

Pak-Afghan Relations Dilemma: A Critical Analysis of U.S. Grand Strategy towards Peace Process in Afghanistan

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Abstract:

Since the US-led invasion in 2001, the war on terror, economic and political instability and security issues have taken a heavy toll on the Afghan people. Both the US administration and the Afghan government demand that Pakistan make an impact and bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Therefore, the peace of Afghanistan will be the peace of the rest of the world. There are flaws in the peace agreement and the parties involved, such as the Taliban, the Afghan government and United States. This article shows how the peace agreement will bring peace to the region. Pakistan, a key partner in the war there and a key neighbor of Afghanistan, is being destabilized by Pakistan, which is adversely bound to further affect regional stability. This research critically analyzes the US grand strategies towards peace in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban, Peace Process, Afghanistan, US, Pakistan

I. Introduction

Afghanistan is a Muslim landlocked, mountainous country on the North West border of Pakistan. It is a multi-ethnic country with a population of about 38 million in 2019 according to Wikipedia, including over two million refugees living in Pakistan. The main ethnic groups are the Pashtuns, about 42%; the Tajiks about 27% and the Uzbeks and Hazarawals about 7% each. The Tajiks and Uzbeks live mainly in the North in the Panjsher valley and the Hazarawals in Central Afghanistan. This ethnic group is of the Shia sect and speaks Persian whereas the other above mentioned groups are Sunni and speak Pashtu.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a troubled relationship ever since the former country was created in 1947. Afghanistan was the only country in the UN to refuse to recognize the new country. The reason for this friction is that Pakistan and Afghanistan

share a border 2430 km. long called the Durand Line which Afghanistan disputes. In the 1st. Afghan War (1838-1842) the British Raj conquered extensive territory from Afghanistan and formed the North West Frontier Province which majorly comprises of the KPK of Pakistan today. Thereafter, Afghanistan remained an independent kingdom, but the British kept their influence over it till the War of Afghan Independence in 1910 (Katzman, 2013).

The British followed a policy called ‘The Great Game’ in Afghanistan to keep out the Russian advance. In 1893 because of trouble with Russia in Herat on the Russian side of the Afghanistan border the British Viceroy Lord Lansdowne (1888-1894) sent his Foreign Secretary Sir Mortimer Durand to demarcate the borders of Afghanistan with Russia on one side and British India on the other. The border with India, called the Durand Line was drawn in an agreement between the Amir AbdrRahman of Afghanistan (r. 1880-1901) and British India with joint survey teams from both sides. This area was mainly inhabited by an ethnic group called the Pashtuns and this border divided this population with presently about 13 million living in Afghanistan and almost double, 25 million living in Pakistan, when with the departure of the British their territories here became part of the newly independent country. Afghanistan does not accept the Durand Line and their contention promotes the concept of a united land for these people called Pakhtunistan (Ackerman, 2014).

Frankly, in view of the historical facts Afghanistan’s stand is untenable. The border was demarcated according to agreements with the rulers of both sides and is recognized internationally (Idrees, Rehman, & Naazer, 2020). Ordinarily in history there has been much acceptance of the interchange of conquered territory between nations; and particularly between Afghanistan, where Afghan dynasties have ruled India and the Mughols have ruled over parts of Afghanistan for extended periods. In fact even after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, the War of Independence, Amir Habibullah Khan accepted the Durand Line (Budihas, 2011).

Unfortunately the issue has been colored as being a matter of ethnic brotherhood and an outcome of manipulation by the British colonialists, so a Pashtun ought to support it whether it really matters or not. However, the question is how much of a genuine demand is this by the Pashtuns. The very fact that it has proved not to be constant mitigates feeling of necessity for this demand (Akhter & Malik, 2016). Further the economic conditions of Pashtun’s in Pakistan as compared to the conditions in Afghanistan have clearly shown the overall preference of the people of the KPK Province. On the other hand in Afghanistan, with its multi-ethnic population, the move for Pakhtunistan will alter the demographic structure and therefore be unwelcome to the Tajiks and Uzbeks, etc (Jackson, 2019). This research has been focused on the following research questions:

- What are the biggest risks to implementation of a peace agreement in Afghanistan, and how might the risks be mitigated?
- Will the Afghan peace process be Pakistan’s road to redemption?
- Data related to this topic collected by secondary sources such as reports, journal articles and books. This research work is analytical as well as descriptive in nature. Hence, the Qualitative technique has applied to investigate the research questions.

II. Implementing the Peace Process and Afghanistan

After partition and the creation of Pakistan relations with Afghanistan have had some high points, but mainly low points. A high point came in the early fifties when the Shah of Iran interceded and got Afghanistan to recognize Pakistan and this lasted till 1955 with a proposal for a confederation between these two countries. Then there was another low point from 1955 till 1957 when the two countries closed down their embassies in each other's country when Pakistan's extended administrative authority over its tribal region (ABEDI & BONESH, 2020). Sardar Daud of Afghanistan was a champion of Pakhtunistan and usually relations were troubled during his periods of power. He was prime minister under King Zahir Shah from 1953 to 1963. When he was relegated to another post in Ayub's tenure in 1963 relations improved again. However in 1973 Daud ousted Zahir Shah and became president (1973-1978) and friction started once more, at least up to 1977. In this year Daud broke with Russian influence in Afghanistan and reversed his policy towards Pakistan. But these friendly overtures were short lived and the Soviet backed Saur revolution removed and assassinated Daud Khan and his family in 1978 (Khattak, 2020).

There was in-fighting and instability in Afghanistan with the subsequent communist regimes. Then in order to bolster the Soviet back regimes in 1979 Russia sent in troops. Thereafter relationships between the subject countries entered a new phase and other circumstances overshadowed the issue of the Durand Line (Shukla, 2014). *Mujahideen* groups (tribal religious insurgents) resisted the Soviet occupation. There was a situation of a violent resistance struggle. This caused about six million refugees to flee, the vast majority to Pakistan and some to Iran; though over the course of years and later exodus of the occupation troops most returned to their homeland and in Pakistan about 1.5 million remained. This was the era of the Cold War between US and the USSR (Jonegård, 2019). US took this opportunity to act against Russia. Pakistan was also threatened by Russian entrance into Afghanistan. Primarily a tripartite alliance between the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia fought a proxy war of supporting the *mujahideen* against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, with US providing finances and equipment; Pakistan providing contacts, 'safe havens', training and logistic and other support to the religious insurgents and Saudi Arabia setting up a chain of seminaries along the border to inculcate the concept of *jihad* to the students to provide a source of new recruits for the *mujahideen* (Murtazashvili & Shah, 2020).

The Soviets finally had to withdraw their troops completely in 1989. During this period Pakistan received huge amounts of aid. Fiscal help for refugees continued to come from the UN after 1989, but very much less than that from other sources during the period of the war. Unfortunately the US withdrew their support immediately after the victory without making any provision for the *mujahideen* groups or establishing any post-war settlements (Mashal, 2019). This was followed by a civil war in Afghanistan from 1990 to 1998. Without Soviet backing the communist government under Najibullah fell in 1982, adding to the strife in the country. Then from 1997 to 2021 the Taliban government established themselves in Kabul and most of the Pashtun areas with the help of Pakistan. The Taliban were mainly the subsequent generations of the Pashtun elements of the *mujahideen* trust in democratic values; they are not going to accept the Taliban with their radical mindset (Sopko, 2020). The Tajiks and the Uzbeks united as the Northern Alliance held the Panjsher valley and this was a period of comparative calm after the civil war. It is interesting to note that though the Taliban government was

affiliated to Pakistan, but they never took up mentioned the Durand Line thus tacitly maintaining the previous Afghanistan governments on this issue (Ashe, 2020).

During the Taliban regime of course relations were stable. In fact the military considered them strategic assets. However, it was not a client state. When the Pakistan government appealed to them not to harm the Benyamin statues they ignored it and afterwards penalized Pakistani banks in Kabul for following UN directives (Johny, 2020). The Al Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden was given sanctuary by the Taliban in Afghanistan. They conducted several terrorist attacks around the world inter alia, a hotel in Yemen in 1992, the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dares Salam in 1998, a US warship in 2000 (Ashe, 2020). Then on 9/11 (2001) the infamous attacks were made on several targets in US, the most devastating being on the twin skyscrapers of the World Trade Centre in New York (Pattanaik, 2012).

In retaliation the President G.W. Bush of US launched a War on Terror, primarily against the Al Qaeda and its supporters and other terrorist groups around the world. He literally threatened Pakistan to join; his famous quotations are: 'you're either with us or against us' and 'if you don't support us we'll bomb you back into the stone ages'. Gen. Musharraf was the military dictator of Pakistan and he joined the War on Terror without hesitation (Farr, 2020). It may be mentioned that Pakistani contingents have played an exemplary role in the UN as peace keeping troops in various trouble spots like Biafra, Croatia and other places. This contribution has been appreciated at an international level. In the US Afghanistan war Pakistan played a crucial role as a non-NATO ally in the US-led 'War on Terror' against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Maizland, 2020).

Unfortunately, these and other terrorist actions by extremists gave rise to many people in Western countries getting an erroneous impression that the religion of Islam encourages terrorism. What has been termed Islamophobia rose in these countries and many people viewed that Muslim immigrants were bringing terrorism into their societies. However, in fact an analysis of terrorist incidents killing innocent civilians in the 80% was violence against Muslims and only 20% was perpetrated by Muslim extremists. Probably one of the worst such incidents was on 15 March 2019 in Christchurch New Zealand, where a prejudiced white supremacist killed 51 Muslims in two mosques. This problem of violent bigotry continues (D'Souza, 2021).

In the war on terror the first thing Bush did was to demand that the Taliban give the US Osama Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders. When the Taliban refused to give them up the US-led NATO troops attacked Afghanistan (Maizland, 2020). This again resulted in another huge influx of refugees into Pakistan. Many *mujahideen* came with the refugees. The Western forces quickly ousted the Taliban government. US began a process of nation building. They established a constitution, a parliament with a presidential system and a Pashtun leader Hamid Karzai was the first president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Hamid, 2017). But though the Taliban were defeated in the war they were not eliminated and they reorganized themselves and began a guerilla war against the foreign troops and the government the US had set up. They had a lot of popular support. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also organized themselves in the neighboring country results (Hussain, 2020).

III. Peaceful Settlement between Pakistan and Afghanistan

Pakistan recognized the Hamid Karzai regime and expressed great desire for good relations between both countries. However uncertainty continued in the region and threatened regional peace and security. Now the terrorists had safe heavens in the tribal areas of Pakistan and along the border areas of Afghanistan. Both countries were in a condition of war due to terrorist activities within both countries as a reaction to the American war on terror. Afghanistan blamed Pakistan for the attacks (Gallagher, 2019). The US was suspicious that Pakistan was playing a double role in not taking sufficient action against the Taliban. Initially the might have been a degree of reluctance because hitherto the Taliban were supported by Pakistan and because of their purported Islamic ideology they had a lot of sympathy at all levels. They had established themselves well in the tribal areas (Mazzetti & Khan, 2020). However, terrorist attacks in Pakistan began to change this mindset. Originally only ill-equipped Frontier Corp. militia was used against them and the emphasis was on peace negotiations. Peace agreements were signed with Baitullah Masud, the leader of the TTP in 2004, 2005 and 2006, all of which were broken forthwith. Also these campaigns did not fare well. The first major military action with the military supported by artillery, air cover and helicopter gunships against TTP strongholds in South Waziristan, Operation Zalzala was launched in 2008. Then similarly Operation Sherdil in 2009 in the Bajaur and Mohmand agencies (Ramez, 2020).

In 2007 another extremist party affiliated with the TTP, the Tehrik-i-Nifas-i-Shariat Mohammadi (TNSM) took over Swat in Pakistan. First the army launched Operation Rah-ul-Haq in 2007 against them and later a full scale operation Rah-ul-Rast in 2009 and successfully eliminated this threat. However, despite urging by US and Afghanistan the military appeared reluctant to take action against the Haqqani group of the TTP whose base was Miranshah in North Waziristan (Idrees, Rehman, & Naazer, 2020). In Dec 2014 apart from innumerable heinous terrorist attacks by the TTP they attacked a school run by the army in Peshawar, killing about 100 innocent schoolboys. This incident more than any other, firmed the public resolve against these acts of violence by these extremists

In July 2014 the army launched an extensive operation titled Zarb-i-Azb in both South. and North Waziristan, which would also take out the Haqqani group and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was an Islamic State (IS) faction that had entered Afghanistan. This was followed up by Operation Rah-i-Fasaad: 2017 because there was a resurgence of terrorism in these areas (Idrees, Rehman, & Naazer, 2020).

However, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan showed no difference in his accusatory attitude towards Pakistan. Currently the two countries may be said to be following a 'tit for tat' policy regarding border violations by extra-state actors. The prime problem of these operations in the FATA region is that they result in hundreds of thousands of people being displaced from their homes. Apart from this there is collateral damage and destruction of infrastructure. These alienate the local population and cause resentment (Ramez, 2020). US drone strikes further aggravated the feelings of the local tribesmen. This resentment increased support for the TTP plus their Islamic ideology appeals to the tribesmen. All these factors made the tribal areas a seed bed for these extremists. The TTP found it easy to find new recruits. Even when the army eliminated them in an area they would quickly get new manpower and recover. Fortunately, this

fervid support seems to be decreasing somewhat now (Minatti, *The Challenges of the Afghan Peace Talks*, 2020)

In the meantime it may be mentioned that some actions by the war of terror by the US compromised the sovereignty of Pakistan, like drone attacks and an attack by US planes on an army post at Salala, in September 2011, reportedly it was a mistake caused by wrong information on the part of the US (Idrees, Rehman, & Naazer, 2020). Another important event during this period was that the US received intelligence that Osama hiding in Abbottabad in Pakistan. On 1st May, 2012 at the mid night a covert operation was launched. Two stealth helicopters fled from Jalalabad to Osama's residence in Abbottabad carrying 20 to 25 Navy SEALs. The helicopters could not be spotted by radar and it was a clear violation of Pakistan's territory (Shahid, 2020). The SEALs quickly killed Osama and carried his body away. One of the helicopters crashed as it took off. They dumped the body into the ocean and proclaimed that since he was a Saudi national first they had asked that country to take the body but they refused, that was why they disposed of the corpse in the sea. On 2nd May, 2011 Barack Obama the US President of USA announced to his public that 'Osama bin Laden has been killed.' However, the fact that he had been discovered in Pakistan led many in the US to suspect that some sectors in the Pakistan Government knew he was there. This led to a deterioration of relations with the US and the government in Afghanistan (Mazzetti & Khan, 2020).

IV. Peace Process: Pakistan's Road to Redemption

Pakistan has suffered more fatalities by terrorists than any other nation. The war on terror has been a drain on the exchequer that has damaged the economy. It has had a negative impact on Pakistan's exports and investment, particularly foreign investment. The war on terror has also affected Pakistan's tourism (Ramez, 2020). Pakistan's scenic northern regions, such as KPK and Gilgit Baltistan were a major tourist attraction and the inhabitants were heavily dependent on tourism to for their livelihood. But now visitors don't dare go there. Pakistan was ranked 122 as a tourist destination out of 140 countries in 2012 (Shahid, 2020).

A true rapprochement between Afghanistan and Pakistan presumes negotiations on a variety of strategic issues. The situation became more complicated, because India began investing heavily in Afghanistan, thus gaining influence in that country, which will further alienate them from Pakistan (Mazzetti & Khan, 2020). Regarding the present circumstances Afghanistan has very little to gain from raising the Durand Line issue. The fact is that the border is too porous. Historically tribesmen periodically crossed across it moving their herds. Also smugglers took advantage of it. As such, this makes it easier for extra-state actors on both sides to cross over to commit acts of terrorism. Further it will check incursion of intrusions of Afghan security personnel (Jones, 2020).

An agreed border could and should be guaranteed by the international community and the new Tripartite Commission of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US and NATO can look into this. Actually the issue goes far beyond the border crisis (Cordesman A. H., 2020). It is clear that the international community's continued involvement in Afghanistan is needed. As long as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and NATO are present in the country the Afghan government can sustain itself. A clearly defined, accepted border will guarantee that the struggle for national authority there rests in Afghanistan and outside interference is checked by all

stakeholders (Allen, 2020). The main problem is that it is a very long border and difficult to patrol within adequate restrictions and does not decadent once more into a domestic combat (Maizland, 2020). The Taliban, who are constantly, assured that U.S troops could not stay afar the end of Bush's tenure, have recognized this and are striving to deter non-U.S. NATO representatives are heading to southern Afghanistan. Such a continuing existence would only be feasible if the United States and the international community effective in the area are capable to escape the trap set by the leadership of Pakistan (Cordesman A. H., 2020).

That is why Pakistan began the project to fence the border with Afghanistan and adjoining Iran. Afghanistan objected to this delineation of this border that they do not acknowledge but on the face of it, the fact that it has not followed up this objection may indicate that Afghanistan also feels the need for this measure or perhaps the presence of foreign powers is influencing its attitude (Bose, 2020). This fence will hamper cross border raids by extra state actors and facilitate containing Afghanistan's problem in its borders. This has become the major grouse between the two countries. Thus it can lead to improving relations between the two countries. Another aspect of this development is that Pakistan has taken advantage of the current situation to implement this project that it has wanted to do for a long time but unable to because of the attitude of Afghanistan (Maizland, 2020).

However, there is another reality to this problem of Pak-Afghan relationships, which goes beyond establishment narratives that are fed to the public. That is the suspicions of Afghanistan and the US that Pakistan is deceiving them. Let's view Pakistan's position deeper. The first imperative is that for the development of the region, particularly Pakistan, it is necessary to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. The fact is that Pakistan needs the foreign presence more than foreign powers need this country in Afghanistan (D'Souza, 2021).

The West saw Islamists as an alternative to communism and Pakistan saw them as a counterweight to Pashtun nationalism. Afghanistan was also viewed as a valuable buffer against Russia by both the West and Pakistan, giving Pakistan more defensive capabilities against the Soviet Union (Cordesman A. H., 2020). The soviet occupation offered Pakistan's military the chance to gain an additional defensive capability against India; that was the concept of strategic assets, despite considerable debate on the idea and its promotion by two military personnel, Gen. Hamid Gul and former Army Chief Aslam Beg, the new term was never an official policy of Pakistan. Now the whole perspective of international relations and hegemony of a super power and the very concept of war is changing all the above notions should be discarded. Russia and China have entered the arena, this time as peace makers, investors and sources of aid. The Taliban have shown their acceptance of these countries (Mazzetti & Khan, 2020).

The Russian Peace Conference of November 2018 was the first time the Taliban attended an international conference and showed willingness to negotiate. In deed the volatile situation in Afghanistan is a dire threat to these powerful nations as well. Regarding Pakistan's policy of giving moral support to religious organizations like Jaish-e-Mohammadi (JeM) based in Pakistan, but operated by members of their factions in Kashmir, it should be apparent that there is no short term solution to the problem (Jones, 2020). However, for those who can discern deeper political currents it is clear that

Modi's India, despite its strong actions in the valley and playing to the gallery, is steadily losing ground. Time is on the side of the Kashmiris (Shahid, 2020).

Regarding the Taliban, they are showing signs of realizing that continuous conflict is showing negative results. They are feeling the need to soften the previously rigid stand they took on all matters. Previously the Taliban refused to negotiate with the Afghan Government but now they have begun to attend sessions. As infrastructure development increases they are losing ground, mainly in the urban areas. On the other hand the influence of the government is hampered by warlords. Inroads of the Islamic State Khorasan and IS are a new threat to security and also to the Taliban (Allen, 2020).

The US had to change their previous stance of refusing to acknowledge the Taliban. They realize that the Bonn agreement made a mistake in excluding them from the democratic system. Karzai was the first to insist on negotiating with them. And now the US has signed a peace agreement with them on 29 February 2020. The problem with the US is that the Afghan Government needs them and the Pentagon also realizes that if troops are withdrawn the situation in Afghanistan will deteriorate (Maizland, 2020). However, the popular feeling in the US is that the US troops should return home and the US Government keeps making commitments in this regard. Whether the Pentagon or the politicians prevail is yet to be seen. However, somehow the Taliban have to be included in the mainstream politics in Afghanistan. If there is an answer to this problem, the US doesn't have it, because they are viewed as an enemy by the poorer classes. With the entrance of Russia and China more accommodative attitudes might arise on all sides. The US must learn not to hold controversial elections tainted with rigging and let democratic forces grow stronger. If possible stricter measures should be taken to check the supply of arms and ammunition to the warlords (Bose, 2020).

Speculating the future of the peace agreement, probably no agreement will be reached between the Taliban and the government. Further US troops will continue to remain in Afghanistan. However, if the government can just get the process going that will be an achievement and the longer the negotiations continue the more the situation. China and Russia should also engage the Taliban on various issues. Steps should be taken to disseminate the media all over Afghanistan especially in the rural areas and outskirts (Maizland, 2020).

Regarding Pakistan, Trump was positively offensive towards this country. However, he had to soften his attitude, because this country has continued to have good relations with the Taliban and the US needed its assistance for the peace talks. Pakistan played a major role in the arranging and making the Doha Peace Talks possible and its efforts were appreciated by all nations. Similarly Russia and China have sought and utilized Pakistan's help (D'Souza, 2021). Perhaps Biden will take a more constructive attitude towards Pakistan instead of the 'do more' mantra. It is clear that military action will not stop terrorism and more emphasis be placed on nation building. And Pakistan should discard the 'good Taliban, bad Taliban' doctrine. It is reported that at one juncture both Afghanistan and Pakistan were keeping terrorists in each other's territories and both were creating trouble in retaliation to each other. If that was the case that would only result in a negative spiral and should be curtailed even at the cost of temporary loss (Bose, 2020).

V. Conclusion

The fact is that Willy nilly Pakistan has become involved in a ‘Greater Game’ than the ‘Great Game’ of the British. The BRI of China involves Afghanistan as the Sino-gateway to Central Asia. Further, the CPEC is the lynchpin of the BRI to establish connectivity in this region and phase III envisages linking Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and if possible India. It will open up trade routes for the mountainous country and become its vital conduit to the Indian Ocean. Russian goods will be able to travel southeast to the region and overseas through Gwadar port. Also Pakistan should allow Afghani goods to go to India and Indian goods to Afghanistan (currently only one way traffic is allowed and can flow through the Torkham and Chaman pass through to India). Most important, it will give Afghanistan a conduit to the Indian Ocean. Apart from that, the other projects connected with the CPEC aim at boosting export oriented goods in that country. The corridor not only envisages connectivity, it also encompasses increasing production. It will automatically make economic interests more important than political or national.

Further, with easy accessibility and increased commercial and other interests between the people of Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries in the region there will be greater interaction among the populations that will boost friendly ties. It took a long time to formalize the peace settlement with Hizbe-Islami Afghanistan (HIA), led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. However, it proved effective in integrating one of the reluctant factions. For a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, the arrangement framework with HIA would also be used. Also Pakistan can cooperate with the Afghanistan to counteract the mutual threat of the IS.

It is also proposed to name a separate Pak-Afghan envoy acceptable to both countries to oversee diplomatic relations. Policy-level improvements should be incorporated by scuttling investigation and monitoring of consignees and strengthening trustworthy sources. In essence, despite provocations from ideologues and superpowers, there is no effective hostility between both the citizen of Pakistan and Afghanistan instead there is a natural affinity. As both these countries embark on the road of developing democracy, this human factor has the potential to bode well for Pak-Afghan relations. Thus, confidence building measures should be taken by the two countries. Pakistan should remain constructively involved in the peace process of Afghanistan and check any cross border violations. Further it should let the Taliban and the government finds their own political equation without any interference.

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