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The Post-9/11 United States' Shift Strategy in Afghanistan: An Explanation in the Perspective of Offensive - Defensive Realism and Offshore Strategy

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Abstract

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush attacked Afghanistan in the name of War on Terror. He intended not only to topple the Taliban government but also to extend diplomatic, economic and military support to anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Offensive realism was the driving force behind the US strategy to achieve its objectives in its war against terror in Afghanistan. But strategic guerilla war by the Taliban fighters and rise of China especially after 2008 have made it very difficult for the US defense policymakers to continue the offensive approach in Afghanistan. Thus, the US strategy of relentless security competition and power struggle, as imagined by the offensive realism, is finally unsuccessful and unconvincing after prolonged Afghan war. As a result, the US had to change its strategy in Afghanistan based on defensive realism and offshore balance and decided to tackle it with the war-cum-peace strategies from defensive realists' perspective.

Keywords: Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, Offshore balance, Afghanistan, United States.



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Introduction

Realism as leading theory of International Relations offers dominant explanation for the state of war in the international system. Morgenthau defines power as the control of men over the actions and minds of other men ([1948]: 1955: 26). Realists believe in three characteristics i.e. stateism, survival, and self-help. For realists, stateism is the central piece. State is the main actor while other actors have less significance. According to realists, in an international anarchy, state competes with other countries for security and power in zero-sum basis. On the grounds of international order and national security powerful countries are able to overturn the principle of non-intervention, as proven by the behavior of United States in Afghanistan. Firstly, a state is to shape its power domestically and secondly to accommodate power globally. So, international politics is the struggle for power (Heywood, 2011).

The international arena is regarded by the realists as a competitive phase, where main currency is power. Although all realist theories shared this idea, but substantial differences exist within this paradigm. There are different labels within the realist school of thought, such as classical realism, neoclassical realism, and offensive realism and defensive realism (PashaKhanlou. 2013). The focus of this article is on offensive realism and defensive realism. It gives a systematic account of why dangerous and intense power competition is an integral part of international system and why efforts to avoid conflicts through engagement remain open. It is argued that the United States' strategy of relentless security competition and power struggle, as imagined by the offensive realism, is finally unsuccessful and unconvincing. The paradigm of offensive realism gives rise to large amount of reaction within the discipline of international politics.

Both theories, offensive realism and defensive realism, relate international relations to the structure of international system and these two forces are the motivating forces behind state behavior towards the international politics. John Mearsheimer in his book *"The Tragedy of great Power Politics"* argues that it is a very reasonable policy for states to acquire maximum power and to seek domination and hegemony if the environment is suitable (Mearsheimer, 2001). According to him offensive realism stands on five "bedrock" assumptions: international system is anarchical, powerful states have inevitably certain offensive military capabilities, countries can never be certain of other states' intentions, survival is the prime objective of powerful states, powerful states are rational actors. Kenneth Waltz (1979), a defensive realist, claims that it is not justifiable for countries to seek to increase their world power share, because the system is mechanized in a way that becomes destructive for excessive power gain of states (ibid).

The rationale behind choosing realist approach in this article is based on the Bush Doctrine; it was based on an offensive strategy of maximum power projection when United States was the sole superpower in 2001. This strategy was based on two basic principles. The first strategy was pre-emptive war. It means that offensive and proactive move against terrorist organizations and terrorist attacks instead of defensive precautions. The second is primacy or hegemony. It means that no other state or actor should be able to challenge the power of United States. This doctrine asks for pursuing terrorists and the countries that harbor them. It also reflects that the "President Bush was a clear-eyed realist". His National Security advisor Condoleezza Rice clearly: "I am a realist" (Wittkopf et al, 2008). This approach of the then US leadership was clearly very close to realist's ideas.

One of the main questions of foreign affairs is why countries fight with each other and how states maintain peace and stability. The United States started war in Afghanistan in 2001. The prime goal of United States invasion in Afghanistan after 9/11 is to extend and preserve US hegemony and

interests in the region. In order to explain how it happened and how different ideas shaped United States foreign policy, this paper discusses realist approach that was adopted by the decision makers of United States. The war on terror in Afghanistan relates to the attempts undertaken by the United States and its eye partners to weed and destroy militant organizations allegedly found responsible for world terrorism before and after 9/11. A strategy that they devised for a long war addresses the major threat to US security from non-state actors and supports Afghanistan's rogue State (ibid).

The United States approach in Afghanistan has switched from offensive to defensive realism for various reasons. The first tangible force was the momentum of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Resultantly, Taliban took control about major portion of the country and defeated Afghan security forces. The second most important reason is China's power status; the global balance of power has shifted toward China since 2001, that US may not have even thought, before intervening in Afghanistan. The US has changed its defensive approach as a result of this broader shift since China's rise which has become most obvious after 2008 and especially since Xi Jinping became premier.

The research paper has been divided into five main parts. After the abstract, the first part relies on an analysis of the theoretical nature of offensive and defensive realism. The section two discusses the theoretical dynamics of offensive and defensive realism and seeks to provide a framework to evolve United States' policies in Afghanistan. The third section has argued that United States' Afghan policy intends to maintain an offshore balance against China since the rise of China. The fourth section is about the role of other stakeholders in Afghanistan crisis. The concluding part summarizes and recapitulates the arguments built in the paper. This research paper contributes to fill this gap in literature to some extent by looking at United States' strategy shift from the theoretical foundations of offensive to defensive realism and offshore strategy in the region.

United States' Foreign Policy based on Offensive Realism

Offensive realists hold that countries optimize relative power in contrast to defensive realism that argues that countries endeavor for only an 'appropriate' amount of power (Bergsten, 1980). International system is anarchical because there is no global Leviathan that protects the states. Consequently, states are not guaranteed that their opponents will not turn to arms against them. Survival is the prime aim of independent nations, since it is the requirement for all other ends. States are rational actors pursuing survival strategies (Mearsheimer and Stephen, 2016). United States' foreign policy goals depend on different factors. These can be defined by decision-makers' domestic policies, ideologies and actions, values of the United States' culture and distinctive political principles, interest of lobby groups, and economic interests, etc.

Rosato and Schuessler (2011) propose a realist theory of United States' foreign policy, and argue that United States should compete against the powerful states in order to ensure security (Rosato and John, 2011). In contrast, Elman (1996) claims that neorealist theories can be applied to make foreign policy predictions. United States, as a powerful state, innately holds offensive military capabilities. It cannot be predicted about the ambitions of other opponent states; therefore, primary goal of powerful state is survival (Elman, 1996). United States as a rational actor acted to strengthen its geo-strategies in Afghanistan. United States felt severe security threat after the 9/11 attacks. This time the threat came not from a rival major force, but from allegedly Al-Qaeda non-state actors. In order to counter threat, the United States ordered Taliban government in Afghanistan to extradite the alleged leader and mastermind of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban government in Afghanistan refused to comply with the orders of the United States. Therefore, United States under Bush administration initiated the War-on-Terror in Afghanistan

with the objective to overthrow the Taliban government and for preserving security (Rahman, 2019). Manfredi (2008) claims that invasion of United States was a direct response to the 9/11 attacks and the rationale behind the war remain deeply rooted in national security issues. It was meant to decimate Al-Qaeda and its protectors and to deter future terrorist attacks by different countries, groups or individuals against the United States (Manfredi, 2008). Taliban regime collapsed by December 2001 and Mullah Umar escaped but United States' intervention in Afghanistan did not stop.

Realists don't believe and want to see world organizations, as long as serve for their state's interests. If world organizations enable their state to benefit in terms of power, then they would help them. If an intervention in a certain condition and suitable environment, whether unilateral or multilateral, would help to increase the power of a state, they might support it. Mearsheimer claims that "Great powers don't work together to promote world order for their own sake". Instead, everyone is seeking to increase their own share of the global order. The specific international order obtained at any time is primarily a by-product of the self-interested actions of the great powers of the globe (ibid). The invasion of Afghanistan was approved by several realists on the ground that there was strong and enough justification for an attack.

During the Cold War, realist assumptions led to the United States foreign policy. But after 9/11, realist policies come up again to explain the foreign policy of United States. Realism provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the post-9/11 United States military response. However, it was difficult for realists to examine the 9/11. Firstly, there was a war on terror against al-Qaeda, which was not a State but a militant group. Yet the war was conducted against a rogue state under Taliban harboring al-Qaeda. Secondly, balance of power did not occur which is one of the pillars of realism, it means that weak states are unable to protect themselves from the powerful states. Walt explains this situation not as counterbalancing but a soft balancing (Walt, 2011).

State-building of Afghanistan was internationalized as UN became officially recognized institutional assistance coordinator. Within the Bonn Agreement of 2001, the principles of state building set down in the agreement included safeguarding human rights, developing social justice, and democratic transition, etc. However, the security issue remained the primary focus. Projects to develop and train Afghan military forces were immediately initiated and sustained over the years. Despite that US faced serious security challenge to its physical appearance in Afghanistan due to Taliban control almost of the country having 2.5 million people. Because of this changed situation on the ground US policymakers decided to shift its offensive oriented strategy to defensive ones. After defeat of the dual authority of Kabul government at the hands of Taliban and US decision makers decided to rethink about their interest in Afghanistan. For this reason, in Afghanistan, the United States' administration has moved from offensive to defensive realism.

The United States' Shift-Strategy in Afghanistan

After 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush attacked Afghanistan under the War on Terror. Initially, he intended only to topple the Taliban government (The Guardian, 2001). It has been claimed by Rashid (2008) that the United States' administration immediately sought to announce conquest, leave Afghanistan. However, Bush administration, surprisingly, has changed its policy in Afghanistan from offensive to defensive realism due to failure of its initial expectations with regard to Afghanistan war and due to China's rise in the region (Rashid, 2008). About twenty years of armed hostilities against the Taliban militants have come to an end in a deadlock leading United States virtually begging for a ceasefire. It is definite indication of defeat when a powerful state calls for peace. But the Taliban will not allow the Americans to leave easily (Hussain, 2019).

China's rise has posed a danger to United States stability in the region as China is in position to acquire regional hegemony. Given the established trend of power politics, China would undoubtedly seek a dominant strategic role within the region, as it has the capacity to challenge regional order. The United States requires sufficient military and political presence in the region to shift from an offensive strategy of maximum power projection to a more defensive strategy of offshore balancing since the rise of China (Ross, 2013).

Later on, keeping in view the changing scenario in the region, the United States has reviewed or changed its policy based on defensive realism and only sought an 'appropriate' amount of power. America's attempts to accelerate the peace process are obviously motivated by the clear and frequent intention of President Trump to end United States' long-standing engagement in Afghan war that has consumed too much in resources and blood (Lodhi, 2020).

Internationalism versus Isolationists trends

There is considerable ambivalence in the United States about its hegemony. Historically, the United States' foreign policy has alternated among internationalist and isolationist moods. Throughout the post-cold war period, internationalism was offset by a new cost consciousness and in response to global displacement and free trade a new isolationist camp was born. However, the 9/11 terrorist attack paved the way for public support for internationalism in distant wars. Recently, the most noticeable momentum in the Taliban insurgency has contributed to the opposition of the protected conflict in Afghanistan. After Taliban control of fifty-seven percent of the region, relentlessly pressurizing the demoralized forces of NATO and Afghanistan. Hard economic conditions at home and changing situation in Afghanistan has spurred a new isolationist trend in United States (Akram, 2019).

Unilateralism vs. Multilateralism

Unilateralism vs. multilateralism is another area of United States' ambivalence. United States government has been skeptical about the United Nations and international organizations since 1990s, generally preferring a more authoritarian approach. The United States led a war with a little number of allies in Iraq in 2003 without the approval of United Nations. This war marked the peak of United States unilateralism. In the meanwhile, NATO allies in Afghanistan had gained new significance. Furthermore, United States and its allies claimed their legal authority backed by NATO and received strong international support from China, Russia and a few other countries. Critics, however, have portrayed the war as unfair and unjustifiable. United States and its allies cannot be regarded as legal authorities as the invasion in Afghanistan has not been authorized by United Nations resolution.

Offshore Balancing Strategy and United States Foreign Policy

Offshore balancing is the second noteworthy axiom of offensive realists. In order to maintain a regional BOP and prevent the emergence of a regional hegemony, offshore balance is a major strategy conducted by an offshore state (Prifti, 2007). Offshore balancing is a technique where the United States as a superpower used its influence over the China in Asian region (ibid).

According to offensive realism, the ultimate aim of powerful countries including United States is to acquire global hegemony. In reality, gaining global and regional supremacy is nearly impossible for any country, because it is too difficult to maintain control across the world and on the territories of distant major powers (ibid). The United States, therefore, wants to gain regional domination and thwart the emergence of other regional hegemons. In this context, it is argued that United States,

as a western regional hegemon and a pursuing global hegemon, is trying to maintain its hegemony in South Asia by intervening Afghanistan and thus it is seeking to avert the rise of China.

As a regional power, China is trying to increase the power gap between itself and other countries in the region so that no country of continent Asia has the ability and resources to threaten China. As a powerful state, China is trying to compel the United States military troops to leave Asia (ibid). What would be the reaction of the US to the rise of China? Christopher Layne (1997) and Thomas Christensen (1999), offensive realists, define United States as an offshore balancing player in East Asia (Layne, 1997). Kang (2007) also argues that United States' is trying to balance offshore in the region, as United States influence has declined dramatically in East-Asia in the last thirty years and other countries in the region want China to have the key position (Christensen, 1999).

United States remains skeptical about the role of China in South Asia. China's preeminence, military expansion and modernization, and the annual 8.5% growth in defense budget have further increased concerns of United States about China's strategic purpose (Rosato and Schuessler, 2011). Given the increasing limitations on America's military spending, considerable domestic demands for social security and the possibility of slow economic development, ongoing financing for aircraft carriers challenges the US policy of offensive realism in the region to balance the rise of China. It would restrict funds for more cost-effective and capable platforms, such as submarines, Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) and Remotely Piloted Aircrafts (RPAs) deployed on less costly, less vulnerable, and on smaller surface ships and/or submarines. Moreover, China is better positioned than the United States to compete in cost-based arms races; it also has a higher total military spending than total increases in the United States (Rahman, 2019).

Role of Other Stakeholders of Afghan Crisis

The dynamism of the Afghan Taliban insurgency after the defeat of demoralized security forces. Pakistan is considered to be the most dominant country in its perceived relations with the ascending Taliban. Islamabad acknowledged its role in arranging for high-level Taliban leaders to engage in the recent Abu Dhabi talks. In recent years, however, influence of Iran has increased significantly. It has strengthened its ties and assistance to Taliban carefully while preserving its conventional links to the members of the former Northern Alliance. Iran will not make it easier for United States to withdraw from Afghanistan. Russia took up the game, opened cooperation with the Taliban and is trying to initiate an intra-Afghan dialogue, in the 'Moscow-Format'. India is worried about the reinstatement of a Taliban-led government by an Afghan political settlement. India is fighting now with its good offices in Russia and Iran to retain its "assets" in Afghanistan (ibid). In the nineteen rounds of US Taliban talks, Saudi Arabia and the UAE began the peace process (Maizland, 2020). China holds this game's largest 'unplayed' cards. It has the diplomatic and financial influence to bring together all the regional actors on board – Central Asia, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan. Obviously, in the present tense transition in the broader US-China ties, China will play these cards.

South Asian region has, no doubt, realized that after its initial 'war of revenge' United States is starting 'new strategy in Afghanistan' which is based on defensive realism— fight, talk, pacify, and withdraw policy. The United States generals, who push this policy, recognize that there is neither hope of full success nor acceptable political solution (Akram, 2017). The United States is no longer involved in a diplomatic settlement unless the Afghan Taliban recognized the terms of America. The geopolitical aim of prolonged presence in Afghanistan is not to seek stability but to use it as a base to advance the wider interests of United States in the region. First of all, US is imposing a "Pax-Indo-American" in South Asia by ensuring that Pakistan accepts the status quo in Kashmir and severe restrictions on Pakistan's nuclear deterrence capability. Second, to overturn Iran's rise

in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria and neutralize threat to Israel. Finally, to restrict Russia and China's influence in Afghanistan and to hinder Chinese ambitious Belt and Road Initiative including CPEC.

Emerging shifts in NATO states' perception about Afghanistan imbroglio.

NATO member countries, since the terrorist attacks in 2001, became committed to help fighting against Al-Qaida forces and the protectors of Taliban in Afghanistan. NATO established a multi-national international security assistance force. The main purpose of this force was to create political institutions to deter the Taliban's return, train Afghan military, and to protect the Afghan government.

Resultantly, the war in Afghanistan remained for almost nineteen years. And, the war was being perceived as a contentious political issue in virtually every NATO country. The pro-Taliban forces began wide-spread attacks and sought to disrupt the progress made in Afghanistan. Due to war's unpopularity, global recessions, and unclear chances of victory, the alliance faced constraints. Such public opinion shifts can both be a cause and an effect in foreign relations. Public opinion in these countries can make it more or less possible for the government to cooperate with the US worldwide.

Conclusion

The US with the assistance of their allies embarked upon the war on terror against the allegedly non-state terrorist groups and their supporter, Taliban government since 9/11 incident. In this twenty years' long war, US got some success in the beginning. However, it has realized that there is a huge gap between the exercise of massive military, diplomatic and economic statecraft by the USA and its NATO allies and what they have gained against the weak but resilient opponents, Taliban. This asymmetric war has proved to be more expensive, problematic and prolonged than what was anticipated by the US defense policy makers. It is concluded that global balance of power shifted towards China in the region more obviously especially after 2008. Given the change balancing status scenario in the region, the US has shifted its strategy in Asian region. Thus, US has changed its offensive approach to a defensive strategy of offshore balancing China's rise. Given the described scenario, The US's foreign policy makers seem to review their policy based on defensive realism so as to come out of the Afghan imbroglio.

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