

Taliban's Government in Afghanistan and the Dilemmas of Pakistan

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The Taliban resistance against the various Afghan governments continued in the post-2001 period which finally culminated in their agreement with the United States of America (USA) for the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan in February 2020 and the subsequent capture of Kabul from President Ashraf Ghani in September 2021. Pakistan once again played a pivotal role in this US-Taliban agreement with a hope to achieve its regional objectives of discouraging Afghanistan from its claim on Durand Line, countering India to seek further influence in Afghanistan, tackling the menace of *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) inside Pakistan and taking benefits from regional economic and commercial developments. To add to the surprise of Pakistan, the Taliban government repeated the Afghan claim on Durand Line as an international border, provided active support to TTP, allowed India to complete the ongoing projects and also failed to help Pakistan in realizing its dream of accessing the Central Asian markets on account of sanctions on their government. This research paper seeks to answer the question that what dilemmas Pakistan faces after the establishment of Taliban government in Afghanistan once again after a gap of 20 years?

Keywords: Taliban, Government, Afghanistan, Dilemmas, Pakistan

The failure of Afghan *Muhahideen* (Holy Warriors) faction of Gulbadin Hekmatyar to capture and rule Afghanistan compelled Pakistan to support another Islamist (using of Islam for political ends) group of the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. Pakistan played a pivotal role in the rise of the Taliban who were mostly the students of the religious madrassas of *Jamiat-e-Ulama Islam* (JUI) and *Jamat-e-Islami* (JI) of Pakistan in the border region and were run through the funds of Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. The ideological mindset of Taliban was not only framed in those madrassas but was also trained militarily. Mullah Mohammad Omar, who later on became the Amir-ul-Momineen of Taliban government, was a teacher in one of the JUI madrassa (Nojumi, 2002). JUI with the backing of Interior Minister, Naseerullah Khan Babar who himself was a staunch supporter of the Taliban influenced the government's attitude towards the Taliban (Rashid, 2010). Subsequently, Taliban's remarkable successes compelled the Inter-Services Intelligence agency of Pakistan to support them for its own vested interests (Nojumi, 2002). The ISI then started educating, training and support in men and money of the Taliban (Emadi, 1997) and extended recognition to them later on along with Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1997. Furthermore, Pakistan also tried to convince the Central Asian Republics (CARs) who conditioned their decisions with the recognition by the United Nations Organization (UNO). This recognition however, caused criticism of Pakistan both at home and abroad (Murshed, 2006) as it ardently pursued the policy of having a friendly Islamist government in Afghanistan that could pacify the Afghan nationalists about 'Durand

Line' and 'Pashtunistan,' discourage India from sorting influence in Afghanistan and might check all types of threats to its trade with Central Asia (Nojumi, 2002).

Pakistan though succeeded in achieving some objectives but when it failed to get recognition for Taliban, they refused to accept Pakistan's guardianship. Besides when Pakistan under the pressure of the United States of America (USA) and Saudi Arabia, asked Taliban to surrender Osama bin Laden (the leader of the terrorist organization, Al-Qaeda) for his alleged involvement in the attack over the American World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, in which many innocent people lost their lives, the Taliban turned it down too. America then launched its war against terrorism and asked Pakistan to join it. The military regime of General Pervez Musharraf immediately joined USA for escaping drastic consequence of political isolation, economic sanctions, endangering nuclear program and American support of India over Kashmir (Coll, 2005).

The Taliban then started hiding in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite this, Pakistan was seen as a major facilitator for the toppling of Taliban government and an obstacle in the promotion of Islamic values. The religious political parties and their leaders inside Pakistan started favoring Islamic *Sharia'a* Law (Toru, 2005). One such leader was Sufi Muhammad whose movement *Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shari'at-e-Muhammadi* (Movement for the imposition of Muhammadan *Shari'ah* law) was inspired by the Afghan *Jihad* (holy war) which was formed in the merged tribal areas of Bajuar in 1995 and which was later on run by his son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah but was crushed by the Pakistan army through a military operation. Similarly, Taliban movements on the model of Afghan Taliban were also launched in the merged tribal areas of Orakzai in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Quetta of Balochistan (Rashid, 2010).

All these movements were much effective compared to the Taliban movement that emerged in the tribal area of Waziristan after the toppling of the Afghan Taliban government. They infiltrated in the tribal in 2003 and restructured their political and military command. When the government of Pakistan launched operations against them, the Taliban became infuriated formally established TTP in December 2007 which beside Pashtuns absorbed Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks and Punjabis who would launch offensives inside Afghanistan against the Afghan government, American troops, the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from the tribal area. Pakistan became an infidel state for TTP after its attack on *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) of Islamabad in 2007 (Siddique, 2010).

Pakistan launched multiple military operations against TTP in the tribal area and received many losses in men and money. Although, its sacrifices were not recognized by the Americans but still it remained a major bridge between the US and Taliban since the Presidency of Barrack Obama who made a decision to vacate Afghanistan. A more clear opportunity came in the hands of Pakistan when the American President Donald Trump showed willingness to pursue open and direct discussions with the Taliban (Irfan, 2015). The inclusion of the Taliban was seen in the interest of Pakistan by the army which would help in safeguarding Pakistan's vested interests in Afghanistan, the stability of Pakistan's volatile northwestern border and the improvement of its own tense relations with Washington (Ahmad, 2010).

Taliban Capture of Power in Afghanistan

Since the American occupation of Afghanistan, the war cost reached to more than two trillion US dollars beside the amount spent on the lifetime care of American veterans while the

death toll of reached to more than 200,000 as a direct result of this occupation and war (Lutz, 2022). USA in its obsession decided to quit Afghanistan and signed an agreement with the Taliban at Doha by returning power to them which caused a breaking point in the international politics too because a significant part of its allies considered Taliban as a terrorist organization (Dora, 2021). Besides some scholars were apprehensive that the Afghan state would be weak and on the mercy of Taliban (Greenwood, 2013) which proved true because the Taliban saw none as equal to themselves.

Subsequently, the Taliban despite their commitment captured power from the US-backed Ashraf Ghani's government in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 and forcefully entered into Kabul. The president along with his dignitaries fled away from Afghanistan and left the ground wide open for the Taliban to rule the country. However, this unexpected capture of Kabul posed an issue of recognition for the Taliban regime at large. Pakistan, as a vital stakeholder in the Afghan conundrum, started its endeavors to provide an opportunity to Taliban to sustain (Akhtar, 2022).

Although many Pakistani celebrated the triumph of Taliban including Prime Minister Imran Khan who appreciated the Afghans for "breaking the shackles of slavery" (Dawn, 2021) but did not extended recognition to their government unilaterally as it did in the past when the first Taliban government was established at Kabul in 1996. Pakistan pursued an ambiguous approach at this stage and the Prime Minister had urged for the strengthening and stability of the Taliban government. Though recognition of the Taliban government was withheld but yet Pakistan came so close to that. It maintained a diplomatic mission along with ambassador at Kabul throughout the conflict. Besides, Pakistan issued visas to the Taliban in the embassy of Kabul at Islamabad and at the various provincial consulates (Staff Reporter, 2021).

However, Pakistan still wanted to see the Taliban successful amidst of conflict, political instability, institutional weaknesses, weak economy, droughts, economic sanctions, and freezing of developmental assistance. Alongside, it was also worried about their economic collapse as it would cause pouring more and more refugees in its territory and the impact of Taliban links and government with the Pakistani militant groups (The Express Tribune, 2021) and sectarian outfits (Newsweek, 2021).

Despite such apprehensions, Pakistan tried to ease the isolation of the Taliban government and asked them to be flexible in governance and be harsh on counter-terrorism. Pakistan convinced the Taliban to cooperate in the evacuation flights of foreign citizens and the Afghans who ran for their lives. Pakistan at this juncture was having strain relations with the US who no more saw it as a frontline state. The administration of Joe Biden asked for more support against Taliban and the terrorist networks but Imran Khan declined it and instead the policy on ground and of air lines communication with US was kept intact. As a result of receiving a setback in its policy with the US and the Western countries, Pakistan started developing a regional consensus on the recognition of Taliban government and hosted the first virtual meeting of the neighbors of Afghanistan including China, Iran, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on 8 September 2021 as Taliban had announced an interim government for Afghanistan on 7 September (Staff Reporter, 2021). This meeting failed too but China, Russia and Iran showed willingness to keep their embassies at Kabul and provide economic support to the Taliban. They conditioned recognition with a more inclusive governance and action against those militant groups who threatened their security. Pakistan also hosted the Troika Plus meeting of USA, China, and Russia on 11 November 2021, to engage with the Taliban for an inclusive government, prevention of humanitarian crisis, protection of human rights and

particularly women's rights (Khan, 2021). Taliban declined such demands of backing off their stand on strict *Shariah* law, suppression of critics, women deprivation of education and jobs and the breaking of links with the terrorist groups, Pakistan then sought incentives for Taliban instead of pressure from the Western countries to change their behavior (Dawn, 2021). Pakistan even then tried to convince the western powers on one hand that Taliban takeover has not destabilized Afghanistan and the security situation has improved and asked the Taliban to make compromises for ending their diplomatic isolation on the other hand (Iqbal, 2021).

Pakistan also kept its policy of Taliban's government recognition intact even after the change in government. It wanted to get recognition for Taliban through a 'regional-consensual approach' as stated by the Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesperson, Asim Iftikhar. On one occasion Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said that we wish a peaceful, stable, prosperous and connected Afghanistan. Furthermore he emphasized over a continued constructive engagement and practical cooperation with the Taliban government for the promotion of sustainable peace and security in the region (Yousaf, 2022). Regarding recognition the foreign minister clarified the stance of Pakistan for not taking a solo flight or of defying the global consensus on the issue. He favored the provision of a wider political space to the Afghan regime without ignoring the fact that Afghan Taliban support is detrimental for the materialization of Pakistan's transcontinental trade network with Central Asian Republics (Kaura, 2022).

Beside recognition, the contested border also remained a tension between Pakistan and Taliban. As the issue of border tension previously caused clashes between the armies of Pakistan and Afghanistan, so with the establishment of Taliban government, Pakistan believed over the mitigation of that tension but it proved a nightmare because both the governments closed the border on several occasions, causing a looming conflict. This tension was mainly caused by the fencing issue and both sides conflicted over the wall (Jamal, 2022).

Pakistan while fearing the infiltration of terrorists sealed the border which was reciprocated by the Taliban authorities. The Taliban stopped Pakistan from fencing the border but soon both sides agreed to resume it on mutual consensus. However, the Taliban acting information minister said that there was no need of fencing as Durand Line is an unresolved issue and fencing it would cause the division of Pashtuns living on both sides of the border (Khan, 2022). Pakistan on the other hand saw fencing as a step towards peace and protection rather than a division of the people (Hanif, 2021). Fearing Pakistan's demand for recognition of Durand Line, the Taliban dignitaries reiterated time and again that the issue of Durand Line cannot be solved by any government including the Taliban alone as it is a national issue and can only be sorted by the Afghan as a nation (Mills, 2022).

Another backdrop of the return of Afghan Taliban regime was the resurgence of TTP which saw the Afghan Taliban as their role model. Taliban's tactical triumph in Afghanistan gave a great boast and encouragement to TTP for restructuring itself and for the imposition of *Shariah* law in Pakistan which already has suffered from the long Afghan war. This new alarming situation provided for more than adequate reason to be worried about blowback from the Afghan Taliban across the Durand Line (Kaura, 2022) as they have themselves started creating problems for Pakistan (Mir, 2022). Although Pakistan wished to have a secure border with Afghanistan and tried to prevent the influx and infiltration of Pakistani militants based in Afghanistan but it proved a major point of its disagreement with the Afghan Taliban who refused to cut ties with TTP asked Pakistan instead to reach a negotiated settlement with TTP (International Crisis Group, 2022) which during the span of eight months from August 2021 to

March 2022, launched 272 terrorist attacks. This was a higher number than in any year from 2018 to 2020 (Ahmed, 2022).

Despite that the government of Pakistan reciprocated to the call of the Afghan Taliban government with opening talks with TTP in October 2022 which broke down in December over several issues of merger of tribal areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the release of some TTP leaders. Pakistan though showed flexibility and was ready to reach a ceasefire with TTP by releasing 90 militants but the opposition criticized the government for making the common citizen vulnerable to attacks. TTP also showed reluctance in signing the ceasefire because it did not trust the government. It escalated violence and launched attacks in various cities and caused deaths of civilians and security personnel (Khan, 2022).

Recently, a massive suicide attack on a crowded mosque in the police compound at Peshawar caused a death toll of 85 policemen (100 policemen according to BBC News 31 January 2023) and more than 150 injured. Regarding the responsibility of this blast, TTP has issued mixed signals of claiming and denying. Keeping aside these claims there is no doubt in the fact that it was a deadliest assault since the Afghan Taliban had captured power in Afghanistan and the resurgence of TTP in 2021. Beside financial emergency with which Pakistan is grappling, the aftermath from the destructive surges and a consistently tempestuous political scene, the growing danger of TTP presents one more test for the striving country (Constable, 2023) because the alliance between the Afghan Taliban and TTP appears to be more grounded than before and that both understands each other very well. There is an aggravation in TTPs attacks and are challenging the security position of Pakistan. Kidnapping, ransom, blackmailing, extortions and racketeering are on the rise. Pakistan seems handicapped and helpless and made multiple appeals to the international community for preventing global terrorists from threatening it (Kaura, 2022). This new spate of assailant savagery has initiated another period of struggle and has set its counterterrorism crusade at a junction. The country needs to recognize the hidden purposes behind the ongoing attacks and how it varies from previous episodes of terrorism.

In reality, Pakistan reaped the crop of its own actions for supporting the Islamist groups inside Afghanistan. They are resurging and menacing Pakistan because their radical agenda is appealing to the people and helping them in stirring religious fervor among them. The ideological association through which Pakistan controlled has caused growing Islamic radicalization inside its own borders. These radical forces used Islam in its agenda to pressurize Pakistan for asserting the true Islamic character of the country (Kaura, 2022).

Another looming menace which Pakistan confronts is the presence of India in Afghanistan. The Taliban are seeing no benefit in keeping India at bay which can provide the much needed funds for reconstruction and development. Though their relations are not improving but at the same time they are not overtly hostile. In the past, India had very strong relations with the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. It not only directly invested in Afghanistan, but also gave political, economic, and other strategic assistance to Afghanistan. It helped in the health and education sectors and provided hundreds of scholarship opportunities to the Afghan students (Akhtar, 2021).

A large sector of the Afghan population sees India as a friendly country. India in the last few decades has provided \$3 billion in aid. The Taliban have assured India protection of its mission at Kabul and asked it for up-gradation while its foreign ministry spokesman Abdul

Qahar Balkhi requested India to complete the ongoing development projects that it had begun in Afghanistan such as the Shahtoot Dam in Kabul (Izarali, 2022).

Pakistan on the other hand see India as an arch-rival and a key security challenge in Afghanistan because it believes that India wants to diminish its position in regional and global affairs. Therefore, Pakistan left no stone unturned to obstruct the influence of India since the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001. Pakistan assisted the Taliban to force out India from Kabul but it failed in its disposition because the Taliban maintained autonomy with regards to its Indian policy. However, the Haqqani network supported by Pakistan is under its influence and is a threat to Indian interests in Afghanistan (Izarali, 2022). Even Pakistan's use of coercive measures, such as trade embargoes, has pushed Afghanistan even closer to India (Ahmed., 2021).

Dilemmas of Pakistan

Undoubtedly Afghanistan is an important western neighbor of Pakistan and the later needs to be cautious in the pursuit of its interests there as the troubled history and unleash some horrific dilemmas. It needs to reassess and reevaluate its Afghan policy of only looking for favorites because there are other stakeholders too both at regional and foreign level. Since its independence, Pakistan envisioned Afghanistan to be its closest neighbor in the face of an Indian threat and has always tried to counter-balance it but in the pursuit of that major objective, Pakistan always distanced Afghanistan from itself. Another objective of getting access to the Central Asian markets have caused it to support the religious ideological groups which in the long run became a menace for the country itself. It has become clear from the Afghan quagmire now that Pakistan cannot treat Afghanistan in the context of its 'strategic depth policy' of indirectly controlling Afghanistan in the face of an Indian military attack anymore and that is why some of the Pakistani leaders proclaimed of giving up this policy in its dealing with the Taliban as the current Taliban government is not like the previous Taliban government which could be treated in a client-patron manner because the use of coercive measures by Pakistan against the Taliban had a very little impact on them (Kaura, 2022).

Another dilemma Pakistan is facing is from its support of USA for its own vested interests which often fire backed in the long run. America being a super power isolates itself from the issues after meeting its objectives and this was evident from the Afghan war of 1979-1988. Pakistan served as a frontline state in that war but then after the war, Pakistan was left alone to fight for its own interests in Afghanistan. Later on when the Global War on Terrorism (GWT) was launched against the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda network, Pakistan was given the status of a frontline state but after the war, Pakistan was totally ignored in the Afghan interim formula and was left alone to suffer at the hands of terrorists. Pakistan has suffered a lot in that war both in men and many and till date it is facing the menace of terrorism and suicide bombing. Beside existential threats, the Americans started suspecting Pakistan for its role in the promotion of terrorism and provided an opportunity to its adversary India to isolate it. However, when USA decided to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan was once again seen as a potential state to arrange meetings and talks with the Taliban. Pakistan played a pivotal role in those talks and successfully facilitated the US-Taliban agreement in 2020. Later on, Pakistan was left isolated once again and even its relations with USA deteriorated for not satisfying to have played a more proactive role for America (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Beside that both the previous and the current Taliban governments have ignored the role played by Pakistan in their capture of power and in providing cover to their governments to be spared from isolations. Pakistan which trusted the ideological orientation of the Taliban

believed that they would help in the recognition of Durand Line as a legal international border between Afghanistan and itself was, however, wrong in its assessment because the previous Taliban government feared the sparking of a tribal revolt (Hussain, 2021) while the current government not only clashed with Pakistan over the border fencing but also rejected the notion of Durand Line by considering it not an issue of any government but a national issue of all the Pashtuns along both sides of the area (Mills, 2022).

Furthermore, Pakistan also faced the consequences of keeping a soft corner for the Taliban. The first Taliban government unleashed the forces of radicalism and terrorism while the later government did not controlled TTP and instead encouraged them. Even the banned members of TTP were given positions in their government and the pleas of Pakistan to stop the Afghan-based TTP militants from infiltrating inside its borders were totally ignored (Mir, 2022). The Afghan Taliban government maintained close ties with TTP who targeted civilians and security forces over the issue of the merger of tribal area and the fencing of border with Afghanistan (Khan, 2022).

India which enjoyed a complete leverage in Afghanistan during the governments of President Hamid Karzai and President Ashraf Ghani though at present find itself in a hot water because the Taliban are keeping it at arm length. This situation however, can change and may not remain the same because the Afghans have developed liking for India due to its previous role in the Afghan reconstruction and rehabilitation. The Taliban dignitaries are still engaging India in its projects and have signaled to develop its mission in Kabul with full protection (Izarali, 2022). Pakistan on the other hand enjoys the trust of Taliban for its role in their support during talks and the issue of recognition. Simultaneously, the fact should not be ignored that the Taliban are unsupportive of the idea of the recognition of Durand Line, maintaining close relations with TTP and are hosting India missions. This phenomenon gives rise to three different kinds of apprehensions. First, if the relations with the Taliban deteriorate, the issue of border recognition will be doomed forever. Second, if TTP found further boast from Taliban, it can become more lethal and can weaken the state internally. Third, if India received a foothold again in Afghanistan, it will once again encircle Pakistan and will support TTP and other ethnic and linguistic dissident movements inside its territory which Pakistan was proclaiming since many years (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Beside the Indian threat, Pakistan should also be vary of the criticism of the US and European countries for seeking recognition for Taliban government. Afghanistan is a sensitive area and all regional and foreign countries feel concerned about it. Pakistan should be cautious in policy towards Taliban as the US and European countries have criticized Pakistan for engaging regional powers in order to get recognition for the Taliban (International Crisis Group, 2022). In addition to that Pakistan engagement of China in Afghanistan is also seen with suspicion and mistrust by the different stakeholders as China is seen as a potential competitor by the US and an ally of Pakistan which can disturb equilibrium in the region by India (Ali, 2020).

A more significant dilemma is that Pakistan never recognized even from its engagement in Afghanistan that relations are based on interests rather than on ideological orientations. That is why it has harmed its own image in the world by aligning itself to such individuals and groups. It should realize that relations with a state are important and image among its citizens is valued instead of giving weightage to an individual. The ideological groups of *Mujahideen* or Holy Warriors (1980s & 1990s), and the Taliban (1996 to 2001) have disappeared from the political scene while Afghanistan and Afghans are still there and will remain there. Relations must be of a state to state nature rather than state to a group nature. This

has been questioned by the Afghans too that Pakistan instead of maintaining relations with the group should ask Taliban for reducing violence (Easterly, 2021).

Conclusion

Pakistan since inception cherished a friendly government in Afghanistan as to outweigh India and to settle the issue of Durand Line. In order to achieve these determined objectives, Pakistan sought to rely on the ideological groups rather than the Afghan nationalists who do not wish a division of their territory or their people. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Pakistan supported different religious Islamist groups particularly the group of Gulbadin Hekmatyar. After the Soviet withdrawal when the Mujahideen failed to agree on a power sharing formula by starting a civil war, Pakistan supported another radical group of Taliban who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban government though ended Indian influence but could not accept the Durand Line or could formally open the road to Central Asia. The subsequent Afghan governments suspected the role of Pakistan and brought India closer. Pak-Afghan relations deteriorated and on the other hand, US showed disregard for Pakistan previous roles as a front-line state.

Nevertheless, Pakistan once again came to limelight with regard to the Afghan affair after the US decision of withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan played a leading role in the US-Taliban agreement and saw an opportunity to exploit the situation in its favor by keeping India at bay, solving the Durand Line issue, by eradicating TTP and by ending its isolation. These dreams however still to be realized but practically speaking the situation is not that favorable. The Taliban after emerging triumphant have supported and sheltered TTP. They did not distance India and also have shown reluctance to reach a settlement over Durand Line.

This scenario outlines few dilemmas for Pakistan which it can handle in its future dealings with Afghanistan. Pakistan should not pursue the strategic depth policy anymore in Afghanistan as it has caused more rifts than of establishing friendly relations with Afghanistan. It should also not rely on the US and should only maintain a principled policy towards it. Besides Pakistan should not expect any group to help in the settlement of Durand Line rather than to pursue a rational policy with the state of Afghanistan and should raise the issue at international forums. India though has not been ousted by Taliban but Pakistan still can keep it away from using the Afghan soil against it. Pakistan should also show some restraint on the issue of the recognition of Taliban. Last but not the least; Pakistan should establish relations with Afghanistan rather than with any individual or group, ideological or non-ideological.

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