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From War on Terror to Taliban Resurgence: Pakistan's Strategic Objectives in Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Muhammad Saqib Gulzar

MPhil International Relations, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Central Punjab, Lahore

Dr. Shahzad Akhtar (Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Central Punjab, Lahore

Shahzad.akhtar@ucp.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates Pakistan's strategic interest in Afghanistan following the events of 9/11, 2001 by analyzing how Pakistan's regional security calculus evolved over time. This study is rooted in the theoretical premises of Realism, Security Dilemma and Strategic Depth. It examines the continuity and transformation of the Pakistan's Afghan Policy with regards to changing global and regional trends. Through a qualitative and analytical method, this paper integrates the historical evidence and contemporary developments to evaluate the strategic behaviour, diplomatic choices, and policy changes of Pakistan during 20 years of intervention and negotiation. The findings suggest that the rationale behind Pakistan's strategies were driven by classical realism, the needs of state survival, regional equilibrium, and to pursue relative power within an anarchic system. The two-fold strategy of collaboration with the United States in the War on Terror while preserving the relationships with the Taliban illustrates the efforts of Pakistan in balancing the external and internal strategies of self-reliance and state survival. The continued Security Dilemma with India coupled with the wavering alliances of Afghanistan put Pakistan in a loop of defence mechanisms which are perceived as offensive, by its neighbours, and which has driven the regional mistrust further- a central feature of realist power politics. The discussion highlights the development of the Strategic Depth doctrine of Pakistan, which has evolved from militarized intervention to a diplomatic intervention, for example, Pakistan's facilitative role in the 2020 Doha Agreement. However, the Taliban revival of 2021 highlighted the weaknesses of state-centric approaches to security and the inadequacy of the role of Pakistan. To achieve the lasting stability in Pakistan, it must transcend zero-sum paradigms not through dominance, but through economic interdependence, cooperative security, and political dialogue.

Keywords: Strategic Depth, Realism, Security Dilemma, Taliban, Post-9/11 Policy, Regional Security.

Introduction

Following the attack of September 11, 2001, there was a decisive shift in the strategic posture of Pakistan with regards to Afghanistan. Pakistan was entangled in a new regional equation, whereby it had to reconcile its old ambitions of strategic depth and requirements of an American-led global war on terror. Pakistan restructured its Afghanistan policy in the following years 2001-2021, alternating between tactical partnership with the United States, expediency with the Taliban, and a long-standing fear of India's expanding influence in Kabul. Pakistan's

strategic behaviour during this period highlights the key paradox i.e. the shifting duality, as far as both adherence to international interest in counterterrorism and to national security needs. This paradox must be understood within the broader geopolitical realities of geographical and historical insecurities of Pakistan.

Pakistan's geographic and geopolitical location provides it with leverage in Afghanistan affairs. It is bordered by Afghanistan to the northwest, China to the northeast, Iran to the west and India to the east, making it a pivotal point in the security of South and Central Asia. The instability on the Durand Line (which refers to the broader skirmishes across the border), the transnational militancy and ethnic interlinkages are all inseparable with the political orientation of Afghanistan, which has led to the inseparability of domestic and regional security of Pakistan. Traditionally, Islamabad has been keen on conciliating governments in Kabul to avoid Indian encirclement and to guarantee its western frontier in case the Indians turn against it. These are the objectives that have been included in the strategic culture of Pakistan since its inception, and it has seen its way into the policies of the country even during post 9/11 era even though the situations at the time were completely different.

The post 9/11 geopolitical situation gave both opportunities and dilemmas to Pakistan. Following the 2001, the American intervention dismantled the Taliban regime, which had previously provided Pakistan with strategic leverage in Kabul, forcing Islamabad to officially align itself with Washington in the War on Terror. This partnership had temporary diplomatic and financial gains, but it was also exposing Pakistan to competing demands. While cooperating with U.S. counterterrorism efforts, Pakistan simultaneously sought to preserve links with select Afghan factions to maintain future leverage. Washington became stricter with his demands over time, leading to mistrust, inner insecurity and foreign criticism. The tribal areas in Pakistan turned into centres of insurgency and the cross-border militancy complicated the Pakistan's relations with Kabul and Washington. These developments pushed Pakistan back toward its long-standing strategic thinking rooted in the doctrine of strategic depth.

The essence of Pakistan's Afghan Policy lies in old strategic doctrine - a redefined version of the "concept of a buffer" in the British times. In the colonial era, Afghanistan was used as a barrier to the Russian encroachment into British India. In the case of Pakistan, the doctrine took the form of counteracting the influence of India by politically and militarily engaging in Afghanistan's affairs. During the Soviet invasion (1979-1989), Pakistan served as the buffer state, as it took the side of the Mujahideen with the U.S. and Saudi support. Islamabad, later in the 1990s, when the Taliban came to power, was keen on consolidating a friendly rule in Kabul so that it could gain the western flank. However, the 9/11 attacks broke this continuity, forcing Pakistan to re-align its policy while remaining constrained by the same strategic fears that had dictated its regional perspectives over decades. Therefore, despite the fact that the dynamics of the world after 9/11 transformed, the strategic calculation of Pakistan has been based on the same premise of balancing in the face of perceived threats, especially the threat of India. Historically, Pakistan's strategic posture had been centred in the counter-balancing India through Afghanistan, the post-9/11 realities compelled it to reconfigure this approach; gradually shifting from overt military alignment to diplomatic manoeuvring.

The objectives of Pakistan in Afghanistan experienced different periods between 2001 and 2021. First it coordinated with the U.S. counterterrorism activities by providing logistical and intelligence services to eliminate the Al-Qaeda's networks. As the war dragged on, Pakistan understood the limitations of military intercessions, and it began promoting a negotiated resolution of the situation among Afghanistan stakeholders. Such positioning in line with

Pakistan helped to support the U.S. - Taliban dialogue, leading to the Doha Agreement in 2020 and eventually leading to the withdrawal of Americans.

Despite this diplomatic success, Pakistan continued to face scepticism by Afghanistan and even USA who accused it of harbouring the Taliban militants. Meanwhile, the growing presence of India in Afghanistan in terms of investments, presence and intelligence missions further increased the perception of strategic encircling by Pakistan. The result of this two-decade development was an apparent success of the Taliban back to power in 2021, which, on the one hand, justified the long-term strategic calculation of Pakistan, but on the other, once again triggered the issues of border insecurity, international scrutiny, and humanitarian crisis etc.

The evolving dynamics of Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, reveal not only shifting alliances and regional insecurities but a persistent tension between realism-driven imperatives and pursuit of strategic autonomy.

To comprehend Pakistan's strategic objectives in Afghanistan, it is necessary to move beyond the limited security discourses. It needs a multidimensional approach to comprehend the historical situation, regional conflicts, ideology, and interplay of domestic politics and external alliances. This paper will use a qualitative and analytical approach to find out how the Afghan policy formulated by Pakistan was changing within the context of the changing geopolitical realities and even the old strategic dogmas.

It argues that in its pursuit of influence in Afghanistan, shaped by its competition with India and mediated by its relationship with the United States, the policy of Islamabad in 2001-2021, generated both contradictory results: the short-term success accompanied by long-term failure. The paper concludes that the future of Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan depends on overcoming its dependence on proxies and redefining its security framework around regional integration, economic interdependence, and sustainable peace.

Literature Review

After 2001, however, academic interest in the Pakistan policy towards Afghanistan has expanded significantly, although many publications address events as single events the U.S. intervention, the Taliban resurgence or Pakistan border militancy without sufficient theorisations about how the individual components combine into a coherent strategic whole. More scholarly contributions such as those by Rashid, Fair and Haqqani have produced such detailed narrative histories (Rashid 2008; Fair, 2014; Haqqani 2010). However, limited work has been done that has entrenched the goals of Pakistan in Afghanistan within histories that capture the external constraints and the internal dynamics to the full extent 2001-2021. Significant recent works (e.g. Strategic Depth Policy in Afghanistan: Origin, Evolution and Practical Manifestations, Noor Rehman 2024) also engage with the doctrine's origins and historical continuity but tend to emphasize its origin rather than failures of the policy and trade-offs in evolving geo-political contexts.

The realist theory remains an effective instrument in explaining the Pakistan's foreign policy behaviour. Pakistan's strategic compulsions can be explained through lens of classical realism with its basic assumptions regarding the state survival, threat perception, and pursuit of power: Historically, Pakistan has remained anxious about India, insecure on its borders, and wanted to influence Kabul. It is also applicable to neoclassical realism, which integrates domestic actors and perceptions of structural pressures. In this view, the Pakistani military establishment, ideological discourses surrounding Pashtunism and Pashtunistan, and internal policy challenges such as terrorism and political instability have shaped foreign policy decisions (Rizvi 2013; Siddiq 2015). These realists' interpretations justify the relevance of the strategic depth doctrine by the Pakistani government, first developed in the 1980s and 1990s, which remained

relevant even after 9/11, albeit in a different form and even in a different level (Noor Rehman 2024; Parkes 2019).

This realist perception is further refined with the security dilemma that underlines the cyclical characteristic of mutual threat perception in South Asia; as Pakistan seeks to assert its influence in Afghanistan, it incites retaliation by Kabul and New Delhi whose counter measures as a response, further bolster the feeling of insecurity in Pakistan. The articles like the Security Dilemma in South Asia by Javaid and Kamal (2015) and Understanding Role of Security Dilemma in South Asia: Implications to Strategic Stability (Qazi and Khalid, 2021) show that the diplomatic, economic, and intelligence activities of India in Afghanistan are not only viewed as the benign foreign policy but as a strategic encirclement of Pakistan. Such perception, in its turn, influences the strategic choices of Pakistan, turning the policy towards cooperation (with U.S. and Taliban), and competition (with India). Recent scholarship posits that the military's institutional prioritization of Indian threat has distorted Pakistan's counter-terrorism framework, systematically. This has resulted in security paradox wherein measures intended to bolster external security against India inadvertently exacerbates internal threats from non-state militant groups (Shah, 2011).

These theoretical pressures evolved over time as reflected in various empirical studies. As an example, Factors Responsible for Strategic Shift in the Post-9/11 Afghan Policy of Pakistan (Baloch and Bashir, 2022) demonstrates that Islamabad near-total cooperation with the United States in the early 2000s to a more calibrated stance in the 2010s, balancing between gaining leverage with Taliban actors and having to withstand the pressure of the U.S. Likewise, the Strategic Depth in Afghanistan: Ambivalence After the Taliban-US Agreement of 2020 (Sarfraz, Moawia and Jabbar, 2024) claims that although continues to occupy a central place in Pakistan's policy discourse,, it has become increasingly hollow in practice due to the costs associated with diplomacy, internal security, and increased nationalist narratives. Analysis of post-withdrawal landscape challenges the notion of Pakistani strategic victory (Grare, 2003). The study posits that the anticipated dividends of a client regime in Kabul were illusory, as evidenced by the rapid bilateral deterioration. This outcome demonstrates a fundamental principal-agent problem within Pakistan's security policy: the proxy (the Taliban) ultimately pursued its own interests exposing the sponsor's (Pakistan's) miscalculation and lack of effective control.

The doctrine of strategic depth employed by the military strategists of Pakistan, has long shaped Islamabad's approach towards Afghanistan. It was being historically used by the military strategists to have an influence in Afghanistan's political and social landscape. (Noor Rehman 2024; Parkes 2019). Siddiqa powerfully extends this analysis, demonstrating through evidence that how Pakistan's strategic depth policy nurtured the jihadists proxies for regional influence has corroded state institutions and fragmented the internal security apparatus. She argues that this strategy has directly fuelled the ascendancy of Tahrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) thereby generating an existential internal threat that now parallel the established external threat from India.

Scholars increasingly recognizes the doctrine's dual nature, both as a strategic asset and as a source of vulnerability. Articles such as Considered Chaos: Revisiting Pakistan's Strategic Depth Policy in Afghanistan (Parkes, 2019) and Pakistan Strategic Depth Policy in Afghanistan: Origin, Evolution and Practical Manifestations (Noor Rehman, 2024) traces how the development of strategic depth has generated the serious internal security blowback i.e; the spillover of insurgency, loss of state legitimacy. A notable effort to bridge this longitudinal gap is Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy: A Twenty-Year Retrospective (2001-2021) (Giustozzi. 2021), which provides

a phased analysis of policy shifts, explicitly linking each phase to changing U.S. priorities, the Taliban's evolution, and the escalating domestic costs for Pakistan, thereby offering a holistic narrative that connects the entire two-decade period.

The author has analysed that a clear research gap exists, only a small number of studies provide a comprehensive longitudinal, phase analysis between 2001 and 2021, which contains a combination of doctrine, threat perception, external alignment (U.S. India and Taliban), and domestic political cost of those alignments. The emerging papers such as *Analysing Pakistan Security concerns and Strategic Depth Policy in Afghanistan* (Zaheer Ali and Binyameen, 2024) and *Pakistan Afghanistan Policy: Strategic depth, Refugee politics, and the humanitarian cost of security policies* (Ali, Rehman Khan and Khan, 2025) offers synthetic framework that incorporates the issues associated with refugees, the cross-border trade in economic terms (implications of CPEC), and the humanitarian cost of security policies. However, even these works tend to restrict their analytical scope to post-2015 or post-2020 context leaving the previous transitions (2001-2008, or 2008-2014) are less analytically related.

Overall, the current literature presents the strategic objectives of Pakistan in Afghanistan as rooted in realist rationales, the pursuit of survival, balance of power and preservation of influence. The security dilemma contextualizes Pakistan's reciprocal suspicion with India and the fear of non-state actor's threats. Meanwhile the strategic doctrine represents a continuing doctrinal constant rather than a transient policy response. Nevertheless, the empirical data indicate that in the next twenty years the trade-offs between the tactical benefits (alliances, influence, proxy leverage) and the strategic costs (terrorism spillover, diplomatic backlash, internal instability) increased in size. This paper aims to bridge the analytical gap by providing a unified, chronologically organized examination of the development of the objectives of Pakistan, the explanations of them through the theory, and policy failures or successes in the period 2001-2021.

Methodology

This study employs the qualitative, historical-descriptive, and analytical design approach to examine the strategic aims of Pakistan in Afghanistan (2001-2021). It primarily uses secondary sources such as academic books, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and official statements to trace how the foreign policy of Pakistan evolved in response to shifting regional and global forces. The study is interpretive, emphasizing contextualization and continuity rather than generalizing. The collected data has been analysed thematically and chronologically in three stages: the alignment of the United States with Pakistan (2001-2008), the Policy recalibration amid realignments at the regional level (2009-2014), and strategic repositioning following the Taliban resurgence and withdrawal of the United States (2015-2021).

Theoretical frameworks, including theories of Realism, Security Dilemma and Strategic Depth are used to analyse Pakistan's behaviour as a security seeking state that is going through the region competition as well as internal constraints. The use of authoritative secondary data and the previously conducted scholarly interviews provide analytical depth, methodological consistency and transparency.

Findings and Analysis

Between 2001 and 2021, Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan was shaped by a complex interplay of geopolitical imperatives, security, and ideological considerations. For Islamabad, Afghanistan was not merely a series of disjointed tactical responses; rather, it was a consistent, overarching objective of acquiring strategic depth during a dynamically shifting regional and global order. Pakistan has historically viewed Afghanistan as a buffer state and a potential sphere of external influence, particularly that of India. Following the realist paradigm, i.e. Afghanistan, as a matter

of survival, Pakistan's post-9/11 policies sought to obtain enduring stability on its western frontier while retaining influence in Kabul.

Thus, the evolution of the policy from 2001 to 2021 can be understood as adaptive continuity, wherein Islamabad, within the bounds of the South Asian security dilemma, responded to changing threats and shifting alliances.

The period following the September 11 attacks saw the partnership of Pakistan along with the US (2001-2008) as not ideological alignment but pragmatic realism. Pakistan had the threat of becoming isolated by the world, economic sanctions, and US coercive pressure which led Islamabad to support the War on Terror. Such cooperation was in the interest of Pakistan's regime security and in pursuit of the country's strategic relevance in an evolving geopolitical landscape. Partnerships of this kind, however, have their own problems. Islamabad was reluctant to face what was termed as strategic encirclement with a pro-Indian regime in Afghanistan, while at the same time, Pakistan was apprehensively positioned with the diplomatic encirclement of Pakistan.

The defeat of its once ally, Taliban, deprived Islamabad of the strategic depth it had cultivated throughout the 1990s. Pakistan's external behaviour reflected an internal paradox: the state tried to represent itself as being on the frontline ally in War on Terror, while privately maintaining lines to the Taliban factions as hedge against uncertainty in future. This conduct is in line with realist predilection of states in an anarchic system to engage in self-help policies even when they disrupt collective security interests.

The second phase of the Afghanistan policy in Pakistan between 2009 and 2014 reflected an increasing disappointment in the U.S. approach and gradual re-alignment approach towards regional balancing. Due to the increasing insurgent violence within Pakistan, the domestic cost of alliance with the United States became politically untenable. The strategic calculus of Islamabad thus returned to the logic of the security dilemma the defence by one actor is viewed as an offensive by another and a mistrust spiral starts. Increasing the presence of India in Afghanistan in terms of diplomatic and developmental work intensified the perception of the threat by Pakistan. The Pakistan military in turn re-entered into dealings with certain elements of the Taliban not only as ideology allies but as leverage tools to shape a positive post-withdrawal settlement. It was also in this period that the conceptual re-emerging of Strategic Depth conceptually redefined; the notion was no longer interpreted as the territorial buffer state but as political leverage, that ensures that the Afghan territory could not be used to provide a threat to the western front of Pakistan. This policy was thus defensive realism and pragmatic revisionism: to seek stability in Afghanistan but on the condition that this would not disturb the security of Pakistan itself.

The final phase (2015-2021) was being marked by the gradual re-legitimatization of Pakistan as an indispensable stakeholder in the Afghan peace process. The U.S. military withdrawal and the Taliban resurgence provided diplomatic space to Islamabad to rebrand itself, no longer as a potential spoiler in the region but as a possible facilitator of the dialogue. The historic relations of Pakistan with the Taliban facilitated it to mediate between Washington and the insurgent leadership to a 2020 Doha Agreement by engaging in diplomatic relations with China, Russia and Qatar. Yet, beneath this diplomatic success there were the underlying long-term demands of the realist framework and security considerations. Pakistan's acceptance of a negotiated settlement was not an acceptance of peace on a normative balancing. Rather it was just a strategically necessary decision to contain the spillover of the civil war, control Indian dominance, and maintain a manageable relationship with an assertive reinstatement of the Taliban.

. The outcome of the agreement, particularly the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban's rapid takeover in 2021, reinforced Pakistan's long-held belief of Pakistan that there could not be any stability in Kabul without the necessity to acknowledge the primacy of the Taliban. It also revealed the limitations of Pakistan's influence the new regime proved far less compliant than anticipated, revealing the inherent contradictions of a proxy-based strategic depth.

Pakistan's Afghan policy over the last twenty years (2001-2021) demonstrates that Realism remains a highly relevant concept in explaining its foreign policy. Domestic goals of the state to survive and its regional hegemony usually contradicted the international requirements of collaboration and democratization promoted by the international community. The Security Dilemma further intensified regional insecurity: the mutual distrust between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India created a continuous cycle of suspicion and reactive politics that consistently undermined the prospects of stability. Meanwhile, the principle of Strategic Depth, though it has taken different forms and configurations, remained at the core of Pakistan's strategic imagination was, serving as both a quest for security and a response to its deep-rooted sense of vulnerability. The one of the Pakistani policies reasoning namely, the survival instinct of the Realism and the restraint agency of the Security Dilemma and the strategic culture which has been cultivated over the decades together with the concept of Strategic Depth can be therefore explained using either of the theoretical perspectives.

In 2021, Pakistan succeeded in achieving a form of tactical victory- restoring its presence in the political transition of Afghanistan, but at the expense of heightened strategic ambiguity. The Taliban return to power was seen as fulfillment of Pakistan's long-term objectives of securing strategic depth, though in reality, it reinforced a fragile and asymmetric relationship characterized by minimal control, and persistent mistrust between the two countries (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). The results thus indicate that the strategic goals that Pakistan has set in Afghanistan have been sporadic rather than systematic: oscillating between collaboration and conflict, reliance and independence, as a reaction to the regional balance of power. This pattern represents not a departure from realism but its complete personification; a continuous negotiation between insecurity and influence that constitutes the geopolitical identity of Pakistan in South Asia.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the strategic conduct of Pakistan towards Afghanistan from 2001 and 2021 can only be understood in the context of the structural realities of regional insecurity and the global power imbalance. The history of the development of the Pakistani policy can be described as the example of the classical realist survival in an anarchic international system. Governments, civilian and military, consistently shaped policy less around ideological commitments or moral principles and more around regime legitimacy, security imperatives, and regional relevance. The Afghan arena, therefore, became a place of reflection and experimentation of the strategic culture in Pakistan where national interests were determined through the logic of the threat perception and balancing of power.

According to the realist approach, the policies of Pakistan post-9/11 were a manifestation of what John Mearsheimer (2001) would call an offensive realism approach to it, which implies a maximisation of relative power to mitigate external weaknesses. The economic benefits and diplomatic status that first attracted Pakistan to cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition, however, also revealed some fundamental contradictions of its long-term goals. Through its collaboration with Washington, Pakistan gained the short-term security and aid advantages but at the same time avoided having any Afghan government completely on terms with India or the U.S. at the expense of Pakistan. This two-track policy illustrates the core realist dilemma

between survival and credibility, as states often adopt divergent or even contradictory strategies to preserve autonomy under external pressure.

The conceptual formulation used by Herz (1950) and Jervis (1978) on the Security Dilemma are central to understanding the predicament of post-9/11 Pakistan (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). The only offensive aspect of the situation was that Afghanistan and India viewed the actions taken by Pakistan as offensive encroachment, even when Pakistan was supporting Taliban factions. In response, Afghanistan's growing engagement with India and the United States further heightened Pakistan's sense of insecurity, creating a reciprocal cycle of mistrust. This relationship had been seen especially after the year 2008, when the investments made by India in developing Afghanistan, collaboration in intelligence affairs as well as diplomatic presence in the country were seen by Islamabad as efforts to encircle Pakistan. The outcome was a stalemate in the region where none of the actors attained any real security since they all aimed at increasing their own standing at the expense of others. The insecurity situation in South Asia therefore cannot be attributed to the radical violence of extremists or ineffective governance; this is rooted in the structural logic of suspicion that characterizes the regional order.

In this context, the Strategic Depth as a concept, works as a doctrine as well as a metaphor to the geopolitical imagination in Pakistan. Originally created by the military institution of Pakistan in the cold war period, it indicated that it was necessary to preserve political dominance in Afghanistan where it could be encircled by India, and a back-up position could be taken in the case of war. This idea changed after 9/11 when it shifted its form to political advantage, becoming the possibility to influence the power structures of Afghanistan so that they would not pose a threat to the western frontier of Pakistan. According to such scholars as Christine Fair (2014) and Rizvi (2013), this obsession with strategy is rooted in the fact that Pakistan remains an identity-less country, whose foreign policies cannot be discussed without taking into consideration internal vulnerability of the state. The results of this case study confirm the idea that strategic depth is still relevant to the thinking of Pakistan, but in a more indirect and less militaristic way, as in the facilitation of the 2020 Doha talks.

The Taliban resurgence of 2021 was a victory and a paradox to Pakistan. On the one hand, it achieved the long-term goal of Islamabad not to allow the pro-India regime to be established in Kabul and regain control over the situation in Afghanistan. On the contrary, it brought back the old fears cross-border militancy and flows of refugees and the uncertainty of the Taliban rule decisions. The independent decision-making process and unwillingness to stand with Pakistan was an independent decision of the Taliban, which showed the boundaries of Islamabad's control even after twenty years of political and financial investments. This finding supports the claim made by realists that alliances in an anarchical system are fluid and transactional in nature and remain so long as there is the convergence of interests. Ideological proximity also ended up being a short-lived strategic depth when faced by the Taliban which sought its own national legitimacy to Pakistan.

There is also an emerging change in the strategy of Pakistan, a slow transition out of military-oriented strategies and towards conservative diplomacy, which is addressed in the discussion. Since the U.S. left Afghanistan and China was building strength with the Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan started redefining its Afghanistan policy as regional connectivity, trade, and multilateral relations. Nevertheless, this is limited by the security dilemma that has been present with India and the instability of the political set up in Afghanistan. The realist and power politics still reign in the foreign affairs of Pakistan although the international and regional relations are drifting towards cooperative security structures.

Finally, the post-9/11 policy of Pakistan in Afghanistan is an indication of how geopolitical conventional reasoning can be persistent in a fast-evolving world order. Although realist imperatives can be used to explain most of the behaviours of Pakistan, it also lays stress on structural constraints of the approach. The excessive dependence on the strategy depth and the zero-sum calculations has cost Pakistan its long-term interests on several occasions by creating regional distrust. The only way that a sustainable approach would be achieved is by going beyond the security dilemma and trying to engage in collaboration, economic integration and confidence-building practice, which cannot be achieved by realism, yet is the key to the South Asian stability.

Conclusion

The strategic goals of Pakistan in Afghanistan between the years 2001 and 2021 developed in a tangle of historical insecurities, regional conflicts and changing global alignments. The environment after 9/11 changed the strategic calculus of Pakistan that had hitherto been a Cold War-style search to strategic depth into a multidimensional struggle to survive, legitimacy, and regional relevance. Even though the initial years were characterized by an opportunistic turn with the War on Terror led by the U.S., the long-term goals of Pakistan were founded on the classical principles of realist challenge of power and security. The two-fold policy of collaboration with the United States with retention of its bargaining power over the Taliban was not an exception but an aspect of the structural tensions of its regional policy.

The results highlight the fact that the Afghan policy adopted by Pakistan was less influenced by ideological sympathy and more informed by the reality of Realism and the security dilemma that has always existed between Pakistan and India. The actions undertaken to improve national security, be it tactical partnerships or political intervention, were seen as offensive to other actors in the region, strengthening the feeling of suspicion between them. The history of instability along the western front, the ability of militant structures to endure and the recurrent failure of trust between Islamabad and Kabul depict the long-term effects of this predicament.

Although this has been altered over the years, the Strategic Depth doctrine remained the strategic consciousness of Pakistan. It was manifested in the early 2000s through secret involvement in the affairs of the Afghan factions; by the 2010s, developed into diplomatic assistance in the peace talks. However, the Taliban return to power once again in 2021 revealed the vulnerability of the long-term vision of Pakistan. Although this has been able to bring a friendly government in Kabul temporarily, the Taliban independent stand and internal crisis restricted the influence of Pakistan. This dilemma represents the shortcomings of state-centrism in Realism in a region where non-state actors, identity politics, and transnational ideologies have sunk the lines between power and security.

In theory, this paper confirms that the Pakistani strategic thinking is congruent with the logic of defensive Realism- a strategy that seeks to maintain the balance in the region, and not expansion. Nevertheless, its implementation frequently had some unforeseen effects that destabilized the interiors and collaboration among the nations. The alternation of coercion and diplomacy is an indicator of a hybrid style of conduct conditioned by structural insecurity and historical legacies and expediency.

To look ahead, the redefinition of its security paradigm beyond its zero-sum calculations is the problem that Pakistan will face. The way forward of Pakistan and Afghanistan lies in ending military dominance and transition to political involvement, regional rivalry to regional connectivity by cooperation. Other initiatives such as cross border trade corridors, cooperating in counterterrorism and multi-lateral dialogue in the multilateral level such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization may offer the model of sustainable peace.

In simple terms, the two decades of warfare in Afghanistan have been a power, fear and ambition strategic ride between the South Asian forces. The period 2001-2021 is not only another demonstration of the realist statecraft, but also an experience of how traditional security mindset might be. Ultimately, Pakistan's optimal strategic vision lies in a stable Afghanistan that is independent, non-hostile, yet friendly, economically dependent and reconciled within the broader South-Asian region.

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