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American Mission in Afghanistan: Geopolitical Interests, Strategies and Reasons of Failure

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Abstract

Afghanistan was considered a bridge to American geopolitical interests in Central Asia. In the late 1990s, the Taliban moved away from the American orbit of influence, the US policies based on democracy and human rights toward Central Asia failed and many diffused threats emerged as primary geopolitical challenges. As a consequence, the US interests and role in Central Asia received serious blows. The US looked for an overriding global threat around which it could organize its geopolitical interests. The al Qaeda's attack on twin towers in the US in September 11, 2001 transformed terrorism into a threat with such global significance and the US's militaristic approach culminated in the War on Terror. However, American post-9/11 mission in Afghanistan was hobbled by a series of challenges which became more complicated due to the overriding geopolitical thrust underpinning it. The geopolitical thrust of the mission not only hindered the US ability to grasp the unfolding security environment within Afghanistan, it raised obstacles for the great power in finding out proper strategies to fix the challenges. At last, the US had to end the mission that had gone awry and withdrew from Afghanistan leaving the country to the very groups those were previously considered and treated as insurgents.

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Introduction

In the post-Soviet era, wielding sufficient influence in Afghanistan was considered vital to American strategic ambitions for multiple reasons. First, its geographic contiguity with most of the Central Asian states was considered instrumental in facilitating a greater American role in the energy-rich Central Asian region. Second, it could provide an alternative route to transport Central Asian energy resources to the world market bypassing Russia and Iran and therefore deemed instrumental in denting their regional influence. Third, military bases in Afghanistan and in the surrounding region were considered important by the US foreign policy makers to check strategic moves of Russia, China and Iran - the primary

conventional threats in the post-Cold War era. In this context, location of Afghanistan in the middle of various other regions was seen as an obvious strategic advantage. American geopolitical interests in Afghanistan converged with the Afghan problems of terrorism and drug-trafficking which conveniently provided the long-term justification for prolonged stay of US in Afghanistan and adjacent areas. Fourth, the geo-strategic location of Afghanistan was vital to allow the US to develop multidimensional strategies based on ocean as well as land. Afghanistan, in this context, assumed significance as a Rimland country which provided interconnecting routes between the Eurasian heartland and the Indian Ocean.

Saul B. Cohen preferred to describe Eurasia as a “convergence zone”, primarily because it is Eurasia “where five of the world’s geopolitical power centres – Maritime Europe, Russia, China, India and Japan converge (Cohen, 2005). However, so far as geopolitics is concerned, it is Afghanistan where real geopolitical games were fought for influence in Eurasia; therefore, the description is actually more relevant to the war-torn country. The manner in which the War on Terror was forged and executed followed by insufficient attention to state-building drive indicates that the predominant motive behind the US-led Afghan mission has been geopolitical rather than humanitarian. A geopolitical thrust of the Afghan war blinded the US as to formulation of proper strategies of war and peace, strengthened insurgency, kept the Afghan state weak, enhanced civilian casualties and prolonged its stay.

Afghanistan’s Geopolitical Significance

During the Cold War phase, threats to its geopolitical interests emanating from the Soviet sway were framed as threats to the economic interests of the West (including European allies) by Washington. For instance, the then US President Richard Nixon argued that “the Soviet leaders have their eyes on the economic underpinnings of modern society. Their aim is to pull the plug on the Western industrial machine. The Western industrial nations’ dependence on foreign sources of vital raw materials is one of our main vulnerabilities” (Nixon, 1980). The Soviet leaders also underlined the geopolitical significance of oil supplies to US in maintenance of the alliance system if one considers the explanation of Soviet president Leonid I. Brezhnev to Somalian President Said Barre: “our aim is to gain control of the two great treasure houses on which the West depends – the energy treasure of the Persian Gulf and the mineral treasure house of Central and Southern Africa” (Ibid).

While some US officials had mentioned in their writings about the presence of rich deposits of minerals like chrome ore, manganese, zinc, lead, and silver in Afghanistan, their significance was dwarfed by a secret study by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1953, which concluded: ‘Afghanistan is of little or no strategic importance to the United States’ (Gibbs, 1987).

It noted further that the country had an extremely underdeveloped infrastructure, with some of the most rugged terrain in the world. If the secret study supplied substantive inputs into US foreign policy, the question arises why Afghanistan turned into a theatre of a revived great game with the Soviet Union during the Cold War era and a new great game among multiple state actors in the post-Cold War era. It appeared as if Afghanistan was considered a springboard for realization of US strategic objectives elsewhere (Persian Gulf and later Central Asia) even while it was not the final destination. Even while Afghanistan was considered a bridge to the superpowers’ objectives, both the US and Soviet Union invested heavily

in socio-economic sectors in Afghanistan and between the 1950s and 1960s, the country appeared more like an “economic Korea” divided between the Soviet Union in the north and the US in south (Cullather, 2002).

The oil crisis of 1973 demonstrated not only the vitality of oil supplies from the Indian Ocean region to the industrial West, it laid bare the vulnerability of the West to external oil pressures. This realization encouraged the Soviet Union to make determined effort to gain control over the oil supply routes running through the Indian Ocean. In this context, Afghanistan could provide the Soviet Union a direct opening to the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan-Balochistan corridor and its military presence in Afghanistan could place it only four hundred miles away from the vital oil region of the Gulf, posing a major threat to access to oil from the Gulf and oil shipments through the straits of Hormuz.

Once balance of power was perceived to be tilting in favour of Soviet Union, it decided to intervene in Afghanistan which invited hard-hitting US reprisal. The humanitarian cost of the geopolitically driven Afghan War was very high. The US role in Afghanistan strengthened Islamic forces in the region. The Islamic dimension of the resistance was encouraged by Pakistan to keep the resistance dependent on it. Fighters from all over the Muslim world were encouraged to join the jihad in Afghanistan. The US sponsored Pakistan's policy of grooming mujahideen to raise jihad in Afghanistan resulted in huge loss of human lives in Afghanistan and promoted illegal economy in the mujahideen controlled areas of Afghanistan and border areas of Pakistan. Militancy and drug-trade became transnational. Although the US assistance to the Islamic groups stopped after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the groups generated money from the trade of arms and drugs and this moved in a circular way and took the form of narco-terrorism. The American intelligence agency, the CIA, allowed the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan to handle arms and assistance during the Afghan war (Cogan, 1993). The US brought many sophisticated weapons and missiles to fight Soviet forces in Afghanistan and therefore contributed to greater militarization of the region. For example, the first ground-to-air missiles in the form of American Stinger were introduced in Afghanistan in 1986. Hi-tech military weapons, like the F-16 and AWACS, were supplied to Pakistan by the US. The CIA did not monitor the inflow of weapons. It did not even ensure that the weapons reached the commanders in the field. The main recipients of the arms were parties in Peshawar who were engaged in illegal drug trade and diverted many weapons to raise insurgency in Kashmir and became a constant threat to India. Pakistan made a move to develop nuclear weapon in such a security environment as the attention of the West was focused on the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Dr. Abdul Qader Khan, the head of the Atomic Plant at Kahuta described Pakistan's success in developing uranium enrichment by centrifuge method in 1984 (Longer, 1988). Promotion of non-state actors such as militant groups weakened Pakistan as a state actor which created the fear of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of militants later.

The US perceived its interests in the Persian Gulf endangered by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and once the Soviet forces were out, the US lost interest in Afghanistan and shifted attention toward the Gulf War involving Washington's direct geopolitical stake in the Gulf region. By then, militancy and the drug trade became transnational, and the groups involved continued to make money from the trade of arms and drugs even though the US stopped aiding the Islamist groups. The humanitarian costs imposed following the Soviet intervention continued to hobble the American mission in Afghanistan post-9/11.

Revived Great Game

Resource potential of the Central Asian region following the Soviet disintegration which was much publicized in the 1990s received quick reaction from American strategists to make way for the great power's overriding influence in the region by exploring and supplying untapped natural resources through alternative pipeline routes which could end Russian monopoly over and Iranian potential to provide transit facilities for energy supplies. The American attention gravitated toward the deserted Afghanistan which was ripped apart by civil war but now could be used as bridge to Central Asia. The fact that the three countries which share the majority of the region's energy and resources, namely Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, are landlocked pushed the regional powers as well as extra-regional power such as US to mastermind strategies which could draw these states to their orbit of influence. Starting from late 1990s, the US Congress passed bills that called for diversification of energy supplies from the Central Asia and Caspian region (Yang, 2008).

Apparently, the American control over the region's resources and their supply are directed at larger geopolitical objectives rather than intended to satisfy its own consumption needs. The importance of energy resources also lies in running the military for more expansionist purposes and sustaining alliance system by providing natural resources to the allies. Even as some experts argue that the real motive behind the US-led 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan was related to America's direct interest in the natural resources of Central Asia, a reductionist approach would not allow one to understand the larger geopolitical interests the US has in Afghanistan and through it in Central Asia. Washington's Afghan drive is not merely aimed at securing oil supplies considering that it depends on geographically closer and more reliable sources located in the traditional American "backyard" and it imports almost fifty per cent of oil from Canada and Latin American countries. Viewed from this perspective, US considered the alternative pipeline project through Afghanistan to serve its long-term geopolitical interests, although it was neither financially viable nor secured (Williams, 2008).

Geopolitical significance of diversification of supply chains of energy resources for US is numerous. First, multiplying the pipelines would end the regional hegemony of powers whose monopoly or possible dominance over supply routes could enhance their regional sway such as Russia and Iran. Second, controlling the production and supply of natural resources would require military projection of power and that would go a long way in securing supply of these resources to regional allies and denying the same to countries adopting adversarial foreign policies. Therefore, natural resources could be used as an instrument to control and shape foreign policies of state actors. Third, the supply routes for their safety would require military presence and thereby would contribute to development of military strategies of the controlling power. Fourth, the ports and routes for the transfer and trade of natural resources can have dual use: commercial and military. Fifth, Afghanistan's location at the crossroads of Central, South and West Asia is considered to provide US a suitable vantage point to operate against both conventional threats such as Iran, Russia and China and non-conventional threats such as growing menace of terrorism. Evidently, in an attempt to revive the Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan (TAP) pipeline project and explore the potential energy projects in the region in the post-Taliban era, President George Bush Jr. appointed a former aide to the US-based oil company, Union Oil Company of California (UNOCAL), Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad, as special envoy to Afghanistan and the project was revived in April-May 2002 once the US-brokered Karzai government was installed Afghanistan (Gokay, 2002).

The US was aware of the fact that Russia controls most of the pipeline system built during the Soviet days to supply the Central Asian energy resources to the European market. The Central Asian states in the look out of their independent identity sought dilution of Russian monopoly over the supply routes and diversification of their supplies to different markets through various supply routes. In this context, most of the independent energy experts found that the potential shortest and cheapest route to the world market could be through Iran. Viewed from perspectives on geopolitics, Iran is better positioned than Pakistan vis-à-vis Central Asian states as the former does not necessarily need Afghanistan as a corridor to connect itself to the Central Asian energy resources as it borders on Turkmenistan whereas Pakistan is separated from the Central Asian region by Afghanistan. However, US chose a geopolitical strategy to limit the influence of Russia in the north and Iran in the south by providing alternative pipeline systems. Washington granted official invitation to the presidents of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to pitch plans for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline through Turkey and the other one from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan which were intended to bypass Iran and Russia. Then US administration is reported to have exerted pressure on oil companies to accept the projects.

The pipeline through Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route was estimated to cost nearly four billion dollars. This project, the financial companies found unjustifiable if the US and Turkish government did not pay part of it (Tarock, 1999). Similarly, the TAP pipeline project involved the risk of insecurity as that was to pass through unstable Afghanistan and Pakistan and Union Oil Company of California (UNOCAL) Vice President Marty Miller not only stated that the project at that moment was not financeable, he preferred to describe it as a “dry hole” (that refers to a failed oil exploration well). Notwithstanding the commercial non-viability of the pipeline projects, Washington was keen to pursue them. The Afghan civil war witnessed how “the more the mujahidins leaned towards Iran, the more Islamabad and Washington became suspicious of Tehran’s policy and therefore persisted in assisting the Taliban” (ibid). The US sought to influence Afghan dynamics indirectly working through Pakistan. While most of the supply routes through Iran had been kept under sanctions by the US since the American Embassy takeover in Iran, the US worked on the strategy of providing an alternative route and linking the Central Asian oil and gas fields with Pakistan by pipelines running through Afghanistan (Rubin, Batmanglich, 2008). Later, the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan became instrumental in determining the timing of US intervention. It was 9/11 that prompted the US to intervene in Afghanistan, but for a long time, the country was ripped apart by civil war and human rights violations by the Taliban regime. The US considered the Taliban a stabilizing force helping to advance its geostrategic interests by assisting with the laying of the alternative Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) pipeline bypassing Iran and Russia (Rashid, 2010).

Failure of American policies towards Central Asia

In 1990s, while the US considered contacts with the radical Taliban regime vital for its long-term interests in Central Asia, it promoted policies based on democracy and human rights in Central Asia on the other. Following the disintegration of the USSR, the Clinton Administration believed that by aggressively engaging the newly independent Central Asian states, the US would be seen taking advantage of Russian weakness and hurt bilateral relations between the two nations which were vital to contain emerging regional powers such as Iran and Iraq. Narrowing the focus to the Gulf region in the post-

Cold War era, Anthony Lake, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, warned during this juncture while keeping Iraq weak, the US would also have to be watchful of Iran.

The end of Cold War also reposed state actors' faith in the international laws and norms in the absence of the ideological rival. In this context, the US declared "New World Order" to ensure its primacy through pushing the ideas like democracy and human rights. The "doctrine of Enlargement" was developed by Lake to spread American influence to the areas of strategic importance (Lake, 2009). However, the ideas of democracy and market economy were to be cautiously followed in the former Soviet Republics so that Russia was not antagonized.

As America's energy politics was facilitated by the ideology of liberal democracy, the US Congress signed the "FREEDOM Support Act" in October 1992, which tied aid with promotion of liberal democracy in Central Asia (Shen, 2010). The US in its Silk Road Strategy Act in 1999, "authorised enhanced policy and aid to support conflict amelioration, humanitarian needs, economic development, transport and communications, border controls, democracy, and the creation of civil societies in the South Caucasus and Central Asia" (Nichol, 2001).

However, the incremental approach based on democracy and human rights towards Central Asian states did not facilitate a major role for the US the in Central Asian region. The Central Asian states which became dynamic actors after their independence resisted to be part of US hegemonic influence cast through the ideas of democracy and human rights. For example, throughout the 1990s, Uzbekistan was not perceived to be a cooperative partner who would buy into the US vision of bilateral relations built on shared commitment to democratic values, economic liberalization, and a non-zero sum approach to international relations. American role in the colored revolutions as part of its strategy to promote democracy in Central Asia was much criticized by the authoritarian rulers. The Central Asian states were also cautious not to allow an extra-regional power to play a major role in their security affairs and challenge the Russian role in a major way.

The formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 1996 was viewed by the US with indifference on the assumption that the political and military interests between Russia and China could not be reconciled. However, the organization stood firm against the American interests in Central Asia. Both Russia and China shared common perception on the US's grand design in Central Asian landscape. Russia did not want the American penetration into its strategic backyard. China, which shares border with Central Asian region, did not wish American influence near its border. Iran along with Russia saw in the rise of American influence in the region and policy of diversification of energy supplies a looming threat.

Threats to America's geopolitical interests and militaristic approach of the US

In contrast to the Cold War era, when the US could develop a grand strategy due to the presence of clear threat and therefore could mobilize allies, there seemed to be little consensus on how to prioritize myriad national security challenges facing the United States in the post-Cold War era. In this era, threats became both numerous and diffuse. The US grand strategy had to involve more traditional concerns about rising powers, concerns about emerging non-conventional threats in the form of terrorism, global energy supply, and the spread of military technology and the enlargement of the democratic/capitalist sphere.

Unlike in the Cold War when the US was getting easy and quick support from its allies to pursue its geopolitical interests from the pro-Capitalist and anti-Communist Islamic countries, the overarching ideological threat got evaporated in the post-Cold War era and in its place arose a number of conventional and non-conventional threats. Terrorism emerged as the most dangerous non-conventional threat and geopolitical challenge to the US in the post-Cold War era. The supreme leader of the Islamist-Jihadist movement Ayman al-zawahiri asserts in his book “Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner” that the struggle ahead will be over the control of the energy-rich heart of Asia and transportation routes connecting it with the rest of the world. He says, “If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahedeen reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahedeen movements in Kashmir” (Vidino, 2005). It became apparent that the US had not only to deal with terrorism; it had to contain the power of Iran, China and Russia and diversify energy supplies so as to contain the dominance of these powers in energy politics.

To deal with both the conventional and non-conventional threats and pursue its geopolitical objectives, America followed a militaristic approach. To meet diversified threats, many states increasingly relied on the United States for either the actual provision of security or the training and equipment necessary to perform security functions. By 2008, the US was providing security assistance to 149 countries. To fill up the power vacuum after the Soviet Union’s disintegration and to pursue its geopolitical interests in various regions, the US in addition to formal treaties, offered protection to a number of countries under its Security umbrella either by law or by policy. Another host of countries were offered special security provisions through major Non-NATO Ally status.

The ideas of democracy and market economy which found their ultimate expressions during Bill Clinton’s Presidency received setback after the Administration explicitly rejected “dovish” prescriptions to abandon “America’s forward strategic presence” (McDonough, 2009). The Clinton’s Presidency was engaged in military deployments with missions that varied from providing logistic support to UN peacekeeping missions to stability operations in the Balkans. Douglas Ross and Christopher Ross, two Canadian observers noted that an imperial approach to world affairs “is more likely to be created under a Democratic rather than a Republican presidency in the name of human rights and democratization” (McDonough, 2009).

George Bush though in the initial years of his Presidency wanted to steer clear of Clinton’s era excessive commitments outside, post-9/11 restored US’s aggressive primacist vision. It is argued that President Bush’s strategy did not represent a revolutionary change when compared to its predecessor, but it did represent the culmination of a strategic adjustment process that has effectively settled on primacy – in one form or another – for the post-9/11 period. According to Walter Russell Mead, the Bush Doctrine, far from being a neoconservative innovation, was in fact well within the mainstream of US foreign policy and very much in keeping with the vision of America’s founding generation, as well as the practice of the Early Republic’s statesmen (Owens, 2009).

The US decided to intervene in Afghanistan when the Taliban indicated it was moving away from Washington’s sphere of influence and the Taliban-led regime refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of 9/11. It is no surprise that

when geostrategic interests rather than humanitarian concerns provide the background to intervention, the mission is bound to be militaristic. The US approached the complex intra-state conflict from a geopolitical perspective instead of adopting a humanitarian approach which, in turn, resulted in a misreading of the nuances of the security scenario, contributing to the failure of Washington's long-drawn military engagement.

Botched American Intervention

The War on Terror aimed at toppling the Afghan regime led by the Taliban which refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the culprit of the 9/11 US terrorist attack. The US resorted to pre-emptive strikes against the Taliban regime, bypassing all the legitimate methods to capture the individuals who masterminded the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, on New York and the Pentagon. Pre-emptive attacks could be self-serving and actions against groups undermine territorial integrity of states within which such groups operate. Military operations against such groups foreclose the policing and extradition options on which international law is based.

There was not even anyone to decide if there was sufficient evidence of state involvement in harboring perpetrators of the terrorist act and, more important, the question remained unanswered as to whether the Taliban had the ability to deliver the mastermind of 9/11 to the US. The apologists of the War on Terror would certainly find it difficult to dismiss the contention that the US had ulterior objectives apart from taking on terrorism, a national security threat to America post-9/11. There are pertinent, logical questions which strengthen such contentions. First, why the American response was disproportionate to the 9/11 attacks in so far as it waged a war against Afghanistan instead of applying legitimate methods to capture a group of individuals who masterminded the act. Second, why did the self-claimed votary of the UN violate article 2 of the UN Charter which prohibits change of regime in a country by external actors defying sovereignty and territorial integrity?

Following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US mainland, Washington's response was initially framed according to Article 51 of the UN Charter, which stipulates that retaliation must be in self-defense. However, to legitimize its long-term presence, the US resorted to the language of humanitarian intervention and provided humanitarian justifications, so the removal of the repressive Taliban regime was provided as the rationale of the war and provision of a stable and democratic state capable of securing rights of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities was offered as a vision as was exemplified by the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. However, the paper looks at the overriding geopolitical interests that shaped the American commitment to the vision which remained inconsistent and fragile.

The US attack on Afghanistan in 2001 was conceived and executed without deep analysis of the objectives of the war and ways for a safe exit. Previously classified memos dubbed the "Afghanistan Papers" containing 2,000 pages of interviews with senior US officials and others directly involved in the war effort have revealed how public perceptions on the war were constructed and fed to the American people in a bid to hide the dark side of this misadventure.

According to statistics put out by several reports, the protracted war took a huge toll on human lives, both military personnel and civilians, while continuing to dry up the American Treasury. Going by US Defence Department statistics, by

the end of 2019 more than 2,300 US troops died in the conflict while 20,589 returned home wounded. The war continues to take lives of civilians apart from frequent tragic killings of Afghan security personnel (Mishra, 2019).

Meanwhile, about a trillion dollars had been spent despite the fact that the US had to spend far more on military operations in Afghanistan than it did on reconstruction, humanitarian aid, economic assistance and training of Afghan security forces (capacity-building exercises) and was still unable to find military solutions to the Afghan predicament.

Interventions could be successful in hypothetical cases where the polarization between the ruler (the government) and the ruled (masses) is more or less complete and the ousted regime's ability to secure mass support and challenge the intervener is close to non-existent. However, defeating the Taliban on Afghan soil was a difficult proposition considering the ethnic divisions and entrenched religious values in the society.

The insurgent group continued to derive support from the Pashtuns – the majority ethnic community in the country – and its radical religious prescriptions, although conflicted with modern norms of human rights, were far from alienating the society – deeply rooted in religious values – at large. Even while many people still wanted to be rid of a radical religious regime, fighting insurgencies on the ground was compounded by complexities of asymmetric warfare where the distinction between an insurgent and civilian was blurred. On several occasions, the commanders and troops on ground were puzzled as to their strategies when the enemy many times appeared to be amorphous.

Many in the American military establishment acknowledged that the US turned down an early opportunity to engage the Taliban in talks and install a multi-ethnic government soon after their ouster from power. Many also believed that then-president George W Bush weakened the Afghan campaign by opening another theater of war – Iraq. The US had to divert its military focus away from Afghanistan, which contributed to the ability of the Taliban to regroup and bounce back from the fringes.

Geopolitics of Containmentment

Even as the Trump Administration stressed on the imperative of US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the policy of continuing sanctions against Tehran and attempts at bringing import of Iranian oil to US allies to zero following Washington's consignment of nuclear deal with Iran appeared as strategies aimed at marginalizing Iran in energy politics and preventing it from laying down Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline. Threat of sanctions also prevented India and Iran from cooperating to complete and operate the Chabahar port to get easy access to Afghanistan. Similarly, Pakistan and Iran also failed to work on IPI pipeline project.

The American efforts at shaping the contours of the Afghan peace efforts excluding the influence of geopolitical rivals like Iran and Russia fell squarely with its geopolitical ambitions. The Trump Administration heavily relied on a containmentment policy toward Iran and Russia by reversing the nuclear deal with Iran and slapping multiple sanctions on both Iran and Russia on various ambiguous grounds. The US, under the Trump leadership, had also been more vocal in criticizing the Iranian and Russian role in sabotaging peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The US alleged that Iran and Russia were contributing to the growing instability in Afghanistan by choosing a role for themselves in training and arming the Taliban in an attempt to put pressure on the US in the wider region. On the other hand, these countries accused the US of pursuing shared interests with ISIS in keeping Afghanistan unstable so that it could justify maintaining a permanent military presence in the region. There were a series of trilateral meetings between Pakistan, Russia and China primarily aimed at combating the ISIS threat. During one of the trilateral meetings in Moscow, they agreed to remove certain Taliban figures from the US sanctions list and approved Islamabad's hosting of a meeting of heads of intelligence agencies from Russia, China and Iran to beef up counter-terrorism efforts aimed at the threat posed by ISIS (Mishra, 2018).

Afghanistan continued to be in an imbroglio even while the US and other regional powers such as Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran changed sides in the geopolitical game. The distrust between the US and the regional powers driven by geopolitical factors prevented a coordinated response to the Afghan quagmire, and violence by radical groups kept on rising.

Weak Afghan state

The US applied a top-down approach to security and development without taking sufficient account of rural and tribal peoples' interests. Corruption and competition for power within the government sapped the strength of the Afghan state. America's initial reliance on warlords to fight al-Qaeda and Taliban forces and their accommodation into power structures could not take the US strategy to the local and grassroots level. Some experts ascribed the weakening of Afghan state institutions to the economic agenda of the intervening powers. The Afghan state has been conceived more as an enabler than a provider of economic growth. International aid was tied to the global private sector, which was entrusted with the task of reconstruction, and this kept the state overly dependent on external financial support.

Furthermore, the Americans tied aid to the purchase of US-sourced products and services, and a full 70% of US aid was made conditional upon US goods and services being purchased or employed, as Tim Bird and Alex Marshall relate in their 2011 book *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (Bird and Marshall, 2011).

Further, the weakness of the Afghan state and inefficacy of the capacity-building exercises are underlined by the fact that a major chunk of international aid was not channeled and spent through the Afghan government because of allegations of rampant corruption. This led to other players such as international consultants and private contractors getting involved, and massive aid becomes their source of income too.

A World Bank report titled "Financing Peace" pointed to the extent of external support that Afghanistan would need even after a peace settlement with the Taliban. It warned that the country would still require financial assistance at near current levels, as much as US\$7 billion a year for several years to come, to be able to sustain its most basic services (Haque, 2019).

Shifting and Secret Alliances

In the context of the post-Cold War era, it has been observed that alliances and partnerships are shifting because of relative independence from the US of regional powers, and therefore, American expectations of effective execution of the policy of coercion and reconciliation with assistance of allies have been belied. What is more intriguing is that regional powers need not form alliances on a formal basis with other state actors and they can assist insurgents with aid and arms and change the tide in their favor. They can operate in a surreptitious way, as the other group is not a state.

For instance, the Afghanistan Papers brought to the limelight the open secret of Pakistan's double game. While it sided with the US and became part of the "war on terror," at the same time it provided sanctuary and logistics to the insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan to strengthen its position of power vis-à-vis India. While the US continued to harbour strong reservations over Pakistan pertaining to its being a reliable ally to fight terrorism, as secret defence documents disclosed by WikiLeaks in the past pointed out, nevertheless the US government continued to give lavish aid to Pakistan in the expectations of squeezing the support base for insurgents there.

In the beginning of 2011, at a time when the US was contemplating ways and means to withdraw from Afghanistan, The Washington Post reported that the Obama administration would provide Pakistan more military, intelligence and economic support after assessing that the US could not afford to alienate Islamabad. President Donald Trump's administration, while it recognized the dilemma and sought to tighten the screws on Pakistan since the beginning of its coming to office, the Taliban had become strong enough within Afghanistan to force US change its war strategy to one of reconciliation. Similarly, Russia and Iran were also reported to have assisted the Taliban to defend their regional interests from perceived American hegemonic ambitions.

Insurgency and Casualties

Difficult terrain, porous boundaries, and difficulty in understanding native peoples' languages and cultural dissimilarities have impeded the American fight against the Taliban. In a conventional war the opponent has a regular army, but there is no identifiable enemy of such a kind in asymmetric warfare. They mingle with civilians and they can even enter the territory of some other states from where they can wage war.

The difficulties in the counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan revealed that the US Army embraced a big-war paradigm. President Barack Obama replaced the counterterrorism strategy of the Bush era with a counterinsurgency strategy (COIN) by inducting more troops to the Afghan theater and focusing on capacity-building of Afghan security forces as well as on winning the hearts and minds of local people. However, such strategies were not successful, as the Afghan government, propped up by external forces, was unable to muster unalloyed loyalty from its security personnel.

The US and allied forces, much like the erstwhile USSR, became a victim of the asymmetric warfare that the hills and difficult terrain of Afghanistan facilitate. While for the intervening forces the Afghan theater provided a limited-war scenario linked with certain political outcomes, it presented a total-war scenario for the insurgents, who considered the war as the

determinant of the very question of their survival. Afghan insurgents proved former US diplomat and politician Henry Kissinger's maxim, "The guerrilla wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it does not win".

The continuing stalemate in the Afghan war implied that the Taliban were winning the battle. The insurgent group has only had to conduct a protracted war of attrition and wait out the American will to stay in Afghanistan. The tactical advantages of the asymmetric war also allowed the insurgents to respond effectively to predictable attacks by leaving the area under aerial and artillery bombardment and come back after the pro-government forces had returned to their bases. On the other hand, the insurgents' unpredictable offensives dampened the patience of the government forces.

Apart from the advantages of geography and the tactics of asymmetric warfare, Afghanistan has witnessed gradual erosion of support for the government forces backed by the US and allied forces and swelling of the support base of the insurgents for reasons such as civilian casualties, unemployment and corruption. Each year civilian casualties caused by pro-government forces kept increasing. Figures released by one of the latest UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reports covering the period from January 1 to September 30 ascribed 2,348 civilian casualties (1,149 killed and 1,199 injured) to pro-government forces, a 26% increase from the same period in 2018. The ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan also known as ISIS-Khorasan or Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) posed a serious security threat to Afghan civilians primarily the minority communities and the foreign nationals apart from the menace perpetrated by the Taliban. The killing of ISIS leader by US strikes such as Abu Sayeed Orakzai in August 2018 as well as those of the leaders Abu Sayed in 2017, Abdul Hasib and Hafiz Sayed Khan in 2016 indicated the American drive to weaken the group.

Even while the Taliban were responsible for more civilian casualties in the first half of 2018, they claimed responsibility for lesser number of civilian casualties with more attacks compared to more civilian casualties with a fewer attacks perpetrated by ISIS as a UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report released on July 15, 2018 indicated. For instance, the report attributed 42 per cent civilian casualties to the Afghan Taliban and 18 per cent to ISIS, however, the Taliban claimed responsibility for 26 attacks resulting in 453 civilian casualties and ISIS claimed responsibility for 15 attacks with 595 civilian casualties (UNAMA, 2018).

While the primary targets for the Taliban remained the Afghan government institutions and officials aimed at the objective of piling up pressure on the US and Afghan government to agree to their political claims and peace terms and the terror attacks by ISIS not only targeted at the Afghan government officials and foreign diplomatic presence considering them 'apostates', it indiscriminately targeted at civilians who they believed to be 'heretics' primarily religious minority communities in Afghanistan. However, amid the growing instability and insurgency perpetrated by various non-state actors, the Taliban remained the predominant insurgent group with claims for legitimacy.

The Taliban movement was strengthened by strategies such as tapping into nationalist feelings and creation of employment opportunities by running a shadow economy – production and trade of opium. Most Pashtuns live in the countryside and remained susceptible to the Taliban's narrative of fighting against foreign occupation, as the group's appeals were able to tap into Pashtun conservatism, which is embedded in the notions of national honor and pride and defending the country from foreign occupation at any costs. The insurgent group in its attempts to evoke the age-old Afghan pride in the country's honor and independence among the rural masses revived and instilled the memories as to

how their efforts and struggle won their country the much-prized independence against the British Empire in the 19th century and against the Soviets in the 20th century. Oral poetry, stories and songs became the insurgent group's mode of communication in transmitting such messages to rural people who are largely illiterate.

The Taliban's support base among the Pashtuns ran deeper than their actual number in Afghanistan. While about 40% of the Afghans are Pashtuns, Pakistan is home to more Pashtuns than Afghanistan. The Durand Line separates the Pashtuns of these two countries and those on the Pakistani side of the border looked upon and assisted the Taliban's insurgency as a legitimate struggle for independence from foreign occupation.

The Afghan Army was dominated by ethnic groups from northern Afghanistan and encountered formidable obstacles in fighting insurgency in southern Afghanistan – the stronghold of the Taliban. Soldiers not only needed to communicate through interpreters hired for the Americans, the historical rifts between the ethnic groups in the north and south led to them to be looked upon as outsiders by local residents. Drives to include Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan through enhanced quotas did not succeed.

Unemployment and corruption

However, long years of foreign intervention and endemic unemployment have helped the Taliban expand their base. A new generation of local commanders from ethnic groups of northern Afghanistan was attracted by the Taliban's offers of jobs and joined the movement despite historical animosities. For instance, many Taliban fighters in Badakhshan province were drawn from the Tajik ethnic group. This apart, a perception of triumph that the insurgent group generated among fighters of other ethnic groups also induced them to join the Taliban movement.

Situations arose akin to the long years of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan gradually strengthening a perception among the troops drawn from the non-Russian Soviet republics that the people they were fighting against were more similar to them (shared common identities) than the Russians. The Afghan war accentuated ethnic unrest within the Soviet army and went a long way in discrediting it. The reliability of Central Asian soldiers began to be questioned and they were often removed from active combat duties in Afghanistan.

Thus it was not far-fetched to believe that the Afghans would appreciate each other's identity more if a sense of occupation by foreign powers were generated with the collapse of the economy accompanied by rising levels of unemployment and corruption. The Soviet invasion fused Islamic ideology with the cause of national liberation, and thousands of officers and soldiers of the Afghan Army defected to the mujahideen, and the insurgents seized hundreds of government outposts, most of which had been abdicated by defecting soldiers.

Corrupt practices continued to sap the strength of the Afghan Army. There were reports of non-existent soldiers on the payrolls despite frequent desertions and absences – a practice that has been sustained by endemic corruption in the Afghan governance system. High casualty rates within the Afghan Army have led many to leave. Afghan forces were not properly prepared to fight a long war of attrition and suffered from casualties, losses, and low morale. The numbers of

actual soldiers were much smaller in proportion to the population of areas to be defended.

According to World Bank estimates, Afghan population growth is so high that it needed an expanded and sustainable economy to absorb the youth bulge. However, the economy was dominated by massive aid and assistance and an informal and parallel economy – opium production. The Taliban not only earned millions of dollars a year through the opium trade, the country continued to subsist from the large amounts of money made from opium production, creating “600,000 full-time jobs” for its citizens. The American objective of “hitting the Taliban where it hurts, which is their finances,” as General John Nicholson has said, could not be successful without provision of an alternative and sustainable source of employment (Mishra, 2019).

It was worth recalling how the Soviets’ policy of destroying agriculture and depopulating the countryside alienated them from the rural masses. The counternarcotics effort of the US “has just been a total failure,” John Sopko, special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, said at the Wilson Center in Washington.

The Taliban’s control over opium production and trade allowed it a disproportional sway in the rural areas and the group has been able to run a parallel government with a continuous flow of resources, whereas Afghan government’s reach in many local areas remained non-existent. While the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s 2018 report referred to failures in building a consensus among the members of the US-led coalition and the Afghan government on the importance of this trade in defeating the insurgency, the US despite several attacks and raids failed to curb it.

Many Afghans placed nationalism above all other ideas and ideologies, and to uphold national pride and honor people rose above ideologies and ambitions to bring territorial incursions of British and Russian Empires and later the Soviet Union to a halt and raised formidable obstacles as and when the US and NATO forces behaved like occupying forces. Disparate local identities usually got transformed into a unifying national identity at the time of threat to the country.

Shifting of Strategies

American strategy of war and peace in Afghanistan kept shifting with a change in government from Obama to Trump administration. While the Obama administration’s peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan shifted to a hardened stance towards the concluding phase of its term, Trump administration’s coercive approach was quickly switched over to direct talks between the US and the Taliban on the Afghan peace process.

Neither the Obama’s policy of aiding Pakistan nor did the Trump’s policy of withdrawing aid worked. The US government under the leadership of President Barrack Obama followed an Afghan policy under the rubric of ‘AfPak’ strategy which focused on Al Qaeda as its target and called for substantial military and economic aid to Islamabad not only to prop up Pakistan to bolster the American counterterrorism efforts, it also aimed at building schools, roads, and hospitals in the Pakistani side of Af-Pak border areas to undercut support-base of Al Qaeda as conceived under the Kerry-Lugar bill.

The administration drew down the number of American troops stressing on a timeline for American troops’ withdrawal and pushing for an exit strategy based on political reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban. On the other hand, it intensified air

war in the form of drone strikes to liquidate the Al Qaeda militants in the border areas. So far as data on US drone strikes are concerned, the highest numbers of drones to date were fired in 2010. While the Obama administration was successful in dismantling the Al Qaeda stronghold, the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network replaced Al Qaeda as the primary threats to US forces within Afghanistan. It was towards the concluding phase of the administration that some of the earlier strategies were reversed.

The plan of withdrawal of troops as was previously conceived to continue was given a pause, the policy of lavishing aid to Pakistan was rolled back. For instance, the US assistance to Pakistan scaled down from \$2.177 in 2014 to \$1.118 billion in 2016 (Ali, 2016).

The American Congress refused to subsidize the sale of eight F-16 fighter aircraft in 2016 which the administration had committed itself to earlier. Though the frequency of drone strikes reduced drastically, selective strikes were conceived to dampen the strength of the Afghan Taliban based on robust intelligence information. For instance, an air strike was conducted in May 2016 resulting in the killing of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mansour in Balochistan while he was allegedly returning from Iran. The concluding phase of the Obama administration also witnessed two US Congress legislators undertaking efforts to introduce a bill designating Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism following the terrorist attack on Uri military camp in India.

The Obama administration's stringent behavior towards Pakistan towards the end of its term perhaps stemmed from Pakistan's alleged support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. The Trump administration's Afghan strategies although marked a departure from the strategy adopted by the previous administration led by Obama, this strategy did not present a paradigmatic shift.

Trump Administration's Strategies

The Trump administration decided to begin where Obama left off on the Afghan issue. It preferred to adopt a coercive approach towards Pakistan from the beginning by suspending military aid following a freeze of \$255 million with the conditions that Pakistan must show commitment to fight terrorism. It believed in a coercive strategy to ensure Pakistan's compliance with the Afghan war efforts and undercut its alleged support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network.

The administration also authorized an increase in the number of American troops in Afghanistan and resumed drone strikes perhaps driven by the belief that negotiations with the Taliban could only be pursued from a position of strength as the insurgent groups were still a resilient force even after so many years of reconciliation efforts.

It is noteworthy that the Taliban declined an offer of the Afghan government led by Ashraf Ghani in February 2018 to abjure violence in return of political recognition, release of prisoners, issuing of passports and relocation of their families while the insurgent group accused the government of being an American puppet and demanded direct talks with the US administration.

However, notwithstanding the Trump administration's efforts at tightening screws over Pakistan, his coercive Afghan

strategy did not prove fruitful as there was a surge in the incidents of terror attacks allegedly propped up by Pakistan as a retaliatory response to US action and in a bid to show its influence over the insurgents in Afghanistan. For example, after Kabul ambulance bombing death toll reached beyond hundred, the head of Afghanistan's intelligence service, National Directorate of Security (NDS) Masoom Stanekzai stated that these actions were deadly attempts by the Pakistani backers of the insurgency to show they could not be sidelined.

The American Afghan gestures tilted towards pursuing peace talks directly with the Afghan Taliban. By quickly switching over to peace talks from a coercive strategy, the Trump administration also indicated palpable failure of the US in forcing Pakistan to commit itself to fight terrorism. Peace talks and negotiations approached from a position of strength could have nudged the Taliban to bring to the table pursuable objectives within the framework of a stable and inclusive Afghan polity and society.

Further, the US preferred to pursue peace talks with the Taliban unilaterally without efforts at engaging regional powers like Iran and Russia and assuaging their geopolitical concerns which kept its bargaining position vis-à-vis the insurgent group weak.

The strategies conceived under President Trump's South Asia policy did not seek to engage Iran and Russia in Afghanistan whereas Obama administration opened up avenues for their cooperation by forging a nuclear deal with Iran and attempting to reset relations with Russia although conflicting claims and roles in Syria and Ukraine stifled such possibilities. The Obama administration adopted a dual strategy of cooperation and conflict with these two countries in his apparent and continuous overture of resetting relations. However, Obama did not assign any prominent roles to Iran and Russia on the Afghan theatre except expecting limited cooperation as and when it considered necessary. For example, the US sought Russian collaboration in supplying lethal and non-lethal goods to American troops in Afghanistan through Northern Distribution Network which included several transit corridors running through the Central Asian states. Russian cooperation was necessary as it not only enjoys significant influence in the Central Asian region; it considers the region as its strategic backyard as well. On the other hand, the Obama administration cast Pakistan in a vital role to fight terrorism and anchor the reconciliation process to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan.

The Trump administration pursued specific policies and was engaged in overtures which excluded the possibility of Iranian and Russian cooperation on the Afghan problem. President Trump not only reversed the previous administration's nuclear deal with Iran by withdrawing from it, but he also slapped new sanctions against Iran to build economic pressure on Tehran as part of his containment policy. Further, the administration took an interest in pursuing a trans-Afghan pipeline project to supply Central Asian natural resources bypassing Iran. The administration also accused the Russian government of its alleged role in destabilizing Afghanistan undercutting American influence in the country.

Along with this, lack of any American policy of engagement, dialogue, and consultations with these powers on the Afghan issue contributed to complicated atmospherics within Afghanistan. With the American presence near the Iranian border, mounting economic pressure under American sanctions cutting down Iran's oil supplies, and looming long-term geopolitical threat in the form alternative pipeline routes, Iran remained inclined to contribute to instability in Afghanistan to

build pressure on the US and force it to co-opt Iranian interests in the region. With Russia and America kept jostling for influence in Ukraine, Syria and Central Asian region, it was not farfetched to believe that Russia would also have been interested to see a diminution of American influence in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The US was on the lookout for an overarching threat based on which it could validate its military actions, form alliances and fulfill its strategic objectives by taking advantage of its superior military force. Hence the desire to have a foothold in Afghanistan dumped logic and ground realities as well as superseding international norms. The move to uproot al-Qaeda quickly turned into a move to change the regime and then into a drive to obliterate the Taliban. The US committed similar mistakes to those of the Soviets and became entangled in the long-drawn Afghan quagmire. What the intervening powers failed to notice was the Afghans' distaste for foreign occupation and their desire for independence. The violation of Afghan neutrality and independence during the US-led "war on terror" contributed to complex and volatile atmospherics within Afghanistan. Not only was there a scramble for influence among state actors, it also created a power vacuum where non-state actors such as the Taliban and Islamic State (ISIS) were witnessed pursuing their objectives. Civilians kept falling victims to incessant war between the Taliban and the Afghan government supported by the coalition forces on the one hand and to the jostling for influence between the Taliban and ISIS on the other. Volatile geopolitical landscape and socio-political scenario provided the necessary inputs into and thrust to the American withdrawal from Afghanistan during the Biden administration precipitating the country into an anarchy.

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