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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF US OFFICIAL DISCOURSE ON PAKISTAN *VIS-A-VIS* AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY

Language is important in the formulation and construction of perceptions regarding allies and foes. In the case of US-Pakistan relations, conflicting themes based on oxymorons have been routinely used to depict the inherent complexities and contradictions in the relations. Using the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, this paper critically analyzes the corpus of US official discourse on Pakistan on the issue of Afghanistan under the Biden Presidency. The corpus of official statements is analyzed with reference to the wider US political culture as well as previous ‘texts’ / older discourse, thereby creating a degree of intertextuality. In this regard, the US official discourse shows four major themes, some of which are in tension with others, which inform overall US-Pakistan relations. They are also, in part, reflective of the tensions within US policies in the region and the War on Terror.

Key words: United States; Pakistan; Afghanistan; war on terror; discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The political world is in the eye of the beholder. Whether the relations between states are friendly or adversarial is a matter of perceptions that never have one-to-one correspondence with objective conditions. Sometimes these are longstanding and may sediment into conceptions of shared identity. In other cases, perceptions may reflect situational interpretations that vary across contexts and administrations. In

certain rare cases like US-Pakistan relations, we see conflicting elements existing together in mutual tension with each other. If we are to understand “war on terror”, a central theme in US foreign policy over the last couple of decades, we must examine the use of language that constructs perceptions of allies and foes across time and space. In this regard, relations between the United States and Pakistan are of particular importance, considering Pakistan’s large role in the “war on terror” discourse.

When searching for implicit meanings of political discourse, we would be well advised to pause over metaphorical language. Metaphors are powerful, and powerful metaphors have the ability to withstand the vicissitudes of time and remain relevant across different historical contexts. A cursory look the titles of books written on US-Pakistan relations echo conflicting themes, such as disenchanting allies¹, and magnificent delusions². Many such descriptions with oxymorons are routinely repeated over the years, such as *mesalliance*, ‘tangled web’ or a ‘bad marriage’ (Nawaz 2020) to describe this relationship across different historical epochs.

Such oxymoronic descriptions featuring words such as disenchantment, delusions and misunderstandings are indicative of a relationship of distrust; great highs and lows, an on-again-off-again alliance, with both sides harbouring a sense of misgiving, while also harbouring a desultory ‘what might have been’ if only the other acted right. As far as similes and metaphors go, a ‘bad marriage’ not only encapsulates precisely these tensions but additionally signifies much more. For one, while marriage is always, in part, a civil contract between equal consenting parties in theory, it is seldom ever equal in terms of actual power dynamics. Much like bilateral relations that always are, in theory, based on the principles of sovereign equality with alliances being consensual, but the latent power dynamics, nevertheless, always remain relevant.

At the same time, the fact that the ‘marriage’ still somehow remains intact despite problems and misgivings is also indicative of a desire by both sides to continue the alliance for greater reasons. This can be attributed, in part, to mutual utility and needs and the lack of an alternative suitable partner that could fulfill the same utility/role. However, it is also often based on past achievements/glories, as well as certain shared values that bind the partners together. In the case of US official discourse on Pakistan, we see all these shades existing together.

1 The book by a former US Diplomat Dennis Kux, who served in Pakistan and on the South Asia bureau, on Pakistan-US relations is titled *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Kux 2001).

2 Former Pakistani Ambassador to the US, Hussain Haqqani’s book is titled *Magnificent Delusions – Pakistan, the United States, and an Epic History of Misunderstanding* (Haqqani 2015).

Relations between Pakistan and the US have always occupied a contested plane, with Afghanistan being, if not the foremost then, one of the major issues that has, both, brought the two countries together, as well as tore them apart, often at the same time. While these conflicting themes were repeated throughout the Cold War *Afghan Jihad* and the Post 9/11 *War on Terror*, they are also key in understanding and deciphering official discourse under the Biden Presidency despite the ‘forever war’ now being over.

While ‘official discourse’ such as State Department Press Releases, Media Question & Answers sessions, and carefully curated speeches by traditional International Relations speaking agents such as the Secretary of State, appear reflective, pensive and often dull articulations of US foreign policy at first viewing, they cannot be fully understood and contextualized without reference to the larger discursive fields that they reside in. With discourse analysis precepts increasingly being used under the framework of Post-Structuralist International Relations, such critical analysis of official discourse aims to draw upon the particular foreign policy culture and *weltanschauung* of a country and, in the process, moves beyond traditional taxonomies of national interest, power dynamics, and polarity.

Foregoing in view, this paper critically analyzes official US discourse, mainly State Department Press Releases, Spokesperson Question and Answers and formal speeches by traditional IR speaking agents such as the President and the Secretary of State, pertaining to Pakistan on the issue of Afghanistan in the first three years of the Biden Presidency (2021-23). By critically analyzing this corpus, the objective of this paper is to shed light on how official discourse could be analyzed and contextualized as being part of a wider discursive field that generates what we know as US-Pakistan relations.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the last couple of decades, a wealth of literature has shown the promise of discourse analysis to offer insights into the operation of the political. One set of this literature offers a conceptualization of what we mean by discourse. O’Tuathail thus defines ‘discourse’ as a “set of capabilities that allow us to organize and give meaning to the world and our actions and practices within it” with the proviso that “there is no agreed and paradigmatic ‘discourse analysis’ but a heterogeneous mix of approaches, perspectives and strategies” (ÓTuathail 2002: 605). Subjects are not “prior to the language games or discursive fields they utilize” but rather “discourses

constrain and enable subject-positioning” (Ibidem 606). Further, as political leaders and foreign policy professionals construct arguments and positions that resonate with popular common sense to create social consensus, more regularized and coherent ‘storylines’ are produced that gain greater “coherence, clarity and consistency” over time (Ibidem 607).

Similarly, Lene Hansen uses a Foucauldian definition of ‘discourse’ as “linguistic systems through which meaning is generated” (Hansen 2016: 96). She posits that post-structuralist IR perspective “theorizes foreign policy as a discursive practice” (Hansen 2016: 96) while noting the “strong nexus” between post-structuralism and discourse analysis in IR (Ibidem 97). Hansen problematizes the relationship between foreign policy and discourse by noting that “foreign policies have to be connected, through discourse, to justification for why these policies are necessary, plausible and possible” (Ibidem 102) and that “discourse analysis” seeks to provide a ‘road map’ that shows as accurately as possible the main foreign policy positions and the representations that sustain them” (Ibidem 102-3).

On the issue of situating ‘official discourse’, she notes that “post-structuralist discourse analysis argues that foreign policy decision-makers are situated within a larger political and public sphere” (Ibidem 6) and, therefore, reside within the wider ‘discursive fields’ of the representations articulated by a larger number of individuals, institutions and media outlets (Ibidem 6-7). Therefore, an ‘inter-textual understanding of foreign policy’ is based on the links of the new texts (or current discourse) with older texts thereby producing ‘new meaning’ (Ibidem 7).

Like all discourse, official discourse does not exist and is not created in a vacuum. On one level, it is a partly bureaucratic function whereby descriptors undergo a process of accretion over time. On another level, it is an attempt at a coherent formulation and articulation of a foreign policy position. Similarly, given that the aim is a representation that resonates with popular common sense, official discourse is also a response to particular cultural conventions and, therefore, forms part of a wider cultural milieu. Based on the above factors, official discourse cannot be meaningfully interpreted without reference to historical antecedents and the wider political culture of a country.

Using this theoretical framework, we aim to interpret ‘official’ US discourse with respect to Pakistan on the issue of Afghanistan under the Biden Administration as the ‘War on Terror’ drew to a close and the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan phase began. By situating the official discourse (i.e. speeches, State Department Spokesperson statements during Q&A’s, Press Releases etc.) within wider discursive

fields, such as Pak-US relations and the ‘War on Terror’, and the wider political culture of the US, the goal is to critically analyse the corpus of text with reference to older ‘texts’/discourse in the above-defined discursive fields, in order to produce new meanings and create a coherent storyline that would not be possible in a traditional realist or liberal framework alone.

3. BIDEN ADMINISTRATION’S POSITIONING OF PAKISTAN ON THE ISSUE OF AFGHANISTAN

The corpus of public statements forming the ‘official’ US discourse on the issue reveals four major themes. The first narrows the Pakistan-US relationship to being purely a function of US interests in Afghanistan alone as opposed to being a broader relationship that stands on its own merits. In this sense, there is a coldness and curtness in the statements that belie a sense of US dissatisfaction and misgivings about Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan with the result that the US only engages with Pakistan out of necessity owing to the Afghanistan situation and does not desire broad-based relations encompassing other issues.

Linked to the first, there is a second theme that flows from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan where Pakistan, despite US misgivings, is required to play a role to protect US interests in the troop withdrawal phase, especially with regards to evacuation efforts. Here, while allusions to past dissatisfaction with Pakistan are made, yet, its role is also praised and acknowledged and these interests remains an enduring prong of US engagement with Pakistan in this phase.

Co-existing in tensions with the first and second themes, however, there is a third theme that acknowledges the complexity and difficulty of the Afghanistan situation and the fact that it is in Pakistan’s own interest to see security and stability in Afghanistan. Here, both US and Pakistan have shared interests in preserving peace and stability in Afghanistan, with Pakistan requiring US help in achieving that aim. In this regard, US and Pakistan are partners.

Lastly, there is a fourth theme, that is again in tension with the first theme, which speaks of Pakistan and the US jointly belonging to the ‘free world’. The historical alliance against the Communist *threat* during the Cold War-era Afghan jihad has Pakistan sharing certain *universal* values with the US that endure even today, implying an element of character beyond a narrow focus on temporary and sectional overlapping ‘interests’, such as their convergence of views on the issue of human rights and girls education in Afghanistan.

These themes, often at odds and in tension with each other, are characteristic of the wider Pakistan-US relations depicted in metaphors based on oxymorons and unresolved complexities, such as a bad marriage and disenchanted allies, that have persisted over the years and continue to hold utility, meaning and relevance today. We now turn to considering each of the themes in greater length.

3.1. Theme I: ‘A Very Specific and Narrow Purpose’ vs. a ‘Broad Relationship’

On 07 October 2021, nearly 10 months into the Biden Presidency, the first high-level visit from the US to Pakistan under the Biden Administration was set to take place. In the afternoon, Wendy R. Sherman, who, as Deputy Secretary of State was the second-highest ranked US Diplomat in the State Department, was in Mumbai where she was due to fly out to Islamabad the same night to undertake a one-day visit. In an interview to Indian think-tank Ananta Centre, she was asked a relatively straightforward question about her upcoming visit to Pakistan. Her response was:

“It is for a very specific and narrow purpose. We don’t see ourselves building a broad relationship with Pakistan and we have no interest in returning to the days of a hyphenated India, Pakistan; that’s not where we are, that’s not where we are going to be. But we all need to know what’s going on in Afghanistan, we all need to be of one mind to approach the Taliban... and so I’m gonna have some very specific conversations, continuing conversations that Secretary Blinken has had...” (The Express Tribune 2021)

The actual video of the interview has Sherman displaying cold curtness evidently showing a distaste at having to engage with Pakistan, yet finding it necessary to do so due to Afghanistan. This is one theme echoed throughout State Department Press Releases and Statements under the Biden administration: State Department read-outs of the phone calls between Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Qureshi in 2021 are each short, curt, and to the point, with Afghanistan remaining predominant, both in terms of space and order of priority showing a focus solely on engaging on and due to Afghanistan and not much else.

For instance, the readout from the 16 May 2021 phone call, from the beginning, lists “the importance of continued cooperation on the Afghan peace process” (Office of the Spokesperson 2021c) as the very first topic broached between the two, with not much else to write home about. While the 09 July 2021 read-out uses almost the same lines (Office of the Spokesperson 2021d), the 16 August 2021 phone call read-out made the situation abundantly clear: as the Taliban stormed into Kabul on 15

August 2021, the short 28-word statement simply says: “Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Qureshi discussed Afghanistan and the developing situation there.” (Office of the Spokesperson 2021e): as business-like a focus on Afghanistan as possible, with not a single other topic mentioned at all, which is usually customary for such high-level engagements, nor any mention or affirmation of a shared goal/outcome.

The stark contrast in this regard comes out when such transcripts are compared with other Readouts of phone calls to regional leaders: for example, with two of Pakistan’s neighbours, India and Afghanistan. The Press Release for the Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar phone call (Office of the Spokesperson 2021b) starts off effusively with Secretary Blinken speaking to Minister Jaishankar “to reaffirm the growing US-India partnership”. Secretary Blinken then “underscored India’s role as a preeminent US partner in the Indo-Pacific and the importance of working together to expand regional co-operation” with the read-out ending with “both agreed to coordinate closely on global developments and look forward to meeting in person at the earliest opportunity”. The texture, tenor and content of this read-out is drastically different compared to the ones with FM Qureshi.

Similarly, the Readout of the phone call with President Ghani of Afghanistan (Office of the Spokesperson 2021a) also starts off with Secretary Blinken speaking to President Ghani “regarding the US commitment to an enduring US-Afghan partnership”. It also talks about the Afghan peace process, “reviewing the February 2020 US-Taliban Agreement and whether the Taliban are living up to their commitments” and ending with stating “the Secretary committed to consultations with the Government of Afghanistan, NATO allies, and international partners regarding a collective strategy to support a stable, sovereign, democratic, and secure future for Afghanistan”. Again, a much broader set of issues listed in the read-out compared to the cold and curt tenor of the ones with Pakistan.

This latent tension and singular focus on Afghanistan and Afghanistan alone when it came to Pakistan could also be seen when Foreign Minister Qureshi was in New York to attend the High-level Segment of the United Nations General Assembly where he met Secretary Blinken on the sidelines of the event. Their brief remarks to the Press before their meeting (Blinken 2021) make for interesting reading.

Secretary Blinken opens his remarks by expressing his pleasure at meeting “my friend and counterpart from Pakistan” while noting their phone calls in previous months. Wasting no time though, he outrightly gets to the issue that for him is the

most pertinent: “... a lot to focus on, starting with Afghanistan and the importance of our countries working together and going forward on Afghanistan. (Inaudible) appreciate the work that Pakistan has done to facilitate the departure of American citizens who wish to leave as well as others” before moving on to the tokenism of “but a lot to talk about there as well as our own bilateral relationship, including the economic relationship between our countries and working in the region as a whole”.

In response, Foreign Minister Qureshi appears to accept the *fait accompli* of having to engage mainly on Afghanistan despite wanting a broader-spectrum discussion: “I’m glad to be meeting face-to-face with you. As you said, we’ve had three telephone phone conversations discussing the regional situation, the Afghan situation. I thought a time would come where we’d be talking beyond Afghanistan, but it seems Afghanistan is there, we can’t wish it away, and we have to find a way of collectively working to achieve our common objective, which is peace and stability”. It is only after this that Foreign Minister Qureshi also mentions, almost in passing, of the meeting being a “good opportunity to... discuss our bilateral relations, and the delicate situation in South Asia”, with the last part enough to indicate that Foreign Minister Qureshi would want to discuss India as well.

Nevertheless, even if Foreign Minister Qureshi would have raised South Asia (a clear euphemism for India), the State Department Press Release (Office of the Spokesperson 2021f) only gives out, what for them, was the main and only emphasis of the meeting: “Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and discussed the way forward in Afghanistan. Secretary Blinken reiterated the importance of coordinating our diplomatic engagement and facilitating the departure of those wishing to leave Afghanistan. The Secretary noted that the United States appreciates Pakistan’s support and assistance with both of these efforts”; no India, no bilateral relations and no tokenisms of ‘regional connectivity’ nor ‘Covid-19 assistance’, only business.

At the same time, we know that such muted allusions are not something that the United States Foreign Policy culture is typically known for regarding those who they are not pleased with. Usually, for the United States, using brash over-the-top adjectives to describe countries in colourful terms such as terrorist allies and the Axis of Evil, or describing foreign Heads of States as stone cold killers, is a norm, with such discourse commonly meted out for countries like Russia, Iran and North Korea. In contrast, despite evident coldness, there is even a bit of praise for Pakistan here with gritted teeth.

In the unique and peculiar foreign policy culture of the US, however, we should remember that such rough treatment is usually reserved for those on the “other side” and, despite often teetering on the edge, Pakistan has never been fully considered beyond the proverbial pale by the US and, therefore, deemed worthy of such treatment; it remains one of ‘our own’, though perhaps sometimes ‘misguided’. It has routinely been given a degree of understanding and leeway despite major misgivings and continues to do so.

A realist interpretation would reason that the US needed Pakistan’s assistance as a supply corridor for its forces in Afghanistan and, therefore, could not ‘cut the cord’ despite its misgivings on Pakistan’s seemingly ‘dubious’ role. Nevertheless, this cannot explain the entire story as the end of the “forever war” would also have ended this dependence and, therefore, allowed the US to fully ‘unleash’ its proverbial wrath on Pakistan, if not in deeds then at least in discourse. Yet, that was not the case under the Biden Presidency despite the coldness it, nevertheless, displayed.

3.2. Theme II: “It is time to end the forever war”

War in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multi-generational undertaking. We were attacked. We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in Iraq – in Afghanistan. And it’s time to end the forever war

~ President Biden, 14 April 2021 (Biden 2021)

Within 4 months of taking up the mantle of the US Presidency, President Biden laid down, what would be, his marker on among the most important issues, if not the sole driving force, of US Foreign Policy in the South Asia/West Asia region: ending the War in Afghanistan. In his 14 April 2021 speech in the Roosevelt Treaty Room of the White House, he announced the drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan.

While listing down the things the US would continue to do – supporting the training of Afghan National Army, peace talks between Taliban and the Afghan Government, and protecting the rights of Afghan women and girls through humanitarian assistance – he added a meaningful “and we will ask other countries – other countries in the region – to do more to support Afghanistan, especially Pakistan, as well as Russia, China, India and Turkey” (Biden 2021).

The ‘especially Pakistan’ holds special import here for two reasons: firstly, it not only required for more from Pakistan, given the nature of the beast at hand (i.e. being

an immediate neighbour), but also expected more, given the nature of relations between the two countries (being the only major non-NATO ally in the War on Terror out of these countries that played an active role as well as their long history).

In terms of the frustration, it also brought Biden full-circle from his time as Vice President in one sense. This need for Pakistan to ‘do more’ on Afghanistan alluded to as President in 2021 has echoes of the then-Vice President Biden’s comments in 2011 in a joint Press Conference with President Karzai to assess progress made: recounting the gains of the military and civilian efforts in the country, he noted “these gains, as you pointed out to me, Mr. President, as we know, are fragile and reversible... and it’s going to require more pressure – more pressure on the Taliban, from Pakistan’s side of the border, than we’ve been – we’ve been able to exert so far” (Biden 2011).

However, on the other hand, this paradox continued to show that, despite the discomfort and unhappiness of Pakistan not doing enough on its side of the border, there was always US willingness to ‘play ball’ with Pakistan, and we see the same echoes in State Department read-outs under President Biden’s tenure despite the end of the ‘forever war’. It somehow continues to be described as an ‘important partner’. Despite allusions of misgivings, it is routinely described as having “shared interests” on Afghanistan and has often been described as being ‘useful’ and ‘helpful’.

State Department Spokesperson, Ned Price, encapsulates these latent tensions in an answer to a question on Pakistan’s role to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table in July 2021 (Price 2021a):

“Well, I think what is true is that Pakistan is an important partner across any number of fronts. Of course, we have shared interests when it comes to Afghanistan, when it comes to peace and stability in Afghanistan. We have – and this goes over the course of successive administrations now – encouraged Pakistan to be a constructive partner when it comes to Afghanistan ... Pakistan has been helpful in – recently when it comes to this shared interest ...”

Yet, in the same answer, the paradoxical nature of US-Pakistan relations comes out, as if it could not be helped:

“What we know to be true is that all of Afghanistan’s neighbors need to play a constructive role in helping to bring about a just and durable political settlement as well as a comprehensive ceasefire. For far too long, some of Afghanistan’s neighbors have not played that role. They had been happy to let – content, I should say, to let other countries take responsibility. And right now, we have made clear that we are going to be working very closely to ensure that

Afghanistan's neighbors do play that constructive role, knowing that it will be a necessary ingredient to what I think we all collectively hope to see in Afghanistan.” (Price 2021a)

Going back to the larger rubric of US-Pakistan relations being described in the beginning as a ‘bad marriage’ where the partners cannot live with each other, yet cannot live without the other, it remains a powerful metaphor as we continue to see its echoes in official discourse despite US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Constant allusions of being an important partner despite misgivings and disagreements; the partnership continues, yet one cannot but help make veiled allusions to the troubled history.

Speaking at a ceremony, jointly with Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of US-Pakistan relations, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said “this is a resilient relationship. It’s capable of overcoming challenges that we’ve had to confront” (Blinken 2022). In the same speech, Secretary Blinken spoke at length about US-Pakistan co-operation, in helping victims of floods, economic and cultural co-operation, US development assistance to Pakistan, and vast people-to-people contacts.

However, the only issue where such an occasion usually kept for unreserved bonhomie and where the paradox did come out was Afghanistan: “We continue to work closely on counterterrorism issues. We have a shared stake in Afghanistan’s future after two decades of war. We’ve had our differences; that’s no secret. But we share a common objective: a more stable, a more peaceful, and free future for all of Afghanistan and for those across the broader region” (Blinken 2022).

There is no doubt that certain US interests continued to remain relevant with Pakistan despite the US withdrawal from Afghanistan: notably, the issue of evacuation of US nationals and others at-risk Afghans for which Pakistan’s assistance was both required and appreciated. Secretary Blinken made this clear in his remarks to the Press before his meeting with Foreign Minister Qureshi in September 2021 quoted above where he said “appreciate the work that Pakistan has done to facilitate the departure of American citizens who wish to leave as well as others” (Blinken 2021) with the same being repeated in the Press Release for the meeting (Office of the Spokesperson 2021f).

The fact that this ‘interest’ remained an important topic of discussion and a driver of engagement with Pakistan in the post-withdrawal phase for the US can also be seen in its appearance in Press Releases of other US engagements with Pakistan under the Biden Presidency. The curtain raiser for the US Under Secretary of State Zeya’s

March 2022 visit to Pakistan, *inter alia*, stated “the Under Secretary’s bilateral meetings will address regional security developments, Pakistan’s generous hosting of Afghan refugees and support for Afghan relocation efforts” (Office of the Spokesperson 2022).

Similarly, the Media Note of the December 2023 visit to Pakistan of the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Julieta Valls Noyes also states, *inter alia*, that she would “discuss shared efforts to protect vulnerable individuals and accelerate safe, efficient relocation and resettlement of Afghan refugees in the U.S. immigration pipeline” (Office of the Spokesperson 2023).

Therefore, echoing the first theme, while there are misgivings and dissatisfaction with Pakistan that are continually alluded to, yet the door to engagement is not closed. In fact, the US still has the need for engagement with Pakistan and, on this count, Pakistan is described as helpful. A purely realist analysis would be able to explain these first two themes. Nevertheless, there are two further prongs of US discourse on Pakistan vis-a-vis Afghanistan under President Biden that are of an intersubjective nature and beyond the horizon of realist analysis.

3.3. Theme III: “This is Wild Country; this is Wilder than the Wild West”

Now, there’s another part of our strategy I want to share with you... We’re going to work Pakistan and Afghanistan to enhance cooperation to defeat what I would call a common enemy. Taliban and al Qaeda fighters do hide in remote regions of Pakistan — this is wild country; this is wilder than the Wild West. And these folks hide and recruit and launch attacks.

People say, well, do you think President Musharraf really understands the threat of extremists in his midst? I said, yes, I do. You know how I know? They’ve tried to kill him. Al Qaeda has launched attacks against the President of this country. He understands. He also understands that extremists can destabilize countries on the border, or destabilize countries from which they launch their attacks.

~ George W. Bush, 2007 (Office of the Press Secretary 2007)

One of the reasons the above quote in President Bush’s 2007 speech remains so pertinent to understand the US-Pakistan paradox on Afghanistan on a deeper level is because, one, it alludes to an admission of the fact by the US how hard the terrain and the job at hand were i.e. wilder than the wild west, and there was no one to better

understand that than the US itself having had ‘boots on the ground’ for 6 years by then. Secondly, and most importantly, on an innate level, the US knew that instability in Afghanistan was not in Pakistan’s interests and that Pakistan, too, had a legitimate stake in, if not a prosperous but at least, a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

In a foreign policy culture of universal truths that are self-evident, the US saw this maxim resonating, if not with the whole of Pakistan, then at least, an important part of Pakistan and its foreign policy/military establishment through the years. This again remains a theme that we see persisting in official discourse under the Biden administration despite the passage of more than 14 years.

On a question on whether the State Department or the US administration had, after the end of the 20-year war, undertaken a review on Pakistan’s role in aiding the Taliban, State Department Ned Price said: “It would be difficult for me to attempt to summarize 20 years of U.S.-Pakistani relationships – relations between 2001 and 2021. I suppose what I would say broadly, of course, is that Pakistan was not a monolith during that time. We saw different governments, and we saw with the passage of years different approaches to the Taliban and to Afghanistan at the time... we recognize and one of the many reasons we’re meeting with Pakistan is because of the shared security interests that we do have. It is neither in our interests nor in Pakistan’s interest to see instability, to see violence in Afghanistan” (Price 2022b).

Similarly, on a question regarding a terrorist attack in Pakistan in December 2022, he said “the broader point is that the Government of Pakistan is a partner when it comes to these shared challenges, including the challenge of terrorist groups – terrorist groups inside of Afghanistan, terrorist groups along the Afghan-Pakistan border. We have partnered with our Pakistani friends to take on – to help them take on this challenge. We stand ready to assist, whether with this unfolding situation or more broadly” (Price 2022c).

Such motifs can be seen across numerous statements throughout the Biden Presidency: the complexity of the Afghanistan issue and Pakistan’s past role notwithstanding, there is an acknowledgment that security in Afghanistan was in Pakistan’s own interest as well. In the classic paternalism of US Foreign policy culture, therefore, Pakistan might need urging and reminding of its own national interest, and thus, Pakistan needed help from one of its long-standing partners in this regard. After all, the two countries had worked on the same objectives for a long time in different eras, current misgivings notwithstanding.

3.4. Theme IV: “*The Triumph of the Free World*”

Hot on the heels of 9/11, the then-Pakistan President (General) Musharraf undertook a visit to the US in November 2001 to formally cement Pakistan’s alliance with the US in the ‘War on Terror’ where the very first line of the Joint Statement read as follows: “President Bush and President Musharraf reaffirmed the benefits of 50 years of friendship and close cooperation between Pakistan and the United States and recalled the pivotal role of the Pakistan-U.S. alliance in the triumph of the free world at the end of the cold war” (Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information 2001).

Reference to the ‘triumph of the free world’ and the ‘pivotal role’ that the US-Pakistan alliance played in it in the very first line of a Joint Statement to cement another long international war where the two joined hands again is a powerful metaphor in itself. By joining hands *back then*, Pakistan was on not just the US side, but on the side of the ‘free world’ and played a key role in the Afghan jihad, the demise of the Soviet Union, and, therefore, the proverbial ‘end of history’. As the new millennium brought another cataclysmic civilizational war, the two had joined hands again in pursuit of victory, not just for the US or Pakistan as countries, but, as joint members of the ‘free world’, for certain universal self-evident truths.

In the particular universe of the US foreign policy culture, the mention of the universal values is an undying and regular theme. These universal values are something that the US continues to espouse and, despite the end of the “forever war” in Afghanistan, they continue to find their way as a motif in US official discourse on Pakistan *vis-a-vis* Afghanistan. While the US was no longer in Afghanistan, asking the Taliban to live up to their ‘commitments’ was one of its repeated demands. Of course, one part of those commitments consisted of cold hard counter-terrorism: not allowing Afghan soil to be used by terrorists. This was a definite point of intersection/convergence between the US and Pakistan *vis-a-vis* Afghanistan (as echoed in the previous theme).

As Ned Price explained in September 2022: “The support for the people of Afghanistan is something we discuss regularly with our Pakistani partners – our efforts to improve the lives and livelihoods, the humanitarian conditions of the Afghan people, and to see to it that the Taliban live up to the commitments that they have made. And of course, Pakistan is implicated in many of these same commitments – the counterterrorism commitments, commitments to safe passage, commitments to the citizens of Afghanistan. The unwillingness or the inability on the part of the

Taliban to live up to these commitments would have significant implications for Pakistan as well, and so for that reason we do share a number of interests with Pakistan regarding its neighbor” (Price 2022b).

However, there is yet another prong that goes beyond terrorism, safety and security, on that trilateral US-Pakistan-Afghanistan axis of intersecting interests that are value-based: “We have heard both publicly and privately from our Pakistani counterparts that they too have an interest in seeing to it that the gains, including among Afghanistan’s minorities, including among its women and girls, over the past 20 years not be squandered. And so there is quite a bit of alignment of interest when it comes to Afghanistan” (Price 2021b).

Similarly, in November 2021, on a question pertaining to the Troika Plus meeting in Islamabad (an international mechanism on Afghanistan that includes US, Russia, China and Pakistan), Ned Price said “... it is especially critical with countries that have a good deal of leverage with the Taliban... It is incumbent on all of these countries to use that leverage to push the Taliban in the right direction. When it comes to this issue, our interests are aligned with the members of the “Troika,” and that includes when it comes to the imperative of seeing girls return to secondary schools and encouraging inclusive governance” (Price 2022a). While Pakistan may be far from perfect, suffice it to say that, between China, Russia and Pakistan, the country that the US could associate most closely on human rights and girls education was Pakistan.

Therefore, the alignment of the US with Pakistan on the question of ‘values’ is also something that is important to understand and acknowledge to have a well-rounded view of US official discourse on Pakistan, especially vis-a-vis Afghanistan. Allusions to such shared values, and not just interests, again explain part of the reason why Pakistan has not been considered beyond the pale despite repeated calls by many quarters. Yes, it has had its problems and its role has been questionable and dubious at times, but for the US, Pakistan has not merely been a useful partner; their alliance has been based, not merely on shared interests, but a degree of shared values as well. Such a ‘storyline’ on Pakistan from the eyes of the US given its particular political culture is something that gives a much richer depiction of the Pakistan ‘paradox’ for the US without descending into reductionisms on the use of naked power and alignment of national interests alone.

4. CONCLUSION

In his 1991 article taking stock of security studies, Walt warned against the field being ‘seduced’ by post-structuralism while saying that it was ‘a prolix and self-indulgent discourse that is divorced from reality’ (Hansen 2016: 96). Nevertheless, as discourse analysis in International Relations has grown over the years, it is hoped that discourse scholarship is not still seen as deviant, marginal and ‘dissident’ scholarship (Milliken 1999: 227).

By analyzing official discourse as being part of a wider discursive field, aspects and nuances of bilateral relations, especially for a country as peculiar as the US, come out to the fore that enrich analysis and are able to portray complex and paradoxical relationships, behaviours and discourses viz. countries such as Pakistan. The case of US-Pakistan relations on the issue of Afghanistan is especially curious given the long history of the subject, with reams upon innumerable reams of literature and books written on the subject, and people holding strong views and opinions on the matter across both sides of the spectrum.

For those with a realist frame of mind, the advice is always for the US to cut the proverbial cord with Pakistan and punish it for its seemingly errant role in Afghanistan. On the other hand, there are those who preach ‘strengthening democracy’ and civilian rule in Pakistan which would automatically make Pakistan see the ‘errors’ of its ways in Afghanistan and bring it in a closer alliance with the US. However, as we have seen, practical geopolitics is never solely based on realist reductionism nor liberal normativism; it is always much more complex.

Complexities and contradictions in discourse are reflective of complexities and contradictions in the material domain. Seen as part of a wider discursive field, US official discourse on Pakistan is no exception to the contradictions and paradoxes of the War in Terror and US policies in the region. As we have seen in the above analysis, under the Biden Presidency, in the first theme, there are shades of previous US misgivings about Pakistan’s role in the War on Terror in Afghanistan which is seen in a tenor of coldness and insistence on engaging with Pakistan only on the issue of Afghanistan out of necessity; there is no desire for a ‘broader relationship’ beyond these narrow confines.

In the second theme, while there are constant allusions to past differences between US and Pakistan, yet, instead of closing off engagement, there is a role that Pakistan has been asked to play in the post-withdrawal phase pertaining to evacuations from Afghanistan. Here, Pakistan is depicted as useful and helpful. In the third theme, the

complexity of the Afghanistan imbroglio is acknowledged along with the fact that it is in Pakistan's own interest to have stability and security in Afghanistan. In this regard, the US wants to help Pakistan achieve that which is in its own national interest and, therefore, both countries are partners (putting it in direct tension with the first theme).

Lastly, in the fourth theme we see that, beyond having overlapping interests regarding peace and security in Afghanistan (echoing the third theme), the US and Pakistan also see eye-to-eye on certain shared values, such as human rights and girls education in Afghanistan. Underlying this convergence is the fact that both countries belong to the 'free world', having partnered for the same values in Afghanistan before.

These tensions and contradictions exist together in the discourse which explains part of the reason why successive US administrations have continually repeated the same hopes and aspirations, as well as frustrations and bitterness about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. While many different approaches and strategies have been tried over the years, the US has neither cut the proverbial cord with Pakistan, nor has it entered into a closer alliance/union with Pakistan on the Afghanistan issue. Perhaps this is why the US continues to engage with and call Pakistan a partner on Afghanistan, despite often having gritted teeth; an unhappy marriage indeed.

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KRITIČKA ANALIZA SLUŽBENOG DISKURSA SAD-A O PAKISTANU *VIS-A-VIS* AFGANISTANA POD BIDENOVIM PREDSDJEDNIŠTVOM

Sažetak:

Jezik je važan u formuliranju i izgradnji percepcija o saveznicima i neprijateljima. U slučaju američko-pakistanskih odnosa konfliktne teme temeljene na oksimoronima rutinski su korištene za opisivanje inherentne složenosti i proturječnosti u tim odnosima. Koristeći teorijski okvir analize diskursa ovaj rad kritički analizira korpus američkog službenog diskursa o Pakistanu vis-a-vis Afganistana za vrijeme Bidenovog predsjedništva. Korpus službenih izjava analiziran je s obzirom na širu američku političku kulturu, kao i na prethodne tekstove / stariji diskurs, čime je uspostavljen određeni stupanj intertekstualnosti. U tom smislu službeni diskurs SAD-a pokazuje četiri glavne teme koje oblikuju sveukupne američko-pakistanske odnose, od kojih su neke u napetosti s drugima. One također djelomično odražavaju i napetosti unutar američke politike u regiji i ratu protiv terorizma.

Ključne riječi: Sjedinjene Države; Pakistan; Afganistan; rat protiv terorizma; analiza diskursa.

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