

India's Afghan Muddle: A Lost Opportunity

(Harsh V. Pant)

Vanshika Sirohi¹

Harsh V. Pant's *India's Afghan Muddle: A Lost Opportunity* offers a comprehensive analysis of India's evolving foreign policy towards Afghanistan, concentrating on the pivotal year of 2014 when significant changes were underway in the region. The book delves into the historical backdrop of, strategic interests, and geopolitical complexities surrounding India's engagement with Afghanistan, providing a critical analysis of the nation's approach and the potential opportunities it may have overlooked.

The book is structured into six chapters, with each delving into specific aspects of India's Afghan policy, regional complexities of the region, and the interplay between major world powers. The author paints a vivid picture of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, from ancient times to the post-9/11 era, highlighting the continuous external struggles for power in the region. The book contends that India, despite its historical ties and economic capabilities, has failed to assert an autonomous posture in shaping Afghanistan's future.

Pant begins by delineating the historical ties between India and Afghanistan, emphasizing the deep cultural connections and rapport. The author posits that Afghanistan is of significant strategic importance to India, due to its geographical location serving as a potential gateway to energy-rich Central Asian nations. The book contends that India's policy towards Afghanistan has predominantly been characterized as cautious and supportive, relying heavily on soft power initiatives.

The strategic interests of major world powers, such as Pakistan, Iran, China, the US, and Russia, are thoroughly examined. Pant highlights the role of Islamic fundamentalist and terrorist groups operating along the Pak-Afghan border region, posing a threat not only to Afghanistan but also to India. The book asserts that India's reluctance to project hard power in Afghanistan, notably in terms of military aid and assistance, has hindered its ability to successfully tackle these security threats.

¹ The author is a Postgraduate student at Jindal School of International Affairs (JSIA) and is the Centre Coordinator of Centre for Security Studies.

The book meticulously examines India's shifting policies towards Afghanistan over the last decade and a half. It contends that India, despite having the economic and military capacity to become a major world power, has a tendency likely influenced by the recommendations of other countries, particularly the United States. The author argues that India's soft power strategy, while contributing to developmental projects, has not been accompanied by a bold projection of hard power.

Pant claims that the US, recognizing Pakistan's role as a cause rather than a solution to turmoil in Afghanistan, has urged India to play a more active role in stabilizing the security situation. The author contends that India's hesitation in adopting a bolder policy may have stemmed from a reliance on American advice, which has evolved over time with changing perceptions of Pakistan's role in the region.

The book delves into the dynamics of India's soft power initiatives in Afghanistan, ranging from financial and developmental aid to cultural outreach and educational assistance. While India has emerged as the country's second-highest beneficiary of foreign aid, the book argues that the nation has been reluctant to provide the essential weaponry and equipment required by Afghan security forces.

Pant argues that the dichotomy between India's soft and hard power approaches has resulted in missed opportunities and a lack of visible strategic gains. Despite being a key neighbour with centuries-old ties, India's inability to assert its influence has resulted in a diminishing presence in Afghanistan. The author contends that India should refrain from retreating from Afghanistan and adopt a more assertive foreign policy to safeguard its interests and promote regional stability.

The book delves into India's aspirations to emerge as a major global player and examines the impact of its Afghan policy on attaining this goal. It highlights India's participation in international initiatives, such as providing military contingents for UN missions, but suggests that India should be more proactive in meeting Afghanistan's requests for military assistance. The author also emphasizes that a strong and secure Afghanistan is in India's strategic interest and can enhance its prestige in the region.

Pant discusses the role of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who first conveyed favourable indications by extending invitations to the heads of SAARC nations for his swearing-in ceremony, however later declined to supply military hardware and assistance to Kabul. The book points out Pakistan's efforts to create strategic depth in Afghanistan and underscores the importance of India assisting the democratic regime in countering Pakistan's ambitions.

As the US-led coalition forces prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, the book contends that Afghanistan sought military aid from India a crucial opportunity that India should not have overlooked. The author urges India to project both soft and hard power in Afghanistan, emphasizing the need for a bold and dynamic role in regional issues.

Pant critiques India's unclear and incoherent foreign policy towards Afghanistan, asserting that the nation has relied solely on soft power. He maintains that India should capitalize on the shifting geopolitical landscape post-2014 and seize the opportunity to establish itself as a reliable alternative in Afghanistan for the region's rehabilitation.

The book concludes with a critical analysis of India's Afghan policy, cautioning that the nation risks being surrounded by darkness if policymakers fail to learn from past mistakes. Pant urges India to use the small window of opportunity to emerge as a credible alternative in Afghanistan, emphasizing the importance of willpower and strategic foreign policies in paving the way for a new dawn.

India's Afghan Muddle: A Lost Opportunity is a comprehensive and meticulously researched analysis of India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Harsh V. Pant provides a detailed examination of historical ties, strategic interests, and regional complexities, offering valuable insights into India's soft power initiatives and the need for a more assertive hard power approach. The book serves as a significant contribution to the understanding of India's role in the geopolitically sensitive region of Afghanistan and provides policymakers and scholars with a thought-provoking framework for future considerations.