

**Continuity or Change? US Policy Towards Afghanistan Through Presidential Terms
(2001-2021)**

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ABSTRACT

The paper surveys the American policy towards Afghanistan since 2001 to answer two interrelated questions: Can the American policy towards Afghanistan under different presidential terms be viewed as continuity of the same policy or change with each presidential term? And, what explains such a continuity or change? The paper traces major policy initiatives under each of the four presidents during this time. The study finds that American policy towards Afghanistan can largely be viewed as continuity of the same trend with slight changes that follow from one president's term in office to the other. The changes are not reflective of the change in vision of the change in presidency. Rather, the changes in broader policy culminating in the withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 can be attributed to the shift in American public opinion towards the war.

Keywords: Continuity, Change, Policy, Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

Judging by the amount of time it received in presidential debates, the US military intervention in Afghanistan gradually lost its centrality to the US foreign policy agenda. On September 30, 2004, when incumbent George W. Bush faced off with John Kerry in the first presidential debate since the intervention, Afghanistan was mentioned at least ten times. The freshly held presidential elections in Afghanistan and the operation in Tora Bora were specifically mentioned. In 2008, candidates Obama and McCain referred to Afghanistan multiple times in their debates, focusing on issues such as a troops surge, demanding that Afghan government takes more responsibility, and coordination with Pakistan.

In the early 2010s, battered by the economic recession at home and the growing pessimism surrounding the war in Afghanistan, the military intervention and presence in Afghanistan started to fall off the political radar. In 2012 presidential debates, Dreyfuss (2012) noted that the war was largely missing from presidential debates between Obama

and Romney. Romney who had criticized President Obama's handling of the Afghan war on previous occasions, appeared to largely agree with the President scheme of withdrawal from Afghanistan (Dreyfuss 2012). Similar trends were reported from the Presidential debates Clinton-Trump debates in 2016 (Tisdall 2016). In the Most recent presidential election in 2020, the war in Afghanistan featured less than US relations with China or even Russia. Arguably, the most heated argument involving Afghanistan, in fact, took place when candidate Joe Biden criticized President Trump for failing to act on reports of Russia allegedly paying bounties over the killings of American troops in Afghanistan (Dilanian and Memoli 2021). The study argues that the increasing absence of Afghanistan in discussions of foreign policy in the presidential debates is indicative of the lack of significant partisan difference on the issue in the US.

This study argues that during each election cycle, successive presidential candidates made promises to significantly alter the US policy towards Afghanistan. However, upon getting elected, their policies would largely be an extension of the Afghan policy pursued by that of their predecessors. The study also contends that the gradual change in the US policy towards Afghanistan, therefore, should more correctly be attributed to the shift in public opinion towards the war in Afghanistan. To substantiate this assertion, this article traces the history of American foreign policy towards Afghanistan since 2001.

The US-led NATO war in Afghanistan came to a poorly managed conclusion in August 2021. The war was initiated with the objectives to decisively defeat al-Qaeda and remove its Taliban backers from power. The objectives had been initially achieved with the removal of Taliban from power in Kabul and the near-dismantling of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the killing of its founding leader Osama bin Laden. However, as the war prolonged, the US agenda in Afghanistan expanded. What started as a mission "leading a global dragnet to help bring terrorists to justice" (US Department of State 2002), turned into a nation-building experiment. The nation-building endeavor, by most measures, achieved little success. And whatever progress was made in Afghanistan, it folded overnight with the immediate takeover of the country by Taliban.

When the Operation Enduring Freedom started with the missile attacks against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, few people could foretell that it would become America's longest war. President Bush initiated the war amidst popular support. 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. He initiated the policy of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

President Donald J. Trump came to power explicitly on the promise of bringing a swift end to America's foreign interventions – most notably the one in Afghanistan. During his term, the so-called Peace Process involving negotiating with the Taliban and calling for an intra-Afghan dialogue was expedited. The former initiative garnered greater interest from the US government than the later. When President Joe Biden entered the fray as the leader of the United States of America, the question surrounding the US withdrawal from Afghanistan already was when, and not if. The departure of the US forces from

Afghanistan in August 2021 was merely a culmination of the process initiated by President Obama and expedited and formalized by President Trump. As this brief summary illustrates, the changing American policy towards Afghanistan could be better understood as a continuum through presidential terms rather than as a series of periodic changes.

The main question this paper answers is: To what extent are Afghan policy under various presidential terms departure from or an extension of predecessor's approach? And, if there has been a change in the US policy towards Afghanistan, to what factor or factors can we attribute such changes? To answer the question, the paper is divided into three main sections: 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 Bush administration towards Afghanistan after September 11, including its conduct of war. The third and most detailed section looks into the Obama, Trump and Biden administration's policies towards 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 his successors' approach to Afghan War. The intent is to merely highlight the existence of an evolving Afghan policy over time.

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. Initially, the US government under President Carter was 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 and the Soviet presence in the country underwent a 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 link between Soviet war in Afghanistan and the eventual disintegration of the USSR has often been made.

The current US imbroglio in Afghanistan has its roots in, what has been described as, the 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 dislocated and lived as refugees in neighboring countries (Wood, 1989). In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal, 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 situation also termed as *warlordism* (Khalilzad, 1995).

The situation resulted in allowing regional actors 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. The word *Talib* in Pashto refers to a student of the *Madrassah* – 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)

After the rise of Taliban movement in 1994, other than occasional diplomatic lip service, the US did very little to counter the Taliban threat. The US did not diplomatically recognize the Taliban government and condemned the actions of the regime for violating human rights. However, there were also reports of engagement between the Taliban and American officials. The American attitude, except for the attempted killing of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in a missile attack, bordered on indifference.

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 retreated to their safe havens to start an insurgency against the US and NATO troops. Although, an Afghan government was installed after the Bonn Conference under the US-backed President Hamid Karzai, the protracted war could neither restore a sense of normalcy to Afghanistan nor prevent the US, NATO and Afghan military and civilian casualties (Goodson, 2012).

The US foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the Bush years was based on viewing the country detached 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 American authorities continued to claim was that Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to find safe sanctuaries in the neighboring areas in Pakistan. The US government agencies would often openly declare that groups with long-held links to the Pakistani security agencies were able to go across the border towards safety (Rubin & Siddique, 2006). More critically, they noted that these groups would conduct their operations aimed against the US and Afghan forces from these safe bases in Pakistan (Jones, 2010). Other scholars and journalists pointed out that Pakistan’s fears of its traditional rival India getting a foothold in Afghanistan resulted in a proxy war against Indian interests in Afghanistan, causing 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 Af-Pak Strategy

When President Obama came into power, the war in Afghanistan had started to become increasingly less popular (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). The growing costs of war in Afghanistan, measured in terms of the loss of American lives and its contribution to the spending of US government, coupled with the financial crisis of 2008 brought home realization that the presence of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan was a drain on US resources while contributing tangibly little to Afghan or international security. Therefore, there seems to be a realization on the part of the Obama White House that the strategy in Afghanistan needed revision. The approach went between a surge in the number of troops and the eventual decline with the aim to permanently withdraw.

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, short of complete elimination, 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). Obama’s surge, drawdown and withdrawal strategy were 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. Although eventually Obama administration was unable to achieve a complete withdrawal, there was a clear declaration that the American engagement in Afghanistan could not continue endlessly.

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). One can argue that Obama administration’s extensive and frequent use of the controversial drone program went well beyond the intentions initially suggested.

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 Northwest 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. However, the attacks were also criticized for civilian, noncombatant casualties.

For years since the inception of the global war on terror, the American policy circles raised doubts about Pakistan's resolve to fight some Taliban groups. US policymakers believed claimed that Pakistani military was less enthusiastic in fighting certain Taliban factions (Shaffer, 2015). 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 attitude among the Taliban. The flexibility in their approach to the Taliban under Obama administration laid the foundation for long term change of policy resulting in publicly negotiating with the Taliban under later administrations.

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 success of the strategy in Iraq proved to be questionable, but around the time the decision was made, it did seem like situation in Iraq was improving.

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).

US and Afghanistan During Trump and Biden Years (2016-2021)

Donald Trump emerged as the unlikely winner in 2016 presidential elections for the top office in the White House. In continuation with Obama’s approach to engage with the Taliban to facilitate a withdrawal of the American troops without making it seem like a complete defeat. Sensing that the public opinion was against extending the war in Afghanistan, Trump administration pursued negotiations with the Taliban with greater rigor. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed as the special envoy of the American government for negotiations with Taliban in 2018. Khalilzad ensured that Pakistan released Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to kickstart the negotiations (Aljazeera 2021).

The starting point for the negotiations was surprisingly easy to build a consensus around. The Taliban wanted American troops to leave Afghanistan and the American government also wished for its troops to withdraw. Additionally, America wanted the Taliban to disengage themselves from Al-Qaeda – something to which Taliban agreed. The negotiations also at various points demanded ceasefire between Taliban and the American and NATO troops. The ceasefire was maintained on occasions and there were

also competing claims of the violation of ceasefire on either side (House Foreign Affairs Committee 2022). The deal with the Taliban was finally signed on February 29, 2020 (Welna and Dwyer 2020). The Biden Administration found rare common ground with the Trump administration on withdrawal from Afghanistan. It understood that the American population had generally become wary of the war in Afghanistan. Therefore, although the initial date that the Trump administration had set for withdrawal in May 2021 had been pushed back to August 2021, the Biden administration followed up on the process that had been initiated by Obama administration and picked up pace under Trump presidency.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion in this paper, it becomes clear that the American policy towards Afghanistan can best be understood as a continuity rather than change. The war in Afghanistan had started with a near consensus among the Washington policymaking circles. All the future presidents had agreed with the incumbent on the justness and necessity of the War in Afghanistan. Once the war saw a decline in popularity, the leaders that had previously seen as necessary and just, started to change course.

Although Obama, Trump and Biden claimed to bring a fresh approach to the Afghan war as a departure from the policies of their predecessors, they in effect continued the same policies as the presidents before them. The paper concludes that the gradual shift in the American policy towards Afghanistan can best be understood by studying the changing popular attitudes towards the war. As the costs of war became less and less acceptable for the American public, the policy elite also changed course with it.

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