

Pakistan and the War Against Terrorism in Afghanistan: Choices, Pragmatism and the Decision

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Terrorist attacks against US on September 11 2001 and the US response to it, suddenly changed the geopolitical situation of South and Central Asia. Pakistan located at the crossroads of these two regions was affected profoundly. Pakistan had to take a fundamental foreign Policy decision. It had to abandon, the Afghan Policy, that depended on friendship of and support for Taliban, or stand by them against the imminent US ‘War on Terrorism’ of which they (Taliban) were the immediate target. Pakistan decided to ally itself with the United States led global War against terrorism. This paper attempts to analyze that Pakistani decision, which has been termed as a U–Turn by some.

The War against Terrorism, with full Pakistani support including the permission to use its territory, has resulted in a government in Afghanistan, dominated by forces considered not friendly to Pakistan. Could Pakistan by choosing a different policy response have avoided this outcome of the US War against Taliban/Al-Qaeda in 2001? There is opinion in this country which argues that such outcome could have been avoided. They argue that without Pakistani support Taliban could not have been removed. At least this is what they imply, when it is argued that

Pakistan has lost ground in Afghanistan, more specifically to India, after the fall of Taliban.

For the United States Terrorism had been a very significant security threat since long. After the cold war ended, global terrorism became important and significant. Pakistan, however, at that time felt no real pressure to do much about the growing accusations against it for being, if not a direct sponsor, at least of being a state with a tolerant attitude towards religious extremism which provided and still provides the recruiting ground for terrorists and justification for terrorism as a means to achieve political goals. India tried to sell Pakistan as the main source for terrorism everywhere generally and in Kashmir more specifically. This Indian policy became really frantic after the Kargil episode¹. However, India could not sell this view to many, at least to a level with which Pakistan could not cope. During this period US gradually started identifying Usama Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organization as the main terrorist threat to her interests worldwide. Taliban became the target of her Campaign against terrorism by default, as they refused to hand over Osama and put an end to the use of Afghan territory as a safe haven to Osama and other alleged terrorists. Pakistan's continued support to Taliban, brought up at least a regional contradiction between Pakistan on one side and Iran, Russia, and India on the other. This had a potential of pushing both China and USA, in this regional configuration on the opposite side of Pakistan. Pakistan, however, did not feel pressurized enough or considered the growing isolation of Taliban as a signal that it needs to reconsider its all out support to them. This was despite the UN imposed sanctions and the US Missile attacks on Afghanistan

and Sudan. The coming of Republican Presidency was also ignored. Traditionally more understanding of Pakistan's position vis-à-vis India, no one tried to see the Republican method of dealing with International issues that would be more aggressive than the democrats. Pakistan tried to play the role of a broker between Taliban and US with an obvious sympathy to the later. The decision makers ignored warnings of the isolation and dangers of continued pro Taliban Afghan policy that did not just come from outsiders, but also from within Pakistan. Judd Harmon has revealed the farsighted and clear warnings that were given by the then Pakistani ambassadors to India and Afghanistan.²

This was the general situation when September 11 happened killing more than three thousand Americans in one go. The symbols of American Power, the World Trade Center representing its economic might and Pentagon representing its military power were hit. The US government very quickly identified Osama Bin Ladin and Al- Qaeda as the real culprits behind the tragedy of September 11, 2001³. Taliban were asked to hand him over and close down bases of his Al- Qaeda Network or face the consequences. The rest of the world was told that there couldn't be any neutral in the war against terrorism. States were clearly told that they must choose sides; they can either be with the United States in its war against terrorism or on the side of terrorism. There could be no neutrals. India considered this as god given opportunity and started selling more hotly the idea that Taliban or Al-Qaeda are not alone. Pakistan is a real and clear part of international terrorism. It argued that war against terrorism would not be a real war against terrorism if it spares Pakistan. Pakistan had only two choices; to

stand by Taliban or side with the US led coalition against terrorism. Pakistan while condemning terrorism tried to convince the Taliban to hand over Osama. There were some last ditch efforts to salvage whatever could be of its Afghan policy, which then centred on Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Pakistan, even after 9/11, in an attempt to salvage its shattered Afghan policy, continued to engage Taliban leadership in dialogue about the need to give up Osama Bin Laden and close down terrorist training camps. On September 17, ISI Director Lt. Gen. Mahmood Ahmed headed a six-man delegation that visited Mullah Omar in Kandahar, Afghanistan. His mission was to convince Mullah Omar to extradite bin Laden or face an immediate US attack.⁴ On September 28, Gen. Mahmood returned to Afghanistan with a group of about 10 religious leaders. He talked with Mullah Omar, who again refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.⁵ Pakistan though had announced support for US in its war against terrorism in Afghanistan and had accepted to provide all support, in case of actual attack against Afghanistan, had been trying to some how save the Taliban regime. The purpose of attempts to convince Taliban to give up Osama and close down terrorists was a clear understanding in Pakistani Afghan policy. Failing in these endeavour it chose to side with the US and became an ally in the International War against terrorism. It permitted the use of its air space as well as provided land bases to US and allied troops. This was portrayed and hailed or decried as a major policy shift. However, the present author believes it was more of a tactical shift rather than any real and fundamental change in Pakistan's Afghan Policy. Pakistan's Afghan policy centred on supporting a strong centralized government (Over which it has had considerable

control and would not be friendly to its enemy, read India and competitor read Iran) that can bring peace to that country as result of which Pakistan would be able to reach out to Central Asian Republics, India would have no access to its (Pakistan's) backyard and the Durand line issue be solved according to its perception. These objectives still remain, however through whom and how to achieve them may have changed. This tactical shift was adapted to clearly off set Indian designs and threats and realization that continued support to Taliban would mean Pakistan would be a target in the imminent military action against Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, one must add terrorism as such could not have been condoned by any state. Pakistan itself has been a target of international terrorism. President Musharraf while announcing⁶ Pakistan decision to join the coalition against terrorism, justified that on mainly four counts;

1. To off set India taking advantage of Pakistan taking any other option, even that of neutrality.
2. Security of its Strategic Assets.
3. Gaining support for its Kashmir Policy
4. Economic relief

He also gave the slogan of 'Pakistan first'. That slogan was interpreted as meaning a turn towards a pragmatic foreign policy giving priority to Pakistan's security interests at whatever price and at whoever's expense. Pakistan may have achieved the first two as well as the fourth one to an arguable extent, at least, for the near future. Even this cannot be said about Kashmir. Despite winning laurels, Pakistan appeared cornered as India continuously threatens Pakistan.

Whatever cooperation Pakistan extends in the war against terrorism, every appreciation expressed by US would come with the advice on the need to do more about putting an end to, what is generally referred to as 'Cross Border Infiltration'⁷. Pakistan Foreign Policy till at least the recent Iraq war can be described as walk on a tight rope. Pakistan has played an important role in this campaign in the shape of arrests of a large number of Al-Qaeda members that had fled from Afghanistan. As a result it had become target of a number of terrorist attacks as well. However, the on and off clashes, some of them very fierce and deadly between remnants of Taliban/ Al-Qaeda and the U.S forces and the new Afghan Army near Pak Afghan border has raised doubts about the capability or/and willingness of the Pakistani state to play its part more effectively. There are still reports of Taliban/ Al-Qaeda hiding in parts of the tribal belt on the Pakistani side of the Pak-Afghan border. Even President Musharraf expressed publicly that Osama Bin Ladin himself might be on Pakistani side of the border⁸.

The war in Iraq poses a question; has it really provided Pakistan with some space as some of the international reactions to the war may suggest. A resultant question would be how Pakistan intends or should be using that maneuverability space, if it really has come up. One must be very cautious about it. We are not re-entering the era of cold war or the traditional balance of power, where France, Germany and Russia are about to provide a balance to the over arching power of the United States. The differences over Iraq should not be over exaggerated. Without exaggerating we can note some of the characteristics of the post Iraq War

International situation. A very significant aspect of this phase is the inability of the US to get UN support for its action in Iraq. Keeping in mind the difference between condemnation and confrontation one must note the widespread condemnation of US and allies handling of Iraq through use of force without UN permission for what its worth. Inclusion in the list of condemning states of France, Russia and Germany is significant but must not be over exaggerated. People's Republic of China also opposed the US and allies' action in Iraq, but that should be considered separately, as China continues to follow a policy of not entangling itself in any international dispute, at least in the intermediate future. However, it must be concerned about the growing military presence of United States in Middle East and more important in Central Asia. To this must be added the very vocal popular opposition in the streets around the world cutting across the religious ethnic or geographic divides. This has the potential of taking the world towards new divisions and is bound to influence the progress and conduct of the campaign against terrorism and thus the role of different partners of that campaign. However, that significant change has yet to find a clear direction and its level and depth has yet to be seen in real terms.

While Pakistan has a chance of an increased manoeuvrability and a chance to get out of the cornered position it found itself in the wake of Sept. 11, it has to tread very carefully. For Pakistan to really get out of the post Sept. 11 cornered situation, it must give up, for starters, the reactive Foreign Policy towards India. It has to use all the cards in its diplomatic arsenal to diffuse the tension with India. There is no need to answer them in their tone. Pakistani Prime Minister Zafullah

Khan Jamali, not just accepted offer of resumption of dialogue from his Indian counterpart Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpai, but went an extra mile by offering to go to India if Prime Minister Vajpai can not come to Pakistan. Further, Pakistan has given permission of over flight to Indian planes⁹. One interesting development in Pakistan's foreign policy debate is that not just those who traditionally supported peace with India, but even those on the extreme right favours at least lowering of tensions with India¹⁰. However, it must be added that the far right supports peace with India more to get out of the cornered position vis-à-vis USA pressures. It has yet to be seen whether the Prime Minister's apparent going an extra mile is a result of serious foreign policy reconsideration or an attempt to buy time. Pakistani desire and attempts to get out the cornered position are understandable, it would not be in its long term interest to lower its commitment to Campaign against terrorism. Pakistan needs diversity in friendship. The lowering of tensions that may result both from Prime Minister Vajpai's initiative and a stronger Pakistani response raises hopes for a lasting peace and solution of the Kashmir dispute between the two nuclear neighbours why these two are lowering the tensions would determine the real long term out come. Pakistan's ability /willingness to more effectively guard its border with Afghanistan and tracking down of Taliban/ Al-Qaeda members reportedly hiding in its tribal areas adjacent to Afghanistan would tell about how far the change is real. The loud and not so loud wondering at the fact of most fierce fighting taking place near Pakistani borders must be addressed in a positive manner. The constant suspicions that most of Al-Qaeda and Taliban are hiding in Pakistan and the

demands for their return needs to be dealt with in accordance with the principle of Pakistan first¹¹. At this stage of history it would be very difficult and almost impossible to find alternate alliances, which can provide Pakistan with enough support so that it can really wriggle out of its current predicament. It would be a gradual process. Very important Pakistan needs to further put its weight behind a stronger United Nations and international activities through it. Pakistan can learn a lesson from Peoples Republic of China by staying put on a lot of issues on which its statements cannot make much of a difference any way. A very important step, which Pakistan must take, is really stop non-state groups to run their parallel foreign policies. While every one has the democratic right to disagree publicly with official Foreign Policy and campaign for changing it according to his / her perception of what would be the interest of the people of this country, they can not be permitted to actually carry out acts within the country or outside it that goes contrary to official policy. Its Afghan policy needs a real basic and fundamental which should be substantially different and more than a mere tactical adjustment. It must also be understood that change in Afghan policy can not be limited to Afghanistan only. If and when that is changed, it would be a result of and would in turn result in a changed view of self and the world, which in concrete terms means change in Kashmir policy as well. Both (i.e. Afghan and Kashmir policies) are a result of a specific worldview and one can not change without the other. The purpose of demands of and support for lowering of tensions with India coming from what one can term the hawks in Pakistan foreign policy debate are intended to ease the US pressure for a more

active role in the War Against Terrorism. Some argue that lowering of tensions would not just ease pressure on Pakistan but it will make it possible for her to seek alliances from among the probable targets of US led War on Terrorism and thus counter any future threat that Pakistan may have from USA itself, to what are referred to as its 'strategic assets'. The post Iraq war international situation does not provide any basis for such thinking. Without going into much debate the War in Iraq has not in any manner diminished the uni-polar basis and character of the post cold war world order, but rather have strengthened that. No new major centres of power have emerged or are likely to appear in the, to be very careful, in the mid term future.

It is important to also take into account the role of non-state actors in international relations. I know the traditional Foreign Policy practitioner or academics trained in the scholarship of Morgenthau would frown at what is being suggested. But it must be kept in mind if the role of terrorists who are simply defined non state actors using violent means to achieve political ends without any regards to laws of armed conflict, is influencing international relations, than peace activists who came out in very large numbers to oppose the use of force would have a definite say in the future scheme of international order. Pakistan's foreign policy can tangibly benefit from approaching that movement, from establishing a real identity with it. That can be helpful in diffusing its problems with India to measurable extent, as well as go miles towards changing the popular perception of Pakistan as an obscurantist state with grand strategic ideas home to extremist ideas and policies. A change in the international perception of Pakistan will go long

way in providing manoeuvring space to Pakistan on the International scene. However, for that perception to change the changes in both policy and action must be real and comprehensive. There still exists an opportunity for Pakistan to play its part in the International Campaign against terrorism as an independent state, because that role suits its interests and not because it has been pressurized into it. That would require a fundamental change in both policy and means and methods of pursuing it. International community has to understand one point, it is not easy for Pakistan to bring about such changes easily, given its economic, educational and political weaknesses and instability. Such a basic re-orientation of foreign policy goals and means would take time and efforts. It would also require a lot of support both material and political, as well

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¹ To have an idea of how India jumped up on that occasion and continues to be in that state look at the large numbers of articles published on the Web. Check these sites <http://www.terrorism.reallybites.com> [Date accessed 21 April 2003] <<http://www.armyinkashmir.org/articles/lindia.html>> <<http://www.kashmiripandit.org/elibrary/pakrole/experts.html>>

² Tim Judah, "The Taliban Papers", *Survival, The IISS Journal* Vol. 44. No. 1, Spring 2002, London pp. 69–80.

³ http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/remarks_current.html> Date accessed 20 April 2003

⁴ Daily *The News*, Islamabad, 18 September 2001

⁵ *ibid*, 29 September 2001

⁶ Daily 'Dawn' Karachi and Daily 'The News' Islamabad of 20 September 2001 for the details of President Pervez Musharraf's televised speech in which he announced Pakistan change of policy regarding Taliban, Osama and Al-Qaeda.

⁷ 'Bush Thanks Musharraf for Cooperation' Daily'. "The News" Islamabad, March 27 2003. President Bush thanked President Musharraf of Pakistan for cooperation in the Campaign against

terrorism in the wake of arrest of one of the top Al-Qaeda men, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad earlier on 1 march 2003 and urged him to reduce tensions on the Line of Control in Kashmir. The same report also says that President Bush earlier i.e. on Tuesday 3 march 2003, called Prime Minister Vajpai of India assuring him of Washington's continuing pressure on Pakistan for ending 'Cross Border Incursions'.

⁸ Daily 'The New' Islamabad, May 2 2003

⁹ This facility was withdrawn as a tit for tat policy in response to Indian refusal to permit Pakistan use of Indian air pace in the wake of terrorist attacks on Indian parliament in 2002. At that time both countries had also decided expelled each other's High Commissioners as well.

¹⁰ Tahir Amin, "Pak-Afghan Relations since the Fall of the Taliban" paper presented at International Conference on 'Pakistan's Foreign Policy : International and Regional Dimensions'. To be published as part of Conference Proceedings. Also read Qazi Hussain Ahmad Chief of Jama'at-e-Islami [A party of extreme religious right with support base in urban areas rather than the traditional mulla who comes from and has main support in the rural areas. A party of political Islam rather than traditional Islam] statement in daily "The News" Islamabad of 20 April 2003. He asserted friendship with India is better than being slave of United States of America.

¹¹ Read reports Press Conference of visiting Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah who accompanied Afghan President Hamid Karzai on a state visit to Pakistan in the last week of April 2003. He demanded the that Pakistan should hand over the fugitive Taliban hiding in Pakistan. He also promised to provide a list of those Taliban that are hiding in Pakistan.