

The Enigma of Power: A Comprehensive Investigation into the Taliban's Ascension to Power

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Abstract

The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan has significantly shaped both regional and global security landscapes, leaving a lasting imprint on the country's sociopolitical development. This study investigates the historical, geopolitical, and strategic factors behind the Taliban's ascension to power, focusing on the roles of the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan's internal dynamics. The rationale for this research lies in the urgent need to understand how foreign interventions, regional rivalries, and domestic power struggles have collectively contributed to long-term instability, offering lessons for future policy and global security. To address gaps in theoretical understanding and policy analysis, this research applies the lens of classical realism to examine how power dynamics and foreign policy decisions influenced Afghanistan's trajectory. A qualitative methodology was adopted, utilizing both secondary literature and primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with specialists in U.S. foreign policy, regional security, and Afghan sociopolitical affairs. These diverse expert perspectives provided valuable insights into the global, regional, and domestic factors driving the Taliban's rise. The findings reveal that U.S. intervention during the Afghan-Soviet War, Pakistan's strategic imperatives, and the fragmentation of Afghan political authority collectively enabled the emergence of the Taliban. The discussion underscores the dominance of *realpolitik* and national self-interest over normative ideals in shaping historical outcomes. The study concludes that understanding the interplay of international, regional, and domestic forces is crucial for informing future foreign policy and conflict resolution strategies, particularly in contexts marked by prolonged instability and competing geopolitical interests.

Keywords: *Taliban, geopolitics, classical realism, American exceptionalism, power dynamics, foreign policy*

1. Introduction

The emergence and resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan has profoundly influenced both the local and global security landscapes, leaving an indelible mark on the country's socio-political terrain. To truly grasp the roots and significance of this phenomenon, it is essential to explore the historical, political, and social factors that shaped the Taliban into the powerful force it is today. This research embarks on a journey through these complex narratives, providing a comprehensive examination of the circumstances that led to the Taliban's rise, the role of key domestic and international actors, and the lasting consequences for Afghanistan and beyond.

The Taliban's ascent is deeply rooted in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the subsequent Afghan Civil War. The departure of Soviet forces left a power vacuum, plunging the country into chaos as rival mujahideen factions, initially united against the Soviet occupation, turned on each other in a bitter struggle for control (Gompert, Binnendijk & Lin, 2014). The resulting instability and lawlessness provided fertile ground for the emergence of the Taliban—a movement predominantly composed of ethnic Pashtuns—who began consolidating power in southern and eastern Afghanistan (Gompert et al., 2014).

By 1998, the Taliban had captured approximately 90% of Afghanistan, though diplomatic recognition came only from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Arms Control Association, n.d; Rubin, 2002). The Taliban's decision to shelter Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network, coupled with financial support from bin Laden himself (Thomas, 2021), positioned Afghanistan as a global terrorism nexus. This led to UN sanctions, including an air embargo, in response to the Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden (Arms Control Association, n.d).

The assassination of Ahmad Shah Masoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, on September 9, 2001, served as a grim prelude to the September 11 attacks orchestrated by bin Laden (Gall & Stewart, 2021). These events prompted the U.S.-led military intervention, initially aimed at dismantling Al-Qaeda and ousting the Taliban regime (Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002). Though the Taliban were quickly removed from formal power, they resorted to insurgent and guerrilla tactics under Mullah Mohammad Omar, targeting

U.S. forces, Afghan government troops, and NATO's International Security Assistance Force (Lindsay & Daalder, 2005).

During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2009), Afghanistan saw significant development including democratic reforms, improved education, and expanded rights for women (Dobbins, Poole, Long, & Runkle, 2008). Nevertheless, these gains were fragile and uneven. President Barack Obama later pursued a dual-track policy combining military surge with diplomatic outreach to the Taliban, culminating in the initiation of peace talks in Doha, Qatar (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2015). Despite sporadic negotiations, a lasting peace remained elusive.

The withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces on August 30, 2021, precipitated Afghanistan's rapid descent into economic collapse, humanitarian crisis, and political disintegration (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021). The Taliban's swift return to power underscored the limitations of prolonged foreign intervention and externally imposed state-building efforts. This sequence of events exemplifies Chalmers Johnson's concept of "blowback," referring to the unintended and adverse consequences of foreign policy interventions (Johnson, 2001).

Scholarly literature provides extensive context for these developments. Scholars such as Tomsen (2013), Hopkirk (1992), and Coll (2005) link the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements to Cold War-era proxy conflicts. The CIA's covert funding of mujahideen fighters during the Soviet-Afghan War is well documented (Prados, 2002), and some of these fighters later formed the backbone of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Parenti, 2001). This highlights how geopolitical maneuvers intended to advance short-term strategic interests can generate long-term instability.

However, existing scholarship often overlooks crucial domestic dynamics and the realpolitik of regional actors. A crucial yet often overlooked factor in the Taliban's resilience was the complex role played by Pakistan. Guided by its strategic depth doctrine, Pakistan viewed the Taliban as a buffer against Indian influence in Afghanistan and provided the group with safe havens, funding, and logistical support (Tomsen, 2013). The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Durand Line—an arbitrary colonial-era boundary dividing Afghanistan and Pakistan—served as a critical corridor for Taliban fighters and a sanctuary from U.S. and NATO operations (Siddique, 2011). This cross-border dynamic underscores the importance of regional geopolitics in sustaining the Taliban insurgency.

Moreover, the internal rivalries among Afghan warlords—frequently neglected in academic analyses—were instrumental in sustaining the prolonged instability that facilitated the Taliban's resurgence. The role of Afghanistan's internal fragmentation also critically shaped the Taliban's rise. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the country descended into civil war as various warlords and militias competed for control (Rubin, 2002; Coll, 2005). The collapse of the central government and the inability of these competing factions to establish stable governance created the conditions for the Taliban's emergence in the mid-1990s (Rubin, 2002). Promising to restore law and order through a strict interpretation of Islamic law, the Taliban capitalized on popular disillusionment with corruption and violence (Gompert, Binnendijk & Lin, 2014). Their swift military gains, including the capture of provinces of Kandahar and Kabul, were not solely the result of military prowess but also of their ability to exploit ethnic and tribal divisions, present a unifying religious identity, and secure cross-border support (Rubin, 2002; Tomsen, 2013). This rise is consistent with classical realism's assertion that in the absence of centralized authority, power vacuums tend to be filled by the most cohesive and forceful actors (Morgenthau, 1948).

This study seeks to bridge these gaps through a comprehensive analysis of the roles played by the United States, Pakistan, and Afghan warlords within Afghanistan's broader historical, social, and political context. Applying classical realism—a theoretical lens emphasizing power politics, state interests, and the anarchic nature of international relations—this research elucidates how strategic calculations by both international and domestic actors influenced the trajectory of Afghanistan's conflict.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to deepen understanding of the complex interplay between domestic and international factors in Afghanistan's protracted conflict. It underscores the human costs of geopolitical strategies and the fragile foundations of externally imposed governance systems. By offering a historically grounded and theoretically informed analysis, this study contributes to scholarly discourse and offers valuable insights for policymakers involved in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

2. Objectives

This study is structured around three primary objectives aimed at unraveling the complex factors behind the Taliban's ascension to power:

1. To examine how American exceptionalism shaped U.S. foreign policies under the Carter and Reagan administrations during the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989), and how these policies contributed to the Taliban's ascension to power.
2. This study seeks to evaluate Pakistan's strategic objectives, focusing on its view of Afghanistan as a buffer state against threats, particularly from India, and analyzes its support for Afghanistan from a classical realist perspective.
3. This study explores the fragmentation of power during Afghanistan's civil war, analyzing how various factions and regional actors pursued their interests and contributed to the rise of the Taliban.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of individuals who have extensive knowledge and expertise related American foreign policy, American exceptionalism, as well as those with in depth understanding of the geopolitical and social dynamics of Afghanistan during the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989) and the subsequent rise of the Taliban.

For the purpose of this research, interview participants were selected based on their expertise, professional background, and direct or indirect involvement in relevant historical and political developments. Initially, four individuals were identified as suitable candidates for semi-structured interviews. However, only two interviews were ultimately conducted. One potential participant was later discovered to have passed away, while another declined due to concerns over discussing sensitive issues related to Afghanistan's current political situation and his former role in the government.

Primary data was deemed essential for Objective 1 because it investigates how deeply rooted ideological beliefs such as American exceptionalism directly influenced decision-making at the highest levels of U.S. government. U.S. foreign policy is not merely a sequence of strategic actions but also involves ideological justifications that inform those actions. The role of American exceptionalism in justifying support for the Mujahideen, for instance, has often been less explicitly analysed in historical documentation. Interviews allowed for exploration of how U.S. officials and policymakers perceived their role in Afghanistan-insights that may not be fully captured in historical records.

No interviews were conducted for Objective 2, which deals with Pakistan's strategic objectives and role. This decision was based on the availability of a rich body of secondary literature, including declassified U.S. documents, Pakistan sources, and scholarly works that already provide comprehensive insights into Pakistan's foreign policy strategies. Unlike U.S. involvement, which is often justified through ideological narratives, Pakistan's actions were more strategically and geopolitically motivated and are well-documented.

Similarly, no interviews were conducted for Objective 3. While two individuals had initially agreed to contribute to this objective, one of whom has since passed away, the other participant later declined due to safety concerns and the sensitive nature of the topic. However, relevant insights were drawn from an earlier interview conducted in 2016 with a key informant (Participant 3) who was one of the founding members of the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan in 1978. This individual's account, originally gathered for previous unpublished research, remains pertinent to the historical focus of this objective and is used with an appropriate contextual consideration. Additionally, the Afghan civil war has been extensively analysed through historical studies, journalist accounts, and war reports. Since the focus of this objective is on the historical rather than contemporary Taliban governance, the existing literature provides sufficient insight to address the research questions without the need for additional primary data.

The selected interviewees provided valuable insights into Objectives 1 and 3 of this study, which examine the influence of American exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy during the Afghan-Soviet War and the fragmentation of power among Afghan warlords during the subsequent civil war.

- Participant 1 is a scholar with extensive research in counterterrorism, political violence, and radicalization, having held faculty positions at institutions such as Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, and the American University in the Emirates, and currently serves as an Assistant professor of social science at the Beijing Institute of Technology. Their deep understanding of

- U.S. foreign policy and global security makes them a critical voice in understanding the broader geopolitical dynamics surrounding the rise of the Taliban.
- Participant 2 is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Ateneo De Davao University, known for their social ethics, political theory, and global justice. Their academic contributions provide crucial perspectives on the ideological and ethical dimensions of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, making his insight highly relevant to this study.
 - Participant 3 is a prominent Shiite cleric from Afghanistan with a distinguished scholarly and political background. They established key institutions including a religious seminary, a university, and a media outlet aimed at promoting Islamic teachings. During the Soviet-Afghan War, they co-founded a major Shiite political party and later held a leadership position within the early mujahedeen government before eventually withdrawing from formal politics.

3.2 Research Instruments

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, facilitating a thorough exploration of intricate phenomena and enabling the incorporation of diverse viewpoints. The primary research instruments included a combination of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, reflecting the distinct data collection needs for each research objective.

For objective 1, semi structured interviews served as the primary research instrument. This format allowed for flexibility in probing key themes while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the study's objectives and existing literature, focusing on American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy during the Afghan-Soviet War. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted online via secure communication platforms.

For objectives 2 and 3, the study relied on secondary sources such as academic journals, books, newspaper articles, reports, and declassified U.S. documents. Additionally, an earlier interview conducted with one of the founding members of the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan was also incorporated into the analysis for Objective 3. Though originally gathered for a previous unpublished academic paper, the insights remain highly relevant to the historical focus of this study.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews with two experts on American foreign policy and international relations. These interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed and analyzed thematically.

Secondary data was collected, encompassing a meticulous review of academic books, peer-reviewed journals, official reports, NGOs reports and historical records. The secondary data supported not only the primary data of Objective 1, but also provided the foundation for analyzing Pakistan's role in the conflict and internal dynamics of Afghanistan, and the internal dynamics of Afghanistan during the Afghan Civil War.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analyzing Interviews: To thoroughly examine the content of interviews, a thematic analysis approach will be employed. This qualitative data will be meticulously transcribed, enabling the identification of recurrent themes, discernible patterns, and underlying narratives.

Evaluation of Arguments: The arguments articulated by interview participants and the theoretical frameworks unearthed in the existing literature will undergo rigorous scrutiny and deconstruction. This process entails a meticulous dissection of the foundational assumptions, supporting evidence, and broader implications inherent in these arguments.

Secondary data was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach. Relevant information was extracted, categorized, and interpreted to complement and contrast with the primary data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and analysis of the study's three core objectives, each examined independently to ensure clarity and depth. By structuring the discussion around the global, regional, and domestic levels, it addresses how American exceptionalism, Pakistan's strategic role, and Afghanistan's internal dynamics each contributed to the rise of the Taliban. The results are contextualized within the

framework of classical realism and supported both by primary interview data and secondary literature, allowing for a comprehensive and multi-layered interpretation of the phenomenon.

4.1 Global Level: The Role of American Exceptionalism in U.S. Foreign Policy

The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan stands as a potent testament to the intricate dynamics of realpolitik, ideological convictions, and unintended consequences in international relations. This analysis reveals a complex interplay of geopolitical calculations, moral framing, and strategic alliances that set the stage for the Taliban's rise to power—an outcome shaped by the ideological underpinnings of American exceptionalism and the pragmatic imperatives of classical realism.

During the Carter and Reagan administrations, U.S. foreign policy toward Afghanistan was driven by the dual forces of ideological conviction and strategic necessity. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 prompted the United States to view the conflict not only as a geostrategic challenge but as a moral confrontation between freedom and totalitarianism (Westad, 2005; Parenti, 2001). This framing, rooted in the enduring notion of American exceptionalism, positioned the U.S. as the defender of global liberty, with Presidents Carter and Reagan presenting their support for the Afghan mujahideen as a righteous crusade (Ceaser, 2012; Dearborn, 2013). This reflects how classical realism views ideological framing as a tool that states often use to justify actions that are, at their core, about maximizing strategic advantage.

However, as classical realism contends, this ideological rhetoric masked a deeper strategic rationale. The U.S. decision to arm and fund the mujahideen was primarily aimed at countering Soviet expansion and securing American interests in the oil-rich Persian Gulf (Coll, 2005; Gaddis, 2005). As Participant 1 (Personal Communication, September 20, 2023) observed, while the public narrative focused on human rights and democracy, policymakers were chiefly motivated by the imperative to weaken Soviet influence. This realist motivation underscores the gap between declared ideals and practical policy. Here, Morgenthau's classical realism is applicable: foreign policies often cloak self-interest in moral language, especially in Cold War rivalry.

The strategic support for the mujahideen, while effective in the short term, failed to consider the fragmented nature of Afghan society and the long-term risks of empowering radical groups. By portraying the mujahideen as "freedom fighters," U.S. policymakers, as Participant 2 (Personal Communication, September 20, 2023) noted, oversimplified the conflict, disregarding the internal complexities and diverse motivations of Afghan factions. This moralistic framing, reinforced by media portrayals, shaped American public perception and legitimized intervention while sidelining diplomatic alternatives (Gibbs, 2000). This aligns with realism's critique of idealist approaches – moral narratives may obscure complex on the ground realities.

S.A. Yetiv's analysis highlights how the Soviet invasion catalyzed a shift in U.S. foreign policy, moving from passivity to assertiveness (Yetiv, 1990). The Carter Doctrine, declaring the Persian Gulf a vital U.S. interest, reflected this shift, aligning with realist principles that prioritize strategic security. Participant 2's critique complements this view, arguing that American self-perception as a global guardian rationalized intervention but ignored local socio-political realities, fostering instability (Participant 2, Personal Communication, September 20, 2023).

Reagan's administration deepened this trajectory. His depiction of the mujahideen as heroic defenders resonated domestically and internationally, strategically garnering support but further entrenching the binary framing of the Cold War (Westad, 2011; Coll, 2005). As Participant 1 (Personal Communication, September 20, 2023) emphasized, this framing not only mobilized public support but constrained policy discourse, marginalizing voices that advocated non-military solutions.

The U.S. media played a pivotal role in sustaining this narrative. By presenting the mujahideen in overwhelmingly positive terms and ignoring their extremist tendencies, the media reinforced a policy environment that favored militarized responses (Gibbs, 2000). As Participant 1 (Personal Communication, October 17, 2023) explained, this convergence of media narratives and government objectives created a self-reinforcing cycle where dissenting perspectives were sidelined. This points to the realist idea that elite-driven narratives are used to maintain consensus around foreign policy choices, even when they carry destabilizing risks.

Realist critiques by Dimitri Simes further underscore how U.S. actions, including arms support and diplomatic maneuvering, contributed to a security dilemma with the Soviet Union (Simes, 1980). Rather than fostering détente, these policies heightened tensions and entrenched antagonism. The shift in U.S. policy, as

Skidmore (1993-1994) notes, also reflected domestic political considerations, illustrating classical realism's emphasis on power and self-interest over moral consistency.

The culmination of these policies produced significant unintended consequences. The pragmatic pursuit of strategic objectives, justified through exceptionalist ideology, left Afghanistan in a state of prolonged instability, ultimately enabling the Taliban's rise. As Participant 1 (Personal Communication, September 20, 2023) insightfully observed, the imposition of American ideals without sensitivity to local dynamics often breeds resistance and backlash—a lesson tragically reaffirmed by subsequent interventions in Iraq and beyond. This outcome reinforces that classical realist prediction that interventions driven by strategic rivalry and moralistic framing often result in instability if not matched with sustainable post-conflict planning.

In summary, the influence of American exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy during the Afghan-Soviet War illustrates the complex interplay of ideological framing and realist strategy. While the Carter and Reagan administrations succeeded in their immediate objectives, their failure to anticipate the long-term effects of their actions exemplifies the enduring relevance of classical realism in understanding international relations. The insights of Participant 1 and Participant 2 enrich this analysis by highlighting the ideological blind spots and ethical consequences that accompanied these policies, underscoring the importance of integrating both theoretical and empirical perspectives in foreign policy evaluation.

4.2 Regional Level: Pakistan's Strategic Calculations and Proxy Engagement

A detailed review of the literature reveals a strategic evolution in Pakistan's policies toward Afghanistan that directly influenced the Taliban's rise to power in 1994 and shaped Islamabad's ongoing involvement in Afghan affairs. Pakistan's actions can be understood through the lens of classical realism, emphasizing power, security, and regional influence over ideological commitments.

The loss of East Pakistan in 1971 was a defining moment that deeply affected Pakistan's strategic psyche (Tomsen, 2013). This defeat not only resulted in territorial dismemberment but also entrenched a perception of existential threat from India, its regional rival (Rashid, 2008). Ahmar (2023) explains that in the aftermath, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's administration prioritized rebuilding Pakistan's strength by forging strategic alliances with China, the Middle East, and the United States, while accelerating nuclear weapons development in response to India's 1974 nuclear test. This set the foundation for Pakistan's subsequent Afghanistan policy.

During the 1970s, the concept of securing "strategic depth" gained prominence in Pakistan's military and political discourse. This doctrine aimed to ensure a friendly government in Kabul, serving as a buffer against both Indian influence and Pashtun nationalist claims that threatened Pakistan's western borders (Ahmar, 2023; Riedel, 2010). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 further galvanized Pakistan's strategic calculus. General Zia-ul-Haq's regime framed support for the Afghan mujahideen as both a religious jihad and a geopolitical necessity, aligning Pakistan with U.S. Cold War objectives to contain Soviet expansion (Kinzer, 2007; Abernathy, 2018). Pakistan's behavior reflects classical realism's premise that states pursue survival and influence through pragmatic alliances and proxy strategies, regardless of ideology.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) emerged as the principal architect and executor of this policy, acting as the critical conduit between the CIA and various Afghan insurgent factions. As Coll (2005) notes, the ISI ensured that aid and influence were channeled to groups that aligned with Pakistan's interests. Roggio (2008) and Adkin and Yousaf (2007) emphasize Islamabad's deliberate exclusion of the CIA from direct contact with Afghan leaders, highlighting Pakistan's intention to maintain sovereign control over the conflict's trajectory.

The withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 shifted Pakistan's priorities towards securing a Pashtun-dominated regime that would guarantee its strategic depth. The Taliban, nurtured in Pakistani madrassas and supported logistically by the ISI, emerged as the most effective instrument to realize this objective (Sial, 2013). Khan and Wagner (2013) underscore that Islamabad's patronage of the Taliban was deeply influenced by its fears of Pashtun nationalism and the unresolved Durand Line dispute. Supporting Islamist factions was a deliberate strategy to suppress ethnic nationalism and ensure control over Pakistan's western frontier.

Fraser (2019) highlights how Pakistan's strategic doctrine aimed to prevent encirclement by India and maintain a pliable Afghan government amenable to Pakistani interests. This policy was also shaped by internal anxieties about territorial integrity, especially regarding the claims of Afghanistan on Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan regions. By transforming the Taliban from a regional insurgency into a strategic proxy, Pakistan secured significant leverage in Afghan politics (Fraser, 2019; Riedel, 2010). Such

use of non-state actors to project power across borders aligns with Morgenthau's claim that states prioritize control and influence under anarchic conditions.

Following the events of 9/11, Pakistan faced a complex geopolitical environment. Nadery (2023) discusses General Musharraf's calculated decision to join the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism, balancing overt cooperation with the West while covertly maintaining ties with the Taliban. This dual-track policy reflects classical realist behavior, where state survival and regional influence take precedence over ideological consistency or international norms.

The classical realist framework provides a comprehensive explanation for Pakistan's actions: driven by security imperatives and power competition, Pakistan's leaders pragmatically utilized non-state actors to pursue national interests (Morgenthau, 1948; Donnelly, 2000). However, while this strategy yielded immediate geopolitical advantages, it also engendered long-term instability. The empowerment of militant proxies eventually resulted in increased regional insecurity and serious domestic challenges within Pakistan itself, including the rise of insurgent violence and political fragmentation (Haqqani, 2005; Fair, 2014).

In summary, Pakistan's strategic involvement in Afghanistan exemplifies the double-edged nature of realpolitik. Initially, the Taliban served as a crucial buffer state proxy to counterbalance India and secure Pakistan's western frontier. Yet, this policy sowed the seeds of future instability, demonstrating the inherent risks of foreign policies that prioritize short-term gains in power and security over sustainable peace and regional stability (Haqqani, 2005; Fair, 2014). The unresolved Durand Line dispute and ethnic divisions continue to complicate Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, highlighting the enduring challenges stemming from Pakistan's realist foreign policy choices.

4.3 Domestic Level: Civil War, Power Vacuum, and the Taliban's Ascendancy

The splintering of Afghanistan's leadership following the Soviet withdrawal must be understood within the broader historical pattern of Afghan rulers relying heavily on external powers for development and security. Participant 3 recalled that the Afghan government initially sought assistance from the United States but was refused. Consequently, Afghanistan turned to the Soviet Union, which began providing financial aid, military training, and modern weaponry as early as 1956. This alignment with the USSR entrenched decades of foreign entanglement, which played a significant role in creating the domestic power vacuum that emerged after Soviet forces left, ultimately facilitating the Taliban's rise (Participant 3, Personal Communication, July 02, 2016). This shift demonstrates realism's view that smaller states will align with greater powers based on survival interests rather than ideology.

From the lens of classical realism, Afghanistan's shifting alliances demonstrate the realist assertion that states prioritize their own survival and security above ideological consistency. The rejection by the United States forced Afghan leaders to pragmatically align with the Soviet Union, despite ideological opposition, illustrating the realist belief that states pursue power and security first and foremost. Morgenthau's theory, which emphasizes the subordination of moral considerations to strategic interests, helps explain how internal fragmentation followed in the absence of a strong centralized authority, as factions competed to dominate the weakened state (Morgenthau, 1948).

Hans J. Morgenthau's classical realist theory offers a useful framework to interpret the Afghan Civil War. Grounded in the view that power-seeking behavior is intrinsic to human nature, classical realism holds that both international and domestic politics are shaped by struggles for power (Morgenthau, 1948). According to Morgenthau, states are continually engaged in conflict or preparing for it, a description well-suited to Afghanistan's turbulent history during and after the Soviet occupation (Waltz, 1959; Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

The Afghan Civil War, marked by internal factionalism and foreign interference, exemplifies the realist concept that domestic instability is often intensified by competing international agendas (Goodson, 2001). The Soviet withdrawal not only changed Afghanistan's place in the international system but also revealed the ambitions and rivalries of Afghan leaders. The exit of Soviet forces created a power vacuum, setting the stage for fierce competition among local factions (Dobbins et al., 2003). This period illustrates the realist notion that in an anarchic system, actors relentlessly pursue power to secure their interests (Morgan, 2012).

After the Soviet departure, the fragile unity among Mujahideen factions quickly collapsed. The common goal of expelling Soviet forces gave way to internecine conflict, fueled by ideological, ethnic, and tribal rivalries (Goodson, 2001; Rubin, 2002). Rival commanders such as Ahmad Shah Massoud and

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar epitomized the realist idea that in the absence of a shared external threat, competition for power becomes inevitable (Waltz, 1979).

Morgenthau's understanding of human nature as power-driven is evident in the prioritization of personal and factional agendas over national unity, prolonging Afghanistan's violent power struggle (Morgenthau, 1948). The government of President Najibullah, although still supported by Soviet resources, struggled to maintain control amid the growing strength of rival Mujahideen factions (Rubin, 2002). The failure to establish a stable central authority after the Soviet exit confirms Morgenthau's contention that without a strong government, competing factions vie for dominance, deepening instability (Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

Internal figures like General Tanai, who allied with Hekmatyar's forces in response to diminishing central power, further illustrate classical realism's claim that in fragmented states, local leaders often seek external support to bolster their influence (Goodson, 2001; Morgan, 2012). Najibullah's efforts to consolidate power through government reshuffles, while intended to restore order, paradoxically heightened mistrust and factionalism, showcasing how struggles for power can produce unintended consequences that exacerbate instability (Rubin, 2002; Morgenthau, 1948).

Foreign intervention heavily influenced Afghanistan's internal conflicts. The United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, among others, strategically funded different factions, thereby intensifying the conflict rather than resolving it (Coll, 2005; Rubin, 2002). Pakistan's support for Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami and its later backing of the Taliban reflect a realist strategy to extend regional influence through proxy actors (Goodson, 2001).

Participant 3 also highlighted that, like other factions backed by the US, Pakistan, and the USSR, their group received support from Iran, which deployed military advisors to train their forces in advanced weaponry (Participant 3, Personal Communication, July 02, 2016). Iran's involvement aligns with Morgenthau's principle that states act in pursuit of national interests, often through proxy relationships in politically fragmented regions. Afghan factions' willingness to accept such assistance, regardless of ideological alignment, further demonstrates the realist priority of power and survival over moral or ideological concerns (Waltz, 1979). This reinforces the idea that ideology is often secondary to strategic interest – realism sees alliances as temporary tools to power gain.

Morgenthau's framework argues that states manipulate weaker nations to achieve their objectives, prolonging conflicts when convenient. In Afghanistan, such external meddling prolonged civil war by empowering select factions and undermining efforts to establish a unified government (Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

Pakistan's realpolitik maneuvers epitomize realist international relations. By supporting factions aligned with its strategic aims, Pakistan effectively turned Afghanistan's internal conflict into a proxy battleground for its own regional interests (Coll, 2005). This exploitation of local divisions reflects Morgenthau's view of international alliances as opportunistic and temporary, shaped by power calculations rather than ideological affinity (Waltz, 1979). Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban further exemplifies how external actors intensify domestic instability while pursuing geopolitical goals (Rubin, 2002).

Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan became vulnerable to regional warlords, each carving out autonomous territories to assert control (Rubin, 2002). This era of warlordism aligns with Morgenthau's realist concept that in the absence of a central authority, power decentralizes as local actors compete for dominance (Waltz, 1979). Ethnic and tribal loyalties frequently superseded national identity, complicating attempts to unify the country (Coll, 2005).

The emergence of warlord fiefdoms highlights the anarchic condition described by classical realism: when sovereign power is absent, authority fragments and competition between factions prevails (Morgenthau, 1948). Prominent leaders like Ahmad Shah Massoud in the north and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in other regions governed their territories independently, effectively dividing the country. This fragmentation severely weakened Afghanistan's ability to function as a cohesive state (Goodson, 2001).

The political disintegration carried profound economic and social consequences, further undermining the central government's capacity to restore control (Rubin, 2002; Dobbins et al., 2003). Najibullah's administration faced growing challenges in providing basic services amid inflation and infrastructure decay. According to Morgenthau, political stability is closely linked to power concentration; once power disperses, economic and social order deteriorate (Morgenthau, 1948). In Afghanistan, the breakdown of central authority contributed to widespread poverty and public disenchantment (Goodson, 2001).

As the government weakened, alternative power structures emerged. Regional actors, including the Taliban, began offering governance, often harsh but providing order in chaotic conditions (Rashid, 2010). The Taliban's ability to enforce stability, though repressive, reflects the realist idea that populations may accept security over liberty during prolonged instability (Morgenthau, 1948). This phenomenon illustrates how, in the absence of effective state governance, new authorities rise to fill the power vacuum, frequently in authoritarian forms.

The Pashtun ethnic identity, long central to Afghanistan's social and political life, was initially a core element leveraged by the Taliban to consolidate support. However, the movement's shift from ethnic Pashtun nationalism toward a broader religious nationalism marked a crucial evolution. Initially, the Taliban's rise reflected Pashtun dominance and tribal order amidst post-Soviet fragmentation (Rashid, 2014). Over time, the movement adopted an inclusive religious nationalism centered on a strict interpretation of Deobandi Islam and Sharia law, aiming to unite Afghanistan under a singular Islamic identity beyond ethnic divisions (Giustozzi, 2019).

This ideological shift, however, marginalized non-Pashtun ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, intensifying ethnic tensions and resistance to Taliban governance (Tomsen, 2013; Rashid, 2014). Thus, the Taliban's transformation represents both strategic adaptation to Afghanistan's complex political-religious landscape and a factor deepening internal divisions (Rashid, 2008).

In summary, Afghanistan's post-Soviet trajectory exemplifies core classical realist principles, where power struggles, survival imperatives, and self-interest drive political behavior. The fragmentation of Afghanistan into competing factions during the civil war underscores Morgenthau's claim that in a power-centered world, stability is fleeting (Morgenthau, 1948). The Taliban's ideological evolution from Pashtun nationalism to religious nationalism further complicates the political landscape, demonstrating the adaptive nature of power consolidation strategies (Rubin, 2002).

Ultimately, Afghanistan's history confirms the realist argument that without a strong and unified central authority, fragmentation and conflict are inevitable. Morgenthau's classical realism provides a robust lens to understand Afghanistan not as an anomaly, but as an expected outcome of international and domestic power dynamics (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979).

5. Conclusion

The study of American exceptionalism's influence on U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the Cold War, specifically under the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, reveals the profound role of ideological frameworks in shaping geopolitical strategies. This deeper analysis underscores that while American exceptionalism served as a guiding narrative in U.S. foreign policy, it was not the sole determinant of American actions in the region. Rather, it provided the lens through which U.S. presidents viewed their roles in global politics, particularly during the Afghan-Soviet War.

America's self-perception as a unique nation with a messianic global mission is central to its national identity. This perception influenced the foreign policy decisions of both Carter and Reagan, albeit in distinct ways. Carter's approach was shaped by "pragmatic moralism," aligning his personal values of human rights with American ideals to defend Afghan sovereignty against Soviet aggression. His moralistic stance justified support for the Afghan Mujahideen as a defense of freedom, though it was not without contradictions that limited its effectiveness.

In contrast, Reagan's administration shifted towards a more aggressive, "messianic" form of American exceptionalism. Reagan framed the U.S. as the moral leader in a global struggle against the "evil empire," significantly increasing aid to the Mujahideen and conducting costly covert operations. His policies were underpinned by the belief that the U.S. was a chosen nation guided by a higher purpose. While both administrations succeeded in countering Soviet influence, their policies had unintended consequences that would shape Afghanistan's future instability.

The conflict drew thousands of foreign fighters to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where they were armed with advanced American weaponry. This influx of militants brought harsh forms of Islamic fundamentalism into Afghanistan, contributing to the country's descent into chaos after the Soviet withdrawal. The failure of the U.S. to plan for post-conflict governance created a power vacuum that facilitated the rise of the Taliban, illustrating the dangers of intervention without long-term vision.

Pakistan played a crucial and multifaceted role in this process. The Soviet invasion presented Islamabad with a strategic opportunity to shape Afghanistan as a buffer state against India and to neutralize Pashtun nationalist threats related to the NWFP and the Durand Line. Pakistan became the indispensable

conduit for U.S. support to the Mujahideen, controlling the distribution of weapons and funds to serve its own regional objectives. In doing so, it entrenched its influence over Afghan factions, established extremist training camps along the border, and fostered the environment that would later give rise to the Taliban. The Taliban, in turn, advanced Pakistan's geopolitical interests while deepening Afghanistan's internal fragmentation.

Additionally, the U.S. and its allies failed to balance short-term geopolitical objectives with the imperative of long-term stability. The singular focus on defeating the Soviets came at the expense of building institutions for sustainable governance. The Soviet withdrawal left behind competing warlords and factional violence that destroyed any hope of national unity. In this vacuum, the Taliban emerged as a brutal but organized alternative, offering order amid chaos—a development that classical realism predicts in the absence of effective state authority.

The Afghan Civil War, with its devastating consequences, serves as a testament to Hans Morgenthau's classical realism: the relentless pursuit of power and self-interest by both internal and external actors perpetuated conflict and obstructed lasting peace. Afghanistan's trajectory reveals that the Taliban's rise was the result of a convergence of U.S. exceptionalist policies and Pakistan's regional maneuvering. Both nations achieved their immediate strategic objectives but left behind a legacy of violence, extremism, and instability that reshaped Afghanistan's political landscape.

While this study focuses on the Taliban's initial rise to power, future research could explore the political, security, social and economic implications following their return in 2021, to provide a broader understanding of Afghanistan's evolving trajectory.

To address the hard-learned lessons from this historical trajectory, the following recommendations aim to establish a framework for more sustainable and constructive approaches to foreign intervention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict recovery. These strategies emphasize balancing geopolitical aims with long-term state-building, fostering regional cooperation, and addressing ideological and governance challenges.

First, future interventions must avoid the short-sighted focus on immediate strategic gains without consideration for long-term consequences. While defeating the Soviets was the driving goal during the Cold War, the subsequent power vacuum in Afghanistan allowed extremist groups to flourish. Future foreign engagements must integrate short-term objectives with durable political stability by:

- Prioritizing the establishment of inclusive, representative governance structures.
- Ensuring that external support fosters political dialogue, reconciliation, and national cohesion. Accompanying military assistance with robust peacebuilding frameworks and capacity-building for governance institutions.

Second, unilateral interventions, as demonstrated by Pakistan's selective support for certain Afghan factions, often exacerbate internal divisions and prolong conflicts. Future interventions should adopt multilateral approaches, involving regional actors and international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and regional bodies. These approaches should:

- Promote shared responsibility among external actors to avoid fragmented and competing efforts.
- Encourage diplomatic initiatives that address the complex socio-political dimensions of conflict.
- Foster regional cooperation to ensure collaborative solutions rather than rivalries.

Third, the Cold War-era emphasis on military success came at the cost of human rights and social justice, as the support for Mujahideen factions overlooked their human rights abuses. Future post-conflict reconstruction efforts must:

- Make human rights central to peacebuilding and state-rebuilding efforts.
- Address the needs of marginalized populations, including women, children, and minority groups.
- Prioritize initiatives that safeguard democratic freedoms, human rights protections, and grassroots empowerment.

Fourth, the rise of extremist groups like the Taliban was not only political but also ideological. The U.S. and its allies lacked a nuanced understanding of the ideological roots of extremism, relying primarily on military solutions. Future counter-extremism strategies should:

- Invest in educational reforms that promote tolerance, pluralism, and critical thinking.
- Encourage interfaith dialogue and the development of alternative narratives to extremism.
- Implement de-radicalization programs that address the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, lack of education, and political exclusion.
- Engage local religious leaders, community organizations, and civil society to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of these initiatives.

By incorporating these recommendations, this study highlights the necessity of learning from past mistakes to ensure that future interventions prioritize long-term peace, inclusive governance, and regional cooperation. A comprehensive strategy that addresses ideological, political, and socio-economic dimensions is vital for preventing renewed cycles of instability. Only through proactive, inclusive, and adaptive engagement can the international community hope to foster lasting peace and security in Afghanistan and similar conflict zones.

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