



## Pakistan's Afghan Policy: Securitized Identity and Ontological (In) Security

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### Abstract:

Pakistan and Afghanistan are geographically contiguous and share same faith—factors that should have brought them close to each other. However, for most of the time relations between them have remained contentious. This paper is an effort to observe improved engagement with Pakistan's Afghan policy through social constructivist's reading of ontological (in)security. It also critically engages with the policy's implications, reasons for the urge of an alternative and its possible future prospect. Policies adopted are “easy fixes” which has led to an increased securitization of identity hence deepening uncertainty. The only way out is desecuritization—transformation of identity towards a democratic self—followed by promoting shared meanings between the two. Methodologically, this study is based on a case study approach which is urged by case specificities that can be generalized to other cases.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Afghanistan, social constructivist theory, securitized identity, ontological security

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are marked by tension over the British era-drawn boundary called Durand Line. Moreover, this tension can also be attributed to their “different strategic outlook and unlike national character” (Hussain 2002, 181). This is stipulated by Afghanistan's policy of keeping itself away from alliance-making with any of the Cold War competitors—USSR and USA—while Pakistan has enduringly searched for security through external alliances (Hussain 2002, 181). Moreover, they have dissimilar approach towards religion and “ideational bases” of state's legitimacy. This difference is rooted in the history of formation of the two states. Pakistan is based on an idea that goes beyond geographical boundaries and ethnic identities while in Afghanistan the issue of legitimacy has been informed by balancing ethnic concerns. Resultantly, the interplay between politics and ethnicity has been opposite in the two states (Weinbaum, 1994, 1).

Tension started between the two neighbors soon after Pakistan's creation as a result of British withdrawal from the subcontinent. The departing colonial Empire, though ensured safeguard of

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Pakistan's fragility against "active Pashtun irredentism" by conflating Pashtun regions with the latter, however, it also inherited issues that engendered tension between British and Afghanistan (Hussain 2010, 44-45). British's double trouble—strategic competition with Russia and Pashtuns tribes' incursions into its domain of influence—urged it to draw a boundary with Afghan King Amir Abdur Rahman in 1893 (Dupree 1980, 425-26). Moreover, during the British-managed referendum held in July 1947 Princely states had the options of staying autonomous or staying back with India while Pashtuns had to decide between India and Pakistan. Afghan officials raised concerns and *Khudai Khidmatgar* boycotted the referendum. The Afghan government especially stressed the position of Tribal areas which had distinct accord with British Government hence demanded that they should be dealt with at par with the princely states ((Dupree 1980, 489). Hence, the colonial power urge of a fortification against the communist danger which had made the North-West into a frontier, was handed over to the new state (Haroon 2011, 169).

Social constructivism, through its middle ground epistemology, argues that reality is neither exclusively material as rationalists (including Marxists) argue nor ideational (discursive) as postmodernists contend. Rather, it is social—meaningfulness of material conditions within the structure of human association (Wendth, 1999)—where the former provides an anchorage to the latter for sustainability (Adler, 1997, 322-30). Thus, in terms of theory-reality link, it argues that it is "theory-dependent"—though constructed, however, being social it is given out there which needs to be approached through theory (Kratochwil 2007, 1). Yet, givenness does not mean that it is unalterable as rationalists especially neorealists argue, rather, because of being constructed, it is changeable. But social constructivists do qualify that socially embedded meanings resist change hence they are agnostic about change (Hopf 1998, 180; Smit, 2008, 395-418). Methodologically, social constructivism, being concept-driven, enables us to collect and interpret concept-based meaningful data which suits its epistemological assumption—its endorsement of multiple identities, however, looking for the contextually meaningful one.

How identity informs Pakistan's Afghan policy, what are implications of the policy and why an alternative policy is needed are questions which this study seeks to answer. The study is aimed at unraveling the riddle of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan, its untowards consequences for the two states especially for Pashtuns in the two states and its possible durable solution.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot has been written about Pakistan and its Afghan policy. These accounts revolve around major themes of Durand Line, nationalism and India-centrism within the broader contours of regional and international system. Alyssa Ayres's *Speaking like a State: Language and Nationalism in Pakistan* (2009), Farhan Hanif Siddiqui's *The Politics of Ethnicity of Pakistan: The Baloch, Sindhi and Muhajir Ethnic Movements* (2012), Christophe Jaffrelot's *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience* (2015), Rasul Bakhsh Rais's *Imaginations Pakistan: Modernism, State, and the Politics of Islamic Revival* (2017), Mohammad Waseem's *Political Conflicts in Pakistan* (2021) are some eminent compendia which encompass Pak-Afghan Relations. With minor variation, dominant and shared argument of aforementioned scholars is that ethnic groups and their elite in Pakistan use ethnicity as an instrument of power to access power and resources.

Moreover, these researchers have applied epistemological approach—predominantly relied on quantitative data (e.g. Pashtuns' presence in different institutions). Qualitative, approach has also been employed in the form of ethnic elite interviews. Though worthy contribution, however, there are two main lacunas in their approach. First, they do not factor in state-society relations and its link with the state's foreign policy. Thus, we are not told about dynamics behind Pakistan's Afghan policy and its links with the state's dealing with Pashtuns at home. Methodologically too, they have loopholes in their approach. For example, we are not told about common Pashtuns' perception about state's policies like uneven distribution of development and importantly post-9/11 violence perpetrated by both state and non-state violent actors in their regions.

### **THEORETICAL ARGUMENT**

Through its “middle ground” epistemology; social constructivism begins dealing with the central theme of debate in IR—material and ideational link. From there then it draws its substantive theoretical assumptions wherein it argues that “reality” as identity is social—material conditions meaningfulness within human associations. This informs its methodological approach wherein it professes “methodological pluralism,” however, “reality” being multiple; it professes concept-driven method both in terms of collection and interpretation of data. Normatively, though skeptical, however, it endorses change via interpretivist orientation.

In contrast to postmodernists—who argue that reality is transiently constructed and conditioned by an antithetical “Other”—they argue that being socially meaningful—both discursive and non-discursive with a material base—it is stable through which we can explain the world (Price & Smit, 1998, 271-72). Similarly, socially shared meanings stipulate the argument that “Other” may take different forms—adversarial, friendly and neutral “Other” (Croft 2012, 220-26). Thus, in terms of methodology—“applied epistemology”—social constructivism counters both rationalists and postmodernists. It counters the former's argument of “data speak for themselves.” Rationalist theories are given to a paradox between theory and data as, on one side, they argue that theories are just the reflection of reality “out there,” but on the other, prior assumptions (theory) help us in the “construction of significant data.” It is still ambiguous what defines what—data define theory or theory defines data—as “when it comes to theory-building, data are theory-dependent, but when it comes to theory testing, data is data (Guzzini 2010, 157).

In the same way postmodernists are convincingly countered for presenting data as “hegemonic discourse” which urges deconstruction or “endless interpretation” hence their being “anti-method.” However, when it comes to empirical questions, the latter though profess collecting data through multiple techniques—“methodological pluralism,” however, data is meaningful only within the structure of discourse (Klotz, 2006, 372-73). Social Constructivism also endorses data collection through multiple techniques— “methodological pluralism.” However, it qualifies that being socially constructed facts/data—collection and its interpretation followed by historicization—urge concept-driven approach (Klotz et al., 2007, 364-76). In other words, it means that it works between rationalists' “foundationalism” and postmodernists' “anti-foundationalism”—a position what is termed “minimal foundationalism” (Hopf 1998). This is what Guzzini argues as “social construction of knowledge” about socially constructed facts (Guzzini 2000, 155-64) i.e. we cannot approach social facts without prior assumptions which enable us to access conceptualized reality.

### EMPIRICAL ARGUMENT: AN APPRAISAL

Pakistan's geographical location, its leadership Western penchant and Afghanistan postures of neutrality and more importantly its trouble with Pakistan on Durand Line, convinced America to welcome Pakistan into its strategic scheme in 1954-55 (Hussain 2010, 66-70). In Afghanistan Sardar Daud, the Afghan King's cousin and a staunch Pashtun nationalist became the prime minister. His policy was to promote Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan and reunite all Pashtuns residing in his own country and Pakistan (Saikal 2004, 112). Though he wanted to keep Afghanistan neutral thus joined NAM in 1961, however, economic constraints urged him to think otherwise (Saikal 2004, 121).

Pakistan's strategy of coercion through border closure and Daud's resignation in 1963 engendered hope of normalcy between the states. This hope was further augmented when Afghanistan took a neutral position in Pakistan's war with India in 1965 (Hussain et al., 2002, 181). Also at home, Ayub Khan's tactical adjustment of accommodating Pashtuns especially in military-bureaucratic structure "resulted in erosion of support for Pashtunistan movement (Hussain et al., 2002, 74). Furthermore, Pakistan dissolved One Unit in 1971 which was the source of tension with minority provinces, nationalist parties, and Afghanistan.

In July 1973, while King Zahir was on a visit to Italy, Daud took over power in a bloodless coup which dealt a blow to efforts for cordial relations between the two states. In initial policy statement, Daud said Pakistan was the only state with which Afghanistan has a serious political dispute and vowed full support to Pashtunistan and Pashtuns' right to "self-determination (Saikal 1980, 172). Afghan irredentist claim became expansionist and it now claimed Balochistan and even some parts of Iran—all dubbed as Greater Afghanistan. It also raised concerns in Iran; therefore, Afghanistan exposed itself to subverting attitude from two neighbours (Emadi 1990, 1516). Pashtun and Baloch nationalists received "open support" which "posed greatest threat to Pakistan's integrity after the secession of East Pakistan" (Hussain 2010, 78).

Pakistan, conceiving Afghanistan as a persistent threat, therefore, decided to manage it through a new policy. Capitalizing on "desperate Islamic groups" who had revolted against Daud's secular policies—tilt towards Soviet Russia and India—Pakistan found ideological allies in them. Links with Afghan Islamists were already developed through *Jamat-e-Islami* (JI) (Hussain 2010, 78). Daud cracked down on Islamists forcing them flee to Pakistan where they were warmly received and started getting finances and even secret military training.

A short-lived thaw was seen in their relations. Bhutto paid a visit to Kabul in June 1976 which was reciprocated by Daud in 1977. Pakistan kept its Islamist card in "cold storage" (Rubin 2003, 101). However, the process was derailed as a result of regime change as in Pakistan General Zia took over the government in 1977. Nevertheless, efforts at normalization of relations were kept intact. Daud met Gen. Zia and told him "This is a Pathan hand promising to establish friendly relations with Pakistan on a firm and durable basis. In the past thirty years, we have a stance on the issue. Give me time to mold public opinion in my country..." (Arif 1995, 303). However, Soviet-supported political faction—People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)—struck in. They killed Daud with his family in what is called "*Saur Revolution*" or "April Revolution in April 1978. This event

fundamentally changed “regional security scenario” and ushered in a fundamental shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy (Hussain 2010, 93).

Noor Muhammad Tarakai, secretly planned with Moscow in 1979 to replace Hafizullah Amin. The scheme leaked and Amin retaliated. He killed Tarakai and became president himself (Saikal 1980, 193). Soviets forced Amin to hand over power to pro-Soviet faction. When failed, they sent a “special KGB unit” who killed Amin (Rubin 2003, 111).

Pakistan was equally conscious of “Soviet wrath”, therefore; it ensured that the “water must not get too hot” (Haqqani 2005, 185) and camouflaged its role behind Afghan religious warring parties. By the end of 1980 with exclusive control over the radical Afghan Islamists, Pakistan properly documented seven factions. Every individual or group was supposed to get registered with any of the groups—the only criteria for making them eligible for aid from foreign donors (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, 172). Pakistan prioritized “pro-Pakistan Pashtun fundamentalists” in distributing funds and other resources (Hussain 2010, 116). *Hizb-i-Islami Hikmatyar* (HIH) and *Hizb-i-Islami Khalis* (HIK), both Pashtun Islamists and with scant concern with Pashtun nationalism; were naturally the chosen favorites of Pakistan. Moreover, their links with rich allies in Gulf States and above all their being close to pro-Zia religious factions, like JUI and JI, were factors that added to their worth for Pakistan (Hussain 2010, 116-17).

Pakistan now emerged as a frontline state which promised its international support as even Communist China and anti-U.S. Iran buttressed combat against the Soviets. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia and America were the main sponsors of the mission that was focused on bruising Moscow to death. America, after initial low profile, increased its backing of the fight to mammoth heights. Billions of dollars started flowing to Pakistan and it was US weapons supply which ensured tilting war in the favor of the “holy warriors.” When American support depleted it was “the Arab money that benefited only the Islamists” (Rubin 2003, 197).

Saudi Red Crescent society, staffed by Arab volunteers, gave Afghan Islamists 100 percent of estimated transport costs plus extra 5 percent for contingencies. They gave traditionalist-nationalist parties only about 15 percent of the total cost. Finally, the moment came when Soviet president concluded a treaty—the Geneva Accord—on 14 April, 1988. The accord stipulated: Soviet forces withdrawal from Afghanistan, and stopping of Pakistan and America's help to Afghan *Mujahidin* (Roy 1990, 137-64). However, seeing hawkish American President Reagan's anti-Soviet intent, Zia openly uttered backing of the fighters till the fall of Dr. Najib's regime. In a response to Reagan's question about clandestine assistance to Afghan *Mujahidin*, which Zia had pledged, however, deviously, the General by “misinterpreting” *Quran* said that “Muslims have the right to lie in a good cause” (Shultz 1993, 1091).

Hikmatyar as its best bet was supported by Pakistan military in overthrowing Dr. Najib's government in alliance with Najib's Defense Minister, Shah Nawaz Tanai. America also supported the plan and called it a move towards transitional setup to achieve stability in Afghanistan. The coup though was countered, yet, Najib's control was dwindling. In a last ditch effort of saving his government, he introduced reforms—named his party Homeland Party (*Hizb-i-Watan*); renounced Marxism-Leninism, renounced socialism in the “favor” of Islam, however, it was too late (Rubin 2003, 147-49). Soviet Union dismembered by the end of 1991 and Dr. Najib followed in April 1992.



Kabul was freed from communists but it was a dead victory as “a brutal and bloody civil war” started among the holy warriors.

A new dimension was added to Pakistan's policy and it was to have access to central Asian energy resources and market. But the plan was not feasible because of unstable situation in Afghanistan to which Pakistan was a party. The war also altered power structure in Afghanistan as it weakened Pashtuns hold on power and empowered non-Pashtuns. However, Islamist Pashtuns and Pakistan ignored all. Their intent was taking Kabul which led to a prolonged ferocious fight between Gulbadin Hikmatyar and Ahmad shah Masoud-led northern alliance. Eastern and southern Afghanistan was in the control of Pashtun Islamists while northern part of the country was under the sway of non-Pashtun factions.

In September 2001 “the Taliban-Al-Qaeda combine was successful in assassinating Ahmad Shah Masood.” Jubilant in their victory, however, Pakistani state was ignorant of the fact that “Talibanisation of Afghanistan had turned that country into the epicenter of international terrorism and a direct threat to the security of post-Cold War order in the region” (Hussain 2010, 222-23). Pakistan's Taliban project collapsed when America invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001.

### **Implications of the Policy**

Pakistan's securitized identity-informed Afghan policy objectives are: containment of the possible rise and interplay between Pashtun ethnic-nationalism in the two states; containment of Indian alignment with non-Islamists regimes in Afghanistan; and accruing economic and strategic gains from America. However, being rooted in securitized identity hence pursued through “easy fixes”, therefore, they are not only short-term gains; rather, they have been at the cost of long-term stable solutions which are possible through a secure identity. What are the gains attributed to this policy, what are its losses and importantly how “easy fixes” that have ensured these gains themselves reflect on the real challenge” will be reflected upon in the subsequent pages?

Pakistan's “paramount aim” has been to “to block the revival of Afghan nationalism” by assuring recognition of Durand Line as international border through and “...if not client” then at least a friendly setup in Afghanistan (Weinbaum 1991, 73). Some Pakistani nationalist academicians argue that Pakhtun nationalism was countered by Afghan Islamists opposition to the idea of a secular Pakhtunistan and supported Pakistan's solidarity (Hillali 2002, 296). Additionally, some historians also predicted by 1988, when defeated, Soviet Russia was planning to withdraw from Afghanistan; that Pashtun nationalism, predicated through Pashtunistan “went into completely decline” because of Pashtuns' “cooption” especially in military (Amin 1988, 32). To this is added countering Indian influence in Afghanistan which the state (Pakistan) has achieved, though sporadically, through alliance with Pashtun Islamist proxies. Another gain attributed to this policy is America's policy towards South Asia. Though tilted towards India; however, America's balancing act creates space for Pakistan which ensures, however, an unstable balance with its traditional rival India. Unstable balance for a “client” state like Pakistan is enough to feed its anxiety.

Nevertheless, as this study argues, these are “easy fixes” which, in addition to their being temporary and unstable, have also deepened its ontological insecurity—insecurity of embodied self—which has necessitated resort to routinized practices in the form of “easy fixes.” Considering the policy implications—internally control through postcolonial institutional mechanism, externally

buttressing radical Islamists by capitalizing on state-society crisis in Afghanistan and playing “client state” role for America—cost of the policy has been much heavier than it gains. Therefore, the only way out is desecuritization of identity—transformation of biographical narrative anchored in healthy institutions.

In policy terms, it means, first, accommodating Pashtuns in a democratic hence secure state structure at home. Second, engaging, rather contributing to Afghanistan stability through its secure self. Uncertainty created after Taliban retake of Kabul urges capitalization on Pashtuns domestic massive uprising against militancy, society's quest for peace and development via an inclusive government in Afghanistan and Taliban's regime global isolation hence pushing them towards democratic reforms. And third, managing America's exploitative strategic policy which is possible through internal reforms and embedding itself into the regional normative order.

## CONCLUSION

Social constructivism, rooted in the sociological and interpretivist account of reflexive modernity hence epistemological middle ground, argues that identity is neither exclusively material nor ideational. Rather, it is social—material condition's meaningfulness within structure of human association where material conditions maintain and sustain it. In other words, identity means “structure of meaning” anchored in material conditions. Therefore, seeking security against anxiety means security of identity through the “power” of identity or embodied self. Thus, correcting ontological security theorists' dichotomous position on relation between ontological and physical security; it argues that identity—being/ontological self or biographical narrative anchored in material conditions or embodied self—defines it becoming or adaptability for containing anxiety or fear of the unknown.

In policy terms, it means, through an inclusive narrative and strong institutional base, shaping a state multi-ethnic society—dominant pattern of states composition in the world—into a nation- or multi-national state. Pakistan, because of its securitized self thus in perennial condition of danger, construct interplay between Pashtun nationalism in the two states into a threat which leads to obsession with ontological insecurity management hence vulnerable to institutionalized securitization. Thus, it is faced with “ontological insecurity in the foreign policy field” or “foreign policy identity crisis” which signifies “embedded self-conception” challenged by a new environment “that mobilizes geopolitical thought as an easy fix, which in turn, mobilizes realism's militarist and nationalist gaze (Guzzini, 2009).

Pakistan can be fit into “no identity” or it being stuck in its Cold War identity. Pakistan, like India, was born as a postcolonial state which signifies a “lack” in their “imagined” identities which is at the root of their ontological insecurity. However, Pakistan's case becomes more specific for three reasons. First, it is a “migrant state” where the lack of a socio-cultural biographical narrative has been compensated through religion and the need of anchorage in institutional base has been met through its postcolonial institutional mechanism. Second, predicated through Durand Line, its identity has been challenged by Afghanistan through the narrative of Pashtuns' ethnic identity. And last, born in the womb of Cold War, it has been a frontline “client state” for America.

Thus, born with a distinct ontological anxiety, the result has been domestic identity crisis and “foreign policy identity crisis.” This in turn has led to securitization of its identity which has

triggered quest for “easy fixes” both internally and externally. Thus, the state’s quest for ontological security in its Afghan policy—which is based on securitization of its identity against interplay between Pashtun ethnic-nationalism in the two states—signifies its being in perennial critical situation hence looking for “easy fixes” both at home and in Afghanistan. Internally, it has urged the state to accommodate Pashtuns within the state’s postcolonial institutional mechanism—centralized federation and controlled democracy; countering any voice of resistance through physical and structural violence and shaping their regions into an outpost for the extension of Islamists proxies into Afghanistan.

Externally, in Afghanistan, it means employment of radical Pashtun Islamist proxies—the result of state-society crisis in the country—as policy tools with the purpose of countering the possible rise of Pashtun nationalism and Indian alliance with non-Islamist regimes. When ensured through a complete control of Islamists proxies or installing a friendly regime there, another strand of the policy has been to have access to the central Asian markets. These objectives have been pursued through playing a “client state” role for America where Pakistan, as frontline state, has rendered services to its patron in fighting Soviet communism during Cold War followed by fighting global jihadists in the post-9/11, 2001 era.

The finding of this study is that democratization may help the state (Pakistan) in accommodating ethnic diversity including Pashtuns into multi-national whole. It may also enable to constructively engage with Afghanistan. However, dissolving its ethnic diversity into a nation-state seems less probable because it may also create space for ethnic groups’ consolidation. In Pashtuns’ case their ethnic consolidation is inseparable from interplay with its twin in Afghanistan. Therefore, it urges the two states, especially Pakistan, to come out of the “territorial trap” of Durand Line and transform it into a free zone of interaction through trade i.e. replacement of “strategic depth” with cultural and economic depth. Though a tough task, however, this seems to be the only way of coming out of the existential challenges—spiraling violence, increasing uncertainty especially after Taliban retake of Kabul, and being vulnerable to shortsighted geostrategic shortcuts which reflect on its ontological insecurity or “foreign policy identity crisis.”

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