

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION NARRATIVE FOR RECONCILIATION WITH TALIBAN

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Original Article

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Abstract

The US caught itself in an imbroglio when it finally decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. The law and order and prevalent security situation in Afghanistan was not favoring the US decision to exit Afghanistan. Moreover, the notion to strike a deal with Taliban who harbored the terrorists of 9/11 attack still made the world livid after two decades. Therefore, a meticulously crafted narrative that provided justification for the reconciliation and enable withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was the need of the hour. The major progress in reconciliation process was carried out during Trump administration as the US Department of State constructed narrative that endeavored to justify the peace deal with Taliban and subsequent withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The aim of this article is to explore official US narrative that facilitated the Afghan reconciliation peace process before the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The article will attempt to explore how US crafted this narrative for reconciliation with Taliban through statements of US State Department officials and the themes which were employed in the narrative. This study attempts thematic exploration of the narrative constructed by US Department of State that facilitated to propagate a sense of requirement for the reconciliation with Taliban. A combination of thematic and discourse analysis will be employed on the statements of US State Department officials that are selected as purposive sampling. This article will find out that an official narrative was constructed by US State Department officials to facilitate reconciliation process with Taliban by portraying a scenario calling for end to 40 years of Afghan war, emphasizing necessity for peace, rebuilding Taliban's image as reconcilable and finally highlighting exorbitant cost of Afghan war. The paper comprises of four main sections including Introduction, Theoretical Framework, Analysis and Conclusion.

Keywords: Narrative, Afghanistan, Reconciliation, Taliban, Khalilzad, Pompeo, US State Department

Introduction

In twenty years of US-Afghan war encompassing from Oct 2001 to Aug 2021, the world witnessed a stalemate between a militarily advanced US and a war torn Afghanistan. US and Taliban both belligerents continued to portray themselves righteous in their actions and goals. Initially, US carved a narrative to justify its military intervention in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 attacks in order to eliminate al-Qaeda and oust their facilitators and abettors, the Taliban from power. Taliban retreated temporarily to reassemble and subsequently reemerge as an organized militarily group against US led coalition forces and Afghan National Security Forces. Their purported objective was to free the Afghan land from western invaders and retribute against their

local accomplices whether formal or informally coerced allies. In a display of arrogance emanating from a swift victory by US and its Allies and subsequent regime change, Taliban were debarred from the new political setup and were not recognized as a stakeholder in deciding the future of Afghanistan.

For two decades, both contenders remained entangled in the dichotomous debate of who is the wrong doer and who is justified in the Afghan war. Civilian casualties and an unprecedented costly war with undesirable results cemented President Obama's conviction to start a dialogue with Taliban and initiate withdrawal of US troops. While historically, US President George Bush in his address to Congress in 2003 refused to even consider negotiations with Taliban. Even the technological, military and financial might of US could not transform into victory of US and its allies in Afghan war against tenacious Taliban resilience.

At political front, it is understood that US committed mistakes while attempting to reform Afghanistan on liberal democratic lines. In reality, the measures undertaken by US due to its own prejudices and lack of understanding vis-à-vis Afghan culture thwarted development of a robust political system while attempting to re-engineer Afghan culture which instigated resentment of Afghans (Hamid 2021). It enabled Taliban to capitalize and regain their tactical and political strength to portray themselves as rightful liberators and inevitable political entity. Taliban's tactical victories in thwarting US Counter-Insurgency operations helped them to maintain significant physical presence and establish their own political governance system in the peripheral areas as an alternate to the western imposed governance system. It was demonstrated that US-led state building process forged a fragile and corrupt Kabul government with limited state writ and legitimacy that could not sustain without significant US commitments of troops on ground.

The War on Terror had expanded into the longest running US war with no approximating end necessitated the need of a genuine reconciliation process with Taliban that was postponed by US in hopes of achieving an upper hand in order to bargain a favorable deal. Taliban bounced back with a systemized and organized insurgency to challenge the exclusionary policy of US and its allies. Typically, the process of reconciliation with enemy commences when war enters into a stalemate phase. Liberal interventionism and a mere change of regime backed by unparalleled military muscle could not bring stability and peace in the war torn Afghan society. Hence, perspectives were reconsidered with the approach to go about the conundrum in Afghanistan. As a result, those who were initially declared enemy were accepted as active stakeholder in bringing an end to war and making efforts towards a lasting peace.

Acceptance of the enemy as an equal stakeholder in conflict resolution efforts is a significant milestone towards peace. All plausible opportunities at comprehensive peace in Afghan war starting from The Unseen Opportunity (2001-02), The Lost Opportunity (2010-13), Limited Engagement (2013-18), Formal Negotiations (2018- Feb 20) and The Failed Opportunity (Mar 2020- Aug 21) could not be materialized into successful reconciliation peace process (Brooking 2022). Eventually, US modified its objective towards Afghanistan as striking an agreement with Taliban and Top-Down approach was employed to reconcile with Taliban. It is important to note that reaching The Peace Agreement is not an isolated event. A sequence of events, circumstances and trust among the negotiating parties and most importantly crafting a narrative to create the conducive environment leading to peace agreement.

In this article we explore themes that are employed to construct a narrative that paves the way for Trump - Taliban reconciliation process. We have attempted to explore the construction of narrative by US State department through various sub-themes in a qualitative way. Discourse analysis and thematic analysis are employed for the official statement of US State Departments selected via purposive sampling to support the research outcomes. The timeframe of the study will remain limited within presidency of Donald Trump i.e. 2017 to 2021 for the reason that significant progress in reconciliation process was achieved during this period.

In Afghan War scenario, reconciliation process had a strong impact on the US narrative as the process and context both are related with each other. There is a huge impact of context on the reconciliation process which is why narratives are employed to provide that favorable context. Similarly, rationale of reconciliation constructed by narrative helps us to understand the salient features of reconciliation process. The objective of this study is to identify an official US narrative crafted by officials of US State Department during the Trump presidency that allowed US to create an environment for reconciliation with Taliban and subsequently withdraw its troops from Afghanistan without having to accept its defeat after two decades of war. The study will explore how US State Department constructed the official narrative to facilitate the process of reconciliation with Taliban and subsequently enabling US to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan? It will also dwell upon on the question that what were the fundamental themes employed in the official US narrative which was crafted by US State Department to promote conducive environment for reconciliation with Taliban?

The study is designed to start with introduction section shedding light on the topic itself and then elaborating research methodology and objectives. The subsequent section builds theoretical framework for the study and provides conceptual understating of narrative including elements of narrative, approaches to narrative, master narrative and counter narrative. Analysis section mainly contributes by focusing on four sub-themes of US official narrative in reconciliation with Taliban during Trump Presidency and their in-depth analysis. The last section concludes the study by final remarks.

Narratives: An Analytical Understanding

The narratives seem to permeate throughout the existence of human beings. Whether it is a historical account, psychological experience, exposure to media and journalism or an attempt to see the world objectively (Cobley 2013). Walter Fisher goes as far as using the term 'Homo Narrans' as he believes all communication that takes place among humans is in the form of narratives (Fisher 1989). Narratives are so important in the lives of humans that they are considered central to consciousness and human understanding of the world by approaches of cognitive science (Dancygier 2011). The struggle of not being able to make sense of an event is usually attributed to inability of person to integrate that event into a plot to provide contextual comprehensive of what has happened and narratives exhibit these explanations (Polkinghorne 1987).

Narratives have immense significance in political, psychological and social dimensions of academia. Several studies have been carried on across variety of disciplines regarding narrative research such as Plummer, 2001; Patterson, 2002; Emerson and Frosh, 2004; Freeman, 2009; Bold, 2012 which depicts the acceptance and popularity of the concept. There are several definitions of narrative due to interdisciplinary nature and implications of the concept. Narrative is defined by Prince as the representation of events or situations (real or fictive) in a time sequence not presupposing or entailing the other (Prince 1982). According to this definition,

the manner in which events and their sequence are represented becomes a narrative. It provides us with a fundamental understanding of narrative having mere basic prerequisites of representation, events and time sequence. However, the working definition of narrative we would adhere to in this study actually defines political narrative as a manner of storytelling that shapes fact and impacts on understanding of reality (Shenhav, 2006).

There are three elements of narrative that constitute a narrative. First element is 'events, characters and background' that consists of events, actors and geographical setting. Second is 'sequence' which is relation of under consideration events with respect to time. Third is 'causality' referring to causal relation of events (Shenhav, 2006). Anyone of the following three approaches to narrative research can be adopted: event-centered approach, experience-centered approach and co-constructed approach. The event-centric approach focuses on a particular event which is explained by different sources. The experience-centered approach focuses on the unique experiences of certain respondents (Andrew, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008). The co-construct approach which is applicable in this study focuses on mutual interactions and conversations.

The narratives are crafted by carefully presenting the situation and facts with additional context to paint a certain picture of the scenario. The act of selection what is to be depicted is very crucial in the narrative process by provision of demonstration about representation therefore certain selected facts are depicted and others are not (Cobley, 2013). Stories are instrument for social negotiations and narrative interpretations by means of negotiating and renegotiating has been the crowning achievements of humans (Bruner, 1990). Narratives have an integral role in building up perceptions of people affecting subsequent decision-making process (Sarbin, 1986). Constructing power of narrative bestows on the narrator a level of authority and trust that is equal to asserting or granting of power (Toolan, 1988). They also play a vital part in constructing political identity and ideology (Cornog, 2004). Narratives are constructed to provide a contextual understanding of the concept mostly aimed at justifying a particular perspective.

Narratives do not appear abruptly in isolation, on the contrary mostly new narratives emerge from already existing narratives called Master Narratives. Master narratives are those narratives that function as the framework by which members of the community are meant to fashion their lives (Squire et al., 2014). Stories sit in relation to other existing stories. Counter narratives are often considered to demarcating a political position that challenges status quo but this is not always right (Squire et al. 2014). There is no consensus on the meaning of counter narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004). The distinction between master narratives and counter narratives is not clear cut rather these are thoroughly interwoven with one another (Squire et al., 2014).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on US envisaged an opportunity for Bush administration to construct a strong narrative for 'War on Terror' which was aptly employed in rallying global support for invasion of Afghanistan. The Bush administration framed these attacks as an act of war and existential threat to US (Murphy, 2003). On 14 Sep 2001, the US president declared that our freedom and way of life are under attack by these terrorist attacks (Bush, 2001). The circumstances enable Bush administration to construct this warmongering narrative based on their interpretation that it had become a matter of survival for the US. Bush said during his speech on 20th Sep 2001, that an act of war has been committed against US by the enemies of freedom (Bush, 2001). Appealing to the popular sentiments of retribution, US administration forged a

narrative for 'War on Terror' that enabled them to declare war against terrorists and their affiliates (Taliban) and invade Afghanistan.

Narratives are shaped by those who control access, context and content; however, narratives work both ways as they acquire momentum of their own they can have constraining effect too (Reeve, 2022). Barack Obama always maintained distance from Bush administration's narrative for 'War on Terror' and expressed desire to change the war narrative (Lindsay, 2011). However, narratives are powerful when aligned with legislation policy and actions (Reeve, 2022). The political and security situation on ground in Afghanistan did not allow Obama administration much room to sway further from the prevailing narrative. The change expected from the Obama administration never materialized and whatever measure touted as rebooting the 'War on Terror' narrative were deemed mere cosmetic changes by the scholars (Barnett, 2016). The core narratives developed during Bush administration were internalized and institutionalized by the public including Obama and his administration (Jackson and McDonald, 2014). Despite his attempt at moderation of Bush administration's narrative, Obama had to adopt similar lines to greater extent (Barnett, 2016).

President Trump had always been pushing for peace and reconciliation process as his dominant foreign policy strategy. In August 2017, President Trump increased US troops by 3,500 to bring out a decisive impact in security situation in Afghanistan which did not bear desired results. After July 2018, Trump administration had been making serious efforts for reconciliation with Taliban and they required transformation of official US narrative to sell this peace to the public. It was under these circumstances that an endeavor to craft an official US narrative with the aim to counter the erstwhile US narrative of engagement in Afghanistan by disparaging the costly on-going war and rebuilding image of Taliban as reasonable and rational entity.

The US State Department constructed an official narrative for facilitation of reconciliation process with Taliban in Afghanistan. The official narrative was employed using four fundamental themes that were reiterated during the period leading up to reconciliation process. The first theme was the allusion to forty years of endless war in Afghanistan instead of the twenty years war imposed by US in Afghanistan. This was opted to distance US from the responsibility of the prevailing chaos in Afghanistan. Moreover, it allowed US to take premature credit for fixing the forty years old conflict within Afghanistan. The second theme was pursuit of peace as the priority of US in Afghanistan. While purporting peace as the ultimate objective US assumed all other factors as secondary like inclusion of Afghan government in the reconciliation process and peace deal with Taliban.

The third theme identified was dissociation of Taliban with terrorism and other terror groups. It was actively propagated that Taliban are not the bad guys that they used to be and they have denounced terrorist activities and other terrorist groups. Image building of Taliban was carried out in order to present themselves as reconcilable and confronted by common enemies like Daesh. The last theme of the pre-withdrawal narrative was exorbitant cost of war in Afghanistan. The cost of war was highlighted not only in financial terms but also as loss of human lives to arouse empathy among the audience. However, the officials carefully avoided to mention total loss of lives in Afghan war and referred to individual instances as that would incite resentment among the audience and fail the desired results.

In order to construct a narrative, it is pertinent that some thematic lines are drawn which are then reiterated to present the current scenario in a context. The official US

narrative to withdraw its presence in Afghanistan was constructed on four major thematic lines. The historic pretext of 40 years long Afghan war, the ultimate objective of peace, Taliban are not Terrorists and Afghan intervention had been costly for the United States were the four themes that were quite pronounced in the official US narrative provided by the State Department of US.

Forty Years of Afghan War

US State Department tactfully played on the fact that Afghanistan had been in a state of war even before the invasion by US in 2001. It not only removed that onus of disturbing Afghan peace prior to US invasion by simultaneously endeavored to veil failure of US in 20 years war. It was also an attempt to divert attention from the fact that the United States has gotten itself in a stalemate in Afghanistan. The frequent allusion to long ongoing 40 years of war was to emphasize that the chaos in Afghanistan was not something created by the United States but, in fact, it has been going on for four decades. Cale Brown, Principal Deputy Spokesperson of US State Department conveyed that US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo welcomed Afghan leadership and owned the effort to end the war that lasted 40 years (US State Department, 2020, Para.1).

US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad commented during a briefing of US State Department that Afghan people have sat down to discuss the political settlement and end the protracted war for the first time in four decades including the Taliban who are considered authoritative. (US State Department, 2020, Para.7). It was a deliberate attempt to hide the embarrassment that Taliban have outlasted the US capacity to continue their war in Afghanistan. In an opening statement during a US State Department briefing on Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said that we hope to commence intra-Afghan negotiations if the violence stays low so that 40 years long war can be brought to end (US State Department, 2020, Para.10).

It was a rhetorical attempt to vaunt a US diplomatic victory for Afghan people against Taliban in making them agree for the reconciliation. In a media note US State Department conveyed that the United States intends to end the Afghan conflict that has been going on for 40 years as per the desires of Afghan people and international community (US State Department, 2020, Para.2). It is presented to the audience that primary beneficiaries are supposedly the Afghan people for whom the United States has brought a hope by brining Taliban to reconciliation process. In closing remarks during State Department briefing Zalmay Khalilzad expressed that peace process in Afghanistan has been facing important challenges because the Afghan war has been going on for forty years (US State Department, 2020, Para.76). It is evident that statements of US State Department continued to emphasize on the length of the on-going war which they purported to be forty years instead of twenty.

In response to a question about Taliban, US Secretary of State Pompeo replied that it is imperative to get all Afghan parties work out a political solution for the conflict which has been going on for forty years in order to make sure that America is not attacked from Afghanistan again (US State Department, 2020, Para.72). Here it is portrayed that the US had done a tremendous job in bringing an end to such a long conflict which will benefit the Afghan people, instead of shedding light on stark failure of Counter Terrorism and subsequent Nation building endeavors of the United States in Afghanistan. The recurrent and rather seemingly unnecessary reference of 'forty years of war' in their speeches and remarks rule out any chances that these allusions were coincidental. Moreover, it is observed that during the pre-withdrawal period US State Department intentionally eschewed any remarks or pronouncements that would qualify tenure of Afghan war as twenty years or two decades long.

Peace - The Ultimate Objective

Another important theme that frequently popped up in US State Department narrative was that the Ultimate Objective of Peace was going to be achieved in effect to the withdrawal of the US troops. It was portrayed that there was an overwhelming consensus among stakeholders in Afghanistan to obtain peace. While issuing a press statement US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo emphasized that Afghan people are desirous of peace overwhelmingly (US State Department, 2020, Para.3). This peace was supposed to be desire of Afghan people but there was no indication if this would ensure safety, security and other rights of Afghan people. While issuing a press note Zalmay Khalilzad expressed that in his meeting with Afghan President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah it was agreed upon that our utmost priority is peace (US State Department, 2020, Para.2). Here again the US officials are building perceptions that even the Afghan government priorities peace over any other consideration which was partially true only as all stakeholders in Afghanistan including US, Taliban and Afghan government had their own priorities and versions of peace.

The official US narrative promoted peace in Afghanistan in a manner that it was the best and only viable option going forward. During a special briefing via teleconference US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said that we are determined about the peace process that has been started after the joint declaration by Taliban and the United States and there can be no better option other than peace. (US State Department, 2020, Para.11). The State Department officials exalted the importance of peace such as other considerations were not deemed of equal weightage at all. He further emphasized the inevitability of peace process by reiterating that even though it has difficulties still it is the best option and therefore we will persist (US State Department, 2020, Para.76). Here we can observe how a sense of urgency and necessity for peace is being instilled through use of phrases like 'utmost priority', 'no better option other than peace' and 'the best option'. These assumptions are deliberately uttered to set up a basic premise for narrative to justify reconciliation process.

In order to address speculations that the United States is negotiating peace from a weak footing, it was communicated that this time Taliban came forward with the shot at peace. Giving his remarks at US Taliban Peace Deal signing Ceremony Michael Pompeo reflected that the effort for peace became viable only after Taliban signaled their interest in peace and cutting ties with terrorist groups including Al-Qaida (US State Department, 2020, Para.2). He further added that Afghans will be victorious when peace and prosperity will prevail in Afghanistan and the United States will press all stakeholders to pursue sustainable peace (US State Department, 2020, Para.11). In this speech he used the word 'Peace' nine times highlighting its importance in their narrative for reconciliation. It is also pertinent to note that Pompeo asserted his own definition of victory for the Afghan people and then credited US for essaying to render Afghan victorious.

It was also propagated that the peace deal was not only envisaged between Taliban and the US but it was only a step forward to forge a comprehensive intra-Afghan peace deal that would ensure lasting peace but the turn of events indicate that the US only managed to secure the peace deal between the United States and Taliban. The Afghan government and Taliban representatives could not culminate their peace negotiations as the issue of prisoner release proved to be a major obstacle (Brookings, 2022). Michael Pompeo, US State Secretary explained in his remarks during a press availability in Kabul that the United States is endeavoring for intra-Afghan negotiations whose objective is comprehensive peace agreement (US State Department, 2019, Para.10). He further added that today we have an international consensus for peace in Afghanistan which will also benefit neighboring countries (US State Department, 2019, Para.12). While concluding his remarks he

pointed out that he had mentioned the word 'peace' more than half a dozen time because it is our priority (US State Department, 2019, Para.15). The purpose of stressing the need of peace was to give it more importance than other factors that hindered or raised objections on the course of actions adopted by US in order to pave the way for US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Taliban, Not Terrorist

Since the onset of US invasion of Afghanistan in Oct 2001, the international community unanimously tilted towards the portrayal of Taliban as an extremist entity and terrorist group. For this reason, it was the most challenging theme of the US narrative to depict Taliban as worthy of reconciliation after all those years of violence from their side against the US, its allies and Afghans. Zalmay Khalilzad said during a special briefing on Afghanistan that Taliban must commit they will not allow Al-Qaida or any other terrorist group to threaten US or its allies from their territory (US State Department, 2020, Para.39). It was propagated that US has demanded stern commitments that Taliban will refrain from violence and will vouch for the territories they control that it will not be used for terrorism. It was impressed upon that US will not compromise on the security and safety of its people and Afghans during the reconciliation with Taliban.

Khalilzad explained while giving a briefing on Afghanistan via teleconference that there is an ideological difference between ISIS and Taliban, and a statement has been issued by Taliban on it (US State Department, 2020, Para.39). It clearly shows that US is officially defending Taliban as a non-terrorist entity and distinct from ISIS only to help in image building of Taliban so that they are considered a reconcilable entity. The US State Department went as far as subliminally indicating that it was Al-Qaida not the Taliban that attacked the New York City thereby implying that the perpetrators of 9/11 attacks were a separate entity. In an appearance on KCMO Radio Talk Michael Pompeo said that New York City was attacked by Al-Qaida and Taliban must break ties with them (US State Department, 2020, Para.6). It can be easily observed in the above mentioned statements that US officials, in the garb of setting the record straight, are actually defending Taliban by repeatedly distinguishing them from Al-Qaida. Moreover, it is being assured that Taliban will only be engaged in reconciliation process if they break ties with Al-Qaida.

Another challenge was to construct an image of Taliban which is reconcilable as previously the US had been the one declaring Taliban to be irreconcilable. A senior administration official during a briefing on Afghanistan stated that Taliban are not endlessly evil neither it will all be roses and doves overnight (US State Department, 2020, Para.6). The US had rejected to negotiate or even consider Taliban for talks for the future of Afghanistan in the first place and now they needed people to see the good in them. In response to a question regarding prisoner release he further added that it is admirable that Taliban care about their people (US State Department, 2020, Para.104). It seems so obvious that US officials had been making deliberate attempts to rebuild and improve Taliban's image as admirable by declaring that they care for their people when in fact they have been pressuring US for release of their prisoners in Afghan prisons. It seldom occurs that an enemy is praised as admirable for demanding release of their prisoners during reconciliation process, however, here we notice the commitment of US officials with their official narrative to portray Taliban as good people.

A serious concern was raised when it was learned that Taliban had been invited to Camp David for the peace deal and there was severe public criticism on this decision. While addressing concerns regarding Taliban coming to Camp David, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said that Camp David holds significance for negotiated peace over the history and for reconciliation you have to deal with bad guys otherwise who else would you negotiate with (US State Department, 2020, Para.23). The narrative theme that Taliban are not terrorist is also reflected in this official statement

because no erstwhile terrorist group has ever been invited to Camp David for peace accords and the history Pompeo is referring to stands true for legitimate representatives of states. Therefore, the above cited comparison of Taliban with representative and portfolio holders of states speaks volumes regarding forging an amicable public image of Taliban by US officials.

Nevertheless, there had been sporadic terrorist attacks during the span of time negotiations were being carried out between the US and Taliban which sometimes caused a lag in the peace process. However, those attacks were casually attributed to other actors who wanted to sabotage the negotiations. While briefing on Afghan reconciliation via teleconference Zalmay Khalilzad declared that some bad forces want US to remain entangled in Afghan conflict and they are at war not only with the US but also with Taliban themselves (US State Department, 2020, Para.22). He further expounded that ISIS has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan and Taliban have been making significant efforts to fight them in Afghanistan (US State Department, 2020, Para.24). It is obvious that efforts were being carried out to construct a narrative in which Taliban have not only refrained from the acts of terror rather they being the good guys are fighting the actual terrorists in Afghanistan. In response to a question he added that we acknowledge that Taliban are fulfilling the commitments to fight Daesh (US State Department, 2020, Para.25). It looks like US Department of State had been vouching for Taliban that they have bid farewell to erstwhile ways of terrorism so much so that Taliban have actually picked up arms against Daesh, purportedly a common enemy of US and Taliban. This is how US officially crafted a narrative to purge Taliban from their label of terrorism and ingrain in public that interest of US and Taliban fighting against a common enemy have converged. It is noteworthy that throughout this period US officials refrained from use of words like 'terrorist attack' or 'terrorism' for the fatal attacks carried out by Taliban against the incumbent Afghan government. They often referred to them as attacks and hostilities deliberately eschewing to categorize Taliban activities as terrorism.

Exorbitant Cost of War

Another significant underlining theme that permeated the withdrawal process was the immense cost of war borne by the people of US. It was constantly alluded to during US official's statements whenever a bleak image of US investment in Afghan war needed a reevaluation. This theme played an important role in pre-withdrawal official narrative building of US. In an interview to CNBC, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo elaborated that reduction of cost and risk to the United States was the mission set in Afghanistan. There are 13,000 American men and women there who are serving their fifth, sixth or even seventh tour. A lot of money around \$25 to \$30 billion per year is being spent (US State Department, 2020, Para.71). The cost of Afghan war for US had indeed been enormous and declaring to be on a mission to reduce that cost actually sets the stage and paved narrative for US reconciliation with Taliban.

That cost of war was not only financial but the Americans were paying it with their lives serving in Afghanistan. While giving interview to Bret Baier on Fox News, Michael Pompeo asserted that he himself being CIA director does not like seeing Americans going to Afghanistan on their third, fourth and fifth trip. I want fewer Americans returning home maimed, injured or worse yet, never coming back home again. (US State Department, 2020, Para.5). In this instance we can point out that Pompeo was subliminally appealing to public to empathize with people who have served in Afghanistan and suffered the brunt of the war. He even claimed authenticity by mentioning himself as having been served in the field as CIA director.

During an interview to CBS's Margaret Brennan, Michael Pompeo narrated that he had been at Dover Air Force Base to oversee dignified transfer of Sergeant First Class Barreto and President Trump is bent on reduction of that risk so that fewer US soldiers are fallen (US State

Department, 2019, Para.5). The urge to mention the example of Sergeant First Class Barreto as a witness on more than one occasion show a deliberate attempt to touch the cord of American hearts that it would invoke empathy for withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. In his interview to ABC's George Stephanopoulos, Michael Pompeo reiterated that he was with Sergeant First Class Barreto's family at Dover Air Force Base just a few hours ago who sacrificed his life last week which is a reminder for us to get it right in Afghanistan (US State Department, 2019, Para.5). He specifically mentioned this event more than once in almost the same words as he had done previously was a clear indication that it was a premeditated part of the narrative construction. However, it is important to mention here that throughout their pre-withdrawal narrative for reconciliation US officials never mentioned the total loss of American lives during the Afghan war as that would undoubtedly spark resentment and disappointment which will defeat the purpose of entire narrative. He further emphasized that even though US faces terror threats from many other parts of the world yet we spent over \$ 30 billion per year only in Afghanistan. (US State Department, 2019, Para.16). Here once more US officials purposely fail to quote the total amount spent by US since the inception of Afghan war and only mention per year annual cost.

US State Department kept reminding throughout their withdrawal narrative that this war had been a very costly one. Michael Pompeo said in a press briefing that the United States has spent enormous amount of life in Afghanistan but this time we are on the cusp of an opportunity (US State Department, 2020, Para.52). In this statement Pompeo underscores high cost of war and in the same sentence he provides the solution as an opportunity not to be missed. The fact that Taliban released American and Australian hostages in 2019 was celebrated with assertion that Taliban have changed their approach. In celebration of release of American and Australian hostages, Michael Pompeo stated in a press statement that we perceive them as positive signs for ending a costly and terrible war that has been going on for 40 years (US State Department, 2019, Para.3). Here we can notice again that ending a costly war was stressed in his statement. This purported end of costly war was obvious as US had been striving for reconciliation with Taliban that would eventually pave the way for US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Narratives are essentially significant in ways humans transmit knowledge, communicate and influence others' opinions. Their role in rallying the popular support for war by invoking sentiments is well established; however narratives are also immensely effective while going into reconciliation process with adversaries. Political narratives provide context to justify a particular course of action sought by political entities. Similarly, US government deliberately crafted an official narrative at diplomatic front to facilitate the reconciliation process with Taliban in Afghanistan. The invasion of Afghanistan by US was driven by popular sentiments of retribution in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks on Twin Towers of World Trade Center in New York which eventually diminished over the period of years. The elongated tenure of US War on Terror in Afghanistan and persistent law and order situation was the reason the Afghan war had lost its popular support. Furthermore, the ever changing objectives and approaches of US government in Afghanistan manifested lack of strategic clarity. At the end of second decade of Afghan war the general perceptions were predominantly pessimistic and almost everybody had been rooting for the war to end but the question was how to go about it.

Efforts had been made to bring Taliban on the negotiating table, however the challenges seemed to prevail and reconciliation with Taliban could not materialize. President Trump, who took pride in himself as a dealmaker managed to score significant progress in reconciliation process with Taliban. The biggest challenge was how to mold public opinion in

favor of a peace deal with Taliban in the contemporary state of affairs in Afghanistan. The security environment had regressed into deplorable state and it reflected weakness on part of US and Afghan government. On the other hand Taliban had refused to reconcile with Afghan government and the onus solely lie on US to engage and strike a peace deal with Taliban.

It was need of the hour to construct an unassuming narrative that would justify a reconciliation process with Taliban keeping in mind the historical baggage that came along. US State Department took the lead in projection and promotion of themes that would set the discourse for withdrawal of US from Afghanistan. Four fundamental themes have been identified in the official US narrative for reconciliation with Taliban that provided basis for the eventual US withdrawal.

Meticulous observation of the pre-withdrawal official statements of US State Department reveals a crafty narrative constructed by US with recurrent themes over the period of time. This narrative allowed US to approach Taliban with reconciliation offer and maneuver its withdrawal with a justified contextual discourse. It also enabled them to extract a peace deal with Taliban without being blamed for making deal with the devil and take premature credit for setting Afghanistan in the direction of peace and progress.

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