The Taliban, a rare oddity in international relations, caught international attention yet again when the terror struck US homeland on September 11, 2001 for harbouring the masterminds of the attacks. The Taliban had provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and his organization, the Al Qaeda and had defied every norms of engagement with the international community, particularly with the United States on the issue of extradition of Osama. The emergence of the Taliban and its rapid advance culminating in its control of two thirds of Afghanistan also coincided with Afghanistan's increasing isolation from the international community as also its conversion to breeding ground of terrorism.

The Taliban drew attention of the international media during its emergence due to multiplicity of images: the torchbearer of Islamic fundamentalism, the supply house of transnational terrorism, a violator of women rights, a generator of lethal narcotics, the initiator of a large-scale refugee movement and internally displaced population and most importantly for its strict interpretation of Islam. These characteristics emerged as different fields of probe and research, which is evident in the surfeit of books and research documents by western academics and journalists. Afghanistan with the Taliban, at its helm must have been the briefest phenomenon to have induced such a vastness in pedantic deliberations.

In this context, another piece of research on Taliban runs the danger of being considered as a duplication effort, a reproduction of the oft-repeated developments and analysis or historical narratives. The simple question that's confronts a reader is what's new in this? With this and objective, this work addresses issues and factors responsible for the emergence and decline of the Taliban from an Indian perspective. It seeks to analyze the US policy towards Afghanistan characterized by periods of attention and lack of it, as a factor responsible for the emergence of the Taliban. The choice of the word 'policy' is intentional as it falls short of the narration of the events and on the contrary, tries to look for the gray areas in American foreign policy, which might have contributed as a force
multiplier for the Taliban. It’s neither a propagandistic eulogy of the American ventures, nor a flag bearer of the Islamic denigration of the Western values. It attempts middle yet an uncompromising path of looking at the subject in an objective manner.

The first chapter delves into the dynamics of US policy towards Afghanistan in terms of phases on attention and inattention till the arrival of the Taliban on the Afghan scene. It divides the whole gamut of relations into various parts beginning with 1946 and touches upon the significant developments in Afghan politics and analyses the corresponding American reaction to it. What comes out in the end is that ‘Afghanistan’ for the United States was nothing but another playground in the height of the Cold War. US interest in that country was directly proportional to the concern Soviets showed towards the country. The chapter introduces the Cold War politics to the readers and creates a benchmark as regard to the future American policy towards the region.

The second chapter on US, Islam & Afghanistan: The Emergence of the Taliban explores the linkages between US, Islam and the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a classic case of ‘blow-back”. It also looks at a number of theories, emanating from the pro-Western and pro-Taliban sources, regarding the origin and underpinning nature of the Taliban. While the chapter attempts to introduce all the schools of thought, its primary emphasis lies on the role on internal and external actors in the origin of the Taliban. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan played no less significant roles in converting the religious scholars into Islamic zealots with extremely myopic visions of life. Frankenstein’s monsters, as they were thought to be, it was but natural that their trainers had to bear the brunt in course of time. The US policy makers use of Islamic card during the Cold War resulted in blowback in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime as also the lack of understanding of Islam in that country led to a situation of floundering policy towards Taliban.

The third chapter titled the ‘US policy towards the Taliban under Clinton Administration, delves of the complexities of the foreign policy mechanism in the United States. The chapter divides its various objectives into two separate categories: Vital and Secondary
interests. The vital interests’ category includes the lucrative oil reserves in the region, controlling of the growing menace of narco-terrorism and checkmating the new hub of transnational terrorism headed by Osama bin Laden. In the secondary interests’ category, the Clinton administration officials also seek to address the issues of violation of women rights, the criminalized economy, eradicating poppy cultivation, retrieval of U.S. Stinger missiles and addressing the refugee migration problem. The chapter also briefly introduces ‘US policy towards the Taliban under Bush Administration’ as a precursor to the events of September 11, 2001.

The chapter titled ‘US Response to September 11 attacks: Implications for the Taliban’ looks at the events of September 11 and the US response in terms of the military action and the resultant decimation of the Taliban from political power. This section begins with assessment of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in terms of impact of military action on the decline of the Taliban and bringing stability to Afghanistan. A cost and benefit analysis of the OEF in Afghanistan is attempted to understand the goals and achievements of OEF. A brief review of the evolution of US war goals and strategy indicates the inter relationship of the changing circumstances of the war to produce the outcomes. While analyzing the strategies and goals of Operation Enduring Freedom, the chapter also looks at the lacunae’s in US policy in terms of nation building and reconstruction which has resulted in the resurgence of the Taliban. The use of the word ‘decline’ brings out this contradiction. The resurgence of the Taliban could have a spoiler effect on the US counter terrorism goals in South Asia.

The last chapter ‘Impact of US action in Afghanistan on South Asia’ delves into the impact of US action in Afghanistan on South Asia which is witnessing a rise in the incidence of terrorism. While Pakistan seems to be playing a minimal role and Musharaff appears to be a marginal satisfier to the US goals in the region, The United States relationship with India is gaining new grounds and momentum and greater cooperation is evolving. The present study is based on field work and 52 interviews with key interlocutors and Afghan experts in the United States, Pakistan and India.