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BOOK REVIEW

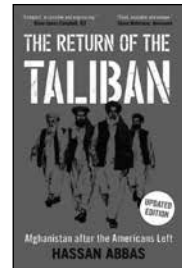
**The Return of the Taliban:
Afghanistan After the Americans Left**

Hassan Abbas

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2023, 305 pp



HIMADRI BOSE

The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left authored by Hassan Abbas is a timely, in-depth and incisive book on a topic crucial to peace and security in South Asia. The Taliban are back, and the world is struggling to come to terms with dealing with a so-called terror outfit that has morphed into the government of the day. The Taliban have won the long war and now have to make the transition to governance. The book seeks to answer the fundamental question: where are the Taliban headed, ideologically and organisationally, what are their challenges, and how does the world deal with them? Abbas states, “The underlying thesis tested here is that the return of the Taliban to power warrants a rebirth of the group in a way—as they are not immune to the changing tides of time.”

Commodore **Himadri Bose** is a serving officer of the Indian Navy, presently at the National Defence College.

The author begins by examining the complex circumstances that led to the peace deal of 2020—the initial Trump years (2017- 18) witnessed an aggressive US posture to counter the Afghan Taliban. However, by the end 2018, the call had been taken for the US to exit Afghanistan. The exit was estimated to save \$ 27 billion a year in military spending. The draft agreement was ready by 2019; countering the Islamic State of Khorasan [ISK – an offshoot of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS)], safe passage of the US soldiers and a smooth transition of power were vital imperatives. While negotiations were ongoing, there was overbearing pressure from Trump for an early conclusion of the deal. For the Taliban, the release of 5,000 prisoners from Afghan prisons was a key negotiation driver, while the US and the Afghan government did not realise the trap they were walking into. The release of the prisoners would eventually bolster the ranks of the Taliban. Trump was dissuaded from concluding the deal in mainland US, and the peace deal was concluded in Doha in August 2020. The Taliban were ready for the ensuing churn and had no pretensions about sharing power or a smooth transition. They moved into Kabul in a show of strength in August 2021. President Ghani bolted to save himself and not end up as Najibullah did after the Russians left, and Taliban 3.0 was born.

The author documents the Taliban's transition and the ensuing power struggle. As the group established its first government, tensions surfaced between hardliners and moderates. Sirajuddin Haqqani, a known adversary of the US and an ally of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), obtained the high-ranking role of interior minister, likely expecting further benefits. Mullah Barader, recognised by the US as the head of the political office in Doha, appeared to be the biggest casualty in this power struggle. Despite his ambition to become the supreme leader, the secluded Deobandi cleric Hibatullah Akhundzada was awarded the title.

Taliban 3.0 began with reconciliatory notes, seeking to repair their international image. The fledgling Taliban were hit hard by the suicide bombing attack by the ISK on August 26, 2021, killing over 170 Afghans and 13 US troops at Kabul airport. The bomber had been released from prison by the Taliban. The interim government of the Taliban was largely Pashtun, and 14 members of the Cabinet were on the U.N. Security

Council terrorism blacklist. Abbas highlights the umbilical links of the Taliban with Pakistan, such as the endorsement of the Pakistani ISI, the membership of the Quetta or Peshawar Shura and alumni of the Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary. It was just a matter of time before the Taliban reneged on their erstwhile promises of moderation, and clamped down on women's rights and education. Adding to the mix, there was no let-up in the persecution of minorities. The Taliban are fraught with internal factional battles and are struggling to cement their legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Complicating the challenges of the Taliban is the rise of the ISK, whose ideology is extremely hardline and seeks to displace them. The ISK ideologues contend that the Taliban are soft on the minorities and are ceding space to the moderates. After the Taliban came back to power, the ISK executed 127 attacks in Afghanistan, of which 80 percent targeted the Taliban. Abbas argues that there is a struggle between the 'old and the new' Taliban. However, a moderate turn in the ways of the Taliban would mean a departure from their hardline foundational ideology. Furthermore, the Taliban are struggling to come to terms with the economics of running a nation.

A thread consistently running through the book is the vexed relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan. The Haqqani network and the Quetta Shura were nurtured to undermine the Ghani government and create strategic depth to counter India. The ISI believed that the Haqqani-led men would be in power and would secure Pakistani interests. However, these grand plans seem to have unravelled with the Haqqanis holding only a fraction of the critical posts. Pakistan is unpopular in Afghanistan, and the Taliban government is careful not to be seen to be too closely aligned with it. Besides, the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan—TTP), which was attacking the Pakistani government and civilian targets, had the tacit support of the Afghan Taliban as payback for the refuge they provided when the Taliban were fighting the US-led forces. Also, the understanding has been that the TTP will continue to use Afghanistan as a base of operations from which to strike and destabilise Pakistan but if the Taliban move against the group, it will drive their adherents onto the ISK.

Abbas contends that countries are slowly coming to terms with the ascendance of the Taliban. On the one hand, the Taliban have reneged on their promise of upholding women's rights and civil liberties and, on the other, they need international validation to address their economic and security concerns. Abbas goes on to highlight the geopolitical imperatives for the US, UAE, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India, Qatar and Pakistan as they engage with the Taliban, either forthrightly or with veiled deniability. There is also a recognition amongst nations, notably China, Turkey and Russia, that Afghanistan is rich in resources and they seek the first-mover advantage. He posits that the competing interests of various nations, internal divides and the threat from the ISK are severe challenges for the Taliban.

The author distinguishes between engaging and endorsing, wherein the former is to keep the dialogue going, and the latter is about supporting what the Taliban stand for. He argues that engaging with the Taliban is the only way forward for the world and that engagement is not to be construed as endorsement. Not engaging runs the risk of playing into the hardliners, reinforcing the lament that the world does not care about Afghanistan. The Taliban will also have to reinvent themselves as 'Taliban Generation Z' comes to the fore. They have a relatively modern outlook and could lead the change within the Taliban. Abbas posits two scenarios. Firstly, "the best-case scenario remains that the Taliban properly build upon the relative peace that has come to Afghanistan—in comparison to previous years—and that the moderates among them rise to the top." The worst case scenario is that the Taliban rule goes from bad to worse, and Afghanistan descends into another period of violence and chaos. Abbas reckons, "The Taliban today are not a product solely of some larger evil ideology... but of a people's pain, desperation and lack of options".

Overall, it is a well-researched and insightful book that raises some very sharp questions on how the world should deal with the Taliban and how they, in turn, should deal with themselves. His recommendation of overlooking the Taliban's brutal past and their repressive present for the greater good of the Afghan people may be controversial, but is, perhaps, the only hope for the region. If the past of Afghanistan is anything to go by, even time may not have an answer to this vexed predicament.