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## Astri Suhrke. *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Saroj Kumar Rath Ph.D.  
University of Delhi, Saroj1saroj@gmail.com

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**Astri Suhrke. *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.**

Astri Suhrke, in her exciting *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*, has critically examined the foreign induced asymmetrical peace and reconstruction-related malaise afflicting Afghanistan since 2001. Observers, policy makers, and analysts have all examined the on-going turmoil and the elusive peace in Afghanistan, but Suhrke's in-depth scrutiny is singular, hitherto untouched, academic, and lucid. Her methods include "on the spot inquiries," "analysis of original official records," and "scrutiny ... [of] facts at international forums and conferences," as well as an "[examination] of literature available in [the] public domain." The evidence Suhrke uses to support her claims is well applied. On the theoretical issues, she consulted authorized literatures and original works. On contemporary issues and data, she referred to official records and declassified reports. For analysis, she relied on the work and reports of specialists in the field, and for narration she used published materials.

As the book highlights, the United States' attack on Afghanistan and subsequent reconstruction plan after the defeat and dislodging of al Qaeda and the Taliban from Kabul necessitated the stationing of multinational troops in Afghanistan. Specifically, to run the affairs of the country and to continue its new "war on terror," the US required military personnel and resources as well as financial resources on a grand scale. Suhrke's thesis dissects the overall inflow of resources, the supply and demand of such resources (including the utilization and waste thereof), and the unintended fallout of the on-going US military presence in Afghanistan. After an empirical inquiry, the author argues that the unparalleled quantity of money flowing into Afghanistan, the massive concentration of international troops, the army of contractors and consultants, the heavy presence and traffic of international diplomatic corps, and the ubiquitous volunteers and voluntary organizations present in Afghanistan have all served only to fatten the very outsiders who came to ameliorate the conditions of Afghans and have not genuinely assisted the Afghans in a measurable way. Says the author, although Afghans have received minor benefits from their partnerships with international governments and agencies, they are often left bewildered and alienated by the work of such groups—or worse, after sufficient alienation, are inspired to join jihad against them. Ultimately, Suhrke asserts, for Afghans, the meaning of the term "international project" implies the collective involvement of outsiders, the implication of which is often far from favorable.

Through an in-depth analysis of the fierce inter-departmental debates and disagreements among various agencies of the US government on issues like the appropriate degree of intervention, the most effective methods of reconstruction, or how to achieve the objective of nation building in Afghanistan, the author provides a glimpse into the inner sanctum of Capitol Hill, the White House, and the seat of government at Kabul. Suhrke's thesis highlights how the complex and confusing chain of military command in Afghanistan, which comprises the US Central Command, NATO, ISAF, and the Afghan National Army, has led to the failure of the overarching objective of this particular "international project": the achievement of peace and stability in Afghanistan under the rule of an autonomous Afghan government. The book argues that the international players in this enterprise, which began in 2001 with the explicit purpose of creating a stable and friendly Afghan state, would end up instead inheriting a "weak, corrupt, and illegitimate rentier state."

The eight chapters of this book can be broadly divided into two segments. The first four chapters are an evaluation and criticism of the unsettling question of international intervention, and an analysis of the conflicting roles of stakeholders. All chapters in this section are interconnected and explain about the international projects, their viability, and their impact on local populations. In this section, the author additionally explores the response of indigenous Afghans in general and insurgent groups like the Taliban in particular to the international projects. Relying on her field visit experiences, Suhrke attempts to explain one of the most convoluted questions of Afghan conflict: how the Taliban acquired the strength to challenge the collective might of multinational forces. The author's portrayal of the functioning of the mysterious and brutal world of warlords, their penetration into the civil government, their interaction with international players, and their participation in the international project, along with her analysis of the existing medievalic societal structures all contribute to her nuanced understanding of not only the ability of insurgent forces to gain traction among local populations but also the failure of the US to meet its objective of eradicating insurgent forces despite the apparent superiority of the US military. The subsequent four chapters are an exposé of the disastrous US-led state building initiatives, the attempts of the US to impose a democratic government, and the disconnect in between the social settings of the country and west-backed legal reform. She concludes, in fact, that it is west's own efforts that have set the stage for the strengthening of insurgent groups. With diligent care and due insight, Suhrke's work scrutinizes the imposition of a west-backed and west-oriented legal reform and points specifically to the application of (and insistence upon) a west-oriented structure as being responsible for the consequential mushrooming of a "traditional justice system" in the country.

The conclusion of this book is rather bleak. Considering the absorption capacity of local need and the colossal investment of resources in Afghanistan (especially in political, legal, economic, and military spheres), the fact that local needs have remained largely unmet, while reconstruction and "nation building" efforts have resulted in further instability and little hope of Afghan autonomy or peace is evidence, says, the author, that "more" is not always best. Indeed, she says, in the case of internationally-backed nation building in Afghanistan, more resources have resulted in outcomes that are less favorable for the intended beneficiaries than were hoped for. She classifies the overabundance of western resources in the country as "too much" and claims that such heavy handed "help" has resulted in outcomes that are less desirable, less stable, and less effective than intended. Suhrke concludes, in fact, that the objectives of the international project have generally been unmet and that, in particular, the scope of involvement from international players and the grand scale of their financial, military, and political "support" has been not only ineffective but counterproductive. Furthermore, Suhrke sees as problematic the west's definition of "victory" in Afghanistan, (i.e. defined as the splitting of insurgents, the eviction of hard-core militants from Afghanistan to neighboring countries, and the installation of a client government at Kabul). She proclaims that such "victory" would be nothing short of "pyrrhic."

Specifically, the author asserts that any further efforts toward such ends, including an increase in number of troops, amounts of funds dedicated to the project, or the number of consultants dedicated to its efforts would only meet the same fate and suffer from the same "internal tensions that [impair] their effectiveness" at this time.

Some of the strengths of this book are its handling of issues like the existence and functioning of a multi-layered (and parallel) international and domestic bureaucratic systems, the reckless working of non-governmental organizations, and the presence of multitudes of security

forces and military command structures in this strife-torn country. Despite the richness and the success of Suhrke's work, the part of the book that deals with the Taliban is little more than mere repetition of facts already highlighted by authors like Ahmed Rashid. On few occasions, the book is in need of proof reading. Additionally, to substantiate her argument and to convince the readers of some theoretical issues, the author went to the trouble of extracting portions of relevant journal articles and authorized works. While doing so, however, she left behind a catalogue of academic jargon about the US policy, tribal states, rentier states, and legal reform that to some extent baffle the reader. Nonetheless, Suhrke's text represents a remarkable achievement. Her skilful and thoughtful analysis of the forces at work in Afghanistan, including the influence of entities with which the west is normally not familiar, has led her to produce a work that is singularly unmatched. This text would be recommended for the policy makers who are scripting policy prescription for Afghanistan; for the military leaders and bureaucrats who are executing policies in Afghanistan; for the academics and journalists who are observing and analyzing developments in Afghanistan; and for the common readers who would be delighted to get an insight into the reasons of the ongoing Afghan quagmire.

Saroj Kumar Rath, PhD  
University of Delhi  
[Saroj1saroj@gmail.com](mailto:Saroj1saroj@gmail.com)