THE AMBIGUITY AROUND PAKISTAN'S ROLE IN WAR ON TERROR: AN ASSESSMENT

Amartya Ray
Assistant Professor
Dept. of Political Science
Sushil Kar College
Champahati, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Pakistan is a country full of riddles, both internally and externally. Its borders with Afghanistan is challenged by the latter and it is also one of the most porous in the world; as the same community, Pashtuns, are living on both sides of the Durand Line. Pakistan always had deep strategic interest in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime in Kabul was a product of that. At the onset of the American war on terror on Afghan soil, to eliminate the Al-Qaida, the pro-Islamabad Taliban government was also targeted and eventually it fell. This development put Pakistan in a precarious position to which it responded in a peculiar way. The US and its allies believe it played a dubious role while Pakistan claims it has done what was to be done, and with fullest capacity and truest intent. This paper is an attempt of taking stock of two contradictory positions held by two sides and it also prescribes ways as to how to find reconciliation between the two.

Key words: Pakistan, Afghanistan, the USA, war on terror, Taliban

Introduction

It is largely believed in the policymakers' circles of the US and its western allies that Pakistan did not play its role to the extent it was supposed to in the war on terror, in Afghanistan. It is also believed that Pakistan's current Afghanistan policy is highly suspicious; and it, probably, aims to strengthen its own grip in that country, by sidelining archrival India and other actors from the reconstruction efforts that have been taken on by the international community after overthrowing of the Taliban regime. Even it can very well align with the Taliban once again if the extremists manage to come to power after the proposed full US withdrawal from the Afghan soil, some critics argue. This maneuvering seems to stem from Islamabad's perennial and strong feelings about gaining and retaining 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan. Strategic depth is a term in military literature that broadly refers to the distances between the frontlines or battle sectors and the combatants' industrial core areas, capital cities, heartlands, and other key centres of population or military production. The idea of strategic depth, in the Pakistani context, was perceived in 1980s by the National Defence University professor General Mirza Aslam Beg (later Chief of Army Staff working under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in late 1980s).[i] Since then, the Pakistani military establishment has been repeatedly accused of forming a policy that seeks to control Afghanistan. Though the Pakistani military leaders have denied this allegation from time to time, the design is more than evident now as claimed by observers of the developments in Afghanistan. Western scholars argue that maintaining this long-term goal set in mind, Islamabad had never been sincere about the US campaign in Afghanistan.

Even if the above claims are taken to be true, it nonetheless seems irrational for a state to provide means of living and sanctuary to such elements which could threaten its own peace and existence sometime later. As a result there is much ambiguity, to explore, about Pakistan's attitude and motive with regard to the more than a decade long war on terror waged on the Afghan soil. This paper tries to raise those issues of apparent suicidal tactics of Pakistan and makes a case for further and intensive study of the same.

Af-Pak relations in perspective

Historically, Pakistan's relation with Afghanistan is quite troublesome and marked by periodic eruptions, especially in the border regions. Kabul had never accepted the infamous Durand Line as the international border between the two countries as it divided the ethnic Pashtun population (the most populous and dominant ethnic community in

Afghanistan) in two sovereign, independent states. The Pashtun-dominated North-West Frontier Province (presently Khyber Pakthunkhwa) was the only constituting province of present day Pakistan which opposed to become a part of Pakistan. It had voted in favour of merging into the new state of Pakistan with a very thin majority (50.1% of votes) even after Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and his followers boycotted the referendum of 1947. So here lies the root of the Afghanistan-Pakistan political conflict arising out of a complex blend of Pashtun nationalism and border disputes.

After the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan (1978), the situation changed temporarily. The USA started supporting the Afghan Mujahidin fighting the Soviet army. Pakistan became the base from where the CIA had operated, trained and guided them and it led to a temporary betterment of Af-Pak relations. But when the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, situation went back to the square one. Afghanistan was then devastated by the 10 years' bitter armed struggle. No central authority was present in Kabul to steer the country out of such gross political instability. From this mess, one group emerged to be powerful enough to force other stakeholders out of the equation and that was the Taliban. It took control of almost all of Afghanistan by 1996. Only three states recognized that regime; and Pakistan was among them. Disregarding the Taliban's agenda, call for global jihad, and the fact that it had direct linkages with the Al-Qaida (which had already become infamous by then) Pakistan decided to engage with them. This policy to engage with the Taliban was necessarily coming from Islamabad's search for strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Undoubtedly, an unstable Afghanistan is a threat to Pakistan as it negatively impacts Pakistan's ability to rebuild and strengthen the weak political institutions and economy, and also the ability to tackle the ongoing militant activity in Baluchistan, FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) or Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. But as a tradeoff it prefers to weather that threat in place of having a peaceful, stable Afghanistan with deep connections with the west and India. Islamabad thus has more reasons than one for not breaking up ties with the Taliban or the Haqqani Network. This stance is also motivated to a great extent by the fear of provoking the armed groups inciting violence in Punjab or Sind, two provinces which Pakistan likes to believe as its core. That's why it could never launch a full-scale, determinate offensive against the Pak Taliban aka the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) though it had all the reasons and desire to launch one.[ii]

9/11 and its aftermath

The scenario changed dramatically and overnight after the incident of 9/11. US president George Bush Jr. declared 'war on terror' and had decided to invade Afghanistan to eliminate Al-Qaida and uproot the Taliban regime as well; and chose Pakistan as their operational base for the offensive. On the other hand, Pakistan, stunned with the pace and magnitude of events unfolding, could not but rally behind the US campaign. Though Islamabad was among the three capitals which maintained close ties with Kabul till September 10th of 2001; it had very little to no option left in the face of Bush administration's war cry. In an effort to avoid becoming the US target himself, Musharraf temporarily cut loose the Taliban leadership from Islamabad's tutelage; the same Taliban it had nurtured, trained and equipped for more than a decade to have indirect control over Afghanistan. It also had to stand by the Northern Alliance, the bitter foe of the Taliban and detested by the Pak Army for long, to fight against their own favourite client. In fact, Musharraf administration initially tried to make a case for the Taliban by differentiating them from the Al-Qaida which was mainly a mercenary force of the Arabs, Africans or Central Asians whereas Talibs were Pashtuns with whom Pakistan shared a long and complicated history and border. Those efforts did not yield any result though and Pakistan consequently started smuggling top Taliban leadership to safe havens in various parts of their country.[iii]

Thus, as the aftermath of 9/11 reached the shores of Karachi and beyond, Pakistan under Musharraf had too many things to fix at one time. It had to stand up by Washington and it did that. At the same time, Musharraf chose not to ruffle too many feathers at home as his own regime, which was quite nascent then, could come under threat from the religious establishment. As a result, though he officially joined the American campaign in Afghanistan and vowed to fight terror at home, did not go all out against terror outfits with foreign objectives, led and supported by the Pakistanis and based in the FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or occupied territories of Kashmir. And eventually, with escalation in Afghanistan, these outfits started providing shelter to Taliban leaders who had been able to flee the NATO offensive.

Thus Pakistan's role in the War on Terror can be termed as highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it played a crucial role in facilitating the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan. On the other hand, it provided shelter to the top

leadership of Taliban and ensured their survival. This too-clever-by-half policy of Pakistan of supporting the US against the Taliban and at the same time supporting the Taliban against the US had not only upset the American agenda in Afghanistan; it had made interior Pakistan the next hotbed for mushrooming of the radical elements in the long run.[iv] The war on terror, with the passing of time, actually became a two-edged sword for Pakistan which is still bleeding from it inside and out.

According to western perception, it was an act of deceit on Musharraf's and successive Pak governments' part. Pakistani voices rationalising their government's actions were drowned in the flood of western allegations. Policymakers and executives of Islamabad had issued briefs on the war on terror from time to time to clarify their stand; they presented their case in international forums as well. Even the military had come out to defend (Which is a rarest of rare exception in Pakistani politics) Musharraf and the following governments often on this issue. But wide reach and deep penetration of western media and economic clout of their governments whipped that all away.

Theoretical dilemma

Every state has a political system which maintains a structure with which it generates outputs, based on the inputs it receives. Maintenance of such structure or the political system itself always remains the primary goal. Having that assured, the state moves on to other tasks by generating coherent and comprehensive outputs, through policies and initiatives. This is the standard line of argument as propagated by the structural functionalists. Now, if a state suffers from the overflow of inputs, sometimes with contradictory ones, and beyond its capacity to process, the system will either collapse or behave in an erratic way. Pakistan's foreign policy posture regarding Afghanistan and the war on terror and its actions on these two fronts, are quite inconsistent. Thus one can assume, following the above line of argument that the Pakistani state could be suffering from too many demands from various sections of the society inside and from the international community as well, which were more often than not at odds and could not be addressed simultaneously. At the same time, for survival, which was at stake, it was trying to provide outputs to pacify and satisfy each and every constituency within its fold. And, thus its behaviour and actions might seem to be irrational and sometimes unjustified for the outsiders; especially for the western states which were not exposed to such a kind of a challenge.

Literary puzzle

There is an array of literature available on the war on terror in Afghanistan. But the problem remains with the fact that most of them are written by western scholars, policymakers or journalists and they start with the assumption that Pakistan is a rogue state and then try to find out the reasons behind its pattern of behavior. Most of these writings are deductive in its approach. While generalisations are best achieved through an inductive method as far as political issues/ conflicts are concerned. Let us take the exceptional case of Magnus Marsden. In his 2005 book, *'Living Islam',* he depicts a vivid picture of a common man's life in the Chitral region of the North-West Frontier Province.[v] This book is a result of almost 10 years' ethnographic study carried out by the author. The author starts with criticising scholars or journalists who write about day-to-day life of a Pakistani Muslim man from distance and while doing so he also breaks a good number of stereotypes that are commonly portrayed by the western media as well as academia. After beginning of the American war on terror campaign in Afghanistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had become a hotbed of activities. This book provides a wholesome picture of the area, shredding the western bias. But as we have mentioned, this book is a rare exception. Like that of journalist Ethan Casey's *'Alive and Well in Pakistan: A Human Journey in a Dangerous Time'*, published in 2004.[vi] In most of the cases the story remains different. Even scholars like Stephen P. Cohen or Ian Talbot also get caught into that trap of prior assumption.

On the other hand, books published from Pakistan or by Pakistani scholars also bear some or the other traces of bias. In most of the cases, they spend more time to justify their government's action than offering some new insight or a rationale to the original problem. And their method also remains to be deductive, like their western counterparts. They start with the assumption that the root of all problems in the region is the presence of foreign powers, to be specific, the US. Thus they suffer from the same problem of seeing the world through a coloured glass, just that their colour is different from that of the western scholars.

Conclusion

The above discussion shows it clearly that Pakistan's role in war on terror waged in Afghanistan is full of ambiguity, puzzles and opaqueness. Like any other academic debate, this issue always demands a full-scale exploration and analysis; but it had hardly been tried so far. Yes, efforts have been made to decipher the typical behavior of various actors involved in the developments, but no study tried to see it from a holistic approach, and from a Pakistani perspective. Also, changes are imminent now in Afghanistan as the US forces are preparing to vacate the land; while Taliban is gaining traction again, especially in the south, in and around Kandahar. Making Pakistan a villain for the resurgence of the Taliban won't help the west; at the same time claiming themselves to be the victims of the war won't help Pakistan either. Most importantly, while the involved sides continue the blame game, humanity may face the danger of terrorism and human rights violation yet again. Thus it is prudent to explore, analyse and fill in the gaps in Pakistan's supposed lack of effort and alleged duplicity in its commitment to war on terror; for Pakistan, and for everyone else.

References:

[i] Arni, A. (2015, October 14). *The Genesis of Pakistan's "Strategic Depth" in Afghanistan*. Fair Observer. https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/the-genesis-of-pakistans-strategic-depth-in-afghanistan-88910/

[ii] Felbab-Brown, V. (2016, July 28). *Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and implications for regional politics*. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/research/pakistans-relations-with-afghanistan-and-implications-for-regional-politics/

[iii] Tellis, A. J. (2008). *Pakistan and The War On Terror*. carnegieendowment.org. Retrieved September 18, 2018, from https://carnegieendowment.org/files/tellis_pakistan_final.pdf

[iv] *Pakistan and the "War on Terror" | Middle East Policy Council*. (n.d.). https://mepc.org/commentary/pakistan-and-war-terror

[v] Marsden, M. (2005). *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge University Press.

[vi] Casey, E. (2004). *Alive and Well in Pakistan: A Human Journey in a Dangerous Time*. Summersdale Publishers LTD - ROW.