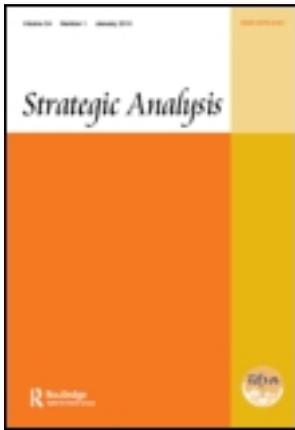


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AN ANTI-TALIBAN PASHTUN PERSPECTIVE ON THE TALIBAN

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Many of India's South Asian neighbours will be happy to see China as a full member of SAARC, much to India's discomfort.

Surprisingly, the analyses presented in the book are often uncritical. Most authors have ignored the numerous uncertainties inherent in China's rise, which raise apprehensions elsewhere, such as in South East Asia.

It is interesting to note that the positive contribution India has made to the prosperity of South Asia, and the fact that it can continue to do so in the future, has been brushed aside by several of the contributors. India emerges as a poor second to China in the perception of its neighbours. For many South Asian countries, the grass seems to be greener on the Chinese side. Reading these analyses, one wonders whether there is anything like a positive South Asian identity.

Indian policymakers can draw several lessons from the analyses in the book. As Muni points out, India's failure in keeping its neighbours happy has provided China with space in South Asia. Suggestions are being made in some quarters in China that India and China could jointly work to promote development in South Asia. To deal with China's growing influence in South Asia, India must resolve contentious issues with its neighbours (p. 283). The key lesson that emerges from the book is that India will have to rethink its neighbourhood policy on the lines of the Gujral doctrine of generous and asymmetric relationships. India should think strategically, move away from ad hoc, tactical approaches and infuse greater economic, political and people-centric content into its neighbourhood policy. India could lead in promoting a regional cooperative approach in South Asia.

*The reviewer is Director-General, IDSA, New Delhi.

Farhat Taj, **Taliban and Anti-Taliban**, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 219 pp

Sushant Sareen*

An old African proverb—'Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter'—comes to mind after reading Farhat Taj's combative, if also compelling, and to an extent controversial, description of what is actually happening on ground zero of the War on Terror, i.e. the Pashtun-dominated belt of the Afpak region. Often enough, the dominant narrative of any war drowns the voices of those living through and dying in the conflict. This is precisely what has happened in the Pashtun-populated areas that lie in the eye of the Islamist storm. Here the narrative has been monopolised either by itinerant reporters and columnists, many of whom have never travelled through the conflict-ridden areas or have at best done 'parachute reporting' on the area, or by academics sitting in Washington or London who have either travelled to the conflict area on tours conducted by the Pakistan army or have analysed the issues on the basis of conversations and interviews with people sitting in Islamabad or Peshawar.

Farhat Taj's book is unique not only because it is written by someone who is a native of the region but also because it is based on her extensive travel in the war-affected areas and intense interactions with people who are living through the conflict. She is

nothing if not the ‘historian’, or if you will, the ‘chronicler’, of the travails and tribulations that ordinary Pashtuns, caught in the crossfire between the militants (Islamist insurgents) and the militaries, are undergoing. By adopting a sort of ‘subaltern study’ approach to the conflict, the author lends an entirely new perspective in defence of the Pashtuns. She debunks (even if not entirely convincingly) the self-serving myth perpetuated by many Pakistani apologists of the Taliban as well as by some Western analysts who argue that the Taliban represents some sort of Pashtun nationalist resistance to foreign occupation.

Taj projects the Pashtuns more as hostages than as hosts of the Islamist insurgents (Al Qaeda, Taliban, et al.). Hers is a liberal, Pashtun nationalist perspective that seeks to absolve the Pashtuns of the havoc that is being wreaked by Islamist terror groups in the region and puts the blame squarely on the Pakistani military establishment for all the problems in the region. The trouble is, however, that Taj treads through a landscape in which treachery is a *sine qua non* for survival and truth is always relative and partial, never absolute and complete. Where fears and loathing rule supreme, truth is always a casualty. In other words, while there is enough evidence to bear out Taj’s finger pointing at the support, sanctuary and sustenance that the Pakistani military establishment provides to the Taliban as the root of all evil, she appears to stretch the limits of credibility when she projects the Pashtuns almost as innocent and blameless lambs who are being slaughtered by the butchers in uniform (read Pakistan army) and black turbans (read Taliban and their Al Qaeda associates).

Even as she tears into the shenanigans and double-dealing by the Pakistani intelligence and military establishment, which, she argues, are perpetrating and perpetuating the conflict in pursuit of certain rather wonky strategic objectives in Afghanistan, she also challenges the tendency among journalists and academics to either dumb down or stereotype an entire people by completely ignoring the bewildering complexities and intricacies of their society. However, her somewhat romanticised portrayal of Pashtuns as an idyllic, peaceable people who have been caught in a violent Islamist maelstrom not of their making is not quite borne out by historical evidence.

In the process, Taj also glosses over the fact that three decades of relentless war have wrought tectonic changes on the Pashtun society. For instance, she asserts that in the 30 years between the 1980s and 2010s the power equations in the FATA region (dominance of the Pakistani state) have not changed drastically. Nor is she willing to accept that the Islamist militants have become a virtual state within a state and are challenging the authority of the Pakistani state by force of arms. Taj insists that the Pakistani state remains the primary player and perpetrator in all the crimes being committed on the hapless people of FATA, something that does not gel with the anecdotal evidence of the atrophying Pakistani state.

Although a lot of what Taj asserts is counter-intuitive and challenges conventional analysis, the real value of her work lies in questioning accepted theories on the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural causes of the conflict in the Pashtun areas and offering an alternate perspective that presents a very benign picture of the proud and turbulent Pashtuns. Going by Taj’s thesis, it is not so much the hapless Pashtuns who are the problem but the hubristic Punjabis, and many of the troubles could be controlled if only the screws were tightened on Rawalpindi.

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