

LAOZI'S PHILOSOPHY: ITS COMPARISON WITH WESTERN THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION ON PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

The complex Pakistan-Afghanistan relations always engage policymakers on both sides of the border. Their concerns towards each other have been changing the socio-political environment intermittently due to internal and external dynamics coupled with historical legacies. This study, therefore, covers the post-independence period, the Soviet Union's communist influence in Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban, and the post-9/11 era. It employs Lao Tzu's philosophy which advocates the overarching features of domestic politics, global governance, and statecraft to address the prevailing intricacies in Pakistan and Afghanistan foreign policies. It discusses vital concepts and approaches of softness, normalness, and actionless action at the individual, state, and system levels while carving out institutionalized foreign policy orientations between the two neighbours. The paper also considers the western thought of realism paradigm through which peace in the region remained elusive. It deliberates upon Lao Tzu's philosophy which lays down the foundation of the political order in a natural, peaceful and balanced way.

Keywords: Lao Tzu's Philosophy, Pak-Afghan Relations, Foreign Policy, Governance, Statecraft.

Introduction

Foreign policy of a country is neither exclusive nor a linear undertaking. Some variables directly influence national policies, such as geography, demography, economy, environment, and the practice of statecraft. South Asia, a volatile region suffering from perpetual conflicts primarily attributed to Pakistan-India animosity and evolving Afghanistan dynamics, exacerbates policymakers' challenges. In the Pakistan-Afghanistan context, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in Pakistan's interest. Historically, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have remained fluctuating. Lord Curzon (a former Viceroy of India) stated that "frontiers are indeed the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations."¹ Post-1979, Afghan *Mujahedeen* waged war against Soviet invasion with the support of the US, and Pakistan eventually forced Red Army to leave Afghanistan. After the defeat of the Cold War opponent, the US left Afghanistan in disarray, but Pakistan continued its efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Following the 9/11 incident, Pakistan acceded to the US demands,

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thus, paid a heavy price. After the Taliban's control over Afghanistan, it is still grappling with foreign policy challenges with a murky and hazy future that lays ahead.

So far, most of the available literature on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations emanates from Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Europe, and the US, offering limited avenues of thinking. This paper, therefore, is an effort towards understanding the complexity of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations from the writings of ancient and famous Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu (also known as Laozi). Laozi's influence on Chinese thinking is overarching, including domestic politics, global governance, and the practice of statecraft. It provides a theoretical lens to carve out some fresh thoughts on the subject. This paper analyses the relevance of Laozi's philosophy to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations during formative years, Pakistan's Afghan Policy during Soviet invasion, Taliban rule (1996-2001), post-9/11 changes, and its application to foreign policy analysis and comparison with western thinking.

Theoretical Lens of Laozi's Philosophy

Sima Qian's writings indicate that Laozi was an elder contemporary of Confucius (581-500 BC). Laozi authored "Dao De Jing," a masterpiece of philosophy, comprehensively encompassing the Universe, human life, and politics.² This book is colloquially known as Laozi's little book of 5000 words, a highly condensed Chinese ancient thought.³

a) Dao (The Way)

The overarching concept of "Dao De Jing" is *Dao* or *Tao*, having literal meanings 'the Way.' Explaining *Dao* is complex and intricate, though it is wholesome as a concept. It is the process of reality, how various things come together. Ontologically, *Dao* is fathomless, invisible in shape, and all-embracing. It exerts energy by existing in nothingness and is dynamic in nature and a generative principle of the Universe. Laozi explains this as "the *Tao* which can be expressed in words, is not the eternal *Tao*."⁴ "The Way is like an empty vessel that may be drawn from without ever needing to be filled. It is bottomless...."⁵ The spirit of *Dao* can also be compared with a river flowing through a valley, "the valley spirit never dies."⁶ Laozi also gives a unique explanation of *Dao* through the concept of reversion. "In *Tao*, the only motion is returning; The only useful quality, weakness."⁷ It is also worth mentioning that *Dao* advocates actionless completion characterized by no intrusiveness and domination. The "*Tao* always remains inactive, yet it acts upon everything in the world."⁸ *Dao* being metaphysical for understanding relies on subjective ontology. Therefore, *Dao* explains the phenomenon of nature and the Universe's dynamics or may call it mother nature. It needs to be perceived in time and space as regulating cosmic mechanisms for understanding some of its fundamental notions. Metaphorically, it shall be deciphered and appropriately interpreted to apply to the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship.

b) *Wu Wei (Actionless Action)*

Wu Wei has a central place in Laozi's philosophy. Relating with *Dao* means following the natural flow and order of Cosmos and nature's rhythm. Thus, *Wu Wei* is a means to an end. As a system of governance or guidance for the policymakers, the concept sounds paradoxical that something positive or concrete can be achieved by inaction. In a philosophical sense, *Wu Wei* advocates that a predominantly kinetic approach in handling challenges violates the law of nature and negatively impacts society and people. The actionless activity follows the way of nature like water. Laozi advocated that man takes the earth as a model; earth takes heaven as its model..., *Dao* takes what is natural.⁹

Wu Wei is a goodness and virtuous way of conduct. Various segments of society act like flowing water, moving as per the downstream natural flow, cleaning what is dirty, and nurturing and nourishing the needy. Indeed, a harmonious society and its members can act positively without any centralized directions by ruling classes. Laozi's further explained that "he who is good at speaking leaves no slips; he who is good at counting uses no counting tools; he who is good at shutting renders all efforts of opening in vain though he uses no bolts; [and] he who is good at tying renders all efforts of untying in vain though he uses no ropes."¹⁰

The concept of *Wu Wei* can be aptly applied in the evolving situation of Afghanistan and how to bring peace and harmony in a war-torn country, a warring society, and by implication, not to support a competing group over the other as it disharmonizes the community. "Those who want to obtain it by force will ruin it; those who hold it by force will lose it. Thus, the sage never ruins it because of his inaction."¹¹ From these quoted references, rulers of Laozi do not follow any act of coercive law but still follow the principles that come from *Dao*.¹²

Laozi maintains that a peaceful society reflects harmony within its various segments. Unrealistic ambitions and unnecessary desires create social and societal ills. The application of force is the act of unnaturalness (anti-*Ziran*) that ultimately takes societies towards conflict and destruction. Afghanistan is a case in point. In the context of statecraft, anti-*Ziran* is not close to nature. It is the state of naturalness defined by harmony. This state of naturalness is the central theme for a peaceful human world. "Heping in Chinese is a combination of 'he' (means harmony) and 'ping' (means balance),"¹³ indicating a wholesome view of peace. *Ziran* (naturalness) is, thus, linked with *Wu Wei* (Actionless Action). *Ziran* is the core value of the thought of Laozi, while *Wu Wei* is the principle or method of realising this value in action.¹⁴

c) *Rou (Softness)*

Laozi advocates that "the more weapons the people own, the more chaotic the state is."¹⁵ His thought still holds good for the case study of Afghanistan. *Rou* (softness) is a function of *Dao* advocating superiority of weakness over strength. *Rou* is a multifaceted concept applied in all spheres of life, society, and the state. Drawing an

example from nature and using water as a metaphor, Laozi explains that nothing is softer and weaker than water; still, amazingly, water can penetrate the hardest and strongest structures. More peaceful approaches resembling water provide a model to follow while dealing with Afghan imbroglio by not following the realist paradigm of international relations but the neo-liberalist school of thought where people are more critical, and thus, a shift from high to low politics. In Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, Laozi's philosophical considerations need study and deliberation.

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations (1947-1979)

In September 1947, Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the UN. Following a few border skirmishes in 1949, the Afghan *Loya Jirga* adopted a resolution unilaterally repudiating all 19th-century treaties with British India, including the Durand Line agreement. In 1951, the assassination of Pakistan Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan by Said Akbar Babrak, an Afghan citizen, jolted Pak-Afghan ties.¹⁶ In 1954-55, Pakistan entered the anti-Soviet South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Baghdad Pact (SENTO). Both pacts included a military aid package to Pakistan, which Afghanistan and India protested.¹⁷ In the same sequence of events, Afghanistan signed for a Soviet assistance package a month later.¹⁸ Bilateral relations worsened; however, conflict was averted. Meanwhile, Pakistan banned Afghanistan trade via Karachi port, which led to Afghanistan's open support of tribal incursions inside Pakistan. Afghanistan reoriented its trade by using the Central Asian states of the former USSR.

Similarly, Pakistan's announcement of One Unit met anger inside Afghanistan. An angry mob ransacked the Pakistan embassy in Kabul and consulate in Jalalabad while police looked on.¹⁹ The event resulted in border escalation, Afghanistan mobilized 70,000 troops, and the inter-state border remained closed for five months.²⁰ Following US mediation between Pakistan and Afghanistan and concerns that the US might attempt to induct Afghanistan into CENTO, the USSR openly supported *Pashtunistan*.²¹ In response, Field Marshal Ayub Khan followed an aggressive foreign policy²² and even threatened to attack Afghanistan.²³ In 1960, over a thousand Afghan soldiers disguised as Pashtun nomads and tribespeople infiltrated the Bajaur Agency (Pakistan's frontier tribal areas); however, they were repelled by pro-Pakistan tribesmen. It followed two separate and more significant incursions (1961) supported by Afghan troops. Pakistan-Afghanistan border was closed, while Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan stated that it would remain closed until the *Pashtunistan* issue had been resolved. He successfully ousted the King, abolished the monarchy, and turned Afghanistan into the Islamic Republic in 1973. The main charge framed against the exiled King was his failure to exploit Pakistan's position of weakness after its defeat in East Pakistan for materializing the cause of *Pashtunistan*.²⁴ The USSR immediately recognized pro-Soviet Daud's government. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, also recognized the new Afghan government to improve relations with Afghanistan. Daud set aside Bhutto's diplomatic initiative, revived old enmity, and resumed Afghanistan's interference in Pakistan by sheltering and training Baloch insurgents.²⁵

Pakistan predicated its Afghan policy, focussing on reducing the threat from a hostile Afghanistan to avoid a two-front hostility from eastern and western neighbours. Considerations of survivability mainly drove Pakistan's Afghan policy during this era. The goodwill and benevolence of Pakistan's approach could not reciprocate from Afghan ruling elites. Pakistan failed to realise that instead of focusing on Afghan political elites, commonalities between two countries be utilized through institutionalised means and strengthening multiple channels linking two societies, a softer approach to building friendly relations as advocated by Laozi through *Dao* (the Way) and *Wu Wei* (Actionless Action).

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations (1979-1994)

People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) infighting for power struggle coupled with covert US support to anti-communist regime forced USSR invasion of Afghanistan.²⁶ Under a well-orchestrated strategy of embroiling the Soviet Union into a Vietnam-like situation in Afghanistan, the US assisted anti-communist factions despite the calculation that it would induce a Soviet military response.²⁷ Jimmy Carter declared the Soviet invasion as "the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War"²⁸ and sought Pakistan's assistance for saving Afghanistan from becoming the next domino. Despite some internal disagreement in President Zia's cabinet and declining initial financial aid (\$400 million) from the US, Pakistan finally decided to become a frontline state in the US-led war for freedom and democracy in Afghanistan with financial assistance worth \$3.2 billion over six years.²⁹ Pakistan took advantage of its geostrategic location without paying adequate attention to essential aspects, such as the effects of arming and training religious zealots with lost entities and diverse motives on the post-conflict settlement of Afghanistan; long-term effects of the presence of large-scale trained and armed radical outfits on security and stability of Pakistan; and possibilities and consequences of outsourcing state's monopoly on the use of violence and plans for repatriation or rehabilitation of such activists.

Pakistan supported the resistance against the USSR in Afghanistan. It allowed thousands of *Mujahideen* to organize, train, equip and undertake attacks on soviet forces in Afghanistan from its soil.³⁰ The long war gave rise to *madrasahs* (religious seminaries) for indoctrinating and recruiting holy warriors based on vicious sectarian fissures.³¹ With over a million civilians who died during the Soviet invasion and the world's largest displaced population,³² fragmented Afghanistan could not find sustainable peace. The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, but the communist-supported regime kept ruling Afghanistan till 1992. After the overthrow of Dr. Najibullah, Sibgat Ullah Mujadedi, a mutually agreed commander of Afghan *mujahideen*, took over the interim government as a follow-up of the Peshawar Accord. Power struggle amongst *mujahideen* groups did not end. In the following years, the civil war got unleashed, whereby broadly ethnically divided factions fought for personal influence and inflicted unimaginable suffering on the people of Afghanistan. Using religion as a tool of politics and arming the population is what in Laozi's philosophy is against the concept of *Ziran*

(Naturalness) and can only give short-lived solutions. Thus, peace remained elusive for Afghans with another cycle of violence and the rise of the Taliban in 1994.

Rise of the Taliban and Pakistan's Connection (1994–2001)

President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his defence minister Ahmad Shah Masoud being Tajiks was the beginning of the rise of Tajiks in Afghanistan after overthrowing President Najibullah's government. Pashtuns never felt at ease with this power arrangement in Kabul. "For them, it amounted to a gathering storm of northerners."³³ Pakistan's support to Gulbadin Hekmatyar and his Hizb-e-Islami party to force a Pashtun-dominated solution on Afghanistan added further bloodshed, internal friction, and intensified civil war. Consequently, power brokers' localised control through the barrels of guns forced people to find safety and security in ethnic or religious identities. Some leaders with sanity and having a moderate view of managing Afghan affairs like Sibghatullah Mujaddedi and Syed Ahmed Gailani were almost discarded.³⁴ In a country ripped apart by intra-state conflict and internecine struggle spread over more than a decade, the rise of the Taliban was a natural phenomenon. The decision to launch the Taliban movement was taken at a meeting in a mosque in 1994.³⁵ Mullah Omar, the founding father of the Taliban movement, took over the leadership of this movement. Taliban movement became a strategic opportunity and a marriage of convenience.³⁶ As an expression of support to the Taliban regime, Pakistan gave diplomatic recognition to facilitate its image globally by recognising the Taliban's government as legitimate.³⁷

By the end of 1996, the international environment turned against the Taliban. Still, Pakistan supported them until 9/11, when it was forced to change its policy under international compulsions and US pressure. As the new realities started taking shape in the region, Pakistan's support to the Taliban proved counter-productive and negatively impacted its image. From the perspective of Laozi's philosophy, it was far away from *Dao* (the Way), *Wu Wei* (Actionless Action), and *Ziran* (Naturalness).

Pakistan's Post-9/11 Afghan Policy

In the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy towards Afghanistan radically changed and supported US policy objectives. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, announced at the beginning of the National Security Council (NSC) meeting that "Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had agreed to US request for support in the War on Terrorism."³⁸ It severed years-long Pakistan's ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. After the initial dust of 9/11 settled and the Taliban government was ousted, India supported the Northern Alliance, and the US kept their elevation to power corridors. "Islamabad interpreted this as an American duplicity, and henceforth had to look after its interests more carefully and not trust anyone."³⁹ Pakistan was rightly concerned about India's growing multidimensional activities on its western border. Afghanistan's strategic partnership with India further increased Pakistan's concerns that it was getting

marginalized, and India was unleashing terrorism against Pakistan with the support of the Afghan government.

With every passing year, the complexity of Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan compounded further. In a true sense, Pakistan was pitched against the US and India in Afghanistan. On the other side, the US administration had reservations about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. This mistrust continued, and President Trump blamed Pakistan in the most undiplomatic manner, making it responsible for the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. The US National Security Strategy-2017 further endorsed that the US had "committed to supporting the Afghan government and security forces in their fight against the Taliban ... [and] that Pakistan to take decisive action against militant organizations operating from its soil."⁴⁰ Trump administration also called for an increased role for India in Afghanistan. In response to US policy, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, reiterated that "Pakistan cannot bring Afghan war into Pakistan."⁴¹ Pakistan has already cleared its areas indiscriminately and taken border security measures, including fencing.⁴² During a meeting with US Ambassador to Pakistan David Hale, General Bajwa also stated that "we are not looking for any material or financial assistance but trust, understanding, and acknowledgment of our contributions.... We have done a lot towards achieving peace in Afghanistan and shall keep on doing our best, not to appease anyone but in line with our national interest and national policy."⁴³

Post-9/11, international efforts in Afghanistan remained riveted on serving the US, and its coalition partners' interests mostly ignored regional sensitivities and ground realities. Pakistan had to manage its national security, and it led to a paradox, which instead of giving it a positive space in Afghan polity and people, created suspicion and distrust. Furthermore, despite massive and successful military efforts to stabilize Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, the reconciliation process remained suspicious. It was magnified due to US and Indian influence on the Afghan political and security establishment. Pakistan needs to have a fresh approach that can address mistrust and misperceptions. Few leaves from Laozi's tenets of statecraft can handle it through a softer and more balanced approach.

Despite being an ally and its enormous sacrifices in the war against terror, continuous attempts were made by the US to coerce Pakistan. It violated the sovereignty of Pakistan on many occasions.⁴⁴ Some critical incursions were the Osama Bin Laden raid in Abbottabad in May 2011 and the Salala Check Post attack on November 26, 2011, leading to the *shahadat* of 26 Pakistani soldiers, including an officer. Pakistan strongly reacted, and US-led coalition forces were denied ground supply routes to Afghanistan for over six months. The attack on Army Public School, Peshawar in December 2014, Bacha Khan University in Charsada in January 2016, and Balochistan Police Training College in Quetta in October 2016 were also planned in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Despite repeated Pakistani requests and detailed exchange of intelligence, the US and Afghanistan failed to bring perpetrators of all such attacks to justice. This mistrust and lack of cooperative relationship with the US and Afghan government continued with no end in sight.

The rapidly evolving environment witnessed a US peace deal signed with the Taliban in February 2020, which profoundly impacted the Afghan security landscape, but failed to make a successful headway. The decision to pull out US-led coalition forces from Afghanistan marked the completion of the second decade of the US longest war. The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and its security apparatus resulted in the occupation of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021. It was followed by a hectic evacuation of US and other diplomatic missions from Afghanistan coupled with the mass exodus of international aid agencies and some Afghans, reflecting the uncertainties ahead. These evolving situations may have serious repercussions, particularly for Pakistan, the region, and the whole world. No country globally has recognised the Taliban's government so far, and the evolving dynamics do not hold strong prospects for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Pakistan is back at the same crossroads where it was in the early 1990s; hence, the question remains, what should be done in terms of policy reorientation. Pakistan's strategic thinking seeks a friendly or the least neutral Afghanistan. It is likely to remain an unachievable policy end in the face of competing and conflicting interests of global and regional players coupled with internal dynamics of Afghanistan, especially the rentier nature of the Afghan state vis-à-vis the limited ability of Pakistan to mould behaviour of Afghanistan's domestic players. The Taliban, now in power, are likely to have a realist foreign policy outlook.

Pakistan's Afghan policy needs to exploit natural and social determinants and geography to build positivity and goodwill among Afghan people through trade and requisite support in other spheres of life. The overall construct of policy is needed to be moulded by getting lead from Laozi's tenets of statecraft where people are centric. It serves millions of Afghans who live along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by alleviating their miseries and supporting their basic needs through enhanced interdependence and massive facilitation in trade and other multiple spheres. Thus, it is a softer approach to an Afghan policy which is key to Laozi's strategic thinking. These guiding parameters were elusive in the past, and Pakistan focused on those instruments of policy, which could not shape a friendly Afghanistan and were beyond its power potential.

Application of Laozi's Philosophy on Pak-Afghan Relations

Rule the state with peace and inaction; governing the world by not troubling the people.⁴⁶
(Laozi)

Foreign policy analysis focuses on relations between different actors, primarily states in the international system. At the heart of the field is an investigation into the decision-making at various tiers, i.e., individual level, state level, and system level, involving processes and conditions that affect foreign policy choices. By this approach, foreign policy analysis is necessarily concerned with the boundaries between external and domestic environments. A study of Pakistan's Afghan policy applying Laozi's philosophy adds fresh thoughts to Pakistan's four-decades-old thinking on Afghanistan.

Moreover, the application of this philosophical perspective may assist in understanding some of the critical questions that why despite all the sacrifices made by Pakistan, including hosting millions of refugees, it could not develop friendly relations with Afghanistan. Why has there always been mistrust between the two states, and why the international community does not fully recognise Pakistan's efforts to facilitate peace in Afghanistan.

States engage in foreign policy behaviours, and the interaction between states in the international system yields outcomes.⁴⁷ Multiple levels of analysis are used corresponding to different foci of foreign policy; individuals make decisions, thus shaping the course of history because their choices and decisions derive the course of events. Their personalities and perceptions matter and how they make sense of the world.

Laozi's Philosophical Approach at Individual Level

Rou means softness; therefore, Laozi's approach to *Rou* can transform bilateral conflictual relationships positively, especially in the Pakistan-Afghanistan context. *Rou*, for its application, can be metaphorically associated with water, thus equating it with softness. Conceptually, it is strength through softness. Based on the concept of softness, a general understanding of statecraft can subdue the strong and stiff. Water tends to flow to low places following a natural course. Water gains strength as small tributaries and streams converge downstream and make a bigger whole, overcoming any resistance or obstacle. By adopting an approach of inclusiveness, leadership in both countries can create common grounds, equated with the concept (*Rou*) of strength through softness.

In the Pakistan-Afghanistan context, the leadership preferred the use of force, thus using strength against others' weakness (one ethnic group against the other – atrocities against Hazaras or Pashtuns versus Tajiks). Unbridled and violent use of non-state actors resulted in decades of fighting and bloodshed with no end in sight. Excessive use of force by strong ethnic communities against weak and marginalized elements has gradually created deep fragmentation in Afghan society. Thus, this phenomenon of using non-state actors (strength used against weakness) has proved fatal for Afghanistan and its people. With the Taliban's control of Afghanistan, this approach is still visible with the dominance of a single group. If used by the leadership, *Rou* (softness) as a foreign policy notion can create common grounds based on *Ziran* (naturalness) for laying the foundation of sustainable peace, which looks elusive even today.

Laozi's Philosophical Approach at State Level

This level of analysis explains how leaders are embedded in government institutions. It focuses on internal factors that compel a state to engage in specific foreign policy behaviour. Post-9/11, US clout, Indian factor, domestic violence, and economic weakness influenced Pakistan's Afghan policy. Moreover, safeguarding Kashmir's cause and preventing Pakistan from being declared as a terrorist state were

other significant preoccupations. Through a partially compliant Afghan policy, Pakistan managed its ties with the US avoiding its retribution, gaining legitimacy for President Musharraf's regime, and projecting itself as a responsible state.

From the perspective of Laozi, how could Pakistan have handled the Afghan challenge; he advocates that "the small state can gain the trust of large one by taking the lower position, the case being either the former or vice versa.... After all, the large state should be more willing to take the lower position."⁴⁸ At the state level, Laozi's thinking is different from the prevailing realist approach to zero-sum politics of balance of power and power maximization. *Rou* (softness), like the water metaphor, can be employed peacefully to manage state affairs. The state needs to be benevolent by extending support and facilitating in all possible domains. It is like water accumulating in a lower place. Water has enormous potential in unifying in quantity due to its fluidity and softness. Water in streams and rivers flowing through valleys stays lower than mountains. A powerful state is like water with an accumulating downstream flow. Laozi's philosophy indicates that harmonious policies and benevolence in interstate relations are more important than coerciveness. Thus, non-coercive and balanced state policies equate with strength through softness.

The concept of *Rou*, in the Pakistan-Afghanistan context, remained unattended. Historically, when Pakistan emerged on the global map in 1947, Afghanistan, a well-established state with historical, ethnic, and religious affinity and bondage, became the only country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the UN. After that, it supported the separatist movement in the Pashtun border areas of Pakistan. Mistrust grew with every passing decade. When in a position of strength, Pakistan supported certain factions of Afghanistan in fighting against the Soviet Army with the help of the US and Middle Eastern countries. It alienated large segments of Afghan society, which thought that Pakistan had taken sides with the US against Afghanistan. Both sides in their bilateral relations used different instruments and external support when they were in a position of strength, though either forced by evolving environment or as an opportunity, displaying a lack of long-term vision. Similarly, after 9/11, Pakistan supported the US onslaught, thus siding the strong against the weak contrary to Laozi's dictum. Where two countries stand today, mistrust and hatred deep inside people on both sides is an example of high-handed policies, thus contrary to Laozi's notion of *Rou*.

Laozi's Philosophical Approach at System Level

During the Cold War, the US and USSR developed their respective sphere of influence. Afghanistan was under Soviet influence, and Pakistan became an ally of the US and an active member of US security alliances. After the disintegration of the USSR, Pakistan remained under US influence, being the sole superpower. Pakistan's policy, after 1979, was mainly crafted with the priority of supporting US interests. Pakistan's post-9/11 Afghan policy was also marred with contradictions and continuous endeavours to remain relevant in an anti-Taliban international environment. Thus, Pakistan's Afghan policy generally remained anchored around the US despite detrimental to its

national interest. From the perspective of world politics, realism is a dominant theory of the international system. It provides a powerful explanation for the state of war, a common condition of life in the international system.⁴⁹ Globalization and other global trends are challenging the Westphalian state system, but power struggle remains a constant of international politics; thus, states tend to maximize their power due to prevalent anarchy. Faced by challenges of geography and unsettled disputes in the regional context, Pakistan was forced due to its external challenges to align itself with the US during a bipolar and unipolar world and had to pay a heavy price. Its current challenges, including Afghanistan and terrorism, are a by-product of its legacy and the international system.

The Chinese concept of *Tianxia* (天下) encapsulates a world theory, 'all under the heaven.' Laozi's idea of *Dao* coupled with *Tianxia* gives it a wholesome meaning. Chinese political philosophy focuses on turning an enemy into a friend,⁵⁰ thus losing the sense of enemy, leading to conflict transformation. Laozi concludes that "a king could rule a state by his orders, win a war by strategies, but let enjoy 'all under heaven' by doing nothing to decrease the freedom and to deny the interest of people."⁵¹ Moreover, Chinese political philosophy defines a political order in which the world (peace) is primary, whereas the state (conflictual relationship in a lawless world) is primary in western philosophy.⁵² All under the heaven concept, with Laozi's *Dao* (the Way) as pivotal to it, is focused on creating a unified system based on peaceful world order. This serene view of the world is much loftier than the Westphalian system in which conflict and war are inherent. The current international theory is based on the state system, where states struggle for power as a zero-sum game having divergence of interest, keep aligning and realigning themselves. Thus, peace remains elusive for mankind. Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship is a classic example of these ongoing conflictual relations amongst states, therefore, need re-thinking.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has consistently been one of Pakistan's most complex foreign policy challenges. There are no run-of-the-mill and straightforward solutions. Geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security challenges emanating from Afghanistan can only be mitigated through a wholesome, softer, and benevolent approach, unlike viewing everything from a single prism as per the legacy. On the geopolitical ground, management of international and domestic perceptions about Pakistan's positive role for peace, stability, and reconciliation without playing favourites is closer to Laozi's concept of *Dao* (the Way), *Rou* (softness), and *Ziran* (naturalness). It is heartening to see that Pakistan's current approach supports an all-inclusive Afghan government in line with international norms. Our focus should be on a friendly and peaceful Afghanistan, supported in socio-economic domains. Cultivating people-to-people contact through multiple and institutionalised channels should have a pivotal place. Linking both states and society through institutional means can lead to sustainable peace for the region.

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