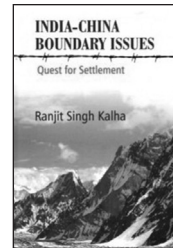

Book Reviews

India-China Boundary Issues: Quest for Settlement

Ranjit Singh Kalha

(New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014)

Rs 995/-



The Sino-Indian War of 1962 is one of the tragic memories in modern Indian history. It began with a question that was left over from history, was fuelled by the tectonic shifts then underway in the global polity and left a deep scar on the future relations between the two Asian giants even as it failed to solve any immediate problems. There is an enormous amount of literature on the 1962 War and the question of the India-China boundary settlement. Works by Neville Maxwell, John Dalvi, Parshotam Mehra, A. G. Noorani, Steven Hoffman and others stand out among the literature available on this issue. The present work by Ambassador (Retd) Ranjit Singh Kalha, *India-China Boundary Issues: Quest for Settlement*, begins with an aim to present a more fair and balanced view of the issues concerned. Divided into ten chapters, this book looks at the India-China boundary issues in the post-colonial era.

In many ways, the fact that the war of 1962 was a global war fought between two insecure and weak countries, having two ambitious leaders at the helm, is often missed in the popular narratives of the war. One of the biggest challenges in the narrative of the 1962 War and the border question in India is that the theme of *Chinese betrayal* has dominated most of the popular and populist writings and the perceptions of the vast number of the Indian people. What this book does is to bring out the

holistic perspective on the India-China War by taking the conversations outside Beijing and Delhi, to Washington, London, Moscow, Lahore and many such places. This just goes to show that the India-China relations have more than bilateral impetus and are influenced by, and susceptible to, the peripheral developments.

The book begins by describing why language and the same interpretation of terminology is critical to the success of a dialogue on borders. It also looks into various concepts associated with border management like boundaries, frontiers and buffers (pp.1-5). The author then goes on to explain the process of boundary-making, including delimitation, delineation and demarcation (pp. 4-5). At certain places, the author makes claims without substantiating these with examples. For example, on page 4 he says, “A militarily and economically strong state is unlikely to be ‘reasonable’ when negotiating a boundary alignment and usually has its way”. While strong states are nationalistic, there is no reason why they cannot be pragmatic on the question of larger national interest. This is especially likely to be true in the present day when globalisation has created interdependencies. Conversely, what drove India and China to the war of 1962 was their post-liberation weak economic and political statures which, in turn, made the regimes more insecure.

This book also presents an important and interesting discussion on the concepts of sovereignty and suzerainty, which are equally important from the point of view of China’s historical relations with Tibet (p. 16). While Tibet perceived that China had suzerainty over Tibet, Beijing interpreted its relations with Lhasa in the framework of sovereignty. This discussion also beautifully brings out Britain’s ambivalence in stating its position in unambiguous terms and its impact on the overall situation.

The book showcases that from 1953-54 to 1962, Jawaharlal Nehru moved from a pragmatic realistic position on China and its occupation of Tibet to a more impulsive one; in 1954, he told the Foreign Secretary that it is difficult to fight a war and defeat the Chinese forces in Tibet

(p. 63), whereas in 1962, he advocated a forward policy (p. 137). In the intervening period, the Sino-Soviet rift, Korean War, failure of the Great Leap Forward and India's perceptible closeness with the United States, had changed the strategic calculus significantly enough to lead to the war of 1962. The narrative on what caused this polar shift in Nehru's thinking on China is a major strength of this book.

Again, as stated earlier, the global context of the India-China War in general, and the role of the Cuban Missile Crisis in particular, is an often-neglected driver (pp. 148-150). The author has brought out China's fluctuating relations with the former Soviet Union and its impact on the Chinese worldview leading up to the war. While discussing the India-China War, it is usually fashionable to vilify Jawaharlal Nehru, either for being too naïve or too idealistic. This book avoids that convenient trap and showcases that there was a communication gap between India's defence strategists, and between India and China.

It also deals with the recent history – the India-China border talks since 1993 – in a satisfactory manner and details all the important events and agreements signed during this period. However, it does not note the issues of stapled visas or China's belligerence of not issuing a visa to the Northern Commander of the Indian Army in 2009.

The book suffers from under-referencing and even if there are a lot of references cited, many claims are unsubstantiated due to lack of references or lack of adequate detailed discussions. For example, Mao's meeting and conversation with the Indian Charge d' Affairs in Beijing in 1970 has no footnote (p. 185). In the academic world, over-footnoting is always better than under-footnoting. Another shortfall, and perhaps a major one, is that the chapters have not been divided into sections and sub-sections, making it difficult to comprehend the structure of the chapter. Therefore, the chapters also suffer on account of being loosely organised, even if the quality of the work is fair enough. What it also does is to make the work appear to be an oral chronological history of events rather than

an analytical book *per se*. This has also caused a degree of repetition as well as inclusion of off-the-theme sections in the book.

In terms of content, it is felt that the work would have been immensely enriched with a discussion on the domestic politics in India leading to the 1962 War. Nehru was under immense domestic pressure from the opposition and there is a rich history of parliamentary debate on this issue. Also the legendary cartoonist Shankar's work described Nehru's policy shortfalls to the people in a crisp manner. Another oversight is the absence of discussion on the trans-boundary river issue between India and China. It overlaps the border issue, as there is a perception that China's claim on Arunachal has something to do with its hydropower potential.

Even then, the shortfalls listed above do not take away from the strength of the book. Better editing and better organisation would help a revised edition to be a more organised and reader friendly version of what otherwise is a content rich and comprehensive text on the multi-dimensional issues of, and related to, the India-China boundary. The fact that it remains China's one of two unsettled boundaries and one of the biggest unsettled territorial disputes in the world, besides the Palestinian question, attests to its complexity. Therefore, this book is an important addition to the literature on the subject and will interest those who are keen to learn about the minute chronological details of the issue at hand. Thus, the author must be complemented on his painstaking work.

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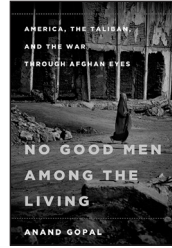
Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War through Afghan Eyes

Anand Gopal

(New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2014)

Rs 699/-



Instability in Afghanistan has prevailed since historical times. The recent phase of conflict started after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. At present, the third Afghan generation is witnessing violence as well as relative stability in the country. The book written by Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, narrates the story about the struggle of four individuals from different strata of social hierarchy, in the post Taliban phase. Jan Muhammad, a powerful tribal leader who was a prisoner of the Taliban but who eventually becomes a politician in Kabul, Mullah Manan, a mid level Taliban commander, Heela, an educated Pashtun widow, who becomes a Senator, and Akbar Gul, who is forced to join the Taliban ranks due to the prevailing circumstances. All of them were young at the time of the Russian invasion and played some role in the reactionary internal phases of the Cold War, civil war, Taliban rule and, more importantly, American invasion. Every person from a conflict zone has a fascinating personal story of struggle, especially in Afghanistan where war has become a part of the day to day life of everyone. The author has chosen these particular stories to give a perspective of the people from all spectra of society post the Taliban era.

The book starts, like many other accounts written on the subject, with the background, starting with the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Mujahideen forces, with the back-up of America and Pakistan, the Soviet withdrawal, followed by the civil war and, subsequently, the emergence of the Taliban. The hunting down of Osama Bin Laden after 9/11 and the American offensive which forced the Taliban to flee to Pakistan brought

the situation to square one. The author, at the very beginning, discards three general perceptions about Afghanistan. According to the author Afghanistan is not the graveyard of empires. Further, he writes, “Every Afghan leader lived and died by foreign backing since the 1970s”. Hence, the argument “Afghanistan is the graveyard of Afghans built by empires”. The second sensitive issue is about the leaders of the Northern Alliance who emerged as national heroes, people like Massoud, Marshal Fahim, Sayyaf and Baba Jan. The author holds them accountable for the ethnic cleansing of the Pashtuns and Hazaras in Kabul and adjacent areas. These atrocities forced Akbar Gul to join the Taliban to seek revenge. He says there are “no more innocents, no more neutrals, only sides already chosen for you... and you allied with those you knew and trusted.” The third aspect is the extreme form of Islamic rule, which, initially, was implemented by the US backed Mujahideen, not the Taliban. However, the author emphasises that the origin of the Taliban lies much deeper in the Afghan past and the *Pashtunwali* culture and not in Pakistani *madrasas*. “In Kandahar, the tribal structure was weakest where the Taliban were fully integrated, hence, they did not feel any cultural opposition from the society” like in the north, the author writes. They tried to make the social practices of the south the political practices of all of Afghanistan, hence, they “applied themselves to the problem of anarchy (during the civil war) with an unforgiving platform of law and order”. This decides the flow of the course of the stories from the southerners’ perspective and covers the geographical, political and societal landscapes from Kabul to Kandahar.

JMK is an acronym used by the author for Jan Muhammad Khan, one of the Popalzai leaders who was Governor of Uruzgan for four years under President Burhanuddin Rabbani and a close friend of Karzai. Later, he was captured by the Taliban and spent three years in a Kandahar jail. Successful mediation by Karzai gave him another chance to live. Karzai made him the Governor of Uruzgan and later special adviser to the President. He was later killed in Kabul when he was planning to return to

Uruzgan. Karzai always kept him close because he understood the tribal politics which the Americans had not been able to understand, the fact that, “not only individuals but entire tribal communities were winners or losers in the war” in Afghanistan.

Mullah Manan, a Taliban commander, had led nearly 1,000 Talibs to ambush Karzai and Lt Col Jason Amerine when they were in Tirin Kot to gather support from local tribal leaders against the Taliban. But air support neutralised the attempt and Manan lost the heart to fight further. Although he wanted to surrender, the harsh US policies against the former Talibs forced him to flee to Karachi. The social and political alienation of the Afghans in Pakistani cities has been illustrated by the author in his story.

Heela, a young woman who studied in Kabul University, escaped with her four children and husband to her ancestral home in Khas Uruzgan. Coming from a liberal society, she had to adjust to the more conservative environment. However, she couldn't stay at home like many other Afghan women and with the help of her husband, Muskinyar, she works with foreign Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Her activities resulted in the death of her husband at the hands of JMK sleuths. The real story of her struggle starts after that, where she can't even leave her house without a *mabram* to meet her two injured children. With the Americans' help, she survives and continues to help other women. Being the only educated woman in the whole district, she successfully creates a space for herself in the society and with the support of Matiullah, nephew and adversary of JMK, she goes on to become a Senator in Kabul. For Heela “the war years were not only about survival; they also meant the wedding you never attended, the trip you never took, the movie you never saw.” She refused to accept the status quo, and serves as a model for emulation by other women in repressed societies.

Akbar Gul had been witness to the killing of his brothers by Gelam Jama, the militiaman of Rashid Dostum. This incident leaves no option

for him other than joining the Taliban ranks to take revenge. In the following days, he becomes well known to the people as Mullah Cable, a junior Taliban commander. But, soon he felt betrayed by the Taliban because of the increasing senseless violence. He smuggled himself to Iran in search of a job and a better life. However, the attraction of the policies of the Karzai government and the social alienation in Iran brought him back to Kabul but the reality was now different back home. There was chaos everywhere. The new police force was an amalgamation of the old militia and gangs. It was like the old days of the civil war, when guns and money had ruled the country. The situation forced him to go back to his former profession and revive old contacts. There was no resurgence of a united Taliban movement like in the 1990s but small autonomous groups had started working in different parts of the country—such as 12 groups were working in Wardak in 2004. Violence increased in the subsequent years. According to Akbar Gul, initially, “people preferred Taliban austerity to government and foreign impunity”. This was a modern Taliban which used cell phones and watched TV. Akbar Gul explains how the revival of the Taliban was the need of the situation and how it was controlled by the patrons who were sitting in Quetta, Karachi and other cities of Pakistan.

The perceptions provided by the book are based on facts which have not been openly discussed or made public knowledge, that is, the Taliban is not the biggest enemy of Afghanistan. Rather, the senior leadership, including Mullah Omar wanted to surrender in 2001 but the Taliban’s Afghan opposition misguided the Americans on every front by giving false intelligence to eliminate their enemies. The book is full of such accounts, giving names, places and incidents. The author writes, “How do you fight war without an adversary... some people created one where there was none”. With each tribe trying to benefit economically and politically from the Americans, the situation falls in the line of the Anglo-Afghan Wars, when the major tribes, the Durrani and

Barakzai were trying to rule the country with the help of the British and Russians. Then, and now, with the leaders trying to exploit everything and everyone around, there can be no justice and rule of law. Only the strong can survive. And this time, the Taliban were targeted because they were on the weaker side, and the opposition got the support of the Americans. They were targeted while those now allied with the US, harboured similarly deplorable records from the civil war era, but their crimes went unpunished. The author goes on to say, “To the Taliban, justice unequally applied, feels like no justice”. Injustice always follows instability, which is why it seems that the author has chosen an old Pashtun saying for the title of the book: there are “no good men among the living”, and no bad ones among the dead.

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Notes

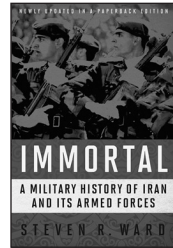
1. *Mabram* is a woman’s husband or a man whom that woman cannot get married to, according to Islamic jurisprudence. This can be due to a blood relationship (such as a father, son, brother, paternal uncle, etc) or a foster relationship.<http://idealmuslimah.com/component/glossary/Definition-of-Arabic-Terms-1/M/Mahram-55/>

*Immortal: A Military History of
Iran and its Armed Forces*

Steven R Ward

(Washington DC: Georgetown University Press,
2014)

Rs 1,666/-



Steven Ward, a senior Central Intelligence (CIA) analyst has made an attempt to compile the military history of Iran and its armed forces which practically covers a vast time span from 550 BC to the present 21st century in a single volume. The book is divided into 10 chapters which trace the contours of the Iranian military history, highlighting the major events which have shaped the Iranian society which, in turn, had an impact on the Iranian military thinking over the years. It, thus, serves as an important indicator to understand why Iran as a nation behaves the way it does. Iran's geo-strategic location had made it a land of frequent invasions and conquests by various powers, and it, thus, witnessed the rise and fall of many great dynasties. Over time, Iran produced some of the world's ablest rulers, from Cyrus the Great to Nadir Shah. However, these leaders failed to produce competent successors who could carry forward or, at least, maintain their legacy, ultimately leading to the collapse of the empire. Despite these shortcomings, Iran has surprised observers time and again as it rose to prominence against overwhelming odds. Its current resurgence in the region after a series of tumultuous events only reiterates this fact.

The author first covers the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty which was responsible for taking the Persian Empire (as it was called then) to the zenith of its power. The major battles fought and the role played by the military in making Persia the world's first superpower in the ancient world have received considerable weightage. There is specific focus on

the battlefield manoeuvres and strategies employed by the Achaemenid kings. The subsequent rise and fall of the major dynasties of Iran, namely, the Parthian, Sassanian and Safavid dynasties and the major battles they engaged in, have also been covered fairly well. Factors like poor leadership, overstretched supply lines, lack of innovation on the battlefield and a stronger adversary have been attributed to the fall of the above mentioned dynasties. The impact of the Arab, Turkic and later the Mongol, invasions has also been briefly mentioned.

On the eve of European colonialism, Persia, ruled by weak and corrupt Qajar rulers, was at its lowest point. It became a victim of the Great Game played in Afghanistan between Britain and Russia and was subjected to absolute humiliation by both powers to serve their strategic interests. The failure of the Qajars and the influence of Western ideas which had reached the Iranians by the early 1900s, led Iran to a constitutional revolution. This was Iran's first experiment with democracy. The author goes into great detail to explain a series of battles that were part of the civil war which continued till the onset of the Great War. The Iranians preferred neutrality, but were eventually drawn into the war. The society was divided in its support for the Allied and Axis powers, resulting in absolute chaos. The war, thus, proved catastrophic for the country.

A series of events in the post- World War I world like Reza Shah's iron fist policies to modernise Iran and its armed forces, and Iran's humiliation in World War II; the coup in 1953, leading to the ouster of Mohammad Mosaddegh; the US' twin pillar policy and Mohammad Reza's unpopular policies added salt to the wounds of the Iranians, eventually culminating in strong anti-Western sentiments among them, triggering the revolution of 1979. Three prominent factions in the revolution were:

1. The conservatives, comprising primarily the clerics.
2. The nationalists who favoured a democratic government.

3. The leftists who were inspired and supported by the Soviets.

These factions continue to exist today in the Iranian political society in the form of clerical hardliners, moderates and members of the underground Green Movement, and members of the banned terrorist organisations like the Mujahadeen-e-Khalqor (MEK) respectively. The author covers the economic, political and societal turmoil experienced by the country during the revolution in great detail and explains how events eventually took an 'Islamic spiral' favouring the clerics, leading to the birth of the Islamic Republic as we see it today.

The turmoil of the revolution was immediately followed by the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-88 which has left a deep impact on the Iranians and also had its reverberations in the region. It unleashed centrifugal forces, the impact of which is felt even today. The author not only covers the war from a battlefield perspective but also the prevalent political, religious and nationalistic fervour it unleashed in the country, making the book an interesting read. Some of the shortcomings of the book are that the author attempts to cover a huge time span of 2,500 years. Considering the strategic location of Iran, its tumultuous history and the countless battles, both major and minor, which it fought, makes it an inherently difficult task to cover all the events in a single volume. The author has intermittently gone into great detail to cover even some of the minor engagements which could have been avoided. The maps in the initial chapters are scant, making it difficult to understand the frequent reverses and gains. The battle formation and tactics which have been mentioned in minute details could have been skipped or adequately reinforced pictorially or with maps which would have provided a clearer understanding to civilian readers or beginners of the study of war.

The author's professional background also seems to interfere in an objective assessment, as is evident from the statement, "*Iranian attempts to advance the Islamic Republic's interests and influence throughout the region in recent years have contributed to growing Sunni- Shia tension and*

provoked neighbouring Sunni states to seek countermeasures to keep Iranian hegemony at bay.” Thus, putting the onus of the sectarian divide solely on Iran and undermining the role of Saudi propagated *Wahhabi* ideology which is a more conservative interpretation of the Quran.

It must be borne in mind that unlike other countries in the region, Iran is a non-Arab state and follows the Shia sect of Islam, which has far less followers than the Sunni sect. Thus, for the Iranians, to further their interests in the region, a leadership role of the broader Islamic cause, devoid of sectarian differences, is more beneficial than championing only the Shia agenda. The Iranian leaders have time and again proved to be very pragmatic when it comes to national interests which far supercede all religious and sectarian differences, a point regularly overlooked by Western strategists. Iran’s hearts and minds campaigns, its hostility towards Israel, and its support for the Palestinians are all part of the broader strategy to ride the pan-Islamic tide which is stronger than the sectarian divide.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is an interesting read because the following important areas have been subtly focussed upon:

Role of Geography The author’s views on the role of geography are in conformity with Robert Kaplan’s views on the ‘Geography of Iranian power’ which has been mentioned in great detail in his book *The Revenge of Geography*. The strategic depth, widely dispersed cities and the difficult terrain have had an impact on the Iranian military planners and continue to do so, as is evident from the current Iranian defence strategy better known as the *Mosaic Doctrine*, which incorporates the advantages bestowed by geography.

Impact of History on the Current Military Thinking Throughout Iran’s history, the failure of the military to prevent the collapse of the regimes, *coups d’état* and excessive internal turmoil which threatened the government in power have, time and again, brought to the fore the need for a parallel force with the sole responsibility to protect the regime.

This explains the raising of the Cossack Brigade, the Gendarmerie, the Imperial Guards and now the Revolutionary Guards throughout the Iranian military timeline.

Impact of Culture According to Robert Kaplan, civilisations represent a thick depository of language, culture, and values. The sub-state represents a dynamic solidarity group and Iran benefits from being both a civilisation and a sub-state. A Persian Empire has been based in one form or another on the Iranian plateau since antiquity. Thus, rather than face political identity problems like the Arabs, the Iranians are blessed with a cultural self-certainty comparable to that of the Indians and Chinese. The author has successfully managed to join all the dots, explaining the role of major events in the history of the country on the Iranian mindset. The book concludes by providing historical references mentioned throughout the text to explain the current Iranian behaviour, like the factors shaping its military, the role of nationalism, insecurity and religion which serve as a strong bonding factor and the possible threat which Iran can pose to the region. The author also enumerates various weaknesses referenced from Iranian history which also serves as a gentle reminder for the Iranians, thus, denying them the garb of invincibility.

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