Assessing India’s Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan

A response to the Review Article in ERIS 5:1 by Arni and Kotasthane

Avinash Paliwal
SOAS, University of London

I would like to thank the reviewers for reading, analysing, appreciating, and criticizing the book. Given that the reviewers are respected analysts writing on South Asian politics and have taken the trouble to author a review article of my book, I too will take the time and space to engage with it in equal sincerity. Though lengthy, this review betrays a lack of comprehension of policymaking processes, qualitative research methodologies, the arguments of the book, and, unfortunately, even misrepresents some of the finer empirical details. The result is a rather stale and unnecessary defence of India’s Afghanistan policy rather than a critical review. Ideas that emphasize utmost unity of thought and practice in India’s foreign policymaking community (especially vis-à-vis Afghanistan), consistency in India’s foreign policy approach, and the righteousness of India’s shared aspiration with Afghanistan to build a ‘resilient’ Afghan state, are narratives that Indian officials routinely feed analysts.

This rejoinder is divided into two parts. The first tackles with points offered on theory, and the second on empirics.

Theory

The main problem is the reviews’ inability to distinguish policymaking process from policy output, policy goals, and/or policy implementation. These are basic conceptual distinctions that literature on public policy studies has to offer. That there is a ‘consensus’ in India to help build an ‘independent, genuinely sovereign, territorially united, and economically strong Afghanistan’ has been argued in the book (p. 11; 287). The policy debate pertains to the ways and means India should adopt to achieve these goals. The book also qualifies that the debate between partisans and conciliators is ‘essentially over matters of operational and tactical relevance’, and not over the nature and character of Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan (p. 12). The review’s conceptual shortcomings are equally visible in sections where it blames