the events unfolding in Afghanistan from a regional perspective up to 2015, set against the backdrop of the scheduled withdrawal of the United States (US)-led military alliance.

Looking at the events from an historical angle, the two authors have challenged the international importance given by regional and global powers to Afghanistan, especially at the Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan in November 2011. At that time, two divergent views prevailed. One of these was then US President Obama's support for a 'regional approach' to resolve the problems of Afghanistan (or as he coined the region, AF-Pak). Further, the transborder threat of terrorism and insurgency, Islamic militancy, drug and arms trafficking, and the new concept of 'Silk Road' and its importance for trade and transit, resulted in the increased interest of global powers in maintaining stability in the region. Obama articulated that other countries—India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Central Asian Republics, and even Russia, China and

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Turkey—too had a stake in the stability of Afghanistan and hence, their cooperation was essential to ensure peace in the region.

This was contested by then Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who, drawing on the writings of the philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal Lahori (1877–1938)—whose ideas were fundamental to the concept of modern Pakistan—stated: ‘Asia is a body of water and soil, where Afghan nation is the heart; its prosperity brings prosperity to Asia, and its decay brings decay to Asia’.<sup>1</sup> In fact, other Afghan leaders have also emphasised that their country’s problems are mainly due to interference by others and for them, she remains ‘Heart of Asia’. The book also considers other theories such as those on regional security and cooperation propounded by Western scholars that have implications regarding the events in Afghanistan.

After analysing the strategic importance of Afghanistan in Asia, the two authors examine if Afghanistan is really the ‘Heart of Asia’, as perceived by its leaders, or is it of peripheral importance to its ‘regional neighbours’? Besides discussing the interests of the various groups of countries to its east, north and west, the authors have also studied the interest of global powers (the US, Russia and China) in the area, thereby attempting to establish and link the importance of Kabul to their hegemonic policies.

The book is not large with the text spread over a mere 160 pages that have been divided into five chapters. It is based on the hypothesis that ‘Afghanistan is really not the Heart of Asia’, but is on the periphery of three regional security power blocks. The countries of these power blocks have their own strategic and economic interests in dealing with Afghanistan, and it is their intra-relations that drive their relationship with it.

*A Rock between Hard Places* begins with a brief history of Afghanistan, delineating various events and bilateral and group alliances between world powers and the country under discussion. The Introduction points out that geographically, Afghanistan is situated at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East (West Asia), and that its ‘present-day borders reflect the need, from the mid-1800s, for what is commonly referred to as a “buffer state”’ (p. 4) between Imperial Russia and the British Empire, in what came to be referred to as the ‘Great Game’. This was finalised in 1895 after the Wakhan Corridor was established, which linked the buffer state to China via a narrow strip of territory. Thereafter, Russian (and Soviet) influence increased in Kabul as the Afghan king

used military support from the former against the British, launching the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919. Between the two World Wars, the Germans also entered the fray in Afghanistan though the latter was neutral during World War II. Since 1947, when the present boundaries were established after British withdrawal from the subcontinent—and the new state of Pakistan emerged as the country's immediate neighbour while the Americans came in to fill the vacuum left by the British—Afghanistan has been trying to become a strong, stable and economically sound country, which is able to follow an independent foreign policy. The chapter then goes on to discuss the events of the 1970s, including domestic political upheavals and the 1979 Soviet invasion of the country bringing events up to date concisely. It also sets out the conceptual framework the authors have used in their analysis and sets out the structure as well as organisation of the book.

Chapter 2 covers the first grouping of countries of South Asia. It primarily highlights the impact of the India–Pakistan conflict on their bilateral relations with Afghanistan. While Pakistan is interested in ensuring a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul for creating 'strategic depth', India is attempting to counter Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. Also, as Afghanistan perceives a threat from militants and terrorists from across her border with Pakistan, she is more comfortable with India and welcomes aid for 'security and reconstruction' of the country. Islamabad, however, is uncomfortable with India's increased influence in the country through 'soft power' diplomacy. The role being played by the US, Russia and China in Afghanistan is also considered in brief here.

The next chapter analyses the second regional security complex, formed by the Central Asian states that were members of the erstwhile Soviet Union, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Out of these, three countries share a border with Afghanistan and people of same ethnicity reside on both sides of the border. While most of the countries have friendly relations with Afghanistan, they share common concerns about drug trafficking, arms smuggling and criminals and terrorists operating across their borders. The instability and differences between the five countries have resulted in the return of Russia to the region, which is being contested by the US (via the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]) and China. The interest of 'big powers' in the energy reserves has further aggravated the rivalry between the five, but no threat is anticipated to Afghanistan.

The fourth chapter considers the third grouping of Persian Gulf countries—a sub-group formed primarily by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Other countries of the region such as Iraq and the smaller Gulf states have also been considered, but very briefly. The religious, ethnic and security dynamics, and the role of world powers in guiding the political agenda of these countries have been discussed at length. It is pointed out that the ideological differences and trust deficit between Iran and Saudi Arabia are the main factors guiding their policies towards Afghanistan, which wants to have friendly ties with all countries. The impact of Iran developing nuclear weapons and the resultant response from Saudi Arabia and Israel has been considered. Such developments will further draw in world powers to the region and destabilise the peace. As it is, the threat of narcotics, terrorism and extremism has had a major impact on their bilateral and regional relations with Afghanistan. The big power rivalry in the region has the potential of destabilising the peace in the region, which will have an impact on Afghanistan too.

The next chapter is devoted to the role being played by world powers—the US, Russia and China—bilaterally as well as in groupings formed under the United Nations (UN) and in regional forums such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The authors highlight that besides oil and mineral resources the main interest of these outside powers is hegemonic—that is, ‘power projection’ and seeking to influence this strategically vital region. The influence of bilateral rivalry and economic competition has a direct impact on their power projection in Afghanistan.

The authors also examine the scenario of a ‘neutral Afghanistan’. They opine that in this role Kabul can be the ‘connector’ for the South Asian region with Central Asia, thus enhancing economic and socio-economic ties. Though not on the Silk Route, in such a scenario, Afghanistan would be a major winner and could take advantage of external assistance bilaterally as well as from regional entities. For this, it is essential that Afghanistan should create stability and remove tensions within, so that the opportunity of socio-economic development can be fully utilised.

In the end, the authors summarise their findings and conclude that the countries surrounding Afghanistan—in South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region—have internal strains and fault lines. Similarly, Afghanistan has internal fault lines apart from considerable external interference, which hamper her ability to deal with her neighbours. This impacts relations and stability of the region.

The authors need to be complimented on their examination of Afghanistan's relations with the countries of the region, both bilaterally and as sub-groups, from a new angle. The book covers Afghanistan's strategic position in West Asia and will interest those studying international relations, strategic and security studies, South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia as well as those interested in geopolitics.

#### NOTE

1. Quoted by Karzai in his speech at the opening of the 'Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan: Security & Cooperation at the Heart of Asia', November 2, 2011, and cited in Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, 'Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia', PRIO Paper, p. 1, available at [http://file.prio.no/Publication\\_files/Prio/Tadjbakhsh,%20S%20\(2012\)%20Central%20Asia%20and%20Afghanistan%20\(PRIO%20Paper\).pdf](http://file.prio.no/Publication_files/Prio/Tadjbakhsh,%20S%20(2012)%20Central%20Asia%20and%20Afghanistan%20(PRIO%20Paper).pdf), accessed on 28 September 2017.

