

Pakistan's Afghan policy: now and then *The News*

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In keeping with the fundamental principle of the nation state system, Pakistan's foreign policy is also guided by the considerations of national interests. It was in its national interest to support the Taliban in the 1990s, and then it was equally so when it withdrew its support from the Taliban. Some people raise objections to this position on the basis of the application of individual moral standards to state policies, but they overlook a cardinal feature of international relations, that a state as an actor in international relations has a morality of its own, that is in keeping with national security, Geo-strategy, Geo-economics considerations and the welfare of the people. Individual moral standards like sticking to one standpoint even if it is counter productive and making it the question of honour doesn't apply to state conduct in international relations.

In the 1990s, in the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan was in turmoil and a fierce civil war was going on between the warlords for the purpose of controlling the government in Kabul. There were no signs of political stability. Afghanistan had become safe haven for drug traffickers, abductors and other criminals. Indeed, before the Taliban, Afghanistan was a failed state.

Afghanistan being situated on the Western border of Pakistan, the latter could not become a silent spectator in the given circumstances. Failed states have their repercussions for the neighbouring states. The smugglers try to use the border states as transit to their drugs, thus giving bad name to them. In the process, the numbers of drug addicts increase giving way to dangerous social problems.

Moreover, given the history of troubled relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, on certain occasions, the latter acting on the directions from a third rival power, Pakistan had a stake in ensuring a stable and friendly political dispensation in Afghanistan, so as it could remain in peace with itself and its neighbours.

Another factor for Pak interest in Afghanistan was the fact that hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees had been living in Pakistan. In the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal from there, International aid to these refugees started drying up and it was becoming increasingly difficult for Pakistani economy to sustain them.

It was in these circumstances that

Pakistan was keen on recognising any government in Afghanistan that could ensure law and order there, check the drug traffickers and enable the Afghans living in Pakistan to return to their homes.

The Taliban came into power, and the fact is that they ensured a degree of political stability and order to Afghanistan. In the beginning, International community including USA remained silent over the Taliban phenomenon and they followed the policy of wait and see. They even tried to establish a rapport with the Taliban. It was only after quite sometime, that the International community increasingly be-

is undignified to leave ones friends alone in time of need. The question is, could Pakistan standing by the side of the Taliban have helped them?. Did Pakistan have the potentials to face the USA and international community by siding with the Taliban in the aftermath of 9/11? Could Pakistan afford to compromise its vital national interests including its nuclear assets and its Kashmir policy? Was standing by the Taliban more important to Pakistan than its own security and the welfare of its People?. These are important questions to be pondered over by those who are critical of Pakistan's pol-

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came critical of the Taliban policies vis-a-vis women rights, retrogressive education, their obscurantist approach towards religion and society. Anyway, what is here meant to be meant to be made clear is that the policy of Pakistan and its support to the Taliban were aimed at serving its own national interests.

The fateful day of 11th September 2001 changed the patterns of international relations drastically. The disintegration of USSR had rendered USA as the sole super power. But this sole super power had not yet an enemy on which to test its military might. The events of the 9/11 provided them with one, and it was terrorism, most precisely, whether people like it or not, Islamic terrorism. Bush declared war on terror in no unambiguous terms. He declared a "crusade" over the terrorists around the world, but he specifically spelt it out that Afghanistan under the Taliban was a safe haven for the terrorists, who were providing sanctuary to the 9/11 suspects, the Al-Qaeda organisation, led by Osama bin Laden, and that countries around the world had two options, they were either with America or against it in its war on terror.

Now, what should Pakistan have done?

Those who believe in the application of individual moral standards to state policies shall say that Pakistan should have stood by the Taliban. Reason? Because it

icy of siding with the USA in its war on terror in Afghanistan.

Most observers will argue that in the 1990s, Pakistan's national security considerations necessitated its support to the Taliban, and after the events of 9/11, its national security considerations and national interests demanded its withdrawal of support from the Taliban.

For now, Pakistan needs to evolve a pro-active Afghan policy. It needs to support and encourage the Afghan leadership, that the reconstruction and the establishment of genuine peace in Afghanistan is the call of the hour. It needs to commit as much economic assistance to Afghanistan as possible for its reconstruction. Pakistan is already involved in Education and communication sectors in Afghanistan. Pakistan also needs to realise that a lot of goodwill and enthusiasm for India exists in a majority of Afghan government officials; especially belonging to the Northern Alliance, which has a history of close association with India. Pakistan needs to ensure that this enthusiasm does not work against its national interests. This Pakistan can do by virtue of added diplomatic engagement with the Afghan leadership for the purpose of creating goodwill among them.

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