

The Troubled Triangle: US-Pakistan Relations under the Taliban Shadow

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai (London/New York: Routledge, 2021, 192 pages)

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Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai's book entitled 'The Troubled Triangle: US-Pakistan Relations under the Taliban Shadow' tries to untie the Gordian knot of the US-Pakistan relations in the post 9/11 era. Yousafzai's account starts from a distant point in time and maps the trajectory of US-Pakistan relations since inception of the latter because alternating periods of convergence and divergence of interests are the mainstay of US-Pakistan relations. Yousafzai's account is packed with the historical context irreducible to understanding both the topic and the enduring patterns of the region. Genesis of the Taliban movement, their consolidation of power, and how they emerged as an insurgency after their government was overthrown, are extensively discussed in this account.

The book proposes a new theoretical spinoff of Stephen M. Walt's Balance of Threat (BoT) theory and contends that Pakistan's relation with the Taliban was an informal alliance between a small state and a non-state actor to balance a threat. This unique dynamic has been dubbed as the 'New Balance of Threat Theory,' the applicability of which is yet to be checked across different cases. The book gives a detailed account of the enabling environment for the rise of Taliban and how Afghan Civil war was instrumental in their genesis. Taliban has been identified as a religio-political movement which emerged to fill the void created by the civil war. It explains the structure of Taliban, how they organized themselves and what factors contributed to their swift rise to power. Taliban's foreign relations is an

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important aspect which is not overlooked, particularly their relationship with the Pakistan and acceptability of Taliban government for the US.

Things drastically changed after the inflection point of 9/11 (September 11, 2001) and the Taliban government became the first casualty in the US global war on terror (WoT). Taliban were thrown out of power because they were labeled as abettors who refused to handover the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks on the US mainland. The book also discusses at length the immediate post 9/11 US policy towards Afghanistan, Bush Doctrine, and the US Counterterrorism policy. The initial blitz of the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was celebrated but the quicksand of a protracted insurgency soon pulled coalition forces even deeper into Afghanistan and the overthrow of Taliban government became a false victory. Most of the Taliban top leadership slipped into Pakistan and even the principal perpetrator, Osama Bin Laden slipped out of Afghanistan unchecked.

Later, the Taliban emerged as a new force labeled as the neo-Taliban. When the US President Barack Obama entered the Oval Office, a change in the US policy was signaled, 'we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.'² Obama dealt with the Afghan problem differently; on one side due to the compulsions of a broken American political spectrum he ordered troop surges to stabilize the security situation in Afghanistan, and on another hand, he pushed both Afghan government and Pakistan to bring Taliban to the negotiating table. Obama ordered troop surge and a withdrawal deadline to circumvent the broken political spectrum because the republicans criticized him for being soft on national security and the democrats were furious at troop surges. Author also analyzes the impact of US hyphenation of Afghanistan with Pakistan in its Af-Pak policy. The

² "Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009.

blueprint of a withdrawal was there, and the US President Donald Trump expedited the process. Yousafzai's account extensively discusses Trump's South Asia policy, US-Taliban Doha Talks, and the US President Joe Biden's final winding up of the longest war in the US history.

The author highlights the historical connection between Pakistan and Taliban, and the strategic compulsions of the former to support the latter in 1994. The alleged support of Pakistan to the neo-Taliban and how the US perceived Pakistan as directly harming its interests in Afghanistan, persisted stubbornly as an irritant in the US-Pakistan relations and at times tainting the ties to the point that Durand line was closed in protest by Pakistan. These bumps in the US-Pakistan relations pushed the latter to diversify its foreign relations and pushed it closer to China and Russia. This account charts out the policies of the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations to tackle Pakistan's alleged support to the Taliban, but all pressure tactics of the US failed to alter Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan.

The book carries extensive interviews of leading experts on the region, along with the Taliban's former spokesperson at Doha political office. It is evident that both the US and Taliban faced different pressures which pushed them towards a peace deal. War is not an end but a means to further some political ends, so a perpetual war made no sense and Taliban knew this. On the other hand, there was a growing realization in Washington that Taliban were an indigenous force deeply entrenched within Afghan society making it impossible to eliminate them therefore; a pragmatic approach of withdrawal was adopted instead of further draining the US blood and money on this war. American domestic political environment has also been instrumental in the 'go back home' mode because the economic hardship and social problems at home took precedence over fighting foreign wars.

Moreover, Pakistan's constructive role is also discussed, which facilitated both sides to sit together and decide their zone of possible agreement. The post-withdrawal challenges will persist, but the world should not put Afghanistan on the backburner again. We have seen the result of ignoring Afghanistan in the past which created an international security black hole and pushed the region and the US into the longest war. To sum up, this account is a rearview mirror which has highlighted many blind spots that are overlooked in most of the accounts. The author has brilliantly used his knowledge of the region and years long study of Taliban. He knows the nuances and subtleties of the region and its people which makes it an insider account and adds to its value.