

The War on Terror and US Foreign Policy: The Transition from Obama's Af-Pak Policy to Trump's Negotiations with the Taliban

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ABSTRACT

The main question this paper answer is: To what extent is Obama's Afghan policy a departure from or an extension of his predecessor's legacy regarding Afghanistan? To answer the question, the paper is divided into three main sections: The first section presents a brief historical background of the US policy towards Afghanistan, starting with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The second section deals with the policies of the Bush administration towards Afghanistan after September 11, including its conduct of war. The third and most detailed section looks into the Obama administration's policies toward the Afghan War. The focus of this section remains on highlighting the main trends in the US-Afghan policy during the Obama years. The paper does not detail the merits or demerits of Bush's or Obama's approach to the Afghan War. The intent is to merely highlight the existence of a different Afghan policy during the Obama years.

Keywords: War, Terror, US Foreign Policy, Transition

INTRODUCTION

The US-led NATO war in Afghanistan has entered its 19th year this October. The war was initiated with the objectives to decisively defeat al-Qaeda and remove its Taliban backers from power. The objectives have been partially achieved in the wake of the instant fall of the Taliban regime and the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2012. However, the complete eradication of the al-Qaeda operations and Taliban power base in Afghanistan remains an unfinished agenda.

President Obama inherited two major wars from his predecessor, President Bush – Iraq and Afghanistan. First as a senator and later as a presidential candidate, Obama opposed

Iraq War. However, he stood firmly behind war in Afghanistan. On various occasions, he called it “the war of necessity” (Baker, 2009). At the same time, however, he took issue with the manner in which Afghan War had been handled. He promised to make fundamental changes to Afghan War in order to bring down the human and material cost of the Afghan war.

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US and Afghanistan: Historical Background

In December 1979, Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan. At the time of Soviet invasion, Afghanistan was a neutral, non-aligned republic. Soviets claimed that the intervention took place at the request of People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) – a socialist party. Soviets swiftly seized the control of Kabul and murdered President Hafizullah Amin (Cooley, 2002). Soviet installed Babrak Karmal as the President of Afghanistan who represented Soviet interests in Afghanistan. In 1985, Karmal was replaced by Dr. Najibullah. The US government under President Carter was meanwhile preoccupied with the hostage crisis in the post-revolution Iran and paid little attention to the happenings in Afghanistan (Bearden, 2001).

After Reagan was elected president, the US policy towards Afghanistan underwent a drastic shift. Under ‘Reagan Doctrine’, the United States adopted the policy of supporting anti-Soviet movements in all parts of the world. Support to Afghan *Mujahideen*, who were fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, was the cornerstone of the policy “to increase the cost of Soviet support of Third World socialist governments” (Hartman, 2002). For the next eight years (1981-89), the US supported and sponsored the struggle of Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviets and the Soviet installed government of Babrak Karmal and Najibullah. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia provided logistical and financial support to the insurgent movement. The deteriorating Soviet economy, and the endless war in Afghanistan forced Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan. After Geneva Accords on Afghanistan (1988) were signed, the withdrawal was completed in February 1989 (Mendelson, 1993). The Cold War came to a decisive conclusion after the disintegration of Soviet Union in December 1991. The importance of the struggle of Afghan Mujahideen to the fall of Soviet Union cannot be overemphasized.

The current US imbroglio in Afghanistan has its roots in its post-Cold War ‘imperial hubris’. The United States turned its back on the war-ravaged country immediately in the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal. During the Soviet occupation, more than two million Afghans were killed. Half a million were maimed (Stabile, & Kumar, 2005). Several

million Afghans were living as refugees in neighboring countries. (Wood, 1989). The various factions among Mujahideen bickered over the transfer of power, and the nature of post-Soviet power structure. The country was practically divided into different spheres of control by various erstwhile Mujahideen commanders – a state of affairs also termed as ‘warlordism’ (Khalilzad, 1995).

The situation resulted in allowing regional actors, like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, to develop proxies to promote their interests in Afghanistan. The Afghan infighting and the regional actors’ power politics destabilized the country. Taliban emerged out of the power vacuum created by the chaos and were readily coopted by Pakistan. The word *Talib* in Pashto refers to a student of the *Madrasah* – a religious school (Raza, 2013). The Taliban movement emerged in 1994, and with the help of Pakistani intelligence services, became strong enough to take control of Kabul in 1996. By 2001, Taliban controlled almost 85 percent of the country’s area. Under their *Amir*, Mullah Muhammad Umar, Taliban imposed their band of strict *sharia* in areas under their control (Rashid, 2010).

War on Terror Begins: The Bush Years (2001-08)

Other than diplomatic lip service, the US did very little to counter the Taliban threat. It was after September 11 attacks that the US recognized the importance of defeating Taliban to prevent safe havens to transnational terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda (Gunaratna, 2002). Nearly a month after the September 11 attack, the US forces initiated UN-backed military operation in Afghanistan. Initially, the US and NATO forces resorted to airstrikes. After Taliban control was sufficiently weakened, the ground forces were deployed. The US war in Afghanistan swiftly removed the Taliban from power in Kabul. However, Taliban only went into their safe havens to start an insurgency against the US and NATO troops. Although, a broad-based Afghan government was installed under the US-backed President Hamid Karzai, the protracted war could neither restore a sense of normalcy to Afghanistan nor decrease the number of US and Afghan military and civilian casualties (Goodson, 2012).

The US foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the Bush years was based on viewing the country aloof from its regional context, especially from the events in the critically important neighbor, Pakistan. The *US National Security Strategy* 2006 reveals the manner in which Afghanistan was repeatedly listed alongside Iraq – its perceived global equivalent. For instance, the strategy declared, “The peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq have replaced tyrannies with democracies” (Bush, 2006). Pakistan on the other hand was mentioned invariably in relation with India. “This Administration has shown that improved relations with each are possible and can help India and Pakistan make strides toward a lasting peace between themselves” (Bush, 2006). The strategy or the other policy frameworks under Bush hardly spoke of the threat to peace in Afghanistan posed by the Tribal Areas of Pakistan that bordered Afghanistan, and were home to a growingly powerful al-Qaeda and Taliban presence.

By 2006, it had become clear that the US strategy in Afghanistan, in spite of its short term gains, was on the road to long term failure. Apart from the massive corruption in Afghanistan, and the remarkably slow process of training Afghan troops, the bigger issue was that Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to find safe sanctuaries in the adjacent areas in

Pakistan. Groups with long-held links to the Pakistani security agencies were able to go across the border towards safety (Rubin & Siddique, 2006). More critically, these groups would conduct their operations aimed against the US and Afghan forces from these safe bases in Pakistan (Jones, 2010). Further, Pakistan's fears of its traditional rival India getting a foothold in Afghanistan resulted in a proxy war against Indian interests in Afghanistan, resulting in substantial damage to the US interests in stabilizing Afghanistan (Rubin, 2007).

The other important oversight in the US foreign policy towards Afghanistan was ignoring the apprehensions of important regional actors, especially China, Russia and Iran, towards the US-NATO presence and operations in Afghanistan. Although, the war in Afghanistan was not fought unilaterally in the sense that it had the approval of members of the UN and military participation of the US NATO allies, Bush administration did not feel the need to engage these important regional actors. These countries had to consistently measure the threat posed to them by al-Qaeda and the Taliban against that posed by the presence of US troops (Rubin and Rashid, 2008). The failure to engage these regional actors through diplomacy meant that there were conflicting interests and contrasting, even competing strategies, in dealing with the terror threat in Afghanistan.

Obama's AfPak Strategy

Changing Military Strategy

As mentioned before, the Bush strategy in Afghanistan achieved initial success. It toppled 'an oppressive and weak government in a poor country' through precision bombing (Nye, 2003). However, the bombing campaign only limited Taliban and al-Qaeda to certain safe areas both in Afghanistan and in the adjacent Pakistani Tribal areas. The long-term threat did not go away. Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to run an insurgency against the US and NATO forces. Obama administration believed that there was a need for a fundamental shift in policy to defeat the long-term threat.

As mentioned, and as the term 'AfPak' suggests, the strategy increased the focus of US policies on Pakistan than it did earlier. As President Obama announced, "I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That is the goal that must be achieved" (Obama, 2009, March). Following are some of the principal changes Obama administration made to its military policy in Afghanistan.

Surge and Withdrawal

During his election campaign, Barack Obama repeatedly referred to the need for increasing attention on Afghanistan. He declared his determination to, at least initially, increase the number of troops in Afghanistan. Soon after he presented his AfPak strategy in his two speeches in 2009 (March and December), the US Department of Defense released the details of his plan to surge the number of troops in Afghanistan. A total of 51,000 US soldiers were authorized to be sent to Afghanistan, increasing the number of US troops to 104,000 by September 2010. The Commander of US/NATO forces Gen. Petraeus declared the 'surge' to be a success (Katzaman, 2010).

In June 2011, President Obama declared a drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. He remarked that the surge of troops during the previous two years had the clear objectives of dismantling al-Qaeda, stalling Taliban's gain and to allow Afghan forces time to train and equip for the responsibility of defending their own country. Those objectives, according to the president, had been achieved. He declared, "we are fulfilling that commitment... we are meeting our goals (Obama, 2011). He further pronounced that gradually the US forces would disengage from their combat responsibilities in Afghanistan and would limit their services to supporting the Afghan forces. "By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security" (Obama, 2011). Although, by the time of the writing of this piece, the US forces continued to perform combat duties, their numbers have been significantly reduced. Obama's surge, drawdown and withdrawal strategy is different from President Bush's open ended war efforts in Afghanistan. Obama administration outlined clear goals and a tentative timeline towards this seemingly endless conflict.

Drone Warfare and Military Operations in Pakistan

As pointed out, Obama administration repeatedly reiterated its belief that the problem of radical militancy in Afghanistan was inextricably linked to Pakistan. Obama believed that unless the war effort was broadened to at least Pakistan's tribal areas, only limited objectives could be achieved. His intentions regarding the importance of operations in Pakistan were revealed by his statement: "If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won't act, we will" (Hoffman, 2015).

The US strategy towards Pakistan can be understood as having three components: intensifying drone warfare, pressurizing Pakistan to step up its efforts in fighting al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Pakistan's Tribal North West and linking aid to Pakistan with advances made against terrorism. Drone strikes in Pakistani territory had begun as early as 2004. However, the number and incidence of drone attacks during Obama years was substantially increased. Of all the drone strikes between 2004 and 2012, the drone strikes during the four years (2008-2012) of Obama administration accounted for 86 percent (288) of the drone strikes (Boyle, 2013). The drone campaign eliminated important al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders such as three *Amir* of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) during these years.

For ten years since the inception of the global war on terror, doubts had been consistently raised about Pakistani military's resolve to fight some Taliban groups. US policymakers believed that Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had been protecting a prominent Taliban group known as Haqqani network (Shaffer, 2015). Under pressure from the US, Pakistani military eventually initiated *Operation Zarb-e-Azab*. The focus of the operation was North Waziristan, an area hitherto providing safe havens to Taliban and al-Qaeda militants. The operations has considerably lowered incidents of terrorism in Pakistan (Gordon, 2015).

Greater Regional Cooperation

As mentioned earlier, in spite of the widespread support for the intervention in Afghanistan, The regional powers especially China, Russia and Iran remained apprehensive of the presence of US forces in Afghanistan. Bush administration also made little effort to include regional actors into the future settlement of Afghanistan. Obama's

AfPak strategy called for collaborative effort to deal with the crisis of militancy in Afghanistan (Mahapatra, 2009).

President Obama declared the support for creation of a 'regional contact group' comprising of China, Russia, India and Iran (Gen. Jones, 2009 March). The US had bilateral issues with Russia, China and Iran. Particularly, engaging Iran was considered a significant diplomatic departure from the policies of his predecessor. The inherent intent of Obama regime in engaging these important regional actors was to make issues – in this case fighting terrorism – the foundation of bilateral relations, rather than a complete engagement or disengagement. Iran was concerned about the growing extremism in neighboring Afghanistan. Further, Iran also feared the impact of drug trafficking from Afghanistan on its society and economy (Mahapatra, 2009). Although the contact group initiative has not really materialized, the US made several efforts to engage regional partners. Thus far, it has been able to garner Indian diplomatic support for Afghanistan.

Engagement with the 'Moderate' Taliban

Another important departure from the policies of Bush administration was the declaration that Obama administration was open to the idea of negotiating with moderates among the ranks of the Taliban. President Obama declared: "There is an uncompromising core of the Taliban. They must be met with force, and they must be defeated. But there are also those who've taken up arms because of coercion, or simply for a price. These Afghans must have the option to choose a different course" (Obama, 2009 March). The idea of negotiating with even the allegedly moderate Taliban would come as entirely alien to President Bush, who during his first term forcefully asserted, "You can't negotiate with terrorists. You can't sit back and hope that somehow therapy will work and they will change their ways" (Bush, 2004). Obama administration, however, did believe in the possibility of such a change of ways.

There was a conviction among the Obama foreign policy team that Bush administration made a mistake by lumping al-Qaeda and Taliban together. The policy of distinguishing local actors, Taliban, from the transnational al-Qaeda, was informed by the experience of Iraq, where in 2008, the local Sunni militias were helped and armed in their fight against al-Qaeda. The administration believed that it is strategically vital to isolate al-Qaeda from Taliban. In this manner al-Qaeda would lose the safe havens provided to it by its association with the Taliban (Ahmad, 2010).

The intention to engage with the Taliban was not limited to mere statements. Negotiations between the representatives of Afghan Taliban and the US started in late 2011. The negotiations continued with fluctuating pace until 2013. During 2013, Taliban declared that they were ready to open an office in Doha (Qatar) and negotiate with Afghan government – they did not recognize Kabul government as legitimate until that point. Although the office was opened, the negotiation did not pick up pace over disagreement regarding Taliban's insistence to display their flag on the office. Nevertheless, a significant development took place in 2014, when after negotiations through Qatari intermediaries, Taliban released US Sargent Bergdahl in exchange for five Guantanamo Prison inmates (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2015). At the approval of the US, negotiations between Afghan government and Taliban resumed through Pakistani mediation in July 2015. However, the news of the death of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah

Umar, during the same month, halted the process as Taliban were in the process of electing new leadership (Goldstein and Shah, 2015). Only time will tell whether the process of engagement with Taliban through third parties and intermediaries bears fruits or not. However, this engagement with Taliban in itself demonstrates the willingness Obama administration has demonstrated to adopt a broader strategy rather than focusing exclusively on military means.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion in this paper, there are three trends that distinguish Obama's strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan from his predecessor's: the specificity of targets and timeline; emphasizing the regional context of the insurgency in Afghanistan and the greater inclusivity towards regional powers. Whether the policy is successful in extricating US forces from a stable Afghanistan is to be seen in the next few years.

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