



US Policy on Afghanistan and the Resurgence of Taliban

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Abstract

The end of cold war signifies the glorification of Capitalism, with the US as the super power in the world. Henceforth, capitalist strategies and economy has dominated the world drastically. In the international realm of politics, the new millennium has changed the course of the US national interest with the emergence of the terrorist and its terror activities. The entry of the terrorist at the international arena has brought Afghanistan into the limelight as it became the hotspot of terrorist groups (Al-Qaeda) who are responsible for the 9/11 attacks. As a result, the US and its military allies invaded Afghanistan (Taliban) govt. with the objectives of fighting terrorism. Soon, the US strategy and policy of Afghanistan changes which cost lives and billions of dollars for reconstruction in Afghanistan. After nearly 20 years of their presence and occupation in Afghanistan, the US since cold war era has been conceded by the opponent. The withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan has led to the comeback of the Taliban in power. This draws attention to the world and has become a national interest over the world. This paper tries to highlight the policies being implemented by the US in Afghanistan and examine its objective and the implications of its policy.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda, Terrorist, Taliban, US, Policy, Strategy, Military.*

Introduction

Afghanistan emerged as a significant U.S foreign policy concern in 2001, in the wake of the terrorist (Al Qaeda) attacks of September 11, 2001 at the U.S soil. The United States along with NATO and international partners have led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban government that harboured and supported it. Military campaign had withstood Taliban government which led to establishment of democratic institutions. Henceforth, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban, which started to drive for the welfare of the people and for development in various measures. Decades of U.S intervention and occupation in the Afghan geo-politics, the US has suffered over 22,000 military casualties and approximately \$144 billion for reconstruction and security forces

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(Service, 2021). The recent development of the US policy against Afghanistan in withdrawing and removing of military troops from Afghanistan announced by President Biden on April 14, 2021 has heralded an end to the nearly two decades US military presence in the country.

The withdrawal of military forces by the US signifies that there has been a consensus between the Taliban and the US. The sudden evacuation of the US troops followed by the immediate walkover by the Taliban in Afghanistan has taken the world perplexed. The Taliban has ceased Afghanistan provincial regions and took over Kabul which eventually led Afghan Prime Minister fled to other country. The resurgence of the Taliban has made a frantic call and a distress to thousands of Afghans and foreigners within the country. After all, the Taliban aims and objectives were and are till today, the establishment of Islamic government. The regrouping and rise of the Taliban after decades long has led to an ambiguity of an international interest. Critics have pointed out that the US and its allies are defeated by the Taliban. Meanwhile, there has been a growing debate that the US failed its objectives and its mission in Afghanistan although, US President Joe Biden claims victory. In this context, the paper assumes significance, which it aims to highlight and examine the US governance policy in Afghanistan and its impact and the revival of Taliban where it tries to understand the interplay of power.

Background: Who are the Taliban, their Ideology and Strategy

Historically, Afghanistan was politically divided into two groups one -Islamic democratic liberals who are backed by Communist and the other is Radical Islam-anti Afghan Communist backed by Pakistan military army and ISI. Although, both are nationalists in their endeavour to build Afghan nation based on their ideology. At the outset, Taliban emerged in the early 1990s in northern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan in Pashtun region. The Pashtun occupied 37-40% population as a majority in Afghanistan, and they speak Pashto. It is believed that majority of Taliban's are Pashtun tribe which they predominantly first appeared in religious seminaries mostly paid for by money from Saudi-Arabia which preached a hard-line form of Sunni Islam (BBC, Who are the Taliban?, 2021). Before the Taliban, religious militancy was present in Afghanistan and Islamic nation during Soviet-Afghan war in 1989 where Al Qaeda and Mujahidin dominated the scene. It widely appeared that these religious militancy and radical Islamic organisations started in Jammu and Kashmir in late 80s and early 90s which are trained by Pakistan army and ISI (BBC, Who are the Taliban?, 2021). These trained Mujahidin have fought in the Soviet-Afghan civil war as Mujahidin fighters against Soviet Communist army. Pakistan has trained large number of students from Pashtun region and has been educated under traditional Islamic religion. Later by 1994 religious militancy soon developed and founded Taliban, the Taliban's are mostly Pashtun tribe and minority or the rest are Taliban sympathizers (Sengupta, 2021).

The ideology and strategy of religious militancy and radical Islam is to fight against the corrupted Communist Afghan political leaders and the presence of western nation around Islam areas and to build Afghanistan nation on the basis of Islamic Sharia law. The Taliban rule Afghanistan from 1996-2001, during which they have control over Afghanistan

governance. Their ideological stance followed an austere form of Islam, they enforced their own hard-line version of Sharia or Islamic law and introduced brutal punishments in line with their strict interpretation of Sharia laws. Men were to grow beards and women had to wear all covering burka. The Taliban prohibited girls aged 10 and above to get education. They banned Television, music and cinema and were accused of various human rights and cultural abuses (BBC, Who are the Taliban?, 2021). It is evident that during Taliban control of Afghanistan, they have created a sanctuary for terrorist groups and Afghanistan became a safe haven for terrorists like Al Qaeda etc. It has become a breeding ground for terror outfits and rendering vast tracts of the country insecure and also a threat to the world. For instance, the Taliban is good for Sharia, Jihad and radicalism but is bad for modern, educated, and the liberals who believed in democracy and think the Taliban is a nightmare (Sengupta, 2021). Their strategy implies drawing attention to the western world by launching suicidal bombs and assassinations in an unsuspected manner.

US Foreign Policy in Afghanistan

The attention of the world was drawn to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the wake of the 11 September 2001 World Trade Centre attacks in New York. The Taliban were accused of providing a sanctuary for the prime suspects Osama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda movement. (BBC, Who are the Taliban?, 2021) As a result, the US foreign policy instantly shifted towards Taliban in Afghanistan and launched a US led military coalition attacks in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 and by the first week of December the Taliban regime had collapsed (Service, 2021). The operation in capturing Osama Bin Laden in particular and declaring war on terrorism had resulted in the weakening of the Taliban as a group. The Taliban government were removed from power in Afghanistan by US-led forces in 2001. With the presence of US led military coalition since the collapse of Taliban, democratic government was established with the support of western allies. Since then the US foreign policy has shifted its major focused in building and restructuring the nation by supply military support and aids and financial assistance for development measures. The US government has provided financial assistance to Afghanistan government in various development measures and during their presence in Afghanistan for almost 20 years the US government has invested over \$144 billion.

The US invasion in Afghanistan started on September 18, 2001 when the then US President Bush authorises the use of force against those responsible for 9/11 (Alzazeera, 2021). The US sends troops to Afghanistan where Al Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden was thought to be hiding. This came to appear as the major target and primary concern for the US in Afghanistan besides declaring war on terror followed with counter-terrorism. The US led military troops operating in Afghanistan started nation-building with promising future. Soon a constitution was written, followed by election, a new President and a democratic government was formed and a remarkable figure gained with women taking position of power. The major objectives of the US in Afghanistan can be highlighted into three categories; a) Get Bin-Laden, b) defeat the Taliban states (to fight against terrorism); and c) nation-building (reconstruction).

US objective 1: Get Bin-Laden

On October 7, 2001 the US begins Operation Enduring Freedom with a massive bombing campaign against Taliban forces. Shortly, Northern Alliance (NATO) backed the US troops on Nov 13, 2001 and soon the US and its military allies enter Kabul as the Taliban withdraw south and eventually the Taliban regime collapses with its surrender in Kandahar. By May 2, 2003 the US officials declares an end to major combat operations in Afghanistan while the search and invasion for Osama Bin-Laden has been going. (Alzazeera, 2021). Meanwhile, as years passed, terrorism and its terrorist activities are still prevailing as Taliban fought back by gaining grounds in rural areas. There have been continuous civilian casualties mounted along with armed forces as a result of terrorist attacks.

In 2007, the new US President Barack Obama has to made new decisions, in which “to go bigger or to go home”. Obama then decided to send additional troops to tackle the on-going and intensifying terror insurgency. He says,” Our overarching remains the same” during press statement at Washington hence, an additional US troops of 17000 and later 30000 were sent in Afghanistan (Alzazeera, 2021). Finally, on May 1, 2011 the largest man-hunt in the world of Osama Bin Laden ended where the US led forces killed Bin Laden in a raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan (WION, 2021). The death of Osama Bin Laden has finally officiated the success of their major objective of the US policy in Afghanistan although the fight against terrorism and counter-terrorism still continues. Hence, by December 28, 2014 the US combat mission officially conclude after the withdrawal of most troops and the transition to an Afghan-led war.

Objective 2: Defeat Taliban states (fight against terrorism)

The US govt. had a sharp response to the 9/11 attacks on the US soil by terrorists. The former President GW Bush Jr. had authorised the use of force against the Al-Qaeda (terrorist) and those responsible for 9/11 thereby declared a war on terror. This has been one of the prime and major leading objectives of the US govt. ever since the attack. Following, President Obama had also given extreme measures on counter-terrorism and had sent over more combat troops to Afghanistan to tackle terrorist activities. During Obama’s Presidency, the main target who was the mastermind and responsible for the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden was killed by the US forces. The capture and death of Osama Bin Laden has strongly manifested that the US govt. has achieved one of its major goals. Although, killing of Osama does not mean the end of terrorism in the world. In fact, the US mission in Afghanistan gradually closes with the withdrawal of most troops. However, the US govt. shifted more attention to counterterrorism and its continuation in the Afghan soil. The presence of military troops in Afghan has somehow weaken the power of the terrorists and their terror activities in Afghanistan. It has also massive gained for Afghan govt. with billions of dollars pouring in the country for reconstruction besides military equipment and training for the Afghan forces.

Meanwhile, with the strong presence of the US and its allied troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban are also gaining grounds in the rural countryside. The US massive campaign of airstrikes and bombing had resulted in high civilian death tolls. This has created an advantage for the Taliban as they are harnessing popularity and power among the rural population (Vox,

How the US created a disaster in Afghanistan, 2021). Though the Taliban may have been defeated and yet the American presence in Afghan brought them back from the death. By 2008, the Taliban had taken back significant territory, especially in the south and east along the Kabul and Kandahar highway. In 2013-14 period, the Taliban began to regain its footing and their activities escalate. (Vox, How the US created a disaster in Afghanistan, 2021) It was clear that every single year they were making some advances and they were operating primarily in rural and depopulated areas.

Often times the US objectives for defeating Taliban states and counter-terrorism has ponder the world in perplexed. By carefully examining all the details of US policy in Afghanistan, the seizing of territory by the Taliban and their activities and the withdrawal of US troops conceded that the US failed its objectives in fighting against terrorism to the core.

Objective 3: Nation building (reconstruction)

Gist to the US objectives in Afghanistan, the US strategy soon shifted from major combat to stabilizing and rebuilding the country. But Afghanistan is a difficult place to control and rebuild due to its mountainous and mostly rural. The population is fractured among several ethnic groups and local communities often operated autonomously. Road construction is a significant factor in reconstruction, there were only 50 kilometers of paved roads in 2002, which meant most of these communities were isolated. The US decided to change that by rebuilding the Ring Road that was partially built by the Soviet Union in the 60s but has been destroyed by decades of war. Starting with the Kabul to Kandahar section, the US and several other countries pledged 1.5 billion dollars to the Ring Road. It would run in a 3200 kilometres loop connecting Afghanistan's four biggest cities essentially tying these communities together (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021).

The US and its alliance started nation-building and it was showing promises where trade would circulate through more places and medical services. It gave the new government in Kabul more legitimacy around the country. The Ring Road also allowed the US and NATO military to send troops and supplies around the country faster, so they could keep the Taliban in check. The former President GW Bush Jr had given in his statement that, "Where the roads end in Afghanistan, the Taliban begin and further stated that roads promote enterprise, enterprise promote hope and Hope is what defeats their ideology". (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021). But the US did not finish the job in rebuilding the nation. In fact, in 2003, the US invaded Iraq and Afghanistan became second priority. Funding, reconstruction, resources and experienced leadership including generals and diplomats were all diverted to the war in Iraq. The Ring Road was far from complete yet reconstruction funding was cut by 1.2 billion a few years later (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021). The US preoccupation with Iraq gave the Taliban an opening to return and they seized it. The Taliban activities in the region escalate from 2004 through 2009. The activities of the Taliban are concentrated largely around the Ring Road area. They set up ambushes, laid roadside bombs, took hostages, and killed US soldiers and road construction crew.

By 2008, the Taliban had taken back significant territory especially Kabul and Kandahar highway. Afghanistan was in a full-blown insurgency. President Barack Obama in his statement said, "Afghanistan is not lost, but for several years, it has moved backwards. There is no eminent threat of the government being overthrown, but the Taliban has gained momentum. In short, the status quo is not sustainable" (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021). Hence, therefore, in 2009, President Obama administration decided to recommit to war in Afghanistan. He sent thousands of troops in what was called "The Surge". The US and NATO made some progress in the south. It quickly became clear that the Taliban would not be easily defeated. The more troops deployed to Afghanistan, the more the Taliban launched attacks. With the military struggling to clear territory, it became nearly impossible to rebuild roads as the Taliban continue to attack road crews. This has forced construction companies to hire security which caused budgets to skyrocket.

President Obama announced that he'd start bringing troops back. He said, "after this initial reduction, our troops will continue coming home at a steady pace, as Afghan security forces move into the lead. Our mission will change from combat to support" (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021). As US troops withdrew, the US left behind oversight of infrastructure projects, including roads. In 2012, USAID cut funding for road construction. And even after the US and partnering countries spent 3 billion dollars on it, the Ring Road was never completed. Road building and maintenance became the responsibility of the Afghan government which was crippled by corruption. Experts estimated that billions of dollars have been lost to corruption in Afghanistan (Danesh, 2016). In 2015, with only about 11,000 US troops in country mostly in major cities, the Taliban swept back through Afghanistan. In 2017, they controlled almost half the country which was more territory than they have had in 2001. And that includes large sections of the Ring Road that is one of the reasons why the road is in dire shape. According to a 2016 inspection 20% of the roads were destroyed and the remaining 80% continue to deteriorate (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021).

The US has no plans to give rebuilding Afghanistan further. In 2017, President Trump committed more troops but made it very clear that "We are not nation-building again". "We are killing terrorists" (Vox, How the US failed to rebuild Afghanistan, 2021). As the Ring Road continues to deteriorate, it's no longer a symbol of the US efforts to rebuild Afghanistan, instead it serves as a reminder of the job that was never finished. Emphasis of the US became built and assist that was not technically delivered. Politically, many Afghans still regard Kabul government as a tool to foreign power. Billions of dollars pouring in the country for reconstruction without the kind of infrastructure to really handle that kind of money. Thus, reconstruction money coupled with America's counter terrorism goals was really a toxic mix. The US policy in Afghanistan as nation-building with one of its objectives has shown that, the US has also not succeeded in rebuilding the nation as it projected due to the maximum interference of the Taliban. This has made it clear that the US again failed its objective in trying to change an Islamic nation according to its version of western capitalist pattern.

Recent Development: Rise of Taliban and its Implications

In the initial stage, the US invasion of Afghanistan focuses on military bombing campaigns and airstrikes in response to terrorist attacks and to fight against terrorism. Although, as time passes by, the US mission in Afghanistan slowly shifted its policy in counter-terrorism and reconstruction of the nation. Meanwhile, to be more pragmatic the Taliban had not changed their extremist ideology, only their strategy. Taliban have pre-eminent and strategic thinking when looking at the Taliban activities in the region since 2004. The Taliban had taken back significant territory and every year their activities escalate. Technically, Taliban did not fight against the Afghan army nor the US troops openly to cease the country. Recently, with President Biden officially announcing the withdrawal and evacuation of US troops from Afghanistan, implications suggests that the Taliban became stronger as a group, and eventually the Taliban easily captured Afghanistan without any weapons. This means that Taliban is not just a group but a mentality and ideology thereby the US has not finished Taliban completely.

US on Taliban Peace Talk or Deal 2020

Since 2016, the former US President Barack Obama promised in bringing home most of its troops. But then new President Donald Trump administration stepped in. President Trump said that, “A hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists would instantly fell” (BBC, What went wrong in Afghanistan, 2021). However, due to continuous involvement and activities created by the Taliban, President Trump announced an open-ended deployment but eventually sign a deal with the Taliban if they promised to keep out terrorist groups and not attack US and its allies. Provided that a full drawn withdrawal of the US troops will happen by May 2021 (BBC, What went wrong in Afghanistan, 2021). On February 2020, US signs a troop withdrawal agreement in Doha with the Taliban.

The DEAL has the following agreement: (Mashal , 2020)

- US wanted Taliban to stop violence and reduced hostilities against foreign troops.
- US wants Taliban to join intra-Afghan peace talks and cut out all ties with foreign terrorist.
- US pledged to withdraw all its troops after the Taliban agreement the US asked Afghan govt. to released Taliban prisoners.

The newly elected US President Joe Biden decided to abide by the terms and conditions of the deal. On April 14, 2021 President Biden sets Sept.11, 2021 as the deadline for withdrawal of US soldiers and the pull out begins on 1st May. President Joe Biden in giving his press statement on said the Taliban would not immediately take over due to US withdrawal but his statement proved wrong there has been an escalation from May 2021 of the Taliban sweeping the country and capturing 9 Provincial cities and by August 15 the Taliban had took over Kabul (Alzazeera, 2021). It has been as a failure on as part of the US govt. Taliban spokesperson in an interview stated that the Taliban are fighting for a legitimate right for reconstruction and for national interest. He emphasises that it is their commitment to

fight for their legitimacy, liberation force and build an independent country hence, today a new chapter unfolds in Afghanistan with the Taliban gaining power again (Official, 2021).

There has been an overwhelming allegations regarding US withdrawal and its objectives. Experts have believed that since the beginning, the US did not have single unified objectives. There are multiple opinion involving in the objectives of US over Afghan. It has also been argued that the US had committed mistakes toward Afghan. They took their eye off from Afghan and turn towards Iran. Furthermore, the model which they design to Afghan security forces were model of western forces which was not suitable for them in which US intelligence was either incredibly misrepresented or incredibly flawed. Experts felt that the Afghans security forces weren't evolving quite in the manner that was anticipated. It is strongly opined that Afghanistan was not made democratically strong enough. Critics have also argued that President of Afghanistan was left out in the negotiating table while the US only consulted the Taliban in an agreement. Now that, the US has officially declared an end of its military mission in Afghanistan and its exit is finally complete, but the question remains on why the US policy failed so catastrophically coupled with poorly executed withdrawal.

Post Afghanistan-Taliban Rule

The US mission in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years has finally concluded which again left Afghanistan fell rapidly under the Taliban control. On 15th August 2021, Taliban gained control over Afghanistan and ended in ceasing the entire country. The aftermath of the US withdrawal of Afghanistan has massive impact in the politics of Afghan. While the Taliban took control of the country, Afghanistan Vice President, Amrullah Saleh appointed himself as the caretaker Prime Minister since former Prime Minister fled to other nation due to the Taliban gaining power and their entering of Presidential Palace. Therefore, based on Afghanistan Constitution of Article 67 of 2004 he took the Prime Ministers charge. Afghanistan governance is at a crossroads with both sides trying to rule the country (Sengupta, 2021). Amrullah Saleh announced the formation of anti-Taliban front in Panchsheel and called out Taliban as a terror group and also promised Afghan people that he will never bow down to Taliban terrorist.

On the other side, Taliban leaders have consultation among themselves in their administrative structure and for the formation of power. Thus, we can see a thrift between Afghanistan government based on constitution and Taliban government based on Sharia Islamic law. Questions are already being asked about how the Taliban will govern the country and what their rule means for women, human rights and political freedom. In an interview with the Taliban spokesperson Suhail Saheen by Doha news official responded that Taliban vowed to fight corruption and improve security but also followed an austere form of Islam. He further proclaimed that the Taliban vision for Afghanistan is a peaceful, a prosperous nation with national unity. It envisages an inclusive opportunity for everyone to see themselves in the government and in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. In an interview, the Taliban spokesperson added that the Taliban have promises and guaranteed over women's rights. Women will have access to education and to work but they

must observe Hijab according to the Islamic society (Official, 2021). The Taliban have promises to women's rights which is believed that their situation will improve over time.

Experts have also reacted and give concern to Afghanistan political crisis, there is a general humanitarian concern for the Afghan people, who are about to see their economy and governance unnaturally propped up for years by international funding which is now rapidly collapsing since the inevitable wave of the Taliban atrocities. William F. Wechsler in his article have mentioned that low-grade civil war will continue in Afghanistan for sometimes, that no single entity can effectively control the entire of Afghanistan as a centralised state. Furthermore, he added that situation is likely to be a product of negotiations, deals and re-negotiations between the centre and the local power on the periphery (Wechsler, 2021).

Where does India go?

India context in the current Afghanistan stepping into new chapter under Taliban has become a major concern too. How is India going to unfold this situation to the future of Afghanistan's political life under the Taliban? For India, Afghanistan is a strategic importance and India has leverage over Afghan in the geo-politics. One former Indian official who supports adopting a broader diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan argues that "engaging with both the Kabul- and Doha-based elements of the Taliban" makes sense only when the Ghani-led government directly negotiates with the Taliban (Chaudhuri & Shende, 2020). Indian government which is a staunch supporter of Kabul government in aiding and supply military and infrastructural hardware has refused to have diplomatic talk with Taliban, there is great reluctant and rigidity in approach towards Taliban. But our strategic policy requires to come close with the Taliban (Lyon, 2021). It is felt that Indian government whether likes it or not, have to open link and open contact with Afghan Taliban if India wants to protect its fundamental interests of remaining engaged in Afghanistan and being able to support an independent government it will have to make some uncomfortable choices and reposition its strategic actions with a view to mitigating the risks identified by its own officials and diplomats. Interviews with Taliban spokesperson commented that so far India has not made contacts with the Taliban, however, he implies that the Taliban are open to have a diplomatic talks with Indian government. Moreover, he added that India government should see Taliban government same as they see Kabul administration. It should push up their impartiality to Taliban government (Saheen, 2021). Thus, it is important for the Indian government to have a revised diplomatic strategy and should include dialogue with the Taliban as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Nearly 20 years of US presence in Afghanistan has come to an end as a result of negotiations and deals with the Taliban. The US exit also signifies major setbacks in its policy and objectives in Afghanistan which eventually led to the resurface of the Taliban. The aftermath of the US withdrawal has major implications in Afghan politics and governance. At the same time, it can be understand that the US still retains vital interests in evacuating US citizens and coalitions and Afghans allies and also in preventing additional terrorist's attacks by Al-Qaeda and others. Both of these objectives will still require a lot more work (both military and diplomatic) and a lot more time to additional national interest. If the US seeks to

navigate this new era, it has also a lot more work to do in shaken up its alliances due to the poorly executed withdrawal. Meanwhile, the whole world has keep an eye on the new era of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and its policy and geo-politics in carry out diplomatic ties with other nations. The Taliban has also major works and efforts to put in for reconstruction and rebuilding of their nation according to their promises and vision.

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