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# Misreading Afghanistan's Crypto-coloniality

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Colonial and postcolonial writings on Afghanistan are marked by the absence of a systematic and critical awareness about the country as an offspring and dependency of Western colonialism. The ethnographic, historic, and political realities of Afghanistan provide extensive evidence for the country as a crypto-colony, invisible and disguised, but a real and ongoing colonial space with continuous political and material dependence on Euro-American metropolitan powers. The historic and contemporary political configuration of Afghanistan is a stark representation of crypto-colonialism—a heuristic device rather than a typology—in which

the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonised lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence. (Herzfeld 2002: 900–01)

Afghanistan's titular and imaginary "independence" and "freedom" have veiled the country's perennial dependence on colonial powers. All rulers of Afghanistan have been directly or indirectly selected by colonial powers. The latest two "Presidents" of Afghanistan have been directly and openly selected by the American occupation machinery. The state apparatus of Afghanistan and its operators have been controlled with material tools in the guise of "foreign" aid, humanitarian assistance, gifts, grants, and subsidies, some accompanied by instances of enraged, destructive, and degrading colonial military intervention.

Afghanistan was born during the first half of the 19th century as a crypto-colony

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Afghanistan Post-2014: Power Configurations and Evolving Trajectories** edited by Rajen Harshé and Dhananjay Tripathi, *New Delhi: Routledge, 2016; pp xix+248, ₹895.*

of Great Britain. Visible and invisible British colonial presence in Afghanistan continued through the first half of the 20th century. The colonially imposed borders of Afghanistan and the subsidisation of the structure and operations of its state apparatus are manifestations of its crypto-colonial genealogy. After World War II, the United States (us) replaced Great Britain as the colonial master of Afghanistan. During the Cold War, Afghanistan became a playground for competition between the Soviet Union and the us for global economic and political domination. During this war and during the continued intervention of the us (1990–present), Afghanistan increasingly became the subject of Western scholarly and popular writings dealing with the culture, history, and politics of the country. With virtually no exception, these texts are uninformed by (or indifferent to) the reality of Afghanistan as a Euro-American crypto-colony, and are clouded with the imaginings of the country as an independent, sovereign, and self-governing state. The contents of the book under review, *Afghanistan Post-2014: Power Configurations and Evolving Trajectories*, reflect this clouded effect.

### Cycles of Intervention

The book is divided into four parts, with each part consisting of three chapters. The introduction to the volume by the editors provides cogent summaries of each chapter. Part I is titled "Locating Afghanistan in a Globalized World and Testing Theories of International Relations." Chapter 1 by Rajen Harshé positions Afghanistan in

globalisation, highlighted by the colonial imposition of the Durand Line by Great Britain and the competing interventions of the us and the Soviet Union. The author properly locates the cradle of terrorist groups—al-Qaeda and its offspring, the Taliban (Hanifi 2002)—in the destabilisation of Afghanistan by outsiders, especially the us. In Chapter 2, Siddharth Mallavarapu acknowledges his inspiration from Alessandro Monsutti's article on Afghanistan in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2013, Vol 42). Mallavarapu attempts to situate writings about Afghanistan at the intersection of various colonial and post-colonial cycles of intervention and the steadily increasing destabilising international presence in the country. Chapter 3 by Omar Sadr addresses the failure of various international attempts at the resolution of conflicts in Afghanistan. Sadr suggests that effectively addressing the political conflicts in Afghanistan requires placing the country in the custody of its surrounding regional (Central, South, and West Asian) international consortiums.

He convincingly argues that the stabilisation of Afghanistan requires "a common external threat" (p 67) from the surrounding regional powers in order to acquire the ability to peacefully integrate its centre-less polity. Sadr proposes a regional version of a global model proposed elsewhere, where it is argued that Afghanistan be declared a political and economic bankruptcy and, for its rehabilitation and reconstruction, placed in the receivership of the global (not regional) international community for about 50 years, that is, four K-12 cycles (Hanifi 2011).

Part II of the book is titled "The USA, NATO and Afghanistan." In Chapter 4, Dhananjay Tripathi provides a discussion of the post-Cold War rise of the us as the sole, but confused, superpower. The intervention of the us in Afghanistan and the American agency in the rise of al-Qaeda and the Taliban are addressed, as well as the prospects of Afghanistan after the recent reduction of American occupation forces. Although it is unlikely that the us will totally withdraw from Afghanistan (3,000 additional American troops have been sent to Afghanistan

in 2017), the author misreads the prospects of a stable Afghanistan by asserting that “no plan for a stable Afghanistan is conceivable and even sustainable without the active participation of the us” (p 74). This starkly contradicts the reality of the destruction, fragmentation, division, and instability that has resulted from the American intervention, especially in West Asia, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Chapter 5 narrates the role of the us and NATO in the creation of the “Afghan National Security Force” and its dim prospects for providing adequate security for the country. In Chapter 6, Mirwais Balkhi, an intellectual and government employee from Kabul, airs out a hyperrealistic (and probably wishful) advocacy for the membership of Afghanistan in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Balkhi’s proposal enjoys popular support in the American-subsidised Kabul government bureaucracy, the Afghan political elite, and much of the Afghan urban civil society trapped in Occidentosis (Westoxification) longing for migration to Euro–America. Every day, thousands of Afghans migrate to Iran and Pakistan hoping to find their way to a Western country.

### Regional Perspectives

Part III deals with the presence of Germany, Russia and India, in attempts at stabilisation and development of Afghanistan during its occupation by the us. Chapter 7 by Sandra Destradi, a German scholar, provides an account of the participation of the German armed forces in the American occupation of Afghanistan. Destradi concentrates on the role of Germany in establishing the security forces of Afghanistan and some development projects in the country. In Chapter 8, Nikolay Gudalov, a Russian scholar, narrates the Soviet and post-Soviet era Russian involvement in Afghanistan. The author offers a discussion of the Russian imagery of Afghanistan as part of Muslim Central Asia, where it has substantial influence, and Russia’s uneasy proximity in Afghanistan to its Cold War American enemy. Gudalov notes the Russian concern about the flow of drugs, migrants, and Muslim fundamentalists from Afghanistan to Central Asia and Russia. Chapter 9 by Shaji S provides an overview of the history

of India’s relations with Afghanistan and ideas about the aftermath of the withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan. The prospects of the involvement of India in the security, development, and reconstruction of Afghanistan are briefly discussed. The chapter includes a brief analysis of the consequences of closer Indo–Afghan relations for the stressful relations of Afghanistan with Pakistan.

Part IV has essays dealing with “Regional Perspectives on Afghanistan.” Chapter 10 by Stephen Kingah argues for locating the prospects for peace and security in a regional context with Afghanistan’s neighbours, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Obviously, India will play a prominent role in this alternative. In Chapter 11, Arpita Basu Roy, while agreeing with Kingah’s emphasis on security, underscores the importance of “human security ... health, food, environment, education, and political security” (p 211) in placing Afghanistan in the custody of SAARC. Chapter 12 by Athar Zafar and Dino K Upadhyay addresses the consequences of the withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan for the economic and political relations of India with Central Asia. These relations are three tiered (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) and are dependent on the physical proximity of Central Asian spaces to the economic, political, and social terrain of Afghanistan.

### Conclusions

The theoretical and methodological frameworks of the chapters in *Afghanistan Post-2014* are not meaningfully informed by the reality of Afghanistan as a cryptocolony. The book’s generally informative texts are marked by frequent episodes of ambiguity and strain caused by decorative, unnecessary, and confusing poetic profundity. Instances of the distortion and misreading of the cultural and social complexities of Afghanistan are scattered throughout the book. For example, in the introduction to the book, the co-editors uncritically rewrite an ethnographically unfounded allegation of a Western-educated writer from Kabul about the sociocultural configuration of Afghanistan: “locally, in nearly every province,

different ethnic groups intermingled, some over centuries and others relatively recently” (p 3). In reality, one will not find Hindus, Hazaras, Turkmens, or Aimags intermingling, in meaningful economic, political and social terms, with Nuristanis in Nuristan (or elsewhere), or Nuristanis, Hindus, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Jews, and Tajiks interacting with the Aimags in north-western Afghanistan. Production and consumption has essentially remained local in Afghanistan. A person living in Gardez or Khost has no idea about what or where Maimana, Sheberghan, or Baghlan (and vice versa) are. This is largely the result of the frailty of the centre–periphery relations in the country (Hanifi 2000, 2004, 2009).

Elsewhere, the author of Chapter 5 states that “the Taleban have often proclaimed that ‘the Americans have all the watches, and we have all the time’” (p 93). The specific local source and language (Farsi or Pashto) of this quoted phrase is not provided. It is quite paradoxical for the (basically pre-industrial and preliterate) Taleban to expatiate on such industrial conception of time, and do so in English! Nowadays, due to exposure to modernity, virtually all of Taleban have watches and are able to keep and set time, especially for producing industrial tools and techniques for explosive resistance to the unwelcome and defiling presence of the West in their culture and society. In the West, this idea is usually constructed as “you have the watches we have the time” (Benbow 2015). This phrase (in various formats) articulates the popular Euro–American condescending Orientalist view of the encounter between pre-modern and pre-industrial “Them” with the modern industrial “Us.”

Nevertheless, despite such misreading, the essays in *Afghanistan Post-2014*, with varying degree of adequacy, provide useful discussions about the local political and economic conditions and processes in Afghanistan and the global hegemonic interventions that have produced visible destabilising political and social effects in the country during the past few decades, especially the years following the American invasion of Afghanistan. The idea of “Post-2014” in the title of the book remains ambiguous and its use varies from

chapter to chapter. Only a few chapters concentrate on the period marked by the reduction of American occupation forces in 2013. A more useful benchmark for the current disintegrating conditions in Afghanistan is 2010, when Ashraf Ghani (an American-educated us citizen) formally became the political advisor to General David Petraeus (commander of the International Security Assistance Forces [ISAF]) and commander of us Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) from 4 July 2010 to 18 July 2011. This partnership triggered us

support for the political momentum that led to the American installation of Ashraf Ghani as the “President” of Afghanistan.

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