Sidhu on Paliwal, 'My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal'

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The revealed limitations of the explicative and predictive capacities of traditional international relations theories and research tools have spawned a host of innovative approaches to address their lacunae. Among them is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), propounded by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith in the late 1980s, to enhance theoretical and methodological tools to study the process of policy formulation: “The ACF has three principal theoretical domains: advocacy coalitions, policy subsystems, and policy change. The ACF posits that advocacy coalitions and policy subsystems are the most efficient way to organize actors interested in the policy process for empirical research.”[1] ACF is premised on the notion that belief systems are the primary drivers for those engaged in policymaking. The belief system itself has three tiers: core beliefs (which are fundamental, broad, and—derived from social conditioning that determines values—difficult to change); policy core beliefs (which are more specific and—refer to the application of core beliefs to the policy realm—are also difficult to change); and secondary beliefs (which are related to the minutiae of policy implementation and—based on learning—are subject to change). Thus, advocacy coalitions are collections of individuals who share a common belief system. In turn, these coalitions compete with each other to determine policy in official and bureaucratic subsystems. It is this contestation among coalitions, coupled with external events, that prompts policy change over a long period.[2]

Using the ACF crutch unquestioningly and superficially, journalist turned scholar Avinash Paliwal examines one of the most understudied aspects of India's foreign policy: the "kaleidoscopic quality" of its approach towards Afghanistan from the time the Soviets marched into the graveyard of empires in December 1979 until the US decision to march out of it nearly four decades later. It was in Afghanistan that India's determination to keep the Cold War out of the region failed spectacularly when the Soviets arrived on South Asia's doorstep; yet New Delhi not only acquiesced to the Soviet presence but dutifully supported the various Moscow-backed puppet regimes in Kabul. It was the Soviet presence in Afghanistan that cemented the US-Pakistan strategic alliance, gave cover for Islamabad's covert nuclear weapon capability, and changed India's security scenario for the worse. It was in Afghanistan that India, despite being then led by a hard-line nationalist coalition, had to surrender humiliatingly to the hijackers of Indian Airlines IC-814 in 1999. And, following the events of 9/11, it was in Afghanistan that India welcomed the continued presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led International Security Assistance Force, despite its avowed aversion to military alliances operating in its neighborhood. By delving into detail of these and other complex
developments Paliwal’s book makes a valiant effort to provide a coherent narrative of Indian policymaking, even when it was not discernable to most Afghans and other external observers.

With a perfunctory nod to the ACF framework Paliwal identifies two advocacy coalitions seeking to dominate India’s Afghan policy. The "partisans" are policymakers whose approach to Afghanistan is centered on "necessarily treating Pakistan as an enemy, or is not accommodative of Pakistani interests in Afghanistan" (p. 19). This group considers all Afghan factions opposed to Islamabad as "natural allies," while it promotes a "'containment' policy vis-a-vis pro-Pakistan factions" (p.12).

In contrast, "conciliators" are policymakers who "gravitate towards the 'engage-with-all' axiom, however difficult it may be to open and sustain dialogue with pro-Pakistan factions in Afghanistan." Their approach is to "focus on whoever comes to power in Kabul without fear or favour" and is marked by "political pragmatism." These coalitions "cut across the bureaucratic, diplomatic and political spectrum" (p. 12). The book does not question or explore why there are only binary advocacy coalitions and what prevented the formation of other coalitions.

The book does, however, note that sometimes "these seemingly disparate advocacies generates dynamics that impart nuance (but also confusion) to the way India behaves in Afghanistan" (p. 13). To add to the confusion, the author admits that in some instances "the same official adopts different approaches—conciliatory or partisan—at different times depending on context" (p. 19). This candid confession, which challenges the very theoretical framework that the book espouses, reflects either a discomfiture with the ACF framework or the inability of this framework to explain the obvious contradictions in India's approach to Afghanistan.

These foibles notwithstanding, the book astutely identifies three principal drivers that determine India’s Afghanistan policy debates. First, all Indian approaches have sought to "strike a balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan" and New Delhi’s approach to Kabul has been predicated on the desire to either cooperate or compete with Pakistan. Second, given the limited capacity of India to support Afghanistan all by itself, the role of external actors in Afghanistan (particularly the Soviet Union, Pakistan, or the United States) over which India has little or no influence has also forced India's policy to be primarily reactive rather than proactive. Third, like most external actors, New Delhi has also struggled to work the ever-changing mosaic of domestic Afghan politics to its advantage; India has not been able to translate the general goodwill it enjoys among the Afghan populace into political advantage (p. 14).

These three drivers in turn underline several characteristics of India’s Afghanistan policy. First, it is evident that India does not have an Afghanistan alone policy and both the partisans and the conciliators look at Afghanistan through the prism of Pakistan. The book does not contest why this is the case and what prevents the development of an Afghan policy, minus Pakistan. Second, in the absence of its own Afghanistan-specific policy India has often scarified its interests in that country to its own detriment and to the advantage of other external actors. For instance, following Moscow's invasion the "real debate was around India's relationship with the Soviet Union and not Afghanistan. Kabul was simply a sideshow as India's Afghanistan policy became more closely aligned to that of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union" (p. 60). Third, the absence of an Afghan-specific policy also made India and its intentions suspect in the eyes of the Afghan leadership. For example, Afghan president Hamid Karzai lamented, not reasonably, that during his tenure Afghanistan had become
a victim of India-Pakistan rivalry.

Paliwal argues that the absence of an Afghan-centered policy until recently might be on account of India’s limited economic capacity and the geographical disconnect. While these are relevant factors, they alone do not explain this lack of policy, especially given the “Neighborhood First” priority of the present government. Another equally crucial factor might be the lack of expertise among the foreign and security establishment on Afghanistan. For instance, a recent report of the Standing Committee on External Affairs of the Indian parliament revealed a shocking lack of relevant Afghan language skills among India’s diplomats: there were no proficient Dari speakers and a mere two had a knowledge of Pushtu.[3] The same is likely to be the case with other agencies and organizations working on Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly then, this deficiency in India’s basic capabilities has also limited its ability to understand and engage with all factions in Afghanistan or to develop policies that focus solely on Afghanistan.

The book also delves into the failure of India to pursue an “internationalist strategy” toward Afghanistan either through the so-called “six plus two” process or the United Nations. India did not even manage to be included in the former informal forum comprised of six (China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and two (the United States and Russia) that ran from 1997 until 2001 and sought a political settlement to accommodate the various warring factions in Afghanistan. This was despite the strengthening of Indo-US relations, India’s unwavering support of Russian interests in Afghanistan, and the overwhelming anti-Taliban sentiment in the group, which also mirrored India's position. India's exclusion might partly be explained on account of an Afghan policy that was closely tied to its concerns over Pakistan.

Similarly, apart from supporting a slew of UN resolutions on Afghanistan, India was unable to leverage the world body to further its interests, especially between the crucial period of the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the Taliban coming to power. While India (and the author) conveniently blame the UN team for failing to resolve the political quagmire in Afghanistan and prevent the rise of the Taliban, they ponder on why India was did not take a more proactive role in the process. While the UN does deserve some blame, India's timidity to lead the UN process in Afghanistan is in contrast to the role it sought to play later in Myanmar, where Vijay Nambiar (a former Indian diplomat who was ambassador in Kabul during the crucial period just after the Soviet withdrawal) served as a special advisor to the UN secretary general. India’s timorous behavior may partly be related to the weak bench of diplomats, who were not deft at playing in the multilateral arena, and partly to New Delhi's inherent preference for bilateral approaches and aversion to the unpredictability of the multilateral process. The shadow of Kashmir (which remains on the UN agenda and was bound to be raised by Pakistan) also loomed large in India's reluctance to lead the UN process in Afghanistan.

The book, which when shorn of its theoretical trappings reads like a first-rate spy thriller complete with graphic details of tradecraft that compares with the best of the old masters, is particularly engaging and insightful on how the “conciliators” gained the upper hand in the post-2010 phase of the Afghan war. They were able to ensure both US engagement and the post-2001 consensus against the Taliban and Pakistan.

The book concludes that despite the divergent belief systems of the "partisans" and the "conciliators,"
the ultimate objective of both advocacy coalitions is "to ensure balance between its two neighbors wherein neither of them has an overbearing influence on the domestic polity of the other" (p. 286). Yet, this evenhanded notion is repudiated a few lines later when the author argues that "India advocates a strong, stable, inclusive, and sovereign Afghanistan that is not dependent on Pakistan for its economic and political survival" and that "addressing ... this structural imbalance ... lies at the heart of India's current policy approach to Kabul" (p. 286).

This volume’s singular contribution is the author's exhaustive research and extensive interviews, primarily with key interlocutors in India’s intelligence community, on a subject that needs to be examined threadbare. In doing so, the book offers a rare peep into the black box of India's enigmatic policymaking. What we discern in this brief glimpse is neither reassuring nor cogent. Nonetheless, it helps to advance our understanding of the challenges India faces in seeking to address complex problems posed by countries, like Afghanistan, in its neighborhood. That is a commendable achievement, even though the volume does little to advance the ACF as an analytical tool.

Notes


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