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Rethinking Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: A Post-Structuralist Approach

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the "liberal peace" paradigm and its associated peacebuilding methodological approach, identifying significant roadblocks arising from its epistemological and ontological foundations and institutional hegemony. The failures of the "liberal peace project" in conflict-affected societies have raised doubts about its validity and reliability as a transformative approach. Despite claims of compatibility with local cultural, social, and religious sensitivities, the implementation of top-down theoretical frameworks has often lacked genuine emancipation, yielding disparate outcomes. Surprisingly, there has been limited effort to deconstruct the entire "liberal peace" paradigm. This paper does not propose alternative peacebuilding approaches; instead, it aims to stimulate critical reflections to foster the emergence of alternative discourses. Focusing on Afghanistan as a case study, the analysis employs post-structuralism to deconstruct the theoretical underpinnings of the "liberal peace" order and to examine the U.S. peacebuilding framework in Afghanistan. By doing so, it reveals the intricacies of the "liberal peace" approach and identifies potential areas for improvement and reformulation.*

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Liberalism, Post-Structuralism, Emancipation, Deconstruction

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Introduction

The liberal philosophical approach re-identified and altered the structure of the world order after the end of the Cold War. The post-Cold War period witnessed the rise and advancement of liberal democracy in conflict-ridden societies and gained phenomenal salience. Various scholars[1] support the claims while referring to Immanuel Kant's ideas in "perpetual peace," which implies that liberal democratic states are more peaceful and less prone to violence. This normative utility is supported by liberal internationalists[2] who believed in the universality of liberalism, and neo-liberal global order and institution building thereupon.[3] It was further iterated that some central tenets are compulsory and fundamental for exporting the currency of liberalism.[4] The pronouncement of liberalism as the principal approach to peacebuilding was envisaged in neo-liberal macro-economic strategies that were mapped out in the processes of democratization, market reforms, human rights, and peace settlements.[5] Originally, it was believed that the expansion of Western liberal ideas into conflict-stricken and dysfunctional societies would resolve a wide range of economic, political, and social problems. However, the resultant scenarios have revealed the discordance of liberal internationalism or liberal intervention in societies such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

However, the critical question this study will attempt to unravel is the unquestionable dominance of liberal peacebuilding on conflict-stricken societies, using the theoretical foundation of post-structuralist emancipation vis-a-vis the examples from Afghanistan. Through this critical inquiry, we seek to deepen our understanding of the impact, strengths, and limitations of liberal peacebuilding. This study will critique the liberal order or liberal governance as an approach to peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. It will mainly focus on Afghanistan, where the genealogy, religious culture, and history are all different from the West, thus, opening a reflective debate on the problems caused by liberal interventions or internationalization of the liberal order. In the first section, the critique of current liberal peacebuilding will be carried out by highlighting its dilemmas, shortcomings, and contradictions. The second section examines the philosophical interpretation of the post-structural influences on peacebuilding where certain meta-narratives were produced and reproduced without questioning the futility of the top-down approach of liberal peace projects. In the third section, failures of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm in Afghanistan will be reflected by critically questioning 20 years of liberal peacebuilding exercises, followed by the conclusion.

The concept of liberal peacebuilding has emerged as a prevailing norm in international interventions, as evidenced by its inclusion in the United Nations' Agenda for Peace.[6] This approach to peace is diverse in its manifestations, including constitutional peace, which draws inspiration from Kantian

arguments promoting democratic norms, justice, women's rights, and minority rights. The civil peace variant involves the direct implementation of liberal principles through citizen advocacy and mobilization to safeguard fundamental human rights and values.[7] Both variants collaborate with influential individuals within and outside the state to achieve their goals.[8] The post-Cold War era marked a shift toward liberal internationalism and the liberal peacebuilding project. Liberal philosophy sought to define the nature and character of the world order, with the United States assuming a hegemonic role that favored a select group of developed states.[9] This international power configuration spurred hope for achieving Kantian peace, particularly as international institutions extended their reach. As a result, states and non-state actors such as donor states, military establishments, multilateral institutions, and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) embraced the liberal models of political, economic, and social transformation as essential tools for conflict resolution in the Global South.

The post-Cold War era marked a shift toward liberal internationalism and the liberal peacebuilding project

Moreover, the liberal order has been briefly challenged by violent non-state actors such as ISIS, which challenged the construction of liberal democracies in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.[10] During the post-Cold War era, the repetitive invasions of Iraq epitomized American hegemonic projections of "foreign democracy at gunpoint" aiming to install neoliberal democracy through peacebuilding.[11] Iraq has been characterized as a project of liberal peacebuilding ideas of "Westernization and securitization of peace" as part of Western democracy promotion and military interventionism.[12]

Furthermore, the liberal order is undergoing internal crises, as Amitav Acharya argues that U.S. President Trump's policies during his first presidency, the rise of neo-fascist and other far-right parties in Europe, and Brexit have led to a reality that challenges the liberal order from within.[13] However, the greatest setback to the liberal order in the post-conflict societies was excluding the people's perspectives. For example, the absence of locals' inclusion in the peacebuilding in post-conflict Afghanistan and Iraq was detrimental to the liberal cause; however, the worst part of the campaign was the recognition of the interests of the warlords or the interest of elites, and the reformulation of the politics based on sectarian lines. These liberal projects lasted for two decades, involving comprehensive international participation. They failed to develop a rapport between the Afghan people and its institutions, leaving a trail of questions and puzzles. In this paper, the debate will rest upon unraveling the theoretical foundation of the liberal project followed by drawing links with its applicability and relevance in Afghanistan.

Epistemology of Peacebuilding

Understanding the epistemological underpinnings of peacebuilding is of paramount importance within the framework of liberal philosophy and theory. Peacebuilding, as a concept, lacks a universal meaning, definition, or conceptualization. It is often understood as a series of events and actions undertaken amid conflict, aimed at not only addressing immediate crises but also fostering lasting peace by providing resources and creating the conditions for comprehensive restructuring.[14] Johan Galtung has further clarified the concept of peacebuilding, distinguishing it from peacemaking and peacekeeping in his work.[15] This paper also seeks to explore the epistemological foundations of peacebuilding within the context of liberal philosophy. By analyzing the varied interpretations and conceptualizations of peacebuilding, we aim to shed light on the complexities and nuances surrounding this crucial aspect of conflict resolution. Our analysis will provide a critical examination of how the liberal perspective shapes the understanding and implementation of peacebuilding efforts. By delving into these epistemological dimensions, we hope to contribute to a deeper comprehension of peacebuilding strategies and their potential implications for conflict-affected societies.

Peacebuilding is generally understood and viewed as a transformative event in society, which signifies the conversion and shifting of conflict or war from "negative peace" toward organic or "positive peace." Negative peace generally refers simply to ending the violent conflict; whereas, positive peace sought after via peacebuilding is inclusive and durable because it involves not only the termination of the direct violence but also an end to structural and cultural violence.[16] Lastly, positive peace signifies that such conducive structures and cultural practices should be embedded in a pattern of conflict transformation so common members of the society feel empowered to use their full potential. Moreover, Lederach's vision of peacebuilding stands as a long-term progression of systemic transformation from war to peace. The key variables in the process are more vicissitudes in the structural, cultural, personal, and relational features of conflict, transcending different timelines and unsettling and upsetting different system levels.[17] In other words, the concept of peacebuilding signifies the essence of conflict prevention or resolution realized by a number of actors such as externally driven intervention by the the UN, IGOs, NGOs, or local actors. On a community level, peacebuilding essentially epitomizes sustainable peace that is not just the absence of violence but rather leads to the structural transformation of a conflictual society.[18]

Peacebuilding is also understood as possessing a dynamic interplay with conflict; it has this intrinsic role to play at various phases and stages of conflict, such as pre-conflict, mid-conflict, or post-conflict situations. The United Nations describes the process as actions that identify and strengthen structures

to fortify and nurture peace to elude the process of returning to conflict. Peacebuilding involves double articulation in terms of achieving dissimilar but concurrently complementary goals: Firstly, preventing the recommencement of conflicts; secondly, the more productive task of knowing and resolving the fundamental causes of the conflict.[19] This articulation closely follows Johan Galtung's theoretical proposal on peace and violence discussed above that promotes a maximalist agenda for positive peace rather than negative peace –that is the end of direct violence.[20] Positive peace is maintained on a consensual basis and a shared understanding of harmony and mutual co-existence.[21] On the contrary, negative peace implies the absence of direct violence, or large-scale collective violence, though with remaining friction and tension within the communities.[22] Along the same line, the UN Peacebuilding Support Office explains that peacebuilding can be epitomized as an instrument of preventing hostilities by mitigating the intensity of the conflict and that peacebuilding and peacekeeping are inseparable entities.[23] The fundamental concept is that peacebuilding would need a conducive environment where it could move on from negative peace to positive peace, between stabilization to development leading to consolidation of peace in its organic sense.

Post-structuralism attempts to reduce the effects of illiberalism, which is an integral part of a liberal-realist conception of the Leviathan, or the determinism of structures that express hegemonic tendencies such as democratization, human rights, and women's inclusiveness

In the same vein, another concept that warrants application in some complex cases is religious peacebuilding. When discussing religious peacebuilding, it is important first to unpack the concept of religion to understand what resources religion might contribute to peacebuilding. Bruce Lincoln states that religion involves a community whose members construct their identity concerning a religious discourse and its attendant practices. Religious organizations and actors make an important difference in building peace to bridge the social capital,[24] or social bonds that span group divisions in situations of conflict.

Influence of Post-Structuralism on Peacebuilding

Post-structuralism includes powerful criticism of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. This critique rests upon the foundation of liberal imperialism that serves the interests of the elites by offering desired meta-narratives.[25] Post-structuralism attempts to reduce the effects of illiberalism, which is an integral part of a liberal-realist conception of the Leviathan, or the determin-

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ism of structures that express hegemonic tendencies such as democratization, human rights, and women's inclusiveness. Michel Foucault argues that illegitimate knowledge is offered in contrast to offset the effect of "true knowledge," which effectively expurgates additional options while constructing objective claims.[26] Foucault's central focus of the research was to ascertain the relationship between knowledge and power; where the dominating actors mask their ascendency through the development of discourses that are inspired by the liberal and Western value systems.[27]

However, the existing literature by a broad range of post-structural theorists often overlooks a crucial aspect: how to further explore the conception of emancipation, enabling people to empower themselves and promote peacebuilding. When delving into the contours of the post-hegemonic emancipatory paradigm, it becomes imperative to comprehend the concept of emancipation and its various interpretations. Moreover, we must consider who will define the motivation, predominant logic, and the multi-lateral application of such reasoning, and how this process will affect different individuals and groups. This raises the important question: Who will be the agent of emancipation and who will be the recipient? One of the most challenging issues with emancipation lies in the discriminatory and subjective nature of its epistemology. It is susceptible to being influenced by the social construction of identity, leading to diverse interpretations based on historical and cultural interactions, experiences, norms, and binary perspectives, particularly concerning the distinctions between the East and West.[28]

The orthodox notion of power, according to Foucault, was associated with the executive, who was assumed to issue uncompromising instructions and commands that controlled and ruled territories in line with the authoritarian dictates of the sovereign.[29] Post-structuralism fiercely questions the intransigent application of neo-liberal order onto territories where military interventions produced flat-pack peace made from standard components. Even the UN's narrative claims to conceive the mission of peacebuilding in terms of giving voices to the unheard and guaranteeing their full participation; thus, many classify the liberal narrative as mere rhetoric due to its absolute top-down approach.[30] Post-structuralism raises certain questions: Is there any scope for enhanced understanding beyond the critical view of an emancipatory peace, given the problematic nature of the epistemology, ontology, and methodology that mark the existing order of peace? Due to its structure that rejects the meta-narratives offering universal truths, it allows the possibility to challenge the common understanding of peace.

Though Foucault had not carried out research in peacebuilding, his studies found relevance and application to the existing discourses of peacebuilding. Traditionally, where peacebuilding is directed toward not only discovering the underlying conditions leading to war but also determining a course for lasting peace, Foucault's work aims to take on a relentless effort to unsettle the orthodox manner of governance that is the embodiment of linear methodology and the exhausted pattern. Rather he identifies broadening the possibilities for new methods of governance that are efficient and swift. However, the purpose of this analysis is not to propose an alternative form of governance but to open the possibility of alternative discourse to the liberal order that has been projected as the premium post-conflict political and social order. It doesn't mean to imply that humanitarian assistance by the international community should be stopped, but imprints of foreign occupation must be reduced by generating more local empowerment and self-governance. Though that kind of governance may be fragile, it is organic and durable, having the legitimacy and room for enormous improvements. Reconceptualization of such an approach is inevitable to abolish the tedious application of power by deconstruction to have an imperfect but indigenous element for any inclusive effort. Poststructuralism develops the kind of criticism of liberal order that is grounded more in the ideological foundation. It aims to interrogate the connection between power, knowledge, and its expression by investigating and exploring the logocentrism that is hidden in the rationalist and universalist domains. It equally inquires about the fundamental construction of binaries that generate the outcomes of inclusion and exclusion.[31] The liberal theory continues to construct the key binaries of self/other, inside/outside, barbarian/civilized, and universal/local, upon which it builds a hegemonic order as demanded by the Western liberal model.

Poststructuralists challenge the prevalence of such an approach of exercising the government where there is little patience and stamina for undertaking a long and sustained mission of transforming societies. Rajeev Patel and Philip McMichael argue that neoliberalism's incapacity led to the emergence of fascism, where the capitalist state disciplined the resistance of civil society.[32] The exploitation certainly becomes obvious when the victims are visible: In other words, peace is disrupted by the presence of the victims of hidden or unrecognizable power centers such as conflict, climate geography, impoverishment, and underdevelopment.[33]

Philosophically, poststructuralism signifies a different kind of emancipation based on hegemony and domination, as well as phonocentrism, logocentrism, teleological progress, and universal claims.[34] This offers delicate emancipation, emphasizing the politics of resistance, solidarity, and indigenous movements for the rights and self-determination that lead to quality peace. But as discussed, critical social movements operate and advance in new are-

nas with distinct qualities that can make it difficult to detect the rise and advancement of nonviolent social movements that could challenge the liberal peacebuilding order. However, the pre- and post-conflict theaters are riddled with the influences of violent actors. As a result, considering the penchant of the international community to engage the powerful warlords, it is highly unlikely that the non-violent social movements would be able to successfully challenge the peacebuilding order being set by international and local elites. In societies armed to the teeth by a host of state and other non-state actors such as Afghanistan, there is meager space for emancipatory movements[35] unless the great powers or the neo-liberal institutions alter their hegemonic interventions.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri perceive the international, civil society-oriented, and post-structural movements as organizing resistance to liberate and emancipate in the international system.[36] Yet again, the rise of such civil society movements is sabotaged and hijacked by great powers for strategic reasons and favorable outcomes. Technically, the mobilization of civil society and other civic rights movements are supported by poststructuralist thinkers. The rise of such movements in countries that carry the status of "National Security States" thereby claim to have been surrounded by existential enemies and arch foes, perceiving even the nonviolent social movements as a threat to the state's integrity and internal cohesion. External hostile states support such movements as an opportunity to weaken the intended state along the lines of ethnicities and nationalities. The support or intervention of imperial forces usually harms the legitimacy of the civil rights movements that seek emancipation.

Poststructuralists agree and even reiterate that the liberal peace project has caused a deep disconnect between the peoples' demands and the goals and intentions of peacebuilders. Roger Mac Ginty argues liberal peace effectively reduces the social space for local and traditional peacebuilding.[37] For example, traditional peacebuilding institutions and networks that existed for centuries in Afghanistan were severely weakened by coercive, hegemonic liberal interventions. Such institutions and frameworks were devalued in the dispute resolution mechanism and were also severely undermined by the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT); therefore, they have not been mobilized effectively by the liberal peacebuilders, which in turn caused severe dissonance between the needs of the people and the intentions of the peacebuilders. David Chandler went further in his criticism by claiming that the entire exercise of interventions can be seen as more comparable to a kind of colonialism than to any unpretentious peacebuilding operations.[38] Similarly, Roland Paris argued that it would be naïve to assume the character of such interventions was peacebuilding.[39] On the contrary, these operations could be defined more precisely as invasions and occupations. Along the same line, the basic control of social life is denied to the locals because of their inability to comprehend the techni-

calities related to peacebuilding processes and structures.[40] Vivienne Jabri describes this as a "post-colonial" rationality,[41] in which the local is incorporated through a superficial and cosmetic lens.

The various components of social life in modernity are largely operated and recognized through the knowledge produced by Western liberal thinkers, and that is rarely contested by indigenous thinkers

The orthodox epistemology and ontology of liberal, hybrid, and emancipatory peace have lost their appeal and thus there are now calls for a new pattern of emancipation that would allow for redefining the relationship between international and local elements. It raises the question of how one knows that one is emancipated and how one can claim to accurately read the minds of others. Furthermore, who would carry the privilege of unquestionable control and facilitating authority that orthodox approaches claim in the emancipation process? This leads to another very important aspect of poststructuralism, and that is a deconstructive and genealogical, approach; that claims to support and navigate around traditional cartographies planned to obstruct interpretation by substituting an "Archimedean point."[42] This is used to examine and fiercely criticize discourses or texts that present common, universal, structural, and stable connotations through oppositional concepts. Derrida argues that social structures, processes, or institutions always want new reconceptualization and re-thinking from a new position and perspective so that the interpretation is not confined to old ways.[43] Here the purpose is not to reject the existing scholarship on liberal peace but since it has suffered serious setbacks in multiple cultural and social settings in different countries, there is a need for a new perspective that may not be perfect but may lay the foundation for new thinking.

Deconstruction of Liberal Meta Narratives

Foucauldian research observes the contradiction in the transition from direct rule to an engagement based on partnership, which resembles an attempt to masquerade the oppressive cycle with the rhetoric of emancipation and "local ownership" in the form of liberal governmentality.[44] Deconstructing the Western sense of governmentality shaped by the meta-narratives of liberalism is something that needs to be unraveled. Deconstruction is about untying the discursive parameters that border certain narratives to identify and understand the conditions that propelled the emergence and rise of such narratives and their further attainment of hegemonic position. The reproduction of existing knowledge about liberalism must be presented through the multilateral process involving the international and local theaters. The various components of social life in modernity are largely operated and recognized through the

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knowledge produced by Western liberal thinkers, and that is rarely contested by indigenous thinkers. For example, the international and local actors' effort of producing and constructing knowledge in the form of the 2004 constitution of Afghanistan, which caused problematic power relations among the Pashtuns, non-Pashtuns, and Taliban, was hardly challenged, or critically debated by Afghans themselves. The unskilled demarcation of such relations among various political actors within the system precluded the possibility of sharing power with the Taliban, primarily because of the inadaptability of the liberal order to adjust to the local conditions by sharing power and political accommodation.

The construction of the binaries Derrida mentions in the aforementioned section, such as international and local, further cripples the possibility of effective governmentality.[45] Thus, language, symbolism, and other forms of illustration fall into suspicion due to elites and structures' tendency to camouflage their dominance and interests, thereby using peace as a vehicle that exerts bio-political control over its subjects. Deconstruction allows liberal peacebuilding to be analyzed as a text, paving the way for a more reflective and critical examination of its significance, meaning, and the difficulties triggered by binary oppositions and the logocentrism that emerge from liberal epistemologies. These binaries are historically and culturally explained in line with the thinking of poststructuralist scholars, who identify such declarations of fixed meaning as camouflaging privileged meaning, self-interest, and violent hierarchies.[46] Deconstruction implies the unraveling of stable conceptions contingent upon the oppositional sides of these formations.[47] In a nutshell, deconstruction proposes that the various actors involved in peacebuilding exercises or structures have to offer new meanings after careful and critical examination. Meanings are not standalone entity hidden in words, but are mostly crafted and manifested by the elite structures. Thus, any belief, thought, concept, or idea that carries some pervasive and consistent meaning relying upon binary relationships is liable to be interrogated. Similarly, a peacebuilding process established on the differences of binary identification such as international, national and local, and local beneath the local,[48] is apt to be reviewed and questioned. In the same vien,, certain conceptual oppositions of the binary characters, patterns, or actors cause differences that lead to social segregation, inequality, and otherness. The interventions by great powers split territories not only geographically but also ideologically, culturally, and politically. Thenceforth, the social segregation lead to creation of fixed identities and classes in society such as ethnic,



Tashkent hosted the "Afghanistan: Security and Economic Development" conference attended by representatives from multiple countries, international organizations, and financial institutions, on July 26, 2022.

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linguistic and religious divisions. As a result, the projected categorization generates the conceptual oppositions that poststructuralism aims to unravel and untie through deconstruction. Deconstruction, in this logic, is a process to not only critically review the structure of the relations between the binary oppositions but more importantly, the discourses that are the driving force of such intense positions. The meta-narrative of greater emancipation would only become a foundation of reality if the shift toward the indigenous populations is conceptualized. An argument is usually presented that these individuals are unqualified to understand the epistemology and ontology of emancipation due to a number of obstructions such as illiteracy, social status, or the cumbersome bureaucratic UN procedures. To have greater emancipation, the local or the true local residing in everyday life deserve more accommodation, privileges, and meaningful representation in policymaking. For example, Afghanistan has experienced 20 years of U.S. liberal intervention but, certainly, the locals were discounted and precluded from participation in the growth of the liberal order and its various manifestations.

Ontology of Liberal Peacebuilding in Afghanistan

The liberal peacebuilding project in Afghanistan spanned over two decades. However, with the U.S. withdrawal, the pillars of liberal peacebuilding projects such as democracy, maintenance of human rights, women's inclusion, and neo-liberal economic structure have withered away. The post-U.S. intervention,

peacebuilding, and reconstruction in Afghanistan brought some positive outcomes like an increase in literacy rate, a lower child mortality rate, an increase in per capita GDP, structuring Parliament and government institutions, a vibrant civil society, and creating and maintaining the national security forces, etc. with the overall U.S. sponsored investment of over $145 billion in 20 years.[49] In total, around $2 trillion was spent on U.S. and NATO militaries, NGOs, and allied expenditures. But despite such an exhaustive attempt to sustain a liberal peacebuilding order, with its fascinating themes such as democracy and liberal values of free speech, human rights, women's rights, and strong civil society, the meta-narrative of the liberal idea did not resonate with the larger section of the population. The problem is that the orthodox neo-liberal institutions, regulations, and liberal discourses were imposed with very illiberal methodology with hegemonic oversight, leaving little room for questions or critique, effectively precluding the possibility of an adaptation to Afghans' way of life.

After the Taliban 1.0 (first Taliban government from 1996 to 2001) were ousted and liberal structures were established in the post-9/11 era, the security structures and institutions claimed the maximum chunk of aid and resources. This left little funding for creating knowledge corridors on the macro and micro levels about the importance of liberal institutions, thus leading to the erosion of those liberal institutions and governance structures. Furthermore, the inability to allocate the needed financing resulted in ineffective planning and an ill-fated strategy for the peacebuilding operations. In 2002, the UN, the World Bank, and the European Union forecasted the estimated reconstruction cost in Afghanistan for the first five years as $9-$12 billion, while the Afghan government estimated the reconstruction grant for the first decade needed to be $22 billion to recover from the Soviet invasion and the resultant civil wars.[50] The World Bank estimated the reconstruction cost of damages from 1978-2001 was $240 billion.[51] In the Tokyo conference, the amount promised by donors reached $4.5 billion with $1.8 billion for the first year, but these promises were not kept and the year 2002 saw a deficit of $600 million.[52] Douglas Lute argues that "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan. We didn't know what we were doing. We're going to do something in Afghanistan with $10 billion. Haiti is a small country in our own backyard with no extremist insurgency and we cannot develop it."[53] Therefore, the obvious inability to understand the nature of the mission, misplaced goals and objectives, and the dominant role of the military added to the burgeoning costs of the NGOs and IGOs.

As for political settlements and reconciliation in peace-building missions, Jan Selby adds that these have been largely focused on establishing disciplinary and coercive control over the population at the expense of promoting genuine liberal values and institutions.[54] There are instances where the a level of doctrinal disagreement. An example of this was the U.S. military imposing a doctrine in contrast with the civilian peacebuilding initiatives. Thus via the military pres-

ence in the rural heartland of Afghanistan, it operationalized the principles of military doctrine in the process of distorting the so-called "liberal image" and resultantly took on an absolute and hegemonic character. Khan argues, "The U.S. military's confidential assessments of more than 1,300 reports of civilian casualties, obtained by *The New York Times* –lays bare how the air war has been marked by deeply flawed intelligence."[55] The massive civilian casualties severely undermined the good intentions of the liberal peacebuilders. The provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) were created to make a combined team of military and civilians. However, they were dominated by the military with symbolic inclusion of civilian members of USAID or the State Department, depriving them of any decision-making process vis-à-vis the development of rural Afghanistan. Moreover, the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement has been perceived as an act of prioritizing the geo-strategic compulsions over the ideal of liberal peacebuilding, indicating that the sustainability and significance of the liberal institutions can be overlooked as long as the strategic interests are served. There has been a lack of collaboration in the U.S. strategic framework, and various departments and organizations lack coordination. For example, the State Department and the Pentagon were mapping out incoherent and disjointed strategies for common objectives. The Obama surge campaign also serves as a prime example of a disastrous outcome resulting from a lack of collaboration between U.S. generals (such as Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus) and their civilian counterparts in the State Department and U.S. administration. They failed to agree on crucial issues, including the required number of troops for counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, drawdown plans, and developmental schemes. This failure to establish a common and unified strategy was evident to then-Vice President Joe Biden in 2009, who remarked, "If you ask 10 of our people what we're trying to accomplish here, you get 10 different answers. This has been on autopilot."[56] The absence of cohesive strategic and operational directions, along with a preference for military interests over liberal ideals, and an overemphasis on security concerns instead of economic and liberal governance undermined the nascent liberal institutions and practices during this period.

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The shift toward the indigenous population to make decisions for their community certainly led to some degree of emancipation, but the U.S. chose to solidify the warlords' network instead of democratic institutions and civil society. War-

The complexity of Afghanistan's cultural and historical background requires a more nuanced and context-specific approach to peacebuilding strategies, operations, and institutional development

lords were not only made part of the governance structure but put in charge of the security sector, which helped to consolidate their hold on power. The U.S. did not include the indigenous nonviolent actors in the reconstruction and peacebuilding process. In fact, at times the Afghan political government was bypassed as the strategic reconciliation process was initiated. Afghan President Hamid Karzai once complained that the international community is running a parallel government in Afghanistan and does not include the Afghan government in important decision-making processes.[57] According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the U.S. started building hospitals in Afghanistan a year before they informed the Health Ministry of Afghanistan.[58] Karzai, despite having a nonviolent history, was gradually demonized for being too weak to take on the Taliban and was heavily criticized for not becoming an effective pillar of U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan.

In the presence of a plethora of donor agencies, states, IGOs, NGOs, the EU, USAID, NATO, and other organizations poured humanitarian aid for fixated projects but not for the Afghan liberal reconstruction efforts. Humanitarian aid can help temporarily but the reconstruction effort and state-building program bring long-term results. SIGAR is discussed as "the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan could be described as 20 one-year reconstruction efforts, rather than one 20-year effort."[59] As discussed above, little funding was allocated for spending on reconstruction, and more was spent on warfighting and humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid helped progress in the areas of health, education, and women's rights but it did not help to avoid social frustration, strengthen state authority, and stop the resurgence of the Taliban after 2003.[60] Therefore, instead of addressing the structural shortcomings, contradictions, and deeply rooted problems, most of the funding was spent on infusing artificial support to keep the economic and political structures afloat. Besides, CIA interventions and influence on the reconstruction projects in the initial phases also proved to be a limit. Ambassador Peter Thomsen warned the Congress Committee about the over-influence of the CIA, saying: "CIA responsibility is to implement policies not to make policies. The CIA managed a $1 billion fund for operations in the field, through which channeled money, supplies, food, and other means of support to Afghan warlords."[61]

Though, in the Bonn conference it was pledged that only true democracy would govern the future of Afghanistan, the same warlords who wrecked Afghanistan amid the civil war mayhem in the '1990s were made part of the alliance.[62] Sev-

eral tribal chiefs such as Ismail Khan, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Mohammad Akhunzada, Atta Noor, and Agha Shirazi became ministers and governors. The CIA and the U.S. military were instrumental in crafting that strategic framework. This led many to question if the military and CIA could carry out both warfighting and state-building in a place at the same time.

Additionally, in Afghanistan, the Taliban see the terms "peace" and "peacebuilding" as militarily and politically loaded.[63] They see this liberal peacebuilding doctrine and practice as colonial constructs and perceive these as Western attempts at de-culturization and de-Islamization of Afghan society. In such a scenario, the traditional peacebuilding neo-liberal institutions would find it hard to make exceptional or meaningful progress. As Hassan Abbas also argues, there is no alternative but to engage with the Taliban as they are a current reality; therefore, there must be a mutually accommodative arrangement of modernity and tradition that can go along in achieving some degree of peace for the ordinary Afghans. The fragility of the Afghan government, democracy, and economy became evident after the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban takeover. Human rights were violated, and women's education was banned. The country lacks the basic democracy and inclusivity of all the factions of society, including different political parties and civil society. The health services have deteriorated. This outcome is significantly due to artificial reconstruction, state-building, and peace-building projects in Afghanistan that left the locals beneath the warlords and were never encouraged to take ownership of the liberal institutions that the U.S. and NATO structured. It was an externally imposed and top-down approach to bringing change, whose most positive effects were also brushed aside as an act of hegemonic interventions.[64] The imposed institutional developments and artificial sustenance do more damage than good as once the outside force leaves the structure falls.

Poststructuralism challenges the dominance of totalizing universal knowledge by exploring local, disqualified, and abandoned knowledge. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of serious efforts to understand the governance needed specifically for Afghanistan, particularly the marginalized and historically overlooked perspectives. The contemporary and universal structure of democracy was foreign to the rural heartland, which, being a religious and tribal society, remained skeptical of democratic ideals, partly influenced by Taliban propaganda. A potential path to effective peacebuilding could have emerged by synthesizing modernity and tradition, or democracy and theocracy, catering to the unique cultural context of Afghanistan. However, this local, disqualified, and scholarly knowledge was sidelined, and the focus solely revolved around imposing a universal notion of democracy. This approach failed to consider that such a system might be incompatible with a country enduring 40 years of war and violence, particularly one with a deeply ingrained religious and cultural structure. It's essential to recognize that Western societies themselves

took centuries of continuous reformation to accommodate their present form of democracy. The complexity of Afghanistan's cultural and historical background requires a more nuanced and context-specific approach to peacebuilding strategies, operations, and institutional development.

Several findings will be discussed in the conclusion section, however, predominantly, the history, culture, geography, and values of Afghanistan are reproduced in Anglophone discourse in a way that prevented the introduction of a constructive and durable peacebuilding process. The U.S. political fraternity involved in the decision-making process of intervention in Afghanistan places the whole blame for liberal project failure upon Afghans' disinclination to preserve and maintain the democratic institutions and the political legacy.[65] The U.S. was trying to rebuild Afghanistan and at the same time discursively represented Afghans as backward, traditional, veiled, barbaric, and terrorists. Washington attributed it as a space of disease and pathology, which certainly did not help in reconstruction and liberal mainstreaming.[66] The U.S. government, its functionaries, aid institutions, the EU, donor countries, neo-liberal institutions such as the UN and other humanitarian IGO or NGOs, and all those who were and are involved in "project" Afghanistan were obdurate on "peace" and "reforms" within their own conception and liberal construction. Thus, this Eurocentric gaze and methodology of sustainable peace was not durable and didn't lead to emancipation. According to poststructuralism, this is a clear reflection of disciplinary emancipation and was driven by the top-down approach. Besides, these inherent contradictions of the liberal peace paradigm have been acknowledged to some extent by the mainstream academy and distinguished scholars. However, this analysis paid more detailed and comprehensive attention to the subject. These theoretical assumptions led to the realization that there should be alternatives to the liberal peacebuilding project in the form of more indigenous thinking in post-conflict societies.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, the presence of foreign forces and their liberal hegemonic structures inspired dissonance and hatred within the population toward the liberal system of governance. Furthermore, Western countries' lack of commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction and excessive reliance on warlords and tribal chieftains, coupled with the disregard for local ownership and customary governance structures, led to the development of a corrupt and dysfunctional Afghan regime. Furthermore, the ineffectiveness and allegedly corrupt practices of Afghan leaders and former Presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani and their ministers contributed to the failure of liberal ideals, democratic institutions, and locals' participation in the decision-making process. Besides, Anglo-American and Eurocentric discourses of standardizing and categorizing

Afghans as "others" who possess a uniform and rigid identity as someone who is very "different" than "us" actually created unbridgeable differences with Afghans. Thus, there is a need to reform the discourse to make liberal ideals adaptable because the whole premise of liberal order has been experimented with and falsified by the conceptual distinctions of its creators and thinkers, such as Fukuyama.[67] It would be necessary to have bottom-up peacebuilding by accommodating the indigenous form of triangulation of various elements such as *Pashtunwali,*[68] theocracy, and democracy. Exhaustive failed liberal peace efforts have elucidated and enunciated the need for an alternative discursive model of governance because the Taliban government is a reality and has to be accepted with accommodation so that peace is established in South and Central Asia.

The restoration of the broken relations could only take place if the peacebuilding is led by native thought (be it religious) but not by the outside intervening forces

Nonetheless, a liberal system of governance is still the most dominant, viable, and authentic system not only in the Global South but North as well. The Taliban must retain the grassroots democratic institutions being created by U.S. and international forces with subtle modifications. Moreover, to establish a suitable bridge between the local and international actors, the Afghan Taliban should keep some heritage of liberal institutions the U.S. forces left behind, such as district and village councils provincial reconstruction teams, etc. It would lead to peace at local, national, and international. This pattern of decentralization would increase inclusion and local engagement in provinces such as Shia communities (*Hazaras*) in the Mazar-e-Sharif and Tajiks in the north (the second largest ethnic group) as well as many others. Moreover, the decentralization in the form of inclusion signifies and exemplifies the synthesis of liberal and Afghan traditional values of tribal egalitarianism. The production of knowledge about liberal peacebuilding should involve a multilateral process by engaging the locals through continuous dialogue without resorting to military intervention. This dissemination of true knowledge about liberal democracy would balance power relations among various social agents within the Afghan governance structure, such as warlords, tribal elites, civil society, teachers, and media.

Moreover, another significant finding of the paper is that Afghanistan has traditionally experienced and witnessed all kinds of governance structures such as tribal, monarchy, kingship, egalitarianism, and presently the Taliban's theological, embedded authoritarianism. Until the present setup, all other governance structures failed and led to foreign military interventions on one pretext or another. Therefore, given the centuries-old religious predispositions in Afghanistan, there could be a possibility of a real connection among communities in the framework of religious peacebuilding. Marsin Alshamary explores

the role of religious peacebuilding in Iraq by examining Hawza-Shi'a Islam's most influential religious institution in Iraq.[69] Similarly, in Afghanistan, the inclusivity of governance based on religious peacebuilding must develop after profound consultative sessions among various Afghan ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups, as discussed earlier, such as the Taliban, Pashtun nationalists, Tajiks, Shia Hazaras, Sikh, and Baluch communities. This must be a plausible finding, as it should be followed by paving the way for decentralization, coupled with equitable power-sharing at the center, reducing the fears of "winner-take-all" outcomes. To further link the local and international actors, religious peacebuilding should also involve the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the process to impart this realization among the Afghan Taliban that Islam is not an anti-democratic religion. Thus, tenants of democracy, liberal human rights, women's education, and free speech should be acceptable to traditional Islamic societies. When religious leaders engage in peacebuilding, they refer to their holy scriptures as sources of authority on how peace can be re-established. This calls for an understanding of religion, particularly the dimensions of religious discourse. The broken social relations among Sunni and Shia and between Pashtuns and Non-Pashtuns (Dari-speaking ethnic groups) are also the main challenge in the wake of 40 years of violence emanating since the 1979 Soviet invasion. The restoration of the broken relations could only take place if the peacebuilding is led by native thought (be it religious) but not by the outside intervening forces.

Religious peacebuilding could decentralize and deconcentrate the central authority of the Taliban among the national and local elites in terms of sharing power and economic integration. In Iraq, the market shock therapy conducted by the Coalition Provisional Authority, which refers to the desire of external powers to rebuild Iraq's economy, deeply strengthened and raised sectarian fissures that reinforced insecurity. Therefore, to remove the sectarian and ethnic divisions in Afghanistan, religious peacebuilding could deliberate upon fiscal decentralization, moving budget authority to the local level for wholesome economic integration.

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