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Pakistan Taliban Policy 1994-1999

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to give a detailed account of Pakistan's Taliban Policy from 1994 to 1999 during the Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif governments. This paper would focus on: the post Soviet period developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan's peace efforts and its policy and objectives. Secondly, it would analyze, what were the main objectives of Pakistani policy makers to support the Taliban? And what was the role of Pakistan government, military and ISI in the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Finally, it would also assess the costs and benefits of earlier/hasty diplomatic recognition extended to the Taliban government by Pakistan and its domestic, regional and international implications for Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, Taliban, Afghanistan, ISI

Pakistan Taliban Policy during 1993 -1996

In the first part of the paper, we would discuss Pakistan's Afghan policy from 1993 to 1996 the second term of Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister of Pakistan. The electoral coalition between the PPP and the Muslim League (Junejo group, consisting of politicians who had left Nawaz Sharif in support of the president), and the MQM's boycott of National Assembly elections made it possible for Benazir Bhutto to return to power on October 6, 1993. However, there was a marked difference in the situation for Benazir Bhutto compared to her first term in office. This time she had a cooperative army chief, General Abdul Waheed Kakar, and a new President of her own choice, Farooq Leghari, an old PPP loyalist. The troika operated harmoniously in contrast to the discord that her first term had. Learning from the past experience, she tried to appease the army and toed the line on sensitive foreign policy security issues.[1]

General Waheed Kakar, the COAS, who was quite supportive of Benazir Bhutto, was a clean man and had a reasonably good reputation in the army. Unfortunately, he rapidly lost his standing in the army first because he sidelined many senior and middle-ranking officers who were

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known to be close to his predecessor, the late General Janjua, and second for being perceived as pro-Benazir Bhutto.[2] Waheed was assertive, however, on another front. He sent two former chiefs of the ISI, Lieutenant General Asad Durrani and Lieutenant General Javed Nasir, home for violating the channels of the command and mandated the new Director General of the ISI, Lieutenant General Javed Ashraf Qazi, to not only cleanse the ISI of "Islamists" but to rein in the Jihadis in Kashmir as well. Qazi mercilessly cleansed the ISI – many officers involved in the Afghan war were posted back to regular army units, and quite a few of them were soon retired.[3] Moreover, the changes in Pakistan's domestic politics had heralded the creation of a form of controlled democracy in the country. Initially, the appointment of Benazir Bhutto, for a second term as Prime Minister did not bring substantial change in Pakistan's stance on Afghanistan. However, the new civilian government of Benazir Bhutto in Islamabad had to follow the basic doctrine [strategic doctrine] of Pakistan military in the formulation of Pakistan Afghan policy.

Generally speaking, post-Zia civilian governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif tended to follow the general parameters on Afghanistan laid down by the military. The army retained the pivotal influence on the formulation of important domestic and foreign policy agendas and the political process remained beholden to the dictates and machinations of the generals.[4] The Army, through close monitoring of the civilian government, made it certain that the political leadership would have no power over the military itself.[5] Theoretically speaking, the foreign and defence policies are for new states a matter for survival; they seriously affect domestic policy. By this chain of logic the leader of the Pakistan Army is propelled into the centre of decision making first as its arbiter and then as its monopolist.[6] Thus, the civilian governments had followed the policy guideline of Pakistan army in foreign policy decision-making, particularly in the case of Afghanistan the Pakistan army has always remained in the center of policy making, for strategic reasons.

Idealistically speaking, there was strong perception in Islamabad, particularly, in the military that the Pakistani Pashtun protégé Hikmatyar would be the best option to achieve its long term military and economic objective in Afghanistan. Hence, Pakistan military wanted to see an important role of Hikmatyar in any future political setup in Afghanistan. In practice, Pakistan had found its goals unattainable in the complex Afghan power struggle.[7] However, General Naseerullah Babar is reported to have argued that Afghanistan would not be stable or a united country for a long time and that Pakistan could not afford to wait until then to expand its links with Central Asia. Subsequently, on September 14, 1994, General Naseerullah Babar, the then Interior Minister announced that the

following week he would travel to Central Asia via Kandahar and Herat to negotiate the transit of a Pakistani convoy.[8]

Many writers and scholars on Pakistan argue that the focus of its policy during 1990s, on its Northwestern border could be opening trade with the new states of Central Asia and gaining 'strategic depth' against its arch enemy India. This view is rightly supported by Anthony Davis that the original reasons Pakistan covertly backed the Taliban were simple enough: open up trade routes to Central Asia, including a natural gas pipeline between Turkmenistan and Pakistan, and win influence with the Taliban regime to provide a secure rear in any confrontation with Hindu India.[9] Therefore, during the 1990s, the main objectives of Pakistan's Taliban policy were to gain 'strategic depth' against India and access to Central Asian States for economic reasons. In the following pages we would analyze these two main objectives of Pakistan pro-Taliban policy.

(a) *Strategic Depth: Security Objective*

One of the major objectives of Pakistan pro-Taliban policy was to gain "strategic depth" in Afghanistan in case of any potential future war with its arch enemy India. Basically, this strategic objective or military strategy has been extended by Pakistan military forces and they staunchly advocated it out of security concerns or reasons. Pakistan military believes that it is in the greater national interest of the country to take such steps in realist perspective to minimize the security threat from India, as security of any state is a primary concern in international system. Consequently, Pakistan military has been in control of the foreign and defense policy as their reserved subjects—as military considered itself as the guardian of country's sovereignty and ideology. However, the theory of "strategic depth" gained popularity in military and foreign policy community during the 1990s, while the concept is as old as Pakistan itself. Therefore, we would discuss it in both military and historical perspectives.

Immediately after independence, when there was no regional Islamic grouping except for the Arab League, Pakistani officials sounded out their Arab counterparts on the possibility of Pakistan joining the forum. Although it sounds impractical and improbable now, Pakistani officials then saw the move as a symbolic gesture of asserting Pakistan's intrinsic relationship with West Asia. The common thinking among the senior theorists of the Pakistan Movement viewed the new nation as the natural eastward extension of the Muslim World. The idea was dropped later because

of the Arab League's then exclusive pan-Arabist leanings and the fact that Turkey and Iran showed no interest in the Arab council.[10]

Thus, the notion of "strategic depth" emerged even stronger after the socialist revolution in Afghanistan and became an obsession after the Soviet intervention in the country. The gaining of strategic depth in Afghanistan was also one of the major objectives of Pakistan's Afghan policy during 1990s, particularly during the Taliban period. Pakistan's support for the Taliban was certainly not based on any ideological consideration. It was based on purely geo-strategic reasons, aimed at asserting Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan through a Pashtun movement. The main objective was to get strategic depth vis-a-vis India. Pakistan's military strategists believed that a Pashtun-dominated friendly government in Afghanistan could provide strategic advantage to the country against its rival, India.[11]

However, the ruling establishment in Pakistan has been of the opinion that a friendly government in Afghanistan is a guarantee of ideological and physical security of Pakistan. The symbolic expression of this policy can be seen in the shape of so called "strategic depth" theory,[12] they argued that lack of geographical depth and hinterland would make Pakistan's security vulnerable in the event of a war with, India. The attainment of this "strategic depth" had been a key element in Pakistan's Afghan policy since the 1980s.

Mirza Aslam Beg, General Zia-ul-Haq's high profile army chief, is credited with the authorship of "Strategic Depth" in the early 1980s. Theoretically speaking, it was a proactive defensive strategy of securing "Strategic Depth" in the west to counterbalance the conventionally superior India by strengthening diplomatic and military relations with Afghanistan and the Arab world to the extent that in the worst-case scenario of war with India, Pakistan Army's High Command could move westward and use Afghanistan as a strategic line against India.

Authors of this policy, the armed forces, continue to wield control over it, in spite of the elected governments in power in Islamabad from 1994 to 1999. And one could also argue, these elected governments were getting periodically thrown out of office, among other things, for their efforts to pursue a policy different from the one authored by the armed forces on Afghanistan.[13]

Moreover, Pakistani armed forces and their agencies functioned as autonomous institutions, not within the polity; and the

harsh political reality is that they are not accountable to the elected governments. The best example of this is the way Islamic militants were being trained in Pakistan. While the elected governments declared policy had been to weed out these Islamic militants from the Pakistani soil, there were enough reports to confirm that they continued to stay in the Pak-Afghan border areas and the Pakistan armed forces were imparting training to them in guerilla warfare and in the use of explosives.[14] Therefore, any discussion of Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan should be read as those perceived by the Armed forces only and not of the civilian government.[15]

General Hamid Gul believes that to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan was security compulsion for Pakistan. Because we have no choice we have a very large Pashtun population on our border and we want friendly Afghanistan. It is our back because we are a country without depth. Therefore it was compulsion for Pakistan to support the Taliban.[16] There was much talk in Pakistan's military establishment on the security threat from the east (India). Pakistan's media and strategic analysts also developed the argument in favour of strategic depth. Pakistan's military strategists believed that a Pashtun-dominated friendly government in Afghanistan could provide strategic advantage in the country against its arch rival, India, with whom it had long been locked in bitter conflict on Kashmir.[17] Further, Pakistan military and ISI for strategic reasons wanted to secure its western borders, which would guarantee the security of Pakistan. However, the only viable option is to have pro-Pakistan or at least friendly government in Afghanistan. To achieve this objective Pakistan military and ISI supported different leaders in Afghanistan, at different times, for example after Soviet withdrawal initially they supported Hikmatyar then opted for Taliban, much has been written on it. This theory [strategic depth] has been criticized by many quarters in Pakistan due to two main reasons. First, the chances of nuclear war are very limited. If in case it happens, there will be no time to take nuclear arsenals inside Afghanistan. Second, keeping the political developments of Afghanistan in view, it is impossible for any regional power to support Pakistan in a crisis situation.[18] On the other hand, Benazir Bhutto had cautioned against it in 1998. In her opinion, it was the Zia-ul- Haq constituency, which had dreamed of strategic depth. She herself did not see how a land-locked Afghanistan could provide strategic depth. She felt strategic depth would be better obtained through Iran, which could be of assistance if Pakistan was blockaded. Others have called strategic depth

an albatross around Pakistan's neck.[19] Hence, civilian leadership control on foreign policy of Pakistan can be understood from the views of former prime minister of Pakistan.

Subsequently, Pakistan military was attacked from left and right after the November 13, 2001, collapse of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Critics ridiculed the concept of seeking a "strategic depth" next door, while some Pakistani liberals seized the opportunity to settle scores with the religious right and with what they saw as its military patrons.[20] A Pashtun senior politician, Afrasiab Khattak believes that the theory of strategic depth in Afghanistan against India is wrong idea. He says, "*It is very unfortunate and this is very foolish. It also shows the bankruptcy of Pakistan's ruling elite in terms of vision – historical vision*."[21] The attainment of this 'strategic depth' had been a key element in Pakistan's Afghan policy during the 1980s and 1990s. But, even during the Taliban government in Afghanistan Islamabad did not achieve this objective, as the Taliban refused to accept a client position.

Pakistan has had to pay a heavy price for the chimera of strategic depth in Afghanistan. Nearly 60,000 Pakistanis died in Afghanistan. It has had to pay heavily for sustaining the Taliban leadership and its economic ineptitude. At least for ten years if not more, every policy, Ministry and Pakistan's polity were held hostage by the Taliban. Pakistan's economic revival was hampered more by Afghanistan than by any other factor. In the process, Afghan society was deprived of its moorings and the country alienated itself from the international community. Iran's relations with Pakistan were badly affected by the Afghan factor. The Central Asian Republics also viewed Pakistani policies with apprehension. Pakistan found itself unwelcome and viewed with suspicion in most international fora, and the price paid by its people was incalculable in terms of lost opportunities for political and economic stability. Rationally speaking, looking for strategic depth in unstable Afghanistan was a strategic folly from both economic and military perspectives.

(b) *Access to Central Asian Republics: Economic Objective*

The other main objective of Pakistan's Afghan policy during the 1990s was to reach Central Asia for economic purposes; it was believed that the ISI theory was to get hold of the Central Asian markets. The control of a friendly force in south-west

Afghanistan could open the prospect for energy and trade corridor between Pakistan and Central Asia. Pakistan was keen to import gas from Turkmenistan but that would only be possible through a pipeline via Afghanistan.[22] In its efforts to secure a land route through Afghanistan for trade with the Central Asian states Pakistan was now trying to make arrangements with regional administrators (rulers?) of different territories in Afghanistan. A press release stated that "Pakistan will construct roads in Afghanistan."[23] Pakistan and Afghanistan, together with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan signed a four-party agreement for laying a gas pipeline connecting all these countries. A separate trilateral MOU between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan was also concluded to construct an oil pipeline. It was believed that these agreements would enhance cooperation in the region and contribute to peace as well as to Afghanistan's economic rehabilitation and reconstruction. However, Pakistan's hopes for gaining influence in landlocked Central Asia could not be realized owing to the protracted internecine conflict in Afghanistan that was leading to increasing frustration on the part of the policy-makers in Islamabad by the summer of 1994.[24]

However, besides these problems, intra-Afghan war also hampered Pakistan's efforts to develop its economic relations with the newly emerging Central Asian States. These landlocked states could not have the shortest and most economical outlet to the Arabian Sea via Afghanistan and Pakistan due to the continuing civil war in Afghanistan. The civil war also made it impossible to implement the accords singed between Pakistan and Central Asian states for building pipelines to transport oil and gas as well as other projects to promote development in the context of ECO.

A Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir revealed in his article which was published in Pakistani news paper, "I was invited by the then federal interior minister, Major General Naseerullah Khan Babar, for lunch. He tried to convince me that all patriotic journalists must support the Taliban because they were protecting the economic interests of Pakistan. What was that economic interest? Babar told me that Afghanistan was a gateway to Central Asia and Iran was trying to close this gate for us through the Northern Alliance for its own interest. Further he said Pakistan was trying to control Afghanistan with the help of the Taliban, and we were heading towards a gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan worth billions of dollars."[25]

Initially, American reaction was also favourable because in the Taliban they saw a power that was anti-Iran. They also hoped that unification of the country under a strong central government would increase the chances of a U.S. company, Unocal, laying a gas pipeline through Afghanistan. U.S. administration, however, was quick to see through the reality of the Taliban and later withdrew whatever support it had extended to them.[26] Americans started owning them, the delegations were exchanged between the Taliban and America, because Unocal a very large American oil exploration company wanted to lay pipeline and Pakistan wanted to open the trade routes to Central Asia.[27] In this new situation, Pakistan armed forces were quite willing to undertake the job on behalf of Unocal/Delta Oil Company as it suited their strategic interests also. And the Unocal/Delta Oil Company was quite well aware of the Pakistani experience in Afghanistan. Pakistani policy makers became frustrated when these pipelines projects had not started due to the on going civil war in Afghanistan. For that reason, Pakistani policy-makers particularly the army junta came up with pro-Taliban policy.

Pakistan and the rise of Taliban

In this part of the paper we would discuss the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the role of Pakistan. The rise of the Taliban and Pakistan's role is now sufficiently well known and will not be fully documented here. However, the key issues and events that led the Pakistani policy-makers to back the Taliban will be discussed in the light of the various studies that have been undertaken to assess the factors behind the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The most popular work on the subject is by Ahmed Rashid (2000), another journalistic version is by Michael Griffin (2001), William Maley (ed.) (2001), Peter Marsden (1998), Larry P. Goodson and the rather brief study by an Afghan M. J. Gohari (2000) etc.

Historically speaking, even after Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Peace in Afghanistan remained elusive despite several attempts of mediation by different quarters, mainly Pakistan. The persistent efforts of UN representative Benon Sevan proved successful and on March 18, 1992, Najibullah announced his resignation and agreed to transfer all the powers and executive authority to a UN established Afghanistan Interim Government (AIG). This proved disastrous as it "created a political vacuum of power in Kabul into which the regional and ethnic coalitions rushed."[28] Warlords seized homes and farms, threw out their occupants and handed them over to their supporters. The commanders abused the population at will, kidnapping young girls and boys for their sexual

pleasures, robbing merchants in the bazaars and fighting and brawling in the streets. Instead of refugees returning from Pakistan, a fresh wave of refugees began to leave Kandahar for Quetta.[29] Thus, the people disliked the Mujahideen because of their corruption and they were fed up from war. In that situation a new force emerged in Afghanistan, known as the Taliban.

Suddenly, everyone wanted to know who were the Taliban? And where did they come from? People wanted to know the source of their funding, equipment, and organizational capacity and, of course, direction and inspiration. Given Pakistan's involvement, some scholars regarded the Taliban as purely Pakistan's creation but others considered it a more complex phenomenon.

However, there are two popular views about the emergence of the Taliban; first view is that the Taliban were the indigenous force and it was the creation of the Afghanistan's political situation. According to this view, a story is related to the emergence of the Taliban on a fateful day. A neighbour came to Mullah Omer and told him that two teenage girls from the Mullah's village had been abducted by one of the gangs of Mujahideen, who controlled much of the Afghan countryside. Unfortunately, the heads of the victims had been shaved. They had been taken to a nearby checkpoint outside the village and they had been repeatedly raped.[30] Mullah Omar gathered 30 former guerrilla fighters, and distributed among them 16 Kalashnikov rifles, and led them to attack on the checkpoint where the abducted girls were kept, freed the girls and tied the commander by a noose to the barrel of an old Soviet tank.[31] well known Pakhtun journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai believes that the Taliban Movement was an indigenous creation. People of Afghanistan were fed up with Mujahideen and the civil war and the Taliban promised peace and security. The Taliban also promised to fulfill the goals of Jihad like the establishment of the rule of Shariah (Islamic rule) in Afghanistan, and the people supported them. People wanted some force to defeat the Mujahideen because they had become very corrupt and cruel. Inhuman atrocities were being committed by the former Mujahideen and Afghanistan was under the grip of continued civil war.[32]

This view is also supported by General Hamid Gul, a veteran Pakistani army general and former ISI chief, who had been directly involved in Afghan affairs. General Gul stressed that "no body who knows Afghan nation would concede to the idea that a force can be imposed on Afghanistan. Afghanistan is not that nation and that is why they have never been subjugated in their entire history, because they are as ferociously independent as people psychologically. They do not accept imposition; I have been very close to them. But, you can not make them bent. Just they

will continue to follow their own path. Further, he said, "would say it was entirely indigenous. But it took birth on the borders of Pakistan in Chaman area somewhere they started, it was the result of internal fighting going on which was civil war...Afghans can not be manipulated they can not be manoeuvred like our people. We have never tasted freedom and they have never tasted slavery, so there is difference between Afghanistan and Pakistan."[33] It is how a Pakistan military general [who worked very close with Afghans during the Jihad against Soviets in Afghanistan] understands the Afghans through history but, interestingly, Pakistan military and ISI wanted to impose pro-Pakistan Pakhtun Islamist leadership in Afghanistan for economic and strategic reasons. It was a reaction to the cruelties and corruption perpetrated by the Mujahideen commanders who carved out fiefdoms and made life miserable for their hapless subjects.[34] Religious groups and the supporters of Afghan Jihad in Pakistan also supported this view. Other than, secular minded people in Pakistan and the west do not accept it is the only story behined the rise of Taliban.

The other view contends that the Taliban were essentially the creation of Pakistan. According to this view Pakistani government was keen to open trade routes to Central Asia for economic reasons; (somewhere else, it is discussed in detail). To achieve its economic and strategic objectives, Pakistan military and ISI created Taliban in Afghanistan. The seemingly unending civil war in Afghanistan frustrated Pakistani designs. Anthony Davis supports this view that the Taliban movement was under Pakistani patronage, and the nature of its weaponry, funding, and training suggested from almost the moment of its emergence that this was something other than a movement of religious students.[35] It is hard to believe that some of the students of our Dinni Madrassas whether Pakistani or Afghanis or both, could go out in October 1994 subdue regional Afghan warlords and seize nine out of 29 provinces in four months.[36]

An Afghan writer J. M. Gohari writes that there were reports, which verified the presence of Pakistani troops within the Taliban militia. For instance, refugees from Mazar-e-Sharif reported that the Taliban were accompanied by Pakistani fighters identifiable by their language, dress and the flag of a Pakistani Muslim fundamentalist party aligned with the Taliban.[37] Further he writes that in August 1998, the Russian Government accused Pakistan of taking part in the Taliban offensive in the north of Afghanistan. In a direct statement, which seemed to be well investigated, Russia said that Pakistan's military was directly involved in fighting and in supplying the Taliban with equipment.[38]

Pakhtun nationalist leader Afrasiab Khattak supported this view that the Taliban were the creation of Pakistan. "I believe that the Taliban

were the creation of Pakistan. Because it was not indigenous force in the sense that it emerged from the processes that were taking place inside Afghanistan. Actually Pakistan's ruling elite particularly army generals had a constant agenda – the continuous agenda within the western agenda. This agenda, later on expressed by some Pakistani generals, was that of creating military depth inside Afghanistan...furthermore he said that Afghanistan produced conducive atmosphere for Pakistan's ruling elite establishment particularly Inter Services Intelligence to create a force and launch it towards Afghanistan...the slogan of security was attractive and 'people popular' at the time. But actually it was not the Afghan groups or the commanders who sat and drew a plan and then implemented it. Actually, it was Pakistani establishment that launched the Taliban."[39] Awami National Party (ANP) President Asfandyar Wali Khan has also blamed Pakistan for the creation of the Taliban. He alleged that the Taliban were created to support the interests of ISI. Pakistan wanted to make Afghanistan its fifth province and the creation of the Taliban was a step in that direction.[40]

A well-known Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid also supported this idea that during Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's second term of office (1993-1996), the Interior Minister General (retired) Naseerullah Babar promoted the Taliban.[41] He further wrote that when the Taliban carried out its first major military operation in October 1994, reportedly it quickly secured the support of Pakistan's trucking cartels based in Quetta and Chaman on the Afghanistan border. The traders, predominantly Pakhtuns and drawn from many of the same tribes as the Taliban, reportedly saw in the Taliban a way to secure trade routes previously contested by predatory warlords. The duties imposed on trucks transiting Afghanistan from Pakistan became the Taliban's most important official source of income.[42]

Human Rights Watch reported, "of all the foreign powers involved in efforts to sustain and manipulate the ongoing fighting, Pakistan is distinguished both by the sweep of its objectives and the scale of its efforts, which include soliciting funding for the Taliban, bankrolling the Taliban operations, providing diplomatic support as the Taliban's virtual emissaries abroad, arranging training for the Taliban fighters, recruiting skilled and unskilled manpower to serve in the Taliban armies, planning and directing offensives, providing and facilitating shipments of ammunition and fuel, and several occasions apparently directly providing combat support."[43]

M. B. Naqvi is also supporting the same view that the rapidity with which they have spread out bespeaks excellent military advice and superb logistics, not to mention ample resources. Despite foreign help to religious parties and their seminaries being known, it is hard to believe that it was so

extensive and of such magnitude. Anyhow acquiring military know-how of such quality, setting up a logistic organization and of course acquiring the required equipment and supplies, not to mention transportation, would suggest that such technical help could only have come from a willing state close by. Perhaps most of the Taliban are Afghans now. But it does not follow that they constitute a factor that is purely of Afghan provenance.[44] Pakistan was certainly behind the Taliban in order to compete to Iran and Turkey.[45] Pakistan's role in the creation of the Taliban has been widely debated but the supporters of both views are agreed upon that Pakistan was the principal supporter of the Taliban. Thus, most available literature and evidences suggested that the Taliban were supported by Pakistan in all respects i.e. training, planning & strategy, financing, manpower and of-course diplomatically.

Pakistan Military and ISI Support for the Taliban

The military's emphasis on national security justified by a real or imaginary threat posed by hostile neighbors-India, Afghanistan and since the end of the Cold War, Iran-has a threat to economic, political and social order. The overbearing interference of the army in the society has stifled the emergence of a civil society. In order to strengthen its power base within the society, the military has created several docile political groupings and Islamist parties through a mechanism of control based on funding and patronage. Moreover, authoritarian governance has required the enhancement of the vast intelligence apparatus comprising the ISI and the MI. The ISI falls directly within Pakistan's military chain of command and had also served as an instrument for promoting the military's domestic political agenda and the guardian of its self-professed 'ideological frontiers' of the country. Almost all ISI officers are regular military personnel, who are rotated in and out for a fixed tenure.[46]

The armed forces grip on the political process, especially its relationship with the Jihadi groups between 1996 and 2001, was such that a former Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto acknowledged the 'ISI to be a state within a state.'[47] The spy agency has been the country's big brother. It is powerful, ubiquitous and has functioned with so much autonomy from the central government that it has almost become a state within a state. It is not only responsible for intelligence gathering, but also acts as a determinant of Pakistan's foreign policy and a vehicle for its implementation.[48] For every civilian and military government, control of the ISI was seen as crucial to maintaining a firm grip on power. The agency had been so powerful for so long that it played by its own rules. Its various heads had contrasting profiles, but emerged among the most powerful figures in the country's establishment. For years they ran semi-independent

operations in Afghanistan and Kashmir and helped to form and topple civilian governments.[49] For more than two decades the ISI had sponsored Islamic militancy to carry out its secret wars.[50]

Historically speaking, in 1979, the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA was launched in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in support of the pro-Communist government of Babrak Kamal.[51] The ISI was decisive partner in the CIA's biggest covert operation in Afghanistan against Soviets. With the active encouragement of the CIA and Pakistan's ISI [Inter Services Intelligence], who wanted to turn the Afghan Jihad into a global war waged by all Muslim states against the Soviet Union, some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 40 Islamic countries joined Afghanistan's fight between 1982 and 1992. Tens of thousands more came to study in Pakistani Madrassas. Eventually more than 100,000 foreign Muslim radicals were directly influenced by the Afghan Jihad.[52] The export of Jihad sponsored by the ISI had its blowback. It had allowed the Islamists a huge space for their activities. State patronage, in the form of an 'unholy alliance' between the military and the mullahs, resulted in an unprecedented rise of radical Islam.[53] After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan the Pakistan army and ISI supported a new group called the Taliban. As has now been established by several scholarly and journalistic works, the Pakistan military establishment directly assisted the Taliban's rise and subsequent capture of this region in Afghanistan between 1995 and 1996.[54]

In 1995, Islamabad decided to back the movement, which by then had captured Kandahar and several other provinces. That also led to the "involvement of the ISI." Dozens of intelligence agents were attached to the Taliban forces, providing them with tactical and professional support. Most of them had operated in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet jihad and had close connections with various Afghan mujahideen factions.[55] Amir Sultan Tarar, who had been involved in Afghanistan since the beginning of the CIA-ISI covert operation, received a new task. Better known by his code name, Colonel Imam, he had known many of the Taliban leaders since the jihad days, which made him the ideal man for the job. Bearded and wearing a turban, Colonel Imam blended in easily with his clients and developed a close, rapport with Mullah Omar. Posted as Pakistan's consul general, first in Kandahar and then in the western Afghan city of Heart, he emerged as a key adviser to the Taliban leaders and also acted as a conduit for arms and money.[56] The Taliban operations received substantial assistance from the Pakistan Army's XI corps at Peshawar. In this connection, Cloughley notes that the arms supply source for the Taliban came from 'army depots.'[57] The development of the Taliban was unquestionably dictated by the Pakistan Army's drive for undisputed hegemony in post-Cold War Afghanistan. It

has already been noted that this goal was, in part, driven by the army's desire to seek strategic depth against India.[58] As ISI influence over Pakistan's Taliban policy grew, Pakistan foreign policy toward Afghanistan and the broader region became increasingly unclear. Rashid notes that, the involvement of several ministries, corporations, provincial governments and the ISI effectively side lined the Pakistan foreign ministry, which has less and less to do with policy formulation towards the Taliban.[59]

In fact, the funding that Saudi Arabia provided Afghan fighters also subsidized militant Sunni organizations in Pakistan, often through the intermediary of Pakistan's military and the ISI. Afghanistan's Taliban, SSP, and HUA/HUM all hail from the same Madrassas and receive training in the same military camps in NWFP and southern Afghanistan. These camps operated under the supervision of the Pakistan military.[60] ISI has been the main conduit for arms, ammunition and fuel supplies from Pakistan to the Taliban in their fight against an opposition alliance based in the north, while the agency's officers have served as military advisers to the Taliban.[61] ISI expected the arrival of the Taliban to bring stability to war-torn Afghanistan, thus, allowing the approximately three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan to return home. These refugees had settled in around Pakistan's major cities, and had become an economic drain on Pakistan; they were also a source of much trafficking in arms and narcotics, and had become a danger to Pakistan's internal security. Pakistan hoped that the Taliban would be favorably disposed towards Pakistan in matters of foreign policy. They would provide strategic depth against India and secure root to Central Asia, which never materialized.

The domestic situation of Pakistan started turning worse for PPP government. The relations between the Prime Minister and the President deteriorated to the lowest ebb. The President dismissed Benazir Bhutto and her government on November 5, 1996. Fourth consecutive civilian government was sent home before completing its stipulated five years term in office. Concurrently, the President also issued a decree to set up the Council for Defense and National Security (CDNS), with chiefs of the armed forces as members along with elected officeholders. Weak democratic institutions, lack of a democratic political culture, politics of patronage, ineptitude of political leadership and the military's involvement in politics all contributed to the continuing crisis of democracy in Pakistan.[62] Deposed Prime Minister later lamented her inability and powerlessness in restricting the military – bureaucratic establishment hold over delineating Pakistan's national interests that eventually resulted in its Taliban fixated policy in the mid 1990s.[63]

Pakistan Taliban Policy 1997-1999

The domestic political crisis in Pakistan did not bring any substantial change in its Afghan policy as the ISI and military were consistently backing the Taliban. Thus, the new government of Nawaz Sharif continued to support the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. From February 1997 to October 1999, despite the change of administration in Islamabad, the essence of Pakistani policy towards Afghanistan did not change. In their myopic vision, the Pakistani elite ignored the domestic and regional implications of backing an irregular Islamist militia comprising a motley assortment of Afghan, Arab and Pakistani factions with differing political agendas.[64]

S. Iftikhar Murshed the then Pakistan's especial envoy to Afghanistan, reveals in his book, '*Afghanistan: The Taliban Years,'* that in the period January-May 1997, I had several meetings with Mullah Ghaus. He was a shrewd negotiator and would persistently insist that Pakistan should extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban. The reply he invariably received was that this was unimportant. What mattered was that we were dealing with the Taliban as a government. Furthermore, our ability to take up their cause with other countries and in international fora would be impaired if we recognized their government at that critical stage. They controlled most of the Afghanistan and had demonstrated their capability staying power. Recognition would follow as soon as peace was restored in all of Afghanistan and the Taliban had got the other ethnic groups and factions on board. They had the advantage of being able to negotiate from a position of strength and should, therefore, talk to their enemies.[65] Nevertheless the Taliban captured the major northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Finally, it led Pakistan to recognize Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Taliban's Untimely Recognition

As Taliban captured the major northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in May, 1997, that event led Pakistan to accord formal recognition to the Taliban government headed by Mullah Mohammad Omar who was called as Amir-ul-Momineen (the Commander of the Faithful). We would see the issue of Taliban recognition in the light of following questions: (a) why did Pakistan recognize the Taliban government? (b), why did Pakistan fail to get diplomatic support for Taliban from the world community? And, (c) what were its political and diplomatic gains and losses for Pakistan? The government of Pakistan under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif extended recognition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan on May 25, 1997, and hence became the first country in the world to do so. Islamabad also persuaded the Taliban's other two key regional sponsors, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE), to do likewise. Although the Taliban were driven out of Mazar-e-Sharif by late May after suffering heavy losses at the

hands of the Uzbek General Abdul Malik and the Shiite Hizb-i-Wahdat. According to the then Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Gohar Ayub, "we feel that the new government fulfills the criteria for de jure recognition. It is now in effective control of the territory of Afghanistan, including capital Kabul, and is representative of all ethnic groups in that country."[66]

The Taliban recognition by Pakistan was widely criticized. Actually, Pakistan had been following a two-track policy in Afghanistan. On the one hand, it supported the idea of a broad-based government and on the other hand it out rightly supported Taliban regime both at diplomatic and political fronts. On the contrary, all the regional and international powers were supporting Northern Alliance (formed in June 1997), which comprised all the Afghan power centers excluding Taliban.[67] A Pakistani general (R) Kamal Matinuddin in his book on Taliban, *The Taliban Phenomenon* noted, "although the decision was in accordance with the standard norms of international law and diplomacy where because the Taliban regime was in effective control of territory and population and was able to fulfill its international obligations, the decision had serious long term political, economic and strategic consequences for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asian Republics and the rest of the world."[68] The former foreign minister of Pakistan Abdul Sattar is of the opinion that Pakistan's recognition of the Taliban government in May 1997 provoked international disapproval and criticism, although the decision was not without justification.[69] This included the necessity of conducting official business with the authorities in power in Kabul on matters of travel and trade between people of common ethnicity on both sides of the borders. The return of refugees required negotiations with the Taliban who controlled three-quarters of Afghanistan territory. Many of them, having lived in refugee camps in Pakistan, evinced goodwill and friendship, Islamabad also hoped to influence the Taliban. It could not have foreseen that the Taliban would prove unreasonable and rigid and commit one blunder after another, provoking international outrage.[70]

Pakistani decision-makers perceived several strategic, economic, and political advantages in taking this crucial decision. They viewed Taliban as a pro-Pakistan force capable of bringing law and order to the war-ravaged Afghanistan, which had descended into anarchy since the fall of Najibullah regime in 1992. They believed that a stable Afghanistan under Taliban-would protect Pakistan's strategic interests vis-à-vis other regional powers like India, Russia and Iran.

Pakistani optimism about the Taliban as a loyal proxy was evident in Islamabad's portrayal of the militia in international fora as the legitimate government of Afghanistan despite the direct accusations of the United Nation's special envoy Mahmoud Mestiri of Pakistan's interference in

Afghan affairs. He said, 'Foreign interference exists and Pakistan's interference is real and something big.' As it was stated by Rabbani that "Taliban's most important function was to provide security for roads and potentially oil and gas pipeline that would link states of Central Asia to the international market through Pakistan rather than through Iran.[71]

The commentary of a senior politician Air Marshal (R) Mohammad Asghar Khan is giving the true picture of Pakistan foreign policy. He wrote a country's defense is an extension of its foreign policy. Our foreign policy has been lacking vision and by ill-timed initiatives we have lost trusted friends. The latest example was the hurried recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan whereas wisdom would have required us to consult Iran on this issue and try to evolve a common policy towards Afghanistan.[72] This sudden recognition by Pakistan and later by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates laid bare the intentions of Pakistan vis-à-vis the Taliban and thus Pakistan could not save her face before the leaders of the world, particularly Pakistan's policy was criticized by Iran, India, Russia and Central Asia.

Pakistan had been trying to persuade friendly countries to recognize the Taliban regime but Pakistan failed to convince the world to get diplomatic support for Taliban, might be because of the Taliban's hard-line policies and the violations of human rights. United Nations, OIC and the ECO refused to accept the Taliban regime. Pakistan the only friend of the Taliban in the world was also blamed for the Taliban's harsh policies. Thus, Pakistan remained isolated in the world on the issue to support the Taliban.

Consequently, there were no political and diplomatic gains for Pakistan but the losses were immense. Afghan war has left an indelible imprint on Pakistan's cultural, economic and political life, especially in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and even in the adjacent settled districts of North West Frontier Province. Afghan war was also important in that it flooded Pakistan with weapons of all kinds, and imprint militancy on its political culture, especially among Islamist groups. The 'Kalashnikov culture' turned sectarian conflicts bloodier, and transformed militant organizations into paramilitary ones.[73] The Afghan war also produced criminal network that profit from trade in contraband and drugs. The collapse of the State in Afghanistan led to an increase in production of heroin, which found its way to international markets via the Pakistani port city of Karachi.[74] It has also adverse repercussions on Pakistan's regional relationships because Pakistan was seen with doubts by regional countries like Russia, Central Asian States, Iran, India and even China.

Within Pakistan, sectarian attacks on Shia by Sunni militants prompted Iranian clandestine operations on behalf of their co-religionists,

and both countries suspected each other's involvement in insurgencies among their respective ethnic Baluch populations. Pakistan Army's Taliban-friendly policy created sectarian havoc at home and became a major cause of deterioration of relations with Shiite Iran. Sectarianism rose dramatically after 1994, with the emergence of the Taliban.[75] Finally, Pakistan Taliban policy resulted in Islamabad's bitter relationship with Iran, the Central Asian Republics, and Russia, it also created serious complications with other countries, including its traditional ally China. Each of these countries viewed the Taliban rule as giving sanctuary to extremist elements. Islamabad was increasingly isolated in trying to justify the Taliban to the outside world. Keeping this entire scenario in view, it is now clear beyond any doubt that Pakistan's Taliban policy was a failure because as Pakistan could neither achieve the set objectives nor got any diplomatic support for the Taliban from the world community, might be due to the hard-line policies of the Taliban. However, Pakistan pro-Taliban policy did not achieve its avowed strategic as well as economic objectives, despite of the fact that the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

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