



## Afghanistan Through the Lens of Neo-Classical Realism

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore Afghanistan through the lens of Neo-Classical Realism. In order to encapsulate the proper foreign policy accumulation there are various theories that suggests and depicts foreign policy behaviors of several states. A theory not only defines politics of emotions but it also predicts the behavior of a state in a certain particular time. In international relations there are several theories that are used as a lens in order to understand the behavior of a state, the foreign policy of a state and to predict the future behavior according to which international arena would behave. There are two major strands in international relations that are used for analysis, and they provide a different and opposing view whenever a state behavior is concerned. These two strands are realism and liberalism. Realism in a theory that explains the behavior of a state in international politics. It states that in international system there is a lack of a centralized political authority due to which the state interactions are not viewed in a particular manner. It also emphasizes that there is an anarchy prevailing international system which can be regulated and can be maneuvered to bring out some favorable results by a sovereign power. The theory emphasizes the role of a state in international system and the way national interests and power grabbing of each state paves a new way towards international. The philosophical ideas that are in the theory have a very long history but in international relations the theory emerged after World War Two. The followers of this theory claim that they offer the most accurate behavior of a state and the explanation that they provide is more accurate to understand the policy perception and prescription for various elements that destabilized the international affairs.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Neo-Classical Realism, Foreign Policy, War on Terror, United States

The theory of liberalism also has its roots in various philosophical ideas. Liberalism mainly international relations emerged after World War One and it is the theory that basically deals with the behavior of a state on moral grounds, and it paves the way through which peace and harmony can be achieved in international affairs. Liberalism is a theory that has evolved with the passage of time according to the solutions it provides to deal with the international crisis (Baylis, 2020). It is basically a feature of modern democracy that has its roots in deep philosophical ideas of liberal philosophers. It contains variety of concepts and several other arguments that shows that the way in which international system works can be worked out if state institutions and international institutions work hand in hand. Economic interdependence of state with other state will eventually help in maintaining and international order in which the mutual interests of states will be secured. Often destiny is criticized by several theorists who oppose this view but still this this works in international relations and provides a solid answer to difficult questions.

As the theory evolves with the passage of time and there are new challenges that that emerged in international spectrum and thus, there are several changes that are done in the theories that provide an answer to that. In the same way, there were already two branches of realism that tends to provide an answer for several realists. Classical realism and neorealism add particularly two major strands in realism itself. In 1988 a new strand of realism emerged in an article of world politics that was written by Gideon Rose (Ripsman et al. 2016). This article tends to provide an answer in international system while giving a combination of classical realist and neorealist. There are intervening systematic variables that new classical realism holds in order to provide an answer to the international systems and to predict the action of a state. These intervening variables are set to be the capabilities and power that are distributed among states. Other variables are known as cognitive variables. These variables are like domestic variables, threats that state perceives, institutions that work in that state, idiosyncrasy of a leader and at other systematic pressures that in some way influence the action of a state.

Neoclassical realism predicts the political phenomena that evolves around short term crisis to the grand strategic behaviors of a state. It also explains the political phenomena and foreign policy of an individual state that revolves around long term patterns of international system itself. The theory suggests that the goals and size of a state's foreign policy can be initially determined by the material power the state has. The idea of neo classical realists is that they argue that the influence of certain power capacities or power factors on the foreign policy of a state are indirect in nature, as there are several other factors that play their role in the foreign policy articulation such as systematic pressures, the perceptions of a foreign policy decision maker and various other pressures. Neo classical realism also predicts that there is a fine thin line between the structural restrictions and incentives on one side and the actual military diplomatic foreign and economic actions on the other side which a state chooses. There are several long-term results in international arena that reflect and depict the actual balance of power among different

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states. As far as systematic analysis is concerned there are several short-term policies that a state adopts in order to understand and get some favorable short-term results (Ripsman et al. 2016).

Neoclassical realism is used as theoretical framework by the researcher. Proponents of neoclassical realism claim that neoclassical realism is the mere logical extension of the ideas of Kenneth Waltz's structural realism (Waltz, 1993). Gideon Rose was the main person who coined the idea of neoclassical realism. There are other proponents as well such as Fareed Zakaria, Randall L. Schweller, Nicholas Kitchen, Wolf worth etc. The reason for choosing this framework is that it incorporates both systemic (external) and unit-level (internal) variables. The proponents of this theory argue that state relative material capabilities define its place in international system but the impact of power capabilities on foreign policies is complex and indirect. The systemic pressure must be translated through intervening variables at domestic level or the unit-level. For them power is the chief intervening variable as it establishes the basic parameter for a country foreign policy. However, foreign policy is made by political elites and leaders, so their perception of relative power matters not only of their own but also of others. Furthermore, the political elites and leaders have not complete freedom to extract the national resources for a particular foreign policy as they might wish. So, in this scenario the structure and strength of states relative to their societies must be examined. It is then in the hand of the leader how they extract and securitize a particular issue to achieve gross national support for its foreign policy. According to the neoclassical realist perspective leaders are constrained both by international and domestic factors. So, the link between power and domestic context as much required for formulation and implementation of a particular foreign policy.

Neoclassical realists take decision makers perceptions as intervening variable. They argue that the international distribution of power influences the decision of the policy makers, but it is the leader perception that matters that how he examines a particular situation. The second intervening variable emphasized by the neoclassical realists is the strength of country state's apparatus and its relationship with the society. For them the notion that 'capabilities shape intentions' are imperative but the intervening variable between national capabilities and their leader's behavior is the introduction of state strength. As "Foreign policy is made not by the nation as a whole but by its government. So what matters is the state power not national power (Ramsey, 1999)." But the state power in turn can be extracted only from the national power by the political elite for its own purposes to achieve its ends. The third intervening variable is the concept of national power. National power is defined as "the ability of the state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives" (United States President, 1994). So this shows the limitations of systemic incentives as they shape certain policy behavior, but they did not totally determine the foreign policy initiatives. The domestic factors are having much impact which constrains the leaders from taking particular decisions. The fourth intervening variable which is linked with domestic factors is revisionism. This contends that sometimes states did not satisfy with its status quo position as their state's goals and interests contradicts with the prestige given to them. So, their national aspirations push them to revisionism at the international system.

The spatial divide between (domestic-international) is bridged by neoclassical realism but also the cognitive (matter-ideas) and temporal (present-future). The neoclassical realists provide a two-level theorization of foreign policy by emphasizing the role of state-level factors, such as domestic politics and perceptions held by state leaders. The neoclassical realists, however, prioritize the structure but take state-level factors as secondary or intervening variables in explain foreign policies.

There is a major transition in power when an empire or a superpower tends to evacuate from a place it has been conquering for a long period of time. There are several reasons that can be choked out from such transitions as there might be a revolution insurgency and sometime independent movements. The withdrawal of a superpower occurs due to various reasons. The neo classical realists advocates and theorize that there are domestic factors that are more responsible for such actions. As far as a decision of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the way US intervention in Afghanistan is concerned can be explicitly understood through the theories of international relations. among these theories neoclassical realism fits the best to explain the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and it also explains the way the state has collapsed (Tariq et al. 2020).

It also explains the domestic factors were more responsible for the collapse of previous US and its allies' backed regime. The United States had no proper reason to stay in the Afghanistan as the presence of U.S. forces since last two decades did not yield the results that were look forward to. Military forces were present to counter terrorist activities that were done by certain state actors and non-state actors as well. It is often highlighted that the presence of United States in Afghanistan was to counter China and Russia simultaneously. The counter terrorist activities of United States are considered as a blowback as the security situation in the Afghanistan worsened day by day. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan can be characterized in different situations. The policy options left on the table of US administration back in Washington were not very hopeful as the reports that were sent by the forces to the administration did not depict the true picture that was on the ground. United States achieved its targets of counterterrorism in the early 2000 and yet it was decided by the administration that they would stay in this region for nation building and institution building purpose. The United States administration miscalculated the domestic factors that were prevailing in Afghanistan and misjudged the traditions and norms that were not aligned with the

modern world. It is fascinating to explore the reasons and domestic factors that were more aligned with the Pashtun conservativeness and are more rampant particularly in South Asia.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan can be analyzed in different lens and for that purpose the political situation that was prevailing in United States should be put in account. The anti-war narrative of the people of United States was gradually building up as there was heavy inflow of money that was spent for the purpose of war and no proper results were yield out of it. The anti-involvement movement that was shaping the public opinion of the US citizens were affecting the internal politics of America. The purpose of these movements was to inculcate the idea to the administration of the United States that there was no reason to spend a huge amount of money in the far-flung areas of the world and the money should be spent on the local people to build the infrastructure of the state (Gillan et al. 2008). As the United States rhetoric was that they had to eliminate the terrorist targets that were responsible for the 9/11 attacks. These targets were eliminated in the early 2000 decade, he went after that the US policy was to evacuate the ideas and to deploy those forces back at home who were sent abroad. Osama bin Laden and senior al Qaeda leaders were eliminated through swift intelligence and operations. The Americans believed that after the elimination of the senior al Qaeda leaders where that terrorist outfit was somehow completely destroyed and it was unbiased for US administration to stay in those regions after these terrorist groups were eliminated. There was a divide between the Republicans and the Democrats on the issue of War on Terror. The decision of evacuation and leaving Afghanistan was later on molded on the lines of public sentiment. The Obama administration purposefully lingered on the withdrawal process and the anti-war narrative was on the rise in the US itself. The large amount of money that was given to Afghanistan in the form of aid and other State Building project were not yielding favorable results (Malkasian, 2021).

There was a large amount of corruption that was going on in Afghanistan and the Taliban advances work quite at rapid pace. The US administration miscalculated the Taliban advances, and they were in a hope that Afghan army was well equipped to counter any insurgency. The US administration gradually realized that the training of Afghan army was not up to the mark. They wanted to stay in Afghanistan to counter the Taliban at once is but the domestic politics of US compelled them to leave the state as soon as possible. In addition to that critics and theorists have also analyzed that the US presence in Afghanistan was to counter the influence that was on the rise and the major powers that were confronting the US interest were China and Russia. It is one of the reasons that the president Joe Biden in his speech shifted the policy and mentioned that there is a start of a new war which was termed as a future war. The future war that particularly Joe Biden mentioned was in a sense that United States had to invest further resources as economy and artificial intelligence wisely in order to reclaim and maintain the prestige of being a superpower in the world (Biden, 2020). The US withdrawal can also be analyzed in a lens that there is a new race of arms that is prevailing in the South Asia to counter the influence of China and Russia. Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) which is a new military alliance that has brought the Indo-Pacific region on the verge of a new arms race (Cheng, 2022). The United States shifting its policy from direct military interventions and military installations to the new means of armament and building new weapons. As the balance of power in the world was shifting and there was a new trap which is also referred as a 'Thucydides trap' (Allison, 2017) This concept means that there will always be a confrontation between the rising power and the existing power. The rising power is at times referred as China as the economic influence of China that is growing at a rapid pace such as belt and road initiatives that are carried on by China and it is termed as a debt trap by The US administration. China is forging its policy to maintain its influence in the region and in the world through economic means and that is the reason that compelled the United States to reevaluate its foreign policy determinants and to relocate its assets. In short it can be understood that the policy changes the US administration is doing and has been doing or just to counter on growing influence of other powers. This has compelled in the US forces to go towards a hasty withdrawal where they left a more power vacuum for the Taliban as the internal structure of Afghanistan was so fragile and weak that it could not counter or it was unable to counter the influence of Taliban (Zimmerman, 2023).

One of the factors that United States gradually realized his that when the talks were going on between the Taliban and the US administration, United States realized that they can counter the influence or they can maneuver anything going on in Afghanistan as the thought the state would seeking a legitimacy from international forum and it is in favor that they can maneuver or manipulate the decisions in Afghanistan. Did Joe Biden administration put their trust in the soft power and relied on soft power to counter their unconventional enemy as the hard power did not heal the results they were looking forward to (Nye, 1990). The social issues that are highlighted by the international media is also a policy of United States administration to put the pressure on the Taliban and to get maximum out of it. Human rights and other social issues such as women education and voting could be highlighted and the pressure could be created on the Taliban regime to get maximum benefits. The United States administration decided to withdraw from Afghanistan as did changed their policy towards economy and they trapped Afghanistan and the Taliban regime in various economic sanctions where the growth and development is being hindered. The US also made a propaganda to bring Taliban on the table and to make them abide by the international order. There are several other proxies that the US can rely upon to do its maximum counterterrorism operations.

This policy is often termed as stick and carrot policy where along with the hard measures soft instruments are also used to make a party abide by the decisions any power wants. The hard power that United States still tends to use as drone attacks where the targets are eliminated by intelligence and artificial intelligence. Critics have also analyzed that the US withdrawal was a reason that China Russia and Pakistan gradually started supporting the Taliban regime. The aids that were given by Pakistan China and Russia were huge in number and his aides were given at the time when the Taliban took over Kabul. These aids had a major impact in understanding the policy shift of the South Asia region and the way it is being portrayed in the international forum. It needs China to have a cordial relation with the government that is not fully friendly with the America and the West. The belt and road initiatives of China for totally hindered by the security conditions that were prevailing in the South Asia (Javaid, 2016).

The change in Afghanistan government it's some sort of favorable for afghani Stan and other South Asian powers as the government will or it is forced to work for the betterment of the people despite being in a power struggle. Pakistan which is also the neighbor of Afghanistan and they have been working through thick and thin as the major influx of migration and the displaced people happened towards Pakistan. Pakistan also need a strong neighbor who can work on its security and the lapses that have created a security risk in the state itself. The sentiment of the people of Afghanistan who are primarily Pashtun speaking and belong to ethnically Pashtun background have a relevance with the major portion of Pakistani people. The people living in the northern provinces of Pakistan and the southern province belong to Pashtun ethnicity. The public sentiment towards the pan Islamist government and the local support that the Taliban regime had as it is considered in Pakistan that the Taliban had been fighting for the freedom and had been guarding the state from Western powers who are considered as invaders. These domestic factors of Pakistan compelled them to support the government which was in favor or neutral towards Pakistan itself as the previous government had been aligning with India and they have infringed major harm on Pakistan and its security through various proxies.

Economy is also one of the major factors that has compelled the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan as they have spent around \$3 trillion on war on terrorism. These heavy amounts of money along with aid were spent in Afghanistan for the nation building process and to build the infrastructure. The US administration thought that they would win the local people through these measures, but the money was not spent on the local indigenous people of Afghanistan rather than money went into the pockets of the elite that were controlling and governing these areas. There were also critics who created size that the government money that was coming from the United States was spent back at the resource building of the forces and was not given to the local people who could manage and work for their own people they were governing. Heavy amount of money was lost in corruption and the engineers that were working in Afghanistan he did not yield the favorable results (Shahid and Ishfaq, 2023). The elite and the warlord system did not deliver to the people of Afghanistan due to various reasons and the people themselves were tired of this. It was often thought by the people of Afghanistan that the new customs add the economy that was trying to be built by the US was not in the favor of the people themselves. Pakistan also spent heavy money in the form of aid and its own counter terrorist activities as the major chunk of money was lost in the War on Terror that was also ongoing in Pakistan itself. The intelligence support that Pakistan gave to the Taliban was itself very statement that the Pakistan you would eventually support the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in order to avoid and to counter the influence of India in Afghanistan. The trade deficit that was prevailing in The United States of America was not due to the war in Afghanistan rather it was due to the competitive trade that the United States administration have indulged themselves in with China and Russia. This trade proved to be fatal for the United States economy and the public sentiment was rising that the Afghan war had put them in a condition that they are unable to cater their own economy. United States ex- president Donald Trump highlighted that the main economic losses is the competitive trade and this trade is being used as a tussle between these two major powers. The heavy amount of money that was poured and it was believed that it was a grand strategy for the nation building purpose did not yield the result that were favorable for Afghanistan (Dodge,2021).

One of the major undermined factors is that United States stayed in Afghanistan for a very long period and there were some crimes that were committed and reported by various agencies. It was asked by the Russian foreign minister in 2017 that there should be an accountability process through which United States action should be probed under unbiased conditions (Shahid and Ishfaq, 2023). It was also highlighted by China and Russia that the presence of US in South Asia was not for any counter terrorist purpose rather it was just a policy objective to counter other powers. There were also reports that CIA have made several sites that are used for black operations and are not listed on the government papers. These operations are covert operations where specific targets are found and eliminated. Crimes against humanity and crisis that were bringing forward a blowback from the local indigenous people who were fed up with US presence in Afghanistan. This was the reason that the locals started supporting the Taliban regime in order to get rid of the Afghan army and the warlords like Dostum (Lorenzo, 2016) who were allegedly involved in certain inhumane activities. These operations jeopardized EU backed president in Afghanistan and there were many state and non-state agencies that were pointing out the inhumane activities conducted by US forces and its allies.

There was such a counter production that the victims of such violence and inhumane activities started to joining Taliban forces to avenge the conditions or the acts they have faced in their own country. Afghanistan yet became another flashpoint of human rights violation and war crimes which was well left by the international watchdogs. presidential pardons were given those U.S. Marines who were involved in crimes such as rapes and tortures (Hashimy, 2022). This sabotaged EU S rhetoric and was all diminished the trust of local people towards democracy and democratic ideals was all diminished. The news agency is that were present in Afghanistan word reporting false information to the entire world and international analysts have realized and analyzed as well that this false information that were given but their entire world proved fatal for the United States itself. It was the time when the Taliban forces controlled over the half of Afghanistan and yet it was shown on the television that the US and Afghan army controlled most of the Afghanistan territory.

The local governance system of Afghanistan was not in collaboration with the modern state system and yet the people of Afghanistan refused to accept the democratic ideals that were inculcated by the US and its allies as the best ideals. The local *jirga* system that was present in Afghanistan was criticized by the US as it was considered that this system is the major source of hindrance in consolidation of a state on modern lines such domestic ideals were not respected thoroughly by the Afghan government and the West. Public sentiments play an important role in an upbringing of a country where the government had decided through the public sentiment even though the democratic ideals are followed or not. The public sentiment was not in the favor of the US backed rhetoric as their rhetoric crumbled itself when the Taliban gave their own form of the government which is at large considered corruption free. When Pakistan also started highlighting the issue of drones attack the US policy towards Pakistan gradually started changing. It was considered that Pakistan is giving safe heavens to terrorist outfit and not doing enough to prevent insurgencies that are sabotaging the peace in the region.

The United States also hinted that Pakistan would have to face serious problems and challenges if Pakistan would not support and act accordingly. Pakistan also openly negated the aspirations of United States and condemned any policy statement by EU S administration that was made against the Pakistani people. The public sentiment in South Asia against the United States is always a tool that is used as a political weapon against several people. The limits of what can or cannot be achieved in a given space and time. The realization that US presence cannot bring in any fundamental changes on the ground situation paved the path for US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apart from this much-awaited confession and realization by US President Joe Biden the hasty withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan seemed to be largely based on strategic miscalculations of the US government regarding the capability, influence, and will of the Kabul government for suppressing the insurgency of Taliban. The US failed in an appropriate estimation of the strengths of the Afghan military for preventing the fall of Kabul (Waldman, 2013).

## Conclusion

The Neoclassical realism forecasts the political marvels that evolves around short term and sometimes long-term crisis to the grand strategic behaviors of a state. It also explicates the political phenomena and foreign policy of an individual state that rotates around long-term patterns of international system itself. The theory proposes that the goals and size of a state's foreign policy can be primarily determined by the material power the state. There is an element of uniqueness that can be understood under the realm of neoclassical realism that there are certain cases in which the domestic factors are more evident, and they tend to dictate the international order in certain way. Moreover, the Neoclassical realism is one of the main theories that is played a vital role in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apart from other factor, economy was also one of the major factors that has forced the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan as they have disbursed around \$3 trillion on war on terrorism. These substantial amounts of money along with aid were spent in Afghanistan for the nation building process and to shape the infrastructure in the United States. This theory also explains the domestic factors that were majorly responsible for the US failure strategically in South Asia.

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