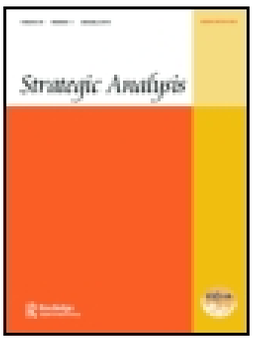

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Considered Chaos: Revisiting Pakistan's 'Strategic Depth' in Afghanistan

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Considered Chaos: Revisiting Pakistan's 'Strategic Depth' in Afghanistan

Aidan Parkes

ABSTRACT: Pakistan's historical insecurity towards India and the Islamisation of its military raises a curious question of strategy and identity rooted in Pakistan's political genesis. This article examines the social and geostrategic factors underpinning Pakistan's Afghanistan approach between its inheritance of security principles from colonial administration after Partition, and the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996 and beyond. This article also critically analyses the existing link between the Taliban and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). Accepting the historically contingent inheritance of realist colonial security construct, this article privileges culture as a primary variable in the evolution of Pakistan's geostrategic thought.

Introduction

> *"History, in other words, is not a calculating machine. It unfolds in the mind and imagination, and it takes body in the multifarious responses of a people's culture, itself the infinitely subtle mediation of material realities of underpinning economic fact, of gritty objectivities"*.
> Basil Davidson[1]

This article explores the history of Pakistan's strategic influence on Afghanistan between the Partition of British Indiain 1947 and the emergence of the Afghan Taliban in 1994. Here, two critical developments in the evolution of Pakistan's strategic behaviour towards Afghanistan require examination. The first development is Pakistan's inheritance of British imperial geostrategy and fusion of such strategy with socio-cultural elements under President Zia ul-Haq. It was thus natural that colonial structures would play a significant role in Pakistan's quest for strategic depth in its north-western neighbourhood and the geopolitical reality surrounding Afghanistan often overshadowed British strategic thinking as much as it would become an important factor in Pakistan's strategic calculus. This section examines how remnants of British colonial strategy informed the genesis of Pakistan's geostrategic posture vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

The second key development is the evolution of Pakistan's Cold War strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan; especially since 1977, with General Zia ul-Haq's systematic institutionalisation of religion in politics and strategic policies of Pakistan, and subsequent fusion of state and mosque following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The article then briefly delineates the inception of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan in 1994, critically analysing how Pakistan's instrumentalisation

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of the movement was symptomatic of its broader preference for use of Islamist groups for realisation of its strategic objectives.

Post-partition strategy

To understand the nature of Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan and the genesis of its support for Islamist groups in Afghanistan, a historical account of the relationship between religion and Pakistan's military establishment is first necessary. The partition of British India into Muslim majority Pakistan and Hindu majority India created an ideological and social division that resulted in four wars, countless skirmishes, and a broad semblance of mutual mistrust and animosity.[2] Unlike India, Pakistan has been under martial law or military rule for almost half of its existence. Its military is the 6th largest in the world, and the largest among all Islamic nations. After partition, Pakistan's fledgling institutions inherited elements of British military strategy which led to the concept of 'strategic depth' later characterising its policy towards Afghanistan. In early 1946, the then Chief of the General Staff in India, General Arthur Smith observed that due to the geographic proximity between would-be Pakistan and Hindustan, Pakistan lacked the 'depth to ensure main bases were located out of effective range of enemy bombers'.[3] He also held that Pakistan must cooperate with India to ensure security on the western front. Smith's observations implied that in case of an adverse relationship with India, Pakistan would have to look for depth in Afghanistan and ensure a pliable regime in Kabul. Pakistani leaders, perhaps, took Smith's parting observations too strategically to seek 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan, pursuing a strategy which had social and political renditions.

Interpreting 'strategic depth'

Strategic depth was a prominent pre-nuclear era geopolitical concept, which Pakistan employed in its approach towards Afghanistan during the Cold War. In colonial military terms, the concept of 'strategic depth' meant geostrategic regional depth or influence. In its 20th century form, strategic depth is a defensive concept. It means Pakistan would adopt a policy to prevent Afghanistan from falling under foreign influence, particularly perceived as adversarial. The British employed this concept during their imperial contest with Czarist Russia for influence in Central Asia, which was known as the 'Great Game'.[4] Pakistan inherited this policy, which became a fundamental pillar of Pakistan's Afghanistan strategy, even before the development of its nuclear capabilities.

The quest for strategic depth partly explains Pakistan's support for Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan, rationalised by cultural affinity, which rationalises Pakistan's support for the Pashtun-dominated Taliban movement. The military's pursuit of political influence in Kabul can be understood through a realist framework. However, an approach of historical contingency, accounting for pre-existing colonial policies, in equal measure with Pakistan's unique policy of engineering a cultural transformation as an adjunct of their policy of strategic depth require critical study and analysis.

Since Partition, Pakistan was wary of Afghanistan's role in fomenting Pashtun unrest domestically. Further contributing to Pakistan's need for strategic depth in Afghanistan based on Islamism, was the unrest among Pakistan's Pashtun tribal groups. During the

Cold War, Pakistan grew suspicious about Afghanistan's promotion of nationalist self-determination among the Pakistani Pashtuns. Expression of separatist sentiments among a section of the Pashtuns during the early years of its existence did undermine Pakistan's objective of nurturing a Pan-Pakistan Islamic nationalist identity. The resultant sense of insecurity prompted its military to evolve strategic measures that would extend its influence in Afghanistan and avert the threat of disintegration. Pakistan's conflict with India persisted beyond partition into the Cold War, and after the loss of East Pakistan in 1971, its military institutions adopted a decidedly Islamist outlook on geostrategic affairs. Its deepening sense of insecurity vis-à-vis India made it even more urgent to secure and sustain its hold over Afghanistan as a territory it could use as a strategic backyard ensuring it critical depth necessary for its military to retreat to, in case of possible surprise thrust by India and continue its offensive without accepting defeat. This required nurturing of the dominant Pashtun ethnic community in Afghanistan that had cross-border linkages with Pashtuns in Pakistan. The turn of events in the early 1980s, made it possible for Pakistan's military to establish lasting linkages with Pashtun mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. This article argues that the impulses generated by Islamisation of Pakistani society and polity during the late 1970s and the early 1980s might have shaded off into the overall Islamic orientation of the Afghan resistance during this period and the ongoing social engineering in Pakistan might have been perpetuated as an element of its policy of 'strategic depth', to moderate the Pashtun nationalist threat earlier faced by Pakistan.

Pakistani realism: from nuclear realism to Islamisation

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's fourth president and ninth Prime Minister played a critical role in Pakistan's nuclear policy to deter the Indian threat following Pakistan's military defeat in 1971 at the hands of India. His nuclear intentions suggested a realist approach aimed at security maximisation,[5] which started with his swift initiation of a nuclear deterrence programme in 1972.[6] Ensuring nuclear parity with India was essential for Pakistan throughout the Cold War period. In a statement written from prison before his execution, Bhutto declared that initiating Pakistan's nuclear programme 'will perhaps be my greatest achievement and contribution to the survival of our people and our nation'.[7] Bhutto's commitment to nuclear proliferation was a significant turning point in Pakistan's history and it indicated culmination of a traditional realist approach towards security.With regard to India, Bhutto sought to achieve nuclear capability and relative power parity within a realist framework. Bhutto's nemesis and successor, Gen. Zia ul Haq would add an Islamist ideological dimension to Pakistan's nuclear policy catalysing the process of Islamisation in Pakistan and through ideational designs secure a prime of place in the Islamic world.[8] This transition would prove to be a pivotal paradigm shift in Pakistan's strategic thinking and pave the way for further consolidation of its policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Zia's Pan-Islamic designs

General Zia ul-Haq introduced a pan-Islamic vision in Pakistan and sought to reshape its institutions to turn such vision into reality. Assuming power through a military coup unseating Bhutto in 1977, Zia is widely considered as having been responsible for institutionalising Islam within the state's military apparatus.[9] Externally, Zia promoted an active Islamist agenda in line with his conservative

leanings, encouraged by the sponsorship of Afghan Jihad by the West. Husain Haqqani, a leading expert on Pakistani politics, notes that President Zia was 'the person most responsible for turning Pakistan into a global center for political Islam'.[10]

At the internal level, Haqqani would aver, under Zia, 'Pakistan's judiciary and administration were infused with individuals with a decidedly Islamist outlook. The military and especially the much-enlarged ISI agency, also assimilated the harder-line definition of Pakistan's ideology'.[11] He employed religious tenets while framing his strategic policies. As a result, Bhutto's largely rationalist and realist approach to security was replaced with an identity-based Islamist and India-centric security discourse. Zia's Islamisation of the military was significant because emotion or 'belief'-based strategies invariably lead to ensuring biases. As an all-encompassing way of life, Pakistan promoted Islam and pursued the policy of exerting influence through a multitude of social and political instruments, most important of which was education, as is being discussed below.

Pakistan's madrassas

Madrassas are traditionally conservative Islamic schools. For Pakistan, *madrassas* bridge an important gap between theology and politics. These schools often teach a conservative interpretation of Islam. Among various *madrassas*, those belonging to Sunni Deobandi sect played a big role in Taliban's evolution and shaped their theological orientation.[12] The Deobandi *madrassas*, it should be noted, teach their students an intensely conservative religious world view. They are anti-Western in outlook and emphasise puritanical practices.[13] The Deobandi *madrassas* of Pakistan receive abundant funding, often referred to as alms or *zakat*, from Gulf donors.[14] During the days of the Afghan Jihad (1979–1989) the Deobandi *madrassas* advocated an interpretation of Islam which was closer to the extreme ideals associated with Saudi Wahhabism.[15] Through these *madrassas*, which mushroomed in the Af-Pak border areas, such ideas were propagated in the region with the hope of expanding the recruitment base for Afghan mujahideen outfits.[16] Although Saudi Arabia's contribution to the *madrassas* in Pakistan helped legitimise and mobilise the Taliban, Deobandi *madrassas* were 'Wahabised' in the process. The Deobandi *ulama* gained significant political clout domestically from Zia's Islamisation of state structures and, received international recognition, during the Anti-Soviet resistance movement within Afghanistan. It is true that this constituency subsequently displayed its pan-Islamic fervour following withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. All this had indelible influence on Pakistani society and consolidated a mindset that contributes to the development of the policy of strategic depth in a significant way.

Daoud, the Durand Line and self-determination

In 1973, former Afghan Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan seized power from his cousin King Zahir Shah. Departing from the monarchical tradition, Daoud assumed the presidency of Afghanistan and established an Afghan republic. Pakistan's Cold War relations with Afghanistan were strategically hazardous and the military saw Afghanistan as a point of geopolitical 'instability'.[17] Largely due to social and political fragmentation, Afghanistan struggled to establish a cohesive centralised government in Kabul.[18] In Pakistan, the tribally and socially conservative

Pashtuns of the North-West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) and border regions caused tensions concerning issues of separatism and Pashtun nationalism.[19] This was inflamed by disputations over the status of the so-called 'Durand Line'.

Agreed upon by Sir Mortimer Durand and Afghanistan's Amir Abdul Rahman Khan in 1893, the Durand Line separates Afghanistan and Pakistan's western border but strategically divides densely populated tribal Pashtun regions.[20] Afghanistan has never officially accepted the Durand Line, and agitation for the reunification a broader 'Pashtunistan' caused angst for Pakistan, particularly during the years Daoud was at the helm first as the fifth Prime Minister and then as the first President. 'Pashtunistan' is geographically reminiscent of Afghanistan under Ahmad Shah Durrani's tribal confederacy in 1747. His 'Durrani Empire' in the Pashtun heartland of Kandahar, Afghanistan, was fractured following Ahmed Shah's death and it was wedged between the imperial empires of Great Britain, Czarist Russia, the Qing Dynasty of China and Persia. Figure 1 maps the overlap between Durrani's 18th Century Empire and Cold War 'Pashtunistan' demographic concentrations. This figure illustrates not only the centrality of Pashtunistan in the scheme of some of the political leaders of modern Afghanistan, but also the strategic separation of ethnic Pashtuns along the Durand Line.[21] Barfield notes that historically, 'Afghan' was so synonymous with 'Pashtun' that Afghanistan could be equally glossed not only as the 'land of the Afghans', but also as the 'land of the Pashtuns'.[22]

In this context, the separatist sentiments emanating from Balochistan in Pakistan's south and west, close to the Pashtun tribal areas straddling both countries were an additional strategic worry for the leadership in Islamabad. That Kabul adopted a sympathetic posture vis-à-vis the Baloch insurgents must have deepened the Pakistani sense of insecurity further. Daoud Khan's support for nationalist separatist movements worried the military because it threatened to undermine

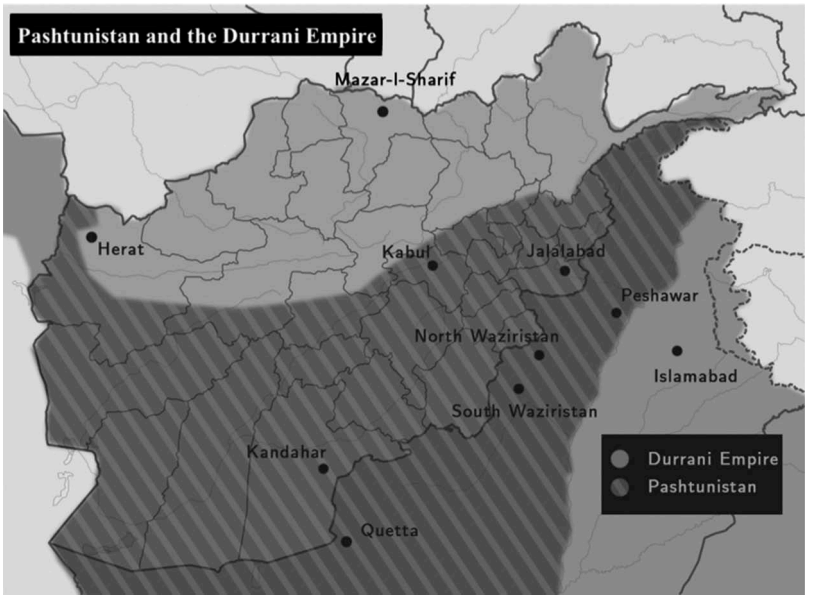

Figure 1. Pashtunistan and the Durrani Empire (Original Source).

Pakistan's territorial integrity and its emphasis on Islamic identity as a unifier in its nation-building efforts. Daoud established 'Radio Pashtunistan' a radio news medium for Pashtuns in Pakistan.[23] The suspicion that it could fuel ethnic separatist sentiments made Pakistan anxious and the fact it would disprove its idea of pan-Islamic Pakistani identity and lead to identity incongruence always weighed heavy on Pakistani psyche. Pakistan also saw Daoud as liable to Soviet influence and Daoud's support for both Pashtun and Baluch ethnic movements in Pakistan compelled Pakistan to seek strategic counter-measures.

The communist interlude

Afghanistan's experiment with communist rule was violent and interspersed with coups and counter coups. The resistance from Afghan society was rather spontaneous and widespread. It was natural that it would assume a tribal-religious colour, Afghanistan being populated by diverse tribal groups with Islamic faith. In April 1978, a Marxist coup, known as the 'Saur Revolution' ousted Daoud's government. In its place came a tenuous coalition headed by Noor Mohammed Taraki's People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). However, within less than a year, Taraki's Soviet-backed regime confronted an uprising in Herat: a violent rebellion in Afghanistan's border region with Iran broke out in March 1979, causing around 5,000 deaths.[24] This was one instance of widespread rejection of communist rule in Afghanistan. Taraki told Soviet Premier Kosygin, 'There is no active support on the part of the population. It is almost wholly under the influence of the Shiite slogans— follow not the infidels but follow us'.[25] Afghanistan's deeply religious society was easily mobilised against non-believers. This was a critical sign of Afghanistan's deep social rejection of atheistic communist rule. However, this did not translate into national unity or political consensus.

Islamic unity

Following the united Islamic resistance movement that took shape in Afghanistan against the communist rule, Pakistan found in it an opportunity to harness the Islamic sentiments both as a counter to the ethnic mobilization that Afghan leaders had resorted to in the past, and also as an opportunity to reaffirm centrality of Islam in its scheme of things. Saudi Arabia assisted Pakistan's Pan-Islamic efforts by funding *madrassas* during Afghanistan's communist interlude. Here, many Afghan refugees were instructed in in various parts of Pakistan's border regions. The import of Saudi Wahhabi Islamic ideology had two notable social effects for Pakistan. Firstly, the militant brand of Islam brought millions of socio-economically disadvantaged youth closer to radicalisation. Secondly, conservative ideals permeated every layer of the society and bolstered the clout of religious ulema and institutions. Students of *madrassas* were given military training and were armed by Pakistan sponsored by the US and its allies to fight in Afghanistan and defeat the god-less communists.

Naturally, the notion of a collective *sharia* observant society resonated with many elements of Afghanistan's religiously conservative society. Despite Afghanistan's deep social and ethnic divisions, Islam unified a multitude of disparate forces against the Soviet Union, and Zia's Pakistan was dedicated to supporting the Islamist cause at home

and abroad. Fraser identifies the transnational essence of Afghanistan's Cold War resistance, noting,[26]

> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan stimulated a response across the Islamic world that, beyond the provision of military and other support for the Afghan resistance movements, mobilised opinion in favour of Islam and Islamic communities threatened by non-Islamic forces or states.

Ultimately, the Soviet invasion precipitated the convergence of vast Islamist forces with vastly-divergent objectives to unify in Afghanistan against a common enemy. Nonetheless, Pakistan employed divide and rule tactics while dealing with various Islamist forces, quite like the British imperialists employed the same formula vis-à-vis the Afghan tribes in the colonial times.

The Afghan resistance

From 1974, Pakistan began instrumentalising various Sunni Afghan resistance groups which by the 1980s came to be known as the 'Peshawar Seven'.[27] Pakistan saw support for radical Islamists within the Peshawar Seven as part of its broader objectives to counter Pashtun nationalism and operationalise strategic depth in Afghanistan. Pakistan believed Pashtun governance in Afghanistan to be strategically optimal for two reasons. First, Pakistan was convinced that Pashtun identity and the Afghan state were in many respect indispensable to each other. Second, Pakistan has a considerable Pashtun population of around 7 million citizens, mostly along the border with Afghanistan.[28] Pakistan's military viewed Afghanistan as a source of instability to be contained, and Afghan jihad provided an opportunity to moderate Afghan behaviour through its influence among various mujahideen groups. However, to the Afghans, the impetus for building an Islamic resistance against communism was organic.

Before the Taliban emerged from the chaos of Afghan civil war, Pakistan supported Burhanuddin Rabbani's 'Jamiat-e-Islami' and especially Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's 'Hezb-i-Islami'.[29] Hekmatyar was more violent in strategy and more dogmatically Islamist than Rabbani who was, by comparison, more moderate. Nonetheless, Pakistan considered Hekmatyar's *Hezb-i-Islami* a reliable strategic instrument. Initially, Hekmatyar's forces were the most favoured force of the resistance, and received most of the foreign support and funding against the Soviet Union. Some analysts estimate that the support US, Saudi and Pakistani intelligence agencies provided to Hekmatyar was over US$500 million.[30]

Various other groups later joined the *Mujahedeen*, each receiving logistical support in Pakistan but bringing disparate objectives and a variety of competing motivations. Saudi Arabia saw a geostrategic threat from Iran's emergent Islamic Republic and, consequently, sought to marginalise the Shia elements within Afghanistan's resistance. For its own part, Saudi Arabia was the key financier in support of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's *Itehad Islami* (Islamic Unity). Sayyaf converted to Wahhabism before the Soviet invasion and attracted dedicated fighters from Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to practise the puritanical Saudi interpretation of Salafi Islam. Wahhabism was not typical to South Asia but spread through Gulf-funded *madrassas* in Pakistan. Winer in 2003, estimated the Saudi Kingdom's donations to *madrassas* in Pakistan beyond US$7 billion annually.[31]

Maulavi Khalis led a splinter group from Hekmatyar, likewise named *Hezbi-Islami* (Party of Islam).[32] Jalaluddin Haqqani was one of Khalis' major commanders, and the 'Haqqani Network' later became a significant Islamist group in Afghanistan's east closely linked to Pakistan's ISI agency. Sibgratullah Mojadidi was a religious Kabuli leader who led the *Jabha-i-Nijat-Milli* (Afghan National Liberation Front). Many saw Mojadidi as a viable compromise leader due to his well-regarded Islamic scholarship and Pashtun ancestry. Indeed, in 1992, Mojadidi became interim President of Afghanistan. Syed Ahmad Gilani was a Kabuli royalist representing the influential Qadiriya Sufi sect.[33] The Qadiriya sect operates hereditarily, tracing their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad in Baghdad.[34] Gilani's Arabian prestige attracted several foreign fighters from across the Middle East and North Africa and saw prominence in the Nangarhar region and surrounding areas. Each of these Islamist groups eventually came together within the broader *Mujahedeen* alliance against the Soviets, sharing a common enemy but seldom a common motivation.

The Soviet invasion of 1979

President Zia's Islamisation of the military became most evident in December 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The ISI cultivated and supported multiple Islamic extremist groups to fight the Soviets, with US and Gulf financial support.[35] While the US and Pakistan shared a goal in defeating the Soviet Union, the CIA and ISI had starkly different strategies concerning Afghanistan's post-communist future. The CIA envisioned a democratic and open post-war Afghanistan which generally subscribed to the 'free world' notions promulgated by the West during the Cold War.[36] By contrast, the ISI chiefly sought to establish Pashtun Islamist governance, with the fundamental objective of minimising Indian influence in Afghanistan.

The Soviet invasion was an ideal catalyst for Pakistan to operationalise its pan-Islamic agenda in assisting the call for *jihad* against a common enemy. During the Cold War, pan-Islamism flourished throughout the Muslim world in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The *Mujahedeen* declared *Jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan and were covertly supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Maley notes 'The mujahedeen reflected the complexities of Afghan society—which is differentiated significantly on ethnic sectarian, spatial, economic and gender lines—and manifested a number of sharp ideological distinctions as well'.[37] Within these diverse groups, Pakistan devoted support mostly to Pashtun Sunni elements of the resistance. Following the 1992 collapse of the communist regime, Hekmatyar's indiscriminate bombing of Kabul reduced his already low political popularity in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's emergence presented the ideal replacement for Pakistan to operationalise strategic depth in Afghanistan during the Post-Cold War period.

The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988 and, by 1992, the communist regime in Kabul led by Najibullah collapsed with Afghanistan descending into civil war. With Pakistan's assistance, the *Mujahedeen* took control of a fractured Afghanistan. However, reaching a political compromise among the various groups within the *Mujahedeen* failed. Amidst the civil war, the ISI continued to bolster support for groups it could instrumentalise. Saikal notes that at one point during Afghanistan's wartime chaos 'the ISI was given a free hand to do

whatever it could to shift the balance of power in favour of Hekmatyar'.[38] However, the ISI's support would not be enough for Hekmatyar, and his failures largely precipitated the ISI's search for a more reliable surrogate force in Afghanistan.

Pakistan'spursuit for strategic depth in Afghanistan through Islamist groupswent beyond Cold War considerations. As articulated in August 1988 by then Army Chief of Staff Gen Mirza Aslam Beg, strategic depth was for Pakistan, a means of ensuring 'Islamic Depth' in the form of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan coming together and providing a 'strategic depth' for the Muslim world.[39] This characterisation is vital because it highlights a pivot in the lexicon of 'strategic depth' between its British interpretation, and its operationalisation by Pakistan. Beg's conceptualisation of strategic depth for Pakistan added a cultural element of religiosity linking the peoples of Afghanistan and Pakistan beyond Cold War political orientations. Ultimately, conventional strategic wisdom demanded that Pakistan would deepen its national security interests through strengthened diplomatic and strategic relations with a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan. This strategic design became a reality when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996.

Rise of the students: the Taliban

The emergence of the Taliban was crucial to Pakistan's pursuit of influence in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal. This was because the group helped Pakistani strategic planners to operationalise their concept of strategic depth in Afghanistan. In 1994, the Taliban, which translates loosely as 'students', emerged south of Kabul in Kandahar. The Taliban's conceptual architect, Mullah Omar, was an ethnic Pashtun of Kandahar origin.[40] Omar's authenticity and religious legitimacy appealed to the zeitgeist of 20th century tribal Afghanistan.

The Taliban sought to establish an Islamic governance structure overseen by the *ulama*, provincial *mullahs*, and the teachings of the Quran. Islam, as Gellner points out, was a useful method of legitimation: 'from its very inception, three main principals of legitimacy have co-existed within Islam: structuralism, sacred leadership, and consensus of the community, with special weighting for its own learned members'.[41] For the Taliban, its governance was structurally based on *Sharia* law. Mullah Omar represented piety and courage and thus, fulfilled Gellner's requisite of 'sacred leadership'. Lastly, the Taliban structure found 'consensus of community' through the *Jirga* (assembly) which decides key tribal matters with Pashtun elders.

The interpretation of Islam the Taliban promulgated, promoted a puritan form of Islamic governance under *sharia*. Masooda Bano notes that the uncompromising nature of fundamentalist ideologies often limits choice, reminiscent of Pakistan's strategic culture.[42] Nonetheless, the Taliban could legitimise themselves among the public and appeal specifically to Afghan youth by elevating Islam beyond existing tribal codes of lineage and prestige.[43] Many analysts noted the Taliban's strategy of recruitment through *madrassas* in Pakistan. In Pakistan, a large number of people also saw religious education as better than the public education, especially given that greater employment opportunities were availed to students of religious schools.[44] These *madrassas* provided cultural and religious legitimacy, which significantly strengthened the Taliban's appeal.

The Taliban harnessed Islam as a reference point for ensuring political unity in Afghanistan. In fact, despite its centuries of internal division along ethnic and tribal

lines, Islam unified tribes against monarchical leaders who disenfranchised conservative elements of society. Externally, Islam brought Afghans together against foreign occupations, as seen in the three Anglo-Afghan wars, and the Soviet invasion of 1979. Barfield notes, 'religion is not an ideology but remains an all-encompassing way of life'.[45] Hence, despite the tenuous nature of Afghan tribalism, Islam both galvanised and unified disparate tribes against a common enemy. Two historical instances typify Islam's effectiveness as a means of political mobilisation. The first such instance was the rebellion against King Amanullah, who sought to modernise Afghan society through radical reforms,which marginalised Islamic customs and neglected the cultural zeitgeist of early 20th century Afghanistan. In opposition to this, disparate Pashtun tribes such as the Alikhel, Mangal, and Ghilzai joined forces with the ethnic Tajik and future King of Afghanistan, Habibullah Kalakani to overthrow Amanullah. And earlier, during the First Anglo-Afghan War between 1839–1842, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Pashtuns, and Hazaras joined forces to expel foreign forces.[46] Both internal and external instances of religious solidarity find theoretical underpinning in the works of ancient Islamic historian, Ibn Khaldun. He notes that it is ubiquitous among Islamic tribal societies to witness collaboration under the banner of Islam, albeit fleeting, when faced with a common enemy.[47] Moreover, in modern Afghanistan, Islam proved a force of unity against the Soviet Union, and of legitimacy to the Taliban.

One incident recalled by a Herati family during the lawlessness of the Civil War noted that *mujahideen* bandits were kidnapping, molesting and beating children to death.[48] So the story goes, Mullah Omar, 'enlisted some 30 *talib* to rescue two teenage girls who had been abducted and repeatedly raped … With only 16 rifles between them, the *talibs* freed the girls and hung these camp commanders from the barrel of the tank'.[49] This illustrates the perennial relevance of Ibn Khaldun's theory regarding Islam as a point of legitimacy and unityin the face of lawlessness. Albeit more syncretic in practice, the Taliban's ethos of governance found resonance with some elements of society who saw the group also as a force for stability. Pakistan's reading of Afghan history, coupled with its timely transposition of backing from Hekmatyar's *Hezb-e Islami* party to Mullah Omar's emergent *Taliban*, is more indicative of pragmatism than ideological zeal. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that Islamic fundamentalism, whilst not central to Pakistan's strategic objectives in Afghanistan, was purposively buttressed for a myriad of historical and cultural factors, conducive to its own objectives and worrisome for India.

The ISI-Taliban relationship

Pakistan's critical support for the Taliban regime brings to question whether the Taliban movement was an organic product of Afghan society or an instrument usedby Pakistan to fulfil its broader strategic goals. It may be safe to conclude that while the Taliban's genesis might have been organic, ready availability of foreign support, particularly from Pakistan, was vital to its growth and success in Afghanistan. Pakistan saw manifest strategic depth in the Taliban as a political instrument in Afghanistan.

Pakistan began to foster deep lines of strategic communication with the Taliban leadership as its control of Afghanistan gradually looked achievable. The Taliban took Kabul in 1996 and established a tenuous government there. Pakistan saw Taliban governance as the most strategically conducive option despite international

condemnation of the brutal regime. Pakistan viewed the Taliban as an ideal strategic instrument to minimise Indian influence. For Afghanistan, the Taliban were an imperfect reflection of a fragmented society. The group's predominant Pashtun composition and conservative Islamic practices conformed to Pakistan's pan-Islamic objectives. Moreover, through religious legitimation Taliban also commanded credibility and respect among the Pashtuns, which Hekmatyar lacked. In consequence, the ISI saw the Taliban as the most likely political party to govern Afghanistan and subsequently developed deep strategic ties with the group.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the strategic and social roots of Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan during and following the Cold War. Pakistan's inheritance of British colonial geostrategy and its fusion with ideological elements under President Zia created a unique interpretation of the concept of 'strategic depth'.Often overlooked due to excessive scholarly focus on nuclear deterrence, Pakistan's strategic depth can be understood as a function of its cultural linkage to Pashtunsand its pan-Islamic appeal. President Zia's Islamisation of the military and the Soviet invasion of 1979 provided an opportune moment for Zia to promote Islamism in Pakistan. The institutional link between *madrassa* education in Pakistan and Taliban recruitment mobilised the movement in two ways. Firstly, the Islamic orientation underpinning the Taliban movement provided legitimacy to the group in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secondly, mass migration of Afghans during the war created a fertile ground for the radicalisation of disadvantaged youths in border regions which helped Taliban retain its links with Pakistani society. Ultimately, Pakistan's policy of 'strategic depth' aimed at security maximisation through development of nuclear weapons on the one hand, and use of asymmetric power through instrumentalisation of Islamist groups such as radical groups within the 'Peshawar Seven' to retain their influence among various Islamist groups in Afghanistan. Further research might point towards perpetuation of Pakistani influence over Afghanistan beyond the period undertaken for study in this article. Pakistan's influence is quite visible today in the ongoing peace talks initiated by the US with the Taliban. It suggests that Pakistan's policy of seeking strategic depth through extension of its cultural influence on the Pashtuns of Afghanistan in general, and Taliban-like groups in particular, is likely to continue in future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Basil Davison, *Africa in Modern History The Search for a New Society*, quoted in Edward Said, *Culture and Orientalism*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1993, p.3.
2. This kind of division was later conceptualised in psychological theory as "social identity theory". See Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict" in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (ed.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Brooks/Cole, California, 1979, pp.33-47.
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6. Farah Gul Baqai, "Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Role in Nuclear Programme of Pakistan (1971-1977)", *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, 37 (2), 2016, pp. 52-60.
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