



RESEARCH PAPER

Confusion in the United States' Afghan Policy and Pakistan's Neo-Realist Responses

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Abstract

With the emergence of the Taliban as successful insurgent movement, which eventually defeated the United States and International forces in Afghanistan, it is necessary to analyze the bilateral relationship between Islamabad and Washington on the issue of the Afghan Taliban from major International Relations theoretical perspectives in order to reach a conclusion on the responses of the Pakistani government on the issue of the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban as a group has always been the top priority of the United States in the war in Afghanistan. The confusion over the principle question of the status of the Afghan Taliban had been a major cause of the United States' policy failures in Afghanistan. If the United States had been clear over the question of the Afghan Taliban, they would have reached a different conclusion, which would have been different result than the current one. One of the major mistakes in the United States' policy towards Afghanistan was framing of the Taliban as different from Al-Qaeda. It is correct that Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban were separate entities, but they both were against the United States' objectives in Afghanistan. The objectives of the US policy should not have been the same in 2018 and 2019 as at the time of 9/11. They had evolved over the period of two decades war in Afghanistan. The strategic retreat of the United States from Kabul after two decades of war and investment of trillion of dollars was the result of confusion over the status of the Afghan Taliban. The policy makers in Washington had always been separating the Afghan Taliban from Al-Qaeda. It is true that the Afghan Taliban was not as dangerous as Al-Qaeda in term of attacking the United States at home, but they were at war with the US in Afghanistan. The strategic question in the policy discussion should have been how to win the war in Afghanistan irrespective of its strategic significance for the United States' security. A policy around this premise would have resulted in different situation. It would have shifted the debate towards winning the war rather than discussing the importance of Afghanistan for the United States' security. This was one factor that had determined Pakistan's cooperation with the US on Afghan Taliban.

Key Words Neo-realism, Confusion, Washington Afghan Policy, Islamabad

Introduction

On the first anniversary of the Taliban's emergence as successful insurgent movement, which eventually defeated the United States and International forces in Afghanistan, it is necessary to analyze the bilateral relationship between Islamabad and Washington on the issue of the Afghan Taliban from major International Relations theoretical perspectives in order to reach a conclusion on the responses of the Pakistani government on the issue of the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban as a group has always been the top priority of the United States in the war in Afghanistan. The confusion

over the principle question of the status of the Afghan Taliban had been a major cause of the United States' policy failures in Afghanistan. If the United States had been clear over the question of the Afghan Taliban, they would have reached a different conclusion, which would have been different result than the current one. One of the major mistakes in the United States' policy towards Afghanistan was framing of the Taliban as different from Al-Qaeda. It is correct that Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban were separate entities, but they both were against the United States' objectives in Afghanistan. The objectives of the US policy should not have been the same in 2018 and 2019 as at the time of 9/11. They should have evolved over the period of two decades war in Afghanistan (Muzaffar, Nawab & Yaseen, 2021).

The strategic retreat of the United States from Kabul after two decades of war and investment of trillion of dollars was the result of confusion over the status of the Afghan Taliban. The policy makers in Washington had always been separating the Afghan Taliban from Al-Qaeda (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Afzal, 2021). It is true that the Afghan Taliban was not as dangerous as Al-Qaeda in term of attacking the United States at home, but they were at war with the US in Afghanistan. The strategic question in the policy discussion should have been how to win the war in Afghanistan irrespective of its strategic significance for the United States' security (Muzaffar, Khan & Yaseen, 2019). A policy around this premise would have resulted in different results. It would have shifted the debate towards winning the war rather than discussing the importance of Afghanistan for the United States' security. This was one factor that had determined Pakistan's cooperation with the US on Afghan Taliban (Muzaffar, Shah & Karamat, 2020).

This paper consists of eight sections. The second part of the paper discusses the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network; an integral part of the movement. The third part analyzes the relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani establishment. The fourth section is about animosity between the Taliban and the United States. The fifth one highlights the United States' demands from Pakistan in respect to the Afghan Taliban. The sixth one discusses Pakistani responses to the US demands. The seventh part of the paper is about Pakistan as security centric state on the issue of the Afghan Taliban. The last one is conclusion of the paper.

The United States' rivalry with the Taliban

One of the major issues between the United States and the Taliban was close association of the later with various militant Islamic groups. The Taliban-ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 soon became a sanctuary for various terrorist groups. Osama bin Laden was already present in Afghanistan before the Taliban occupied Kabul. According to The 9/11 Commission report (pp. 63-65), when bin Laden first returned to Afghanistan in May 1995 he maintained ties to Gulbadin Hekmetyar as well as other non-Taliban and anti-Taliban political entities. However, by September 1996 when Jalalabad and Kabul had both fallen to the Taliban, Bin Laden had solidified his ties with the Taliban and was operating in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. The United States was consistently forcing the Taliban to shut down terrorist camps and oust Osama from Afghanistan (Elais, 2012)⁷. There were also other terrorist camps in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. An unnamed British journalist reported to the U.S. Embassy that her visit to two terrorist training camps in Paktia province, near the Afghan-Pakistan border on 14th November 1996 revealed that both camps appear occupied, and her "Taliban sources" advised that "one of the camps is occupied by Harakat-ul-Ansar (HUA) militants," the Pakistan-based Kashmiri terrorist organization. The other camp was

occupied by “assorted foreigners, including Chechens, Bosnian Muslims, as well as Sudanese and other Arabs (Elias-Sanborn, 2012).⁷

There are different reports on the Afghan Taliban relationship with Al-Qaida. Some scholars like Christine Fair (2011)¹¹, Antonio Giustozzi (2009), Bruce Riedel (2011)³⁹ and Rahimullah Yousufzai (2011) believed that the Afghan Taliban had minimum contacts with Al-Qaeda. They are of the view that the Quetta Shura Taliban’s relationship with Al-Qaeda was less explicit and visible, whereas, Al-Qaeda relationship with the Haqqani network and Pakistani Taliban is warmer and deeper (Dressler, October 2010). One of the major reasons was due the locations where they operate. Al-Qaeda did not have as high level of freedom in Quetta as they enjoyed in North Waziristan, which was under the de facto control of the Haqqani network and the Pakistani Taliban. The Quetta Shura Taliban was living in southern Baluchistan before the start of their movement in Afghanistan. On the contrary, Al-Qaeda members were foreigners, who could easily be recognized and arrested in Quetta. The Quetta Shura Taliban also wanted to increase its credentials as a responsible group that was acceptable to international community. Its leaders Mullah Mohammad Umar said several times that the Afghan Taliban was not interested in any other country affairs and respect the sovereignty of other countries. It actually wanted to distance itself from Al-Qaeda to increase its legitimacy among the international community. According to the Washington Post,

In Washington, officials differentiate between the relatively young Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban, which have deep political roots in its country. “The Pakistani Taliban gets treated like Al Qaeda,” one senior official said. “We aim to destroy it. The Afghan Taliban is different (2010).

It shows that the Afghan Taliban had projected an image that it was different from Al-Qaeda and had a stake in Afghanistan’s affairs. The debate in strategic review committees in the Obama administration on policy towards Afghanistan further illustrated that the Taliban was perceived differently from Al-Qaeda in Washington.

On other hand, there were scholars who argued that the Afghan Taliban would not distance itself from Al-Qaeda as long as it was winning the war in Afghanistan. The US former ambassador to Pakistan Ann Peterson, General Petraeus, Robert Gate, Seth Jones, Frederick Kagan, John Nagl and former US Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair believed that the Taliban was related with Al-Qaeda and would not desert them until it was not defeated militarily in Afghanistan (Woodward, 2010). They believed Al-Qaeda had been helping the Afghan Taliban at tactical, operational and strategic levels in Afghanistan's insurgency (Jones, 2008). They were of the view that the Afghan Taliban became more lethal after its intense cooperation with the Al-Qaeda and Iraqi insurgent groups (Dressler, 2009). They were of the opinion that Al-Qaeda was also financially helping the Afghan Taliban, by collecting money from wealthy individuals in Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Dorransoro, 2009). Although, it is difficult to establish a concrete opinion from the open sources on the Taliban’s association with AlQaeda, but there are some evidences that the Taliban are getting assistance from Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, but it is unlike Pakistani Taliban did not claim responsibility for any attack or plot outside Afghanistan. It shows that the Taliban is ready to accept Al-Qaeda financial and technical assistance in Afghanistan, but it doesn’t agree with Al-Qaeda’s strategy of attacking the United States at home.

Secondly, the Afghan Taliban association with the Pakistani security establishment might have prevented them from full-fledge alliance with Al-Qaeda. As Al-Qaeda was in war with the Pakistani state, therefore any association of the Afghan Taliban with Al-Qaeda would have been perceived as alliance, which could have

triggered a military operation against them as well. On other hand, the Pakistani Taliban didn't only openly support Al-Qaeda, but also took responsibility of the Time Square bomber in May 2010. The Pakistani Taliban had also attacked Pakistan's naval base in Karachi, where they destroyed two multimillion dollar Pakistan's navy premier anti-submarine and marine surveillance aircrafts- the US made P3C Orion (BBC, 23rd May, 2011). The spokesman of the Teherik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban) Ehsanullah Ehsan said, "It was the revenge of martyrdom of the Osama Bin Laden. It was the proof that we are still united and powerful" (BBC, 2011).

The Role of Pakistani Establishment

As mentioned earlier that Pakistan has been the oldest party to the Afghan conflict due to geo-strategic and geo-political factors. There are confirmed evidences verified by renowned scholars that Pakistan started supporting the Afghan Mujahideen after the Soviet invasion of Kabul in December 1979 before the United States (Haqqani, 2010; Grare, 2007)16,14. During the Cold War, Pakistan was an established partner of the United States against the spread of Communism in the region by signing two security pacts; SEATO and CENTO. Islamabad did not only oppose Communism internationally due to strong ideological and strategic alignment between Moscow and New-Delhi, but also ruthlessly oppressed sub-nationalist ethnic groups and left wing political parties due to their socialist outlook. According to Rubin, "specifically, Pakistan sought to avoid building up the strength of Pashtun nationalist groups that might subsequently want to carve an independent Pashtun state from Pakistani and Afghan territory".

Pakistan's security elites were also extremely conscious of the Soviet's presence on western border in Afghanistan in the presence of domestic threat from left wing political or militant organizations and Indian threat on eastern border. Therefore, it started supporting Hikmatyar's Hizb Islami during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. When Hizb Islami could not produce the desired result in 1993, it switched its policy to the Taliban, which allegedly continued during the US occupation of Afghanistan. According to Rubin,

Bhutto's interior minister, Gen. Naseerullah Babar, created the Afghan Trade Development Cell in the ministry ostensibly to promote trade routes to Central Asia but also to provide the Taliban with funds. Moreover, says Rashid, the state-owned Pakistan Telecommunications Corporation set up a telephone network for the Taliban; the public works department repaired roads and provided electricity; the paramilitary Frontier Corps, a part of the interior ministry, set up a wireless network for Taliban commanders; the Civil Aviation Authority repaired Qandahar airport and Taliban fighter jets; and Radio Pakistan provided technical support to the Taliban's official radio service, Radio Shariat (2007).

The Afghan Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan were considered as the most important factor for the survival of the insurgency and failure of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. According to Jones,

[t]hose insurgencies that received support from external states won more than 50 percent of the time, those with support from non-state actors and diaspora groups won just over 30 percent of the time, and those with no external support won only 17 percent of the time. Support from state actors and non-state actors, such as a diaspora population, criminal network, or terrorist network, clearly makes a difference" (2008, p 21).

Insurgencies usually enjoy two kinds of external support. The first one is a direct support, when a state or non-state actor has a declared policy of supporting an

insurgency that include providing training, recruiting insurgents, giving money, weapons and strategic guidance. During the Cold War, Pakistan and the United States were displaying a clear policy of supporting insurgency in Afghanistan against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul; the CIA and ISI also collectively provided every possible support and successfully ousted the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989 (Jones, 2008)²². Similarly, Pakistan openly supported Kashmir's insurgency against India during the 1990s and even risked a nuclear war during the Kargil crisis in 1999. The second kind of support is a passive one, when insurgents have freedom to use the territory of any state as a sanctuary. There could be several reasons for that: either the insurgents may have a tacit approval of the state or the state may be too weak to take effective actions against the insurgents, or both (Asia report, 2011, p.27). There were strong allegations on the Pakistan's ISI from the American top generals and politician that the ISI has been supporting the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan in attacking the US and Afghan forces (NYT, 2011). Zalmay Khalilzad, a prominent American policy maker on Afghanistan said on 18th June 2005,

Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders are in Pakistan. [Mullah Akhtar] Usmani, one of the Taliban leaders, spoke to Pakistan's Geo TV at a time when the Pakistani intelligence services claimed that they did not know where [the Taliban leaders] were. If a TV company could find him, how is it that the intelligence service of a country which has nuclear bombs and a lot of security and military forces cannot find them?"

Pakistan had always denied that it had any relationship with the Afghan Taliban. However, it is difficult to confirm Pakistani claim that it did not give a tacit approval to the Taliban's activities inside Pakistan for geo-strategic reasons.

Pakistan's security establishment, particularly the ISI, links with the Haqqani network was a profound source of concern for the United States. There was consensus in the Obama administration that Pakistan had been providing support to the Haqqani network at different levels, although the nature and intensity of support might vary across time and subject. According to New York Times,

Today, the ISI admits that it maintains regular contact with the Haqqanis, but denies providing operational support. American and other Western officials, citing intelligence reports, say the ISI and the Haqqanis do more than just talk. Pakistani intelligence allows Haqqani operatives to run legitimate businesses in Pakistan, facilitates their travel to Persian Gulf states, and has continued to donate money. Senior Haqqani figures own houses in the capital, Islamabad, where their relatives live unmolested (The New York Times, August 1, 2012).

Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen said in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 22, 2011,

The fact remains that the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network operate from Pakistan with impunity. Extremist organizations serving as proxies of the government of Pakistan are attacking Afghan troops and civilians as well as U.S. soldiers. The Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network are hampering efforts to improve security in Afghanistan, spoiling possibilities for broader reconciliation, and frustrating U.S.-Pakistan relations.

Pakistan as Security-centric State:

There is a group of experts on terrorism who sees Pakistan as a security seeking state. They believe that there is rivalry between India and Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir since their independence in 1947. India as a major power in the region poses security threat to Pakistan in the present structure based on security dilemma, arms race and balance of power. In order to balance India's conventional superiority, Pakistan has adopted a two pronged strategy: (a) to acquire nuclear weapons at the highest level to

avoid the threat of military invasion (b) to support militant groups in Kashmir and Afghanistan to counter Indian influence and hegemony (Cohen, 2011)³. They argue that Pakistan, especially its army, sees every issue surrounding Afghanistan from the Indian perspective. They believe that Pakistan will not support any regime in Kabul that is friendlier to New Delhi than Islamabad, because a hostile regime will pose a threat to the country from the western border with the help of India. There is already a security threat from India on the eastern border. It would force Pakistan to protect two borders at the same time, which is not possible with its current military capability. They are of the view that Pakistan's army will not cooperate with the United States against the Afghan Taliban and other terrorist groups unless it resolves the issue of Kashmir between Pakistan and India (Krasner, 2012). They recommend that the United States should use its diplomatic leverage on India and Pakistan to stop seeing Afghanistan as a 'zero-sum game' (Riedel, 2011).

This is the dominant school of thought; belongs to neo-realism, on Pakistan's responses to the United States' demands against the Taliban. Neo-realism provides a scientific explanation of international political system by urging upon the role of international system. One of the key question neo-realism is interested why different states, with different political system and internal set up produce the same result. Waltz argues that it can be explained by the constraints that are imposed by the structure of the international system on their behaviors. He says, "A system's structure is defined first by the principle by which it is organized, then by the differentiation of its units, and finally by the distribution of capabilities (power) across units" (Waltz, 1979, p93)⁵⁸. He maintains that the ordering principle in international system is anarchy, which is the organizing principle that tells us how international structure emerges. The units in the system are self-regarding states, operating in power maximizing ways, who at least seek to survive mainly aim at hegemony. Neo-realists recognize non-state actors, but consider nation state as the only entities that are entitled to use force to look after itself and have fighting capabilities, which makes them (states) the primary actor in international system.

It further argues that all states are alike, but only differentiated by their capabilities. It ignores cultural, political and social differences among states because of the importance of international system. Whether a state is democratic, liberal or despotic, it doesn't matter when it comes to dealing with other state because of international constraints. "Realists treat state as if they are black boxes: they are assumed to be alike, save for the fact that some states are more or less powerful than others" (Mearsheimer, 2006, p73). According to Neorealism, the distribution of military and economic, considered as systemic factor, is the key variable to explain a state behavior. It maintains that state leaders are prisoners of the international system. They must do what international system dictates them. It says, "If states are to be secure in an anarchic world, they need to pay heed to the structural constraints under which they operate. Simplistically stated, powerful states can and indeed should or must "do more" than less powerful states" (Nawab, Yaseen & Muzaffar, 2021; Jakobsen, 2013). The question that how much power is enough for a major power further divided neo-realist into offensive and defensive camps.

This group of scholars is of view that Pakistan's cooperated with the United States against Al-Qaeda, but not against the Afghan Taliban, because it would need the former to counter the Indian influence in Afghanistan. According to Rashid, "Washington's limited aims suited Pakistani army perfectly because they allowed for a new strategic

alliance with the United States at minimum risk to the army's concept of national security" (Rashid, 2009, p 63). He believes army concept of national security rested on three pillars: resisting Indian hegemony in the region, protecting and developing the nuclear program and promoting a pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2009, p 132).

Barnett Rubin also echoes the same position by saying, "Pakistan's military establishment has always approached the various wars in and around Afghanistan as function of its main institutional and national security interest: first and foremost, balancing India, whose elite, at least in Pakistani eyes, don't accept Pakistan's existence." (Rubin, 2007, p63)⁴². Similarly, Kronstadt and Katzman claim in their Congressional Research Report on 21st November 2008 that, "Pakistan is wary of signs that India is pursuing a policy of "strategic encirclement" taking note of New Delhi's past support for Tajik and Uzbek militias which comprised the Afghan Northern Alliance, and the post-2001 opening of several Indian consulates in Afghanistan" (CRS, 2008, p 9).

Ashley Tellis also said in his testimony to the House Committee on foreign Affairs that Pakistan doesn't cooperate with the United States on the issue of Afghanistan, because their objectives are fundamentally at odds. He said:

The United States seeks to leave behind after 2014 an Afghanistan that is united, capable, and independent. Pakistan, in contrast, seeks an Afghanistan that, although nominally unified, is anything but capable and independent. Specifically, it desires an Afghanistan that would be at least deferential to, if not dependent on, Islamabad where Kabul's critical strategic and foreign policy choices are concerned. (Tellis, 2011, p4).

Seth Jones argues that Pakistan doesn't support the US in Afghanistan because of its rivalry with India. According to him:

Insurgent groups have been successful at leveraging assistance from external states- especially in Pakistan. Pakistan's motives have largely been geostrategic. Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul-Haq once remarked to the head of the ISI, General Akhter Abdul Rehman that 'the water [in Afghanistan] must boil at the right temperature. The Pakistan government's strategy has for decades been to balance India and keep a foothold in Afghanistan (Jones, 2007, p 17)²².

Stephen Krasner also argues in his article in Foreign Affairs that there is a more straightforward explanation for Pakistan's behavior:

Its policies are a fully regional response to the conception of the country's national interest held by its leaders, especially those in the military. Pakistan's fundamental goal is to defend itself against its rival, India. Islamabad deliberately uses nuclear proliferation and deterrence, terrorism and its prickly relationship with the United States to achieve this objective (Krasner, 2012, p91).

Bruce Riedel, the architect of the Obama administration policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, is of the opinion that,

America needs a new policy for dealing with Pakistan. First, we must recognize that the two countries' strategic interests are in conflict, not harmony, and will remain that way as long as Pakistan's army controls Pakistan's strategic policies. We must contain the Pakistani Army's ambitions until real civilian rule returns and Pakistanis set a new direction for their foreign policy (Riedel, 2012).

Conclusion

Pakistan's responses to the US demands against the Afghan Taliban have been the core subject of investigations during the last two decades. A plethora of research has been published on Pakistani response to the US demands. This paper has explicitly illustrated that Pakistani responses are the product of its conception of geo-strategic security structure of the region. Pakistan and India have been locked in Hobbesian world, where they have been competing viciously for increasing their respective sphere of influences in the region. Although, there are significant differences in the equilibrium of power between Islamabad and New Delhi, but Afghanistan has always been considered as geo-strategic backyard, which plays profoundly important role in the security analysis of Pakistan's elites. India is already recognized as an established economic and security power, whereas, Pakistan has been struggling to put its house in order politically and economically. This paper has highlighted that Pakistan's responses to the United States demands against the Afghan Taliban could be understood from neo-realist perspective.

This paper has also discussed in detail the origin of the Taliban and the Haqqani network in the second section. The Taliban relationship with Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani establishment has never been as explicit as that of the Haqqani network, which strategically maintained its relationship with Al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban and the Pakistani establishment at the same time. The Haqqani network at the beginning was an off-shoot of the Afghan Taliban, primarily active in the Zadran tribe areas of Loya Paktia in Afghanistan, but later on turned into a parallel organization to the Afghan Taliban due to its relationship with the afore-mentioned three organizations, which increased its strategic importance and political significance. Sirajuddin Haqqani, who was the head of the Haqqani network, is the de-facto leader of the Islamic Emirat of Afghanistan by running the powerful Interior Ministry.

Pakistan security elites were skeptical of the United States' capability and strategic rational to convert Afghanistan into a functioning state. Three developments in particular shaped Pakistan's conception of the United States' staying power in Afghanistan; domestic debates in the United States over the war of necessity and war of choice about Afghanistan. It was confirmed that the war in Afghanistan would soon turn into a war of choice due to shifts in international power structure. The second one was the withdrawal of the United States from Iraq. Once the United States withdrew from Iraq, the Pakistani security elite understood that withdrawal from Afghanistan is just a matter of time. The third factor was the geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan. It is neither Europe nor South East Asia of the Cold war. There was firm belief among the policy makers in Islamabad that any shift in International Politics would immediately shift the focus and attention of the United States to other geo-strategically important issues like war in Middle East, Europe of South East Asia. These developments damaged the credibility of the United States to bring structural changes in the region to change the interest and identity of Pakistan as a nation state. In the current structure of security dilemma, Pakistan as security centric state is not ready to cooperate on the issue of Afghan Taliban.

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