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Understanding the Strategic Culture of the Taliban - Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the evolution of the Taliban's strategic culture and its implications for Pakistan's security, diplomacy, and regional policy. Drawing on Strategic Culture Theory, it examines how religious orthodoxy, Pashtun tribal codes, and resistance identity have shaped the Taliban's strategic behavior across three phases—Taliban 1.0 (1996–2001), the insurgency phase (2001–2021), and Taliban 2.0 (post-2021). The paper argues that the Taliban's return to power has transformed them from a proxy into an autonomous actor pursuing its own national and religious agenda. This shift has strained Pak-Afghan relations, intensified border tensions, and fueled cross-border militancy through the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The ideological spillover has also emboldened terrorism and extremism within Pakistan. The study concludes that Pakistan must abandon its overreliance on ideological affinity and adopt a transactional, interest-based policy toward Kabul to safeguard national stability and effectively manage future regional challenges.

Keywords: Taliban`s Strategic Culture, Pak-Afghan relations, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Deobandi Ideology, Pashtunwali.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

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Introduction

The Taliban is a formidable force to be reckoned with today. Their return to power in August 2021 marked the beginning of a new strategic era in South Asia and the end of two decades of US-led intervention in Afghanistan and the broader region. It also signaled the re-emergence of a political actor whose decision-making and worldview are deeply shaped by a distinct strategic culture. The current Taliban regime—often referred to as Taliban 2.0—draws from a strategic culture rooted in their interpretation of religious orthodoxy, Pashtun tribal codes, resistance warfare, and anti-colonial memory. These elements defined the strategic culture of the Taliban 1.0 (1996–2001), influenced their resistance phase (2001–2021)— referred Taliban 1.5 in the study—and now shape the group's approach to governance, diplomacy, and regional engagement. As the Taliban transitions from insurgency to statecraft, its strategic choices carry significant implications for neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, which has long positioned itself as a key stakeholder in Afghan affairs under the approach of, though not officially, strategic depth.

According to academics like Colin Gray (1999)[1], Alastair Iain Johnston (1998)[2], and Jack Snyder (1977)[3]Strategic culture is the collection of institutional, historical, and ideational elements that influence a political entity's strategic preferences and actions. Recent research has expanded the framework to non-state actors[4], including insurgent groups like the Taliban, whose cultural and religious ethos greatly influences their strategic calculus[5], whereas the majority of the early literature concentrated on states. The strategic culture of Taliban 2.0, from being an instrument of influence under Pakistan's doctrine of "strategic depth."[6,7] has now become a source of "strategic anxiety" for Islamabad. The resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which enjoys safe havens in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan[8], has reignited serious security concerns for Pakistan. The two countries share a porous border of over 1,600 miles, much of it linking the tribal belts on both sides.

Despite initial optimism following the Taliban's return to power after the US withdrawal from the Afghan land in August 2021, Pakistan now finds itself increasingly alienated—facing frequent border clashes, unresolved disputes over the international boundary, and a lack of cooperation from the Taliban regime in curbing cross-border militancy.[9]

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[1] Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy, pp. 129-152,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[2] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, 1998).

[3] Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations.* (1977), https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R2154.html.

[4] Alister Miskimmon, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 1st ed., with Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, Routledge Studies in Global Information, Politics, and Society 3 (Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315871264.

[5] Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018, pp. 159-162,* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[6] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 1. publ. as a Yale Nota Bene book, Yale Nota Bene (Yale Nota Bene [u.a.], 2001).

[7] Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

[8] Asma Akbar, "Taliban 2.0: Implications for National Security of Pakistan," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (December 2024): 540–553.

[9] Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left*, *pp. 177-181,* with Yale University Press (Yale University Press, 2023).

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

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Though Pakistan has deported hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees in an effort to pressure the Taliban—a tactic recently mirrored by Tehran after Kabul's neutrality during the 12-Day War between Iran and Israel—the TTP continues to pose a significant threat, particularly in the ex-FATA regions (now KP) and the Pashtun belt of Balochistan. The so-called Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) remains another lethal threat, which is allegedly supported by a few factions within Pakistan.

Unlike the Taliban 1.0, the current Taliban regime engages in multi-vector diplomacy with Iran, China, Russia, India, and certain Central Asian states. This shift further complicates the Taliban's strategic autonomy, as they are no longer beholden to a single external patron.[10] In sum, the current regime has effectively diluted Pakistan's leverage, an influence it had enjoyed for much of recent history. Simultaneously, the ideological presence of the Taliban has emboldened religious extremist actors within Pakistan, posing internal ideological and counter-extremism challenges for the state.[11] This study seeks to examine how the Taliban's strategic culture—shaped by decades of conflict, resistance identity, and Islamic conservatism—interacts with Pakistan's foreign policy, border management, and internal security strategies. By tracing the evolution of Taliban strategic behavior and analyzing Pakistan's responses, this paper argues that Pakistan's long-standing assumptions about Afghanistan require urgent re-evaluation. The Taliban's worldview is no longer that of a proxy or ideological ally; it is that of an independent actor with its own national and religious priorities, often at odds with Pakistan's strategic interests.

Conceptual Framework

Strategic Culture Theory (SCT) provides a lens through which the behavior of state or non-state actors in international relations is analyzed, examining how deeply rooted cultural, historical, and ideological factors are in shaping their strategic choices. The concept emerged as a critique of rationalist approaches like Neo-realism, in which it is often assumed that state actors act as homogeneous, utility-maximizing entities. The origins of the theory are primarily associated with Jack L. Snyder, Collin S. Gray, and Alastair Iain Johnston. Their works have defined the evolution of the approach across three distinct generations. Moreover, this theory is particularly useful for understanding the Taliban's strategic behavior and its implications for regional actors such as Pakistan.

Origins of Strategic Culture Theory

Jack S. Snyder was the first to articulate this concept. In 1977, he wrote a report titled "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations." Snyder used this approach to explain why Soviet responses to the US nuclear strategies deviated from the assumptions of many American policymakers, as the Soviet Union often engaged in mirror-imaging, projecting its own strategic logic onto adversaries. He named this new concept strategic culture and defined the theory as "the sum total of ideals, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that the members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation" with respect to strategy. Snyder argues in the report that the Soviet Union's strategic thinking was shaped

[10] "The Taliban's Neighborhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan | International Crisis Group," January 30, 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/337-talibans-neighbourhood-regional-diplomacy-afghanistan.

[11] Husain Haqqani, "Pakistan Reaps What It Sowed," *Foreign Affairs*, May 23, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2022-05-23/pakistan-reaps-what-it-sowed.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

by its historical experiences of authoritarianism and insecurity, which led the state to prefer offensive strategies over the cooperative restraint assumed by US deterrence policies. His work also challenged the widely accepted Game Theory, which treated actors as "culture-free" and rational.[12]

Colin S. Gray is also counted as a key figure in the first generation of strategic culture theorists, who expanded on Snyder's ideas by giving particularity and emphasis to the contextual role of culture. He viewed strategic culture as encompassing "ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operation specific to a geography-based community with a unique historical experience."[13] In his works, "The Geopolitics of Superpower (1988)"[14] and "Nuclear Strategy and National Style (1986)"[15] he argues that all dimensions of strategy are inherently cultural, which are shaped by a political entity`s cultural, geographical, and historical context. Gray rejected too generic theories of state conduct and instead proposed that strategic decisions are made via the prism of culture, in contrast to Snyder, who regarded strategic culture as a counterweight to rationalist assumptions. His all-encompassing strategy placed strong emphasis on cultural continuity, arguing that despite changes in the outside world, cultural influences change gradually.[16]

Alastair Lain Johnston represents the third generation, who took a more positivist approach. He sought to make strategic culture a testable variable in strategic analysis. In his work, "Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History (1995)," he defines strategic culture as an "ideational milieu" that influences strategic choices through group identification and historical experiences. He argues that strategic culture is not merely a context, something that Gray also argues, but an independent variable that in interaction with other factors shapes behavior. He also focused on the group identities and sub-national bureaucracies suggesting that strong-in-group identification can lead to aggressive realpolitik behavior. In contrast, weaker national identities may foster cooperative idealpolitik. In contrast to Gray's focus on continuity, Johnston also recognizes the potential for dynamic shifts in strategic culture over time.[17]

The concept of strong in-group identification was basically introduced by Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). His theory of *ʿAsabiyya* (group solidarity), presented in his seminal work *Muqaddimah*, lays the foundation for this idea. He argues that social cohesion, rooted in shared lineage or purpose, drives the rise and consolidation of civilizations. This collective identity strengthens internal unity and fosters loyalty, leadership, and long-term group survival.[18] Ibn Khaldun introduced this concept in the broader context of civilizations and dynasty nation-states, of course, did not exist at that time.

The idea of SC has been further developed by other academics, such as Ken Booth and Jeannie L. Johnson. Johnson's "Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct

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[12] Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture*.

[13] Gray, *Modern Strategy*.

[14] Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower* (University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

[15] Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Hamilton Press, 1986).

[16] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies (Cambridge University Press)*, 1999, 49–69, https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/14965922.pdf.

[17] Johnston, *Cultural Realism*.

[18] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History - Abridged Edition (Princeton Classics)*, Abridged (Princeton University Press, 2015).

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

(2006)" underlines the necessity for a more precise technique to apply strategic culture to various players,[19] whereas Booth's "Strategy and Ethnocentrism (1979)" notes how cultural self-centeredness can skew strategic perspectives.[20] Together, these contributions highlight how useful the theory is for examining players outside of nations, such as non-state organizations like the Taliban.

Application to the Taliban

Applying the SCT to the Taliban requires a comprehensive understanding of the group's ideological, historical, and social underpinnings, which ultimately shape its strategic behavior. Geography is also a pertinent factor in this regard. Their strategic culture is blended in Pashtun tribal traditions, which can better be termed Afghan rather than Pashtun traditions, as the majority of Taliban are Pashtun, but not all Pashtun are Taliban, Deobandi Islamic ideology, and historical experiences, particularly of resistance against foreign intervention. Its government, military strategy, and contacts with regional actors—especially Pakistan—are largely influenced by this culture, which has a significant impact on bilateral relations.

From the Soviet invasion in the 1980s to the US-led intervention after 2001, the Taliban's historical narrative of *jihad* (loosely translated as holy/sacred war) against foreign occupiers is closely linked to their strategic culture. The Taliban see them as the guardians of Afghan sovereignty and Islamic principles because of this narrative. The Taliban's consistent employment of asymmetric warfare, such as suicide bombers and guerrilla tactics, demonstrates Snyder's idea of "conditional emotional responses" and reflects a strategic preference for resilience over traditional military confrontation. The group's focus on *jihad* as a strategic and moral necessity is consistent with Gray's theory that culture is a collection of "habits of mind" that place a higher value on ideological purity than on practical compromises.

Johnston's emphasis on group identification is especially pertinent to the Taliban. The Taliban's violent approach toward out-groups, such as Western forces and, increasingly, Pakistan, is driven by their strong in-group identity, rooted in their interpretation of Deobandi Islam[21] and influenced by elements of *Pashtunwali*, the Pashtun code of honor.[22] Though the Taliban claim to realize the objective of an Islamic Emirate based on their ideology of Deobandi Islam, it cannot be ruled out that *Pashtunwali* is in their DNA, and it has a significant influence on their daily actions. For instance, *Pashtunwali* opposes foreign intervention, a reason that kept the Taliban in cohesion during the years of direct foreign involvement, and even today, they oppose indirect interventions in their internal affairs.

However, at the same time, it can also not be ruled out that the Taliban have used *Pashtunwali* as a tool in situations where they could not religiously motivate people for their cause. There are numerous instances where they have violated the very principles of this otherwise peaceful Pashtun code of conduct. For example, *Nanawatay* (merciful

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[19] Jeannie L Johnson, *Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct* (Defense Threat Reduction Agency, United States of America, 2006), 25, https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/strat-culture.pdf.

[20] Ken Booth, *Strategy And Ethnocentrism* (Croom Helm, 1979).

[21] Naveen Khan, *Sifting Facts from Fiction: The Underpinnings of the Taliban's 'Islamic Emirate' - The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, The SAIS Review of International Relations, February 15, 2024, https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/sifting-facts-from-fiction-the-underpinnings-of-the-talibans-islamicemirate/.

[22] K. B. Usha, *A Wounded Afghanistan: Communism, Fundamentalism and Democracy*, 1. ed (Shubhi Publications, 2004), 229.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

protection) is a key element of *Pashtunwali*. A Pashtun is bound by this code to provide asylum even to his enemies if they seek it. In the case of the Taliban, however, the genocide of Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan stands in direct violation of this principle. During that period, two delegations of tribal elders in Bamiyan approached the Taliban, seeking *Nanawatay*, only to be mercilessly killed.[23]

Similarly, *Nang* (honor) is another central element of *Pashtunwali*. Under this code, Pashtuns are obliged to defend those who occupy weaker social positions. In stark contrast, during the massacre of Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 under the Taliban's first regime, the Taliban not only carried out mass killings but also shot scores of innocents attempting to flee the city, thereby blatantly negating the concept of *Nang*.[24] Taliban also have a distinct interpretation of the Deoband sect of Islam, which is best demonstrated by the Taliban's unwillingness to take action against the TTP, an organization that shares ideological and familial ties with the Afghan Taliban; it shares a common mission with the Afghan Taliban of Islamizing the region. Moreover, the Afghan Taliban`s historical experiences with the state of Pakistan during the years of insurgency (2001-21), and maybe other minor internal and external factors, further strengthen the cooperation between the two factions of Taliban.

Relations have been strained by the Taliban's preference for ideological affinity over political affiliations, even though Pakistan has historically supported the Taliban as a strategic asset to provide "strategic depth" in Afghanistan.[25] As seen by the Taliban's transition from insurgency to rule after seizing Kabul in 2021, Johnston's approach also emphasizes a dynamic strategic culture that evolves with new experiences. Pakistan is greatly affected by the strategic culture of the Taliban. With the Taliban's comeback to power in 2021, Pakistan's decades-long strategy of supporting them to undermine Indian influence in Afghanistan first appeared to be working. This "victory" has backfired, though, as Pakistan's security has become unstable due to the Taliban's failure to deal with TTP sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, which has encouraged cross-border terrorism. With the Taliban opposing Pakistan's attempts to fence its border, what they call the Durand Line—a long-standing source of conflict—has resurfaced as a flashpoint, demonstrating a strategic culture that places Afghan territorial integrity above diplomatic compromises.

Other academics offer more perspectives on how to apply strategic culture to the Taliban. In her work, Jeannie L. Johnson highlights the significance of culturally grounded insights for comprehending the security policies of non-state actors. She suggests that certain actors' or non-actors' administrations reflect a strategic culture that emphasizes ideological coherence over pragmatic economic considerations.[26] The Taliban's dependence on tribal networks and religious discourse to preserve unity and legitimacy is comparable to Carl G. Jacobsen's description of strategic culture as a country's "particular ways of adapting to the environment." These viewpoints highlight the Taliban's strategic culture as

[23] Khan, *Sifting Facts from Fiction*.
[24] Khan, *Sifting Facts from Fiction*.
[25] Asad Durrani et al., *The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2018), pp. 185-186.
[26] Johnson, Jeannie L. Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct. Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 2006, pp. 5, 11–14.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

a multifaceted interaction of history, ideology, and social structure[27] that directly affects Pakistan's security and regional stability.

To sum up, Snyder, Gray, and Johnston's strategic culture theory provides a strong foundation for understanding the Taliban's strategic actions. Together, Snyder's emphasis on cultural distinctiveness, Gray's emphasis on historical continuity, and Johnston's positivist view of group identity and dynamism shed light on the Taliban's strategic and ideological decisions. These decisions have complicated Pakistan's strategic thinking and transformed a once-useful asset into a regional dilemma. The application of the theory highlights the difficulties in dealing with a non-state actor whose strategic culture defies traditional diplomatic or military responses, requiring Pakistan and other players to adopt sophisticated policy approaches.

Evolution of the Taliban`s Strategic Culture

For a better understanding of the SC of the Taliban and their unwillingness to take prudent action against non-state terrorist or extremist groups like the TTP, or insurgent groups allegedly having sanctuaries in Afghanistan, one must first understand Afghan traditions.

Long before the Taliban came to power, Afghanistan's reputation as the "graveyard of empires" was established due to centuries-old customs of staunch tribal autonomy, a hardy *Pashtunwali* code, and dispersed resistance that prevented foreign assaults. This reputation dates back to the 19th century, when British forces catastrophically lost the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–1842), as they fled Kabul. This highlighted the dangers of underestimating local terrain and relationships. This legacy was further solidified by the Soviet invasion in 1979, when *mujahideen* warriors, using guerrilla tactics and ethnic allegiances developed over many generations, killed thousands and forced a humiliating withdrawal in 1989 despite overwhelming military superiority.

In a strategic culture where external dangers bring people together rather than subjugate them, these patterns reflect Afghan traditions that place greater value on sovereignty and hospitality toward relatives than on subservience. The land's "graveyard" status results from adaptive resilience rather than innate disorder; therefore, ignoring this historical depth risk of misinterpreting current dynamics. The transition of non-state actors from the *mujahideen* to the Taliban is a prime example of the Afghans' resilient empowerment trajectory, fueled by both internal unity and external support. Through CIA's Operation Cyclone, which provided over $3 billion in aid and training, the US-backed *mujahideen* transformed from a diverse group of tribal fighters into a powerful force during the Soviet Afghan War (1979–1989). In 1985, Reagan even hosted Gulbuddin Hekmatyar at the White House as a symbol of anti-communist bravery.[28] Following their retreat, the Taliban emerged in 1994 as a result of factional infighting. They seized Kabul in 1996 and established an emirate implementing strict *Shariah* amid the chaos of the civil war.[29] While *Pashtunwali's* certain codes, like *badal* (revenge), subtly influence decision-making, giving tribal honor precedence over practical concessions and sustaining regional instability. This cyclical dominance highlights a powerful *assabiyya*—group solidarity according to Ibn

[27] Carl G. Jacobsen, *Strategic Power: United States of America and the U.S.S.R* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1990), pp. 121–28.

[28] Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 57–68, 152.

[29] Rashid, *Taliban*, pp. 23–24, 55.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

Khaldun—fueled by *ummah* unity against *kafir* outsiders, influencing the SC of the Taliban.

In literal terms, the word *Talib* means "student." The term is commonly used for students of *madrassahs* in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and *Taliban* is its plural form. These students, who were turned into *mujahideen* with the help of the West—particularly the United States—became non-state actors once the West no longer needed them. Over the past few decades, this transformed actor has emerged as a significant player in the region, possessing a distinct strategic culture.

Taliban 1.0 (1996-2001)

The strategic culture of the Taliban was in formation even before their initial rule between 1996 and 2001. However, it was during their government that the foundations of their strategic culture were truly set. The strategic culture of Taliban 1.0 was rooted in a rigid interpretation of Deobandi Islamic fundamentalism, which became even more conservative when fused with certain Pashtun tribal code with interpretations that support the presence and growth of the Taliban.[30] The group began to formally emerge in 1994 from certain religious schools in Kandahar and was led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, better known as Mullah Omar. He aimed to establish an Islamic Emirate governed by a strict interpretation of *Shariah*.[31]

Mullah Omar, a madrassah teacher, gathered students to address the chaos that had engulfed Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet and later American forces from Kabul in 1989. This period was also marked by the end of the Cold War and a subsequent civil war on Afghan soil. Mullah Omar became a hero—one the Afghans had been yearning for—as he succeeded in disarming warlords empowered either by the Soviets or the Americans and in restoring order, initially in Kandahar. His success resonated with Afghans weary of the country's violence and corruption.[32]

It was 1996 when the Taliban captured Kabul, ousted the Rabbani government, and declared Afghanistan an Islamic Emirate. Mullah Omar was proclaimed the *Amir-ul-Momineen* (Commander of the faithful), a proclamation that granted him near-absolute authority.[33] Mullah Omar centralized governance, established a council of his loyalists to make decisions on the country's affairs, leaving little room for dissent, while adhering to a rigid interpretation of *Shariah*. The media strategy of Taliban 1.0 was minimal. Instead, they relied on mosque networks and religious edicts to propagate their ideology. They quite clearly and boldly prioritized religious legitimacy over modern governance.[34]

When it came to the military, the Taliban "relied on a mix of local militias and foreign fighters," where most of the fighters were from local Pashtun tribes and a large chunk were foreign fighters, most of whom were Arab *Jihadists* who fought in the 1980s against the foreign forces along with the Afghans.[35]

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[30] Alia Brahimi, "The Taliban's Evolving Ideology," *LSE Global Governance*, July 210 AD, 20, https://eprints.lse.
ac.uk/29970/1/WP022010_Brahimi.pdf.

[31] Rashid, *Taliban, pp. 17-30*.

[32] Rashid, *Taliban, pp. 17-30*.

[33] Rashid, *Taliban, pp. 41-54*.

[34] Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War and Religion in Afghanistan*, New expanded ed (Zed Books, 2002).

[35] Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001, pp. 301-314.* (Penguin Books, 2005).

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

The governance structure comprises four institutional bodies. The first was Inner *Shura*. It consisted of key leaders who were supposed to meet during crises. The second body was Outer *Shura*. It consisted of members who included provincial notables and religious figures. They used to advise the Inner *Shura*. The third body was the Caretaker Council. It was led by Mullah Rabbani. It had the obligation of implementing policies. The fourth and last institutional body was the *Ulema Shura*. It was a secretive 24-member council based in Kandahar that influenced social policies and Islamic law in the country.[36] Decision-making was opaque, with Omar's authoritarian style dominating, and officials were often rotated to prevent power consolidation.[37]

The Taliban also pursued rapid territorial expansion, resulting mostly in negotiations with warlords rather than combat. Their campaigns were often marked by brutal tactics like public executions and massacres, notably of Hazaras, who are Shia Muslims, in 1998 in Mazar-i-Sharif.[38]

Economically, the Taliban relied on aid from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, taxation, and the Opium trade. Initially, the Taliban taxed Opium; however, later in July 2000, Mullah Omar banned its cultivation, which drastically reduced its production. Though the motives of the ban are debated.[39] Their economy seriously started trembling when their alliance with Al-Qaeda further isolated them. Mullah Omar shared the idea of Pan-Islamism with Osama Bin Laden of Al-Qaeda. Such isolation left only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates that recognized their regime; they were the only countries that "ever recognized Taliban as the country`s lawful government."[40] Taliban also did not have stable terms with their neighbor Iran due to their anti-Shia approach.

[36] United States Department of State, "Afghanistan: Taliban Decision-Making Process and Leadership Structure - Document 8 - Islama 11233," National Security Archive, December 1997, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB295/doc08.pdf.

[37] United States Department of State, "Afghanistan: The Taliban`s Decision-Making Process and Leadership Structure - Document 13 - 1998 Islama 09513," National Security Archive, December 1998, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB295/doc13.pdf.

[38] *Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-I-Sharif* (Human Rights Watch, 1998), p. 17, https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/a/afghan/afreporo.pdf.

[39] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, Rev. ed (Penguin, 2004).

[40] "Recognition and the Taliban," *Brookings*, n.d., accessed July 23, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/recognition-and-the-taliban-2/.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

S.No.	Aspect	Details
1.	**Governance**	Centralized under Mullah Omar; Inner Shura (23 leaders), Outer Shura (>100 members), Caretaker Council, Ulema Shura (24 members). Opaque decision-making, ideological diversity.
2.	**Military**	Rapid expansion, warlord negotiations, mobile units, foreign fighter alliances. brutal tactics, e.g., Mazar-e Sharif massacre.
3.	**Media**	Minimal; banned TV/radio, used Radio Shariat, mosque edicts.
4.	**Economy**	Taxation, Opium trade (banned in 2000), aid from Pakistan/Saudi Arabia.
5.	**International**	Isolated, recognized by three countries, the Al-Qaeda alliance led to its downfall.

Table 1: *Summary of the Taliban`s Strategic Structure/governance during their first regime (1996-2001).*

Taliban 1.5 (2001-2021)

The years following the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan—after the Taliban government refused to hand over Osama bin Laden despite Al-Qaeda's acceptance of responsibility for the 9/11 attacks—marked a turning point for the Taliban. This insurgency phase is referred to as "Taliban 1.5" in the study. The group had to change its strategy in order to survive and resist coalition forces after losing control of Afghanistan and transitioning from a ruling regime to a decentralized insurgency. This period, lasting from 2001 to 2021, was characterized by tactical flexibility, ideological tenacity, and a focus on enduring foreign involvement by combining both conventional and modern military tactics.

The strategic culture of Taliban 1.5 was deeply rooted in certain elements of *Pashtunwali*. As majority of the Taliban are Pashtun, to maintain coherence among insurgent forces, the Taliban emphasized the *Pashtunwali* principles of honor, hospitality, and revenge, stressing that their sovereignty had been violated and that their honor needed to be restored. For the more religious segments of society, however, they invoked Islam to persuade people to join or support their cause, claiming that infidels had invaded their land.[41] In practice, the Taliban selectively employed both Islam and *Pashtunwali*.

This approach provided the group with a cultural framework for its resistance against foreign—or, as they referred to them, *kafir* (infidel)—forces. The group once again blended this cultural approach with Islam to gain broader legitimacy. They framed their insurgency as *jihad* to defend Afghan sovereignty and Islamic values, a narrative that already resonated strongly among Pashtun communities across the country and even beyond borders in Pakistan.[42] A few factions of the group had safe havens in Pakistan's tribal areas, from which they operated. They cashed the concept of "infidel occupiers" to portray their coalition as legitimate. The leadership of the Taliban 1.5 maintained

[41] Ding Long, "Ideological Transition of the Afghan Taliban," *Contemporary International Relations* 32, no. 2 (2022): 39–61, https://mideast.shisu.edu.cn/_upload/article/files/0a/b4/0c8b82df4b6882d3bc654c97852e/17372d78-2f78-457c-96d5-a1f4f2856c19.pdf.

[42] Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, p. 45*.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

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cohesion by invoking religious and cultural legitimacy during the years of insurgency against the foreign forces in Afghanistan.[43] Their blending had already given them an ideological stance when they were in government; the same approach worked even during their insurgency phase. Through this ideological stance, the group justified its extreme tactics, including suicide bombings,[44] by portraying those who carried them out as martyrs destined for paradise. Despite the fact that suicide bombings are not justified by the majority of Muslim scholars, and that numerous *fatwas* (Islamic decrees) distinguish between *jihad* and terrorism, labeling suicide bombings as acts of terrorism and extremism[45] nor *Pashtunwali* supports extremism—the Taliban nonetheless made suicide bombings a significant feature of their campaign during this phase.[46] This shows that innovations and improvisations in their versions of Islam and *Pashtunwali* are very much part of their strategic culture for broader interests, and it further strengthens the argument that they use the two to gain broader legitimacy.

Tactically, the Taliban 1.5 implemented a decentralized command system, giving local commanders the freedom to adapt operations to local conditions. Effective guerrilla warfare, including the deployment of ambushes, targeted assassinations, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against coalition and Afghan government targets, was made possible by this flexibility.[47] In order to weaken state legitimacy and increase their influence, the organization took advantage of local concerns, especially in southern and eastern Afghanistan, such as government corruption and civilian deaths from the airstrikes of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces.[48] Their attrition approach, which placed an emphasis on patience and long-term endurance, was influenced by Afghan resistance against foreign invaders, particularly the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.[49]

Diplomatically, the Taliban 1.5 demonstrated pragmatism by opening a political office in Doha, Qatar, in 2012, indicating a readiness to engage in negotiations while maintaining military operations.[50] Given that a direct military triumph over NATO forces was unlikely, this dual strategy—talking while maintaining insurgency—reflected a strategic culture that struck a balance between ideological purity and pragmatic concessions.[51] Mullah Akhtar Mansour and other leaders of the group placed strong emphasis on preserving internal unity and avoiding factionalism, which had undermined previous Afghan resistance movements.[52]

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[43] Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
[44] Rashid, *Taliban, p. 98.*
[45] Muḥammad T āhirulqādrī, *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings* (Minhaj-ul-Quran International, 2010).
[46] Rashid, *Taliban, p. 98.*
[47] Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (Bodley Head, 2017).
[48] Thomas Jefferson Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 9. print., and first paperback print, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics, p. 325, (Princeton Univ. Press, 2012).
[49] William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban, p. 156,* (New York University Press, 1998).
[50] Michael Semple, *Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement*, no. 102 (United States Institute of Peace, 2014), 36, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW102-Rhetoric-Ideology-and-Organizational-Structure-of-the-Taliban-Movement.pdf.
[51] Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War.*
[52] ʿAbd al-Salām Z aʿīf, *My Life with the Taliban*, Reprinted, ed. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, p. 201, (Hurst & Company, 2012).

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

The Taliban also realized that a modern media strategy is the need of the hour. They developed a sophisticated media strategy at the same time. They used websites, social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), and publications like Al Sumud not only to propagate their narrative but also to counter Western propaganda.[53] Such a change of approach worked for the Taliban. The outreach boosted morale and recruited fighters.[54]

S. No.	Aspect	Details
1.	**Governance**	Shadow Structures: courts, tax collection, services in controlled areas.
2.	**Military**	Guerilla tactics, IEDs, suicide bombings, mobile units, sanctuaries.
3.	**Media**	Social media, Al-Sumud Magazine, propaganda
4.	**Economy**	Opium trade, extortion, and foreign funding
5.	**International**	Doha Agreement, pragmatic diplomacy with the US

Table 2: *Summary of the Taliban`s Strategic Structure during the phase of insurgency in Afghanistan (2001-2021).*

In terms of economy, the group sustained itself through the Opium trade, local taxation, and external funding, particularly from Gulf donors. Funding, in particular, proved to be the backbone for the prolonged insurgency.[55] This blend of ideological commitment, tactical flexibility, and economic resourcefulness defined the Taliban 1.5's strategic culture, enabling them to endure two decades of conflict and eventually reclaim power.

Taliban 2.0 (2021-Present)

Following the US exit, the Taliban regained power in August 2021, ushering in "Taliban 2.0," a period distinguished by a transition from insurgency to rule. The strategic culture of this era aims to strike a compromise between the practical requirements of statehood, international legitimacy, and internal stability, and the rigid interpretation of Islamist ideology. Taliban 2.0 has demonstrated the ability to adapt to international standards while maintaining the essential components of their earlier iterations; nonetheless, there are still major obstacles to bringing their inflexible worldview into line with contemporary administration.

The Taliban 2.0 immediately had to make the shift from a dispersed rebel organization to a centralized government after retaking Kabul. A rigorous interpretation of *Shariah* law continued to influence their strategic culture, which placed a strong emphasis on gender segregation, moral policing, and limitations on working on the creation of a thorough strategic culture framework for comprehending the Taliban's development from 2001 to 2021 and beyond.[56] However, in a bid to win recognition abroad, Taliban 2.0 has tried to present a more moderate image. They have done this through diplomatic initiatives and public messaging to lessen the idea that their government is

[53] Alex Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, "An Enemy We Created," *Hurst*, January 2012., accessed July 30, 2025, p. 189, https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/an-enemy-we-created/.

[54] Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, CERI Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies (Columbia University Press in association with the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 2005), p. 67.

[55] Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al Qaeda*, 1st ed (Thomas Dunne Books, 2009), pp. 67-71.

[56] Claire Mills et al., "Afghanistan: One Year under A Taliban Government," *UK Parliament: House of Commons Library*, July 29, 2025, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9632/.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

regressive and authoritarian.[57] Such a pragmatic shift is evident in their public statements, which emphasize Afghanistan's sovereignty, governance, and economic development based on Islamic principles, while initially refraining from implementing or announcing controversial policies. Nonetheless, they are gradually moving in that direction.

The strategic ethos that values stability and control over ideological adaptability is reflected in the Taliban's new governing approach. Under the leadership of the Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has established a hierarchical structure.[58] To guarantee uniform policy implementation, local government is overseen by province and district leaders, who have less autonomy than during the Taliban 1.5 era.[59] Although the group's strategic culture remains grounded in self-interpreted Pashtunwali and Islamic values, some of its practices have been loosened to conform to international standards, such as permitting restricted access to media and education for women under stringent guidelines.[60]

S. No.	Aspect	Details
1.	**Governance**	Centralized under Akhundzada, factional divides, strict *Shariah,* with regional variations.
2.	**Military**	Focus on internal security, countering the so-called Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), and tensions with Pakistan over TTP.
3.	**Media**	State-controlled, international moderation, and local restrictions.
4.	**Economy**	Different means, anti-corruption, Opium ban with mixed results, more focus on revenue growth.
5.	**International**	Engagement with China, Russia, Iran, India; Western isolation.

Table 3: *Summary of the Strategic structure of Taliban since they are back in power (August 2021-Present).*

Moreover, Taliban 2.0 has engaged in diplomatic negotiations with regional and international powers, such as the United States[61], China[62], and Russia[63], and most recently

[57] International Crisis Group, "The Taliban's Neighbourhood."

[58] Graeme Smith, "Afghanistan Three Years after the Taliban Takeover," International Crisis Group, August 14, 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-three-years-after-taliban-takeover.

[59] Waheedullah Hamoon et al., "Governance and Public Administration under the Taliban," *Asian Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2025): 87–111, https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2024.2446960.

[60] Elena Becatoros, "With No Access to Education beyond the 6th Grade, Girls in Afghanistan Turn to Religious Schools," AP News, July 24, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-education-girls-madrassa-7cdaf68896e8ccfda2abd71a07a02b99.

[61] The Associated Press (AP News), "The US Lifts Bounties on Senior Taliban Officials, Including Sirajuddin Haqqani, Says Kabul," AP News, March 23, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-haqqani-us-bounty-a9f5434850d78f15f81f72222c14b894.

[62] Sarah Shamim, "Russia Recognises the Taliban: Which Other Countries May Follow?" Al Jazeera, July 4, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/4/russia-recognises-the-taliban-which-other-countries-may-follo
wutm_source=chatgpt.com.

[63] Jasmine Venet, "Russia Is First Country to Recognize Taliban Rule in Afghanistan," The Daily Beast, July 5, 2025, https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-is-first-country-to-recognize-taliban-rule-in-afghani

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

India, in an effort to gain legitimacy and economic support. Their strategic culture places a strong emphasis on independence and sovereignty; they selectively interact with nations that respect their authority and frequently reject outside intervention. They still rely on opium trade, taxes, and foreign help for their economic needs, but they are having trouble diversifying their sources of income because of international sanctions and restricted access to international markets.[64]

The media strategy of the current Taliban regime is controlled, with restricted internet access and state-run outlets like "Afghanistan Times" that promote the Taliban`s narratives.[65] The strategic culture of the current regime reflects a delicate balance between maintaining ideological purity and navigating the complexities of modern governance. However, the struggle of balance between the Taliban's traditional roots and the need for pragmatic state-building is evident amid ongoing issues of governance in the country.

Pak-Taliban Strategic Relations

Pakistan`s relationship with the Taliban began during the civil war in Afghanistan when the Taliban emerged as a dominant force to get control of the situation. It was one of the three countries that recognized the Taliban`s government in 1996.[66] This recognition came with substantial support for the Taliban 1.0 government, including military advisers and logistical aid.[67] Despite calls by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to end such support[68], Islamabad continued backing the Taliban under its 'Strategic Depth' doctrine.[69] This doctrine aimed to ensure friendly relations with its western neighbor and prevent Kabul from falling under New Delhi's influence.[70] A few internal reasons for supporting the government in Afghanistan were that the religious beliefs of the Taliban are similar to the Deobandi school of thought, whose followers hold significant influence in Pakistan.[71] While Deobandi Muslims constitute about 15 percent of the country's population, 64 percent of *madrassas* are affiliated with this school.[72] Moreover, supporting the Taliban

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[64] Peters, *Seeds of Terror*, Pp. 33-37.

[65] "Afghanistan: The Disturbing, Escalating Censorship Suffocating the Free Press," Reporters without Borders (RSF), February 27, 2025, https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan-disturbing-escalating-censorship-suffocating-free-press.

[66] "Crisis of Impunity - Pakistan's Support of the Taliban," Human Rights Watch, 2001, https://www.hrw.org/rep
orts/2001/afghan2/Afghan0701-02.htm.

[67] Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban, and the Afghan Quagmire," *Brookings*, August 24, 2013, https://www.brookin
gs.edu/articles/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/.

[68] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *the 9/11 Commission Report*, Government Report (National Commission of Terrorist Attacks, 2004), 585, https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf.

[69] Durrani et al., *The Spy Chronicles*, 185-186.

[70] Abdul Rehman and Wang Mingjin, "Pakistan and the Taliban: A Strategic Asset Turned Strategic Predicament," The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), *Pakistan and the Taliban*, July 30, 2024, https://www.nbr.org/publication/pakistan-and-the-taliban-a-strategic-asset-turned-strategic-predicame
nt/.

[71] Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "Pakistan's Support for the Taliban: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, August 25, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/article/pakistans-support-taliban-what-know.

[72] "Islam in Pakistan," GlobalSecurity.Org, accessed August 18, 2025, https://www.globalsecurity.org/mil
itary/world/pakistan/islam.htm#google_vignette.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

aligned with public opinion in Pakistan, particularly among Pashtuns, as the country shares its longest border of more than 1,600 miles with Afghanistan, where Pashtuns are the major ethnicity on both sides.[73] The period 1996-2001 established Pakistan as a key patron of the Taliban in shaping the group`s early military and political success.

Post-9/11 Ambivalence

A testing time emerged in Pakistan-Taliban relations after the 9/11 attacks. The turning point came when the Taliban government refused to hand over Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks. Under intense pressure from the United States, Pakistan extended full support to the US in its so-called "War on Terror."[74] However, Pakistan's support remained ambivalent, as Islamabad could not afford to lose the Taliban altogether, given their significant influence in Afghanistan and the growing Indian presence on Afghan soil, which had raised security concerns and suspicions in Pakistan.[75] Such an approach led the US and the West to accuse Pakistan of playing a "double game" by arresting some Taliban leaders while providing safe havens to others, particularly in Quetta and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[76]

An ideologically aligned militant group of the Taliban emerged in Pakistan, naming itself Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and began targeting sites across the country, further complicating the period from 2001 to 2021. This led to a surge in terrorist attacks throughout Pakistan and triggered a domestic backlash, as public opinion increasingly turned against the doctrine of "strategic depth," which seemed to validate concerns that maintaining ambivalent ties with the Taliban would only exacerbate internal security threats.[77] Islamabad`s Afghanistan strategy had clearly backfired.

Post-2021 Engagement

After twenty long and exhausting years, and the spending of trillions of dollars on the "War on Terror," the US finally decided to withdraw from Afghanistan, reaffirming the notion that it is indeed the graveyard of empires. The withdrawal of US and NATO forces was completed in August 2021, followed shortly by the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. During their stay, the US and its allies imposed a government on Afghans, displaced millions, caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, and left behind countless stories of misery and hatred. They spent more than 2.3 trillion USD[78] On the war, it remained in Afghanistan for two decades despite killing the culprit in 2011 and dismantling Al-Qaeda, ironically, only to ultimately leave Afghanistan with power returning to the Taliban once again.

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul was initially perceived as a victory for the doctrine of "strategic depth," as Pakistan's Prime Minister at the time, Imran Khan, described their

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[73] Miller, "Pakistan's Support for the Taliban."

[74] Miller, "Pakistan's Support for the Taliban."

[75] Vinay Kaura, "Pakistan-Afghan Taliban Relations Face Mounting Challenges," Middle East Institute, December 2, 2022, https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistan-afghan-taliban-relations-face-mounting-challenges.

[76] Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban, and the Afghan Quagmire."

[77] Mir Asfandyar, "Pakistan's Twin Taliban Problem," United States Institute of Peace, May 4, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem.

[78] "Total U.S. War Spending in Afghanistan FY 2022," Statista, July 5, 2025, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1075910/total-us-war-spending-afghanistan-category/?srsltid=AfmBOookVa9kn43I1VdTRxA8vaDooFuUKgX_opr6V69-TdVUCuiyeGAD.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

return to power as Afghans breaking "the chains of slavery."[79] Pakistan`s Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed suggested that the Taliban`s swift return to power will create "a new bloc" in the region.[80]

However, this optimism was short-lived, as Pakistan and the Taliban's relationship soured as a result of the Taliban's purported backing of the TTP. Pakistan has charged the Taliban with giving TTP terrorists safe havens, as the group has carried out multiple attacks over the Afghan-Pakistan border, killing a large number of people. According to Anwar ul-Haq Kakar, Pakistan's acting prime minister between August 2023 and March 2024, 2,867 people had died in Pakistan since the Taliban took power, and he blamed the increase in violence on TTP actions that the Taliban had backed.[81] Whereas the Taliban Government not only denied the allegations but also pointed fingers at Pakistan, claiming that it is Pakistan's military efforts, including airstrikes in Afghan territory, that are destabilizing the region.[82]

Islamabad has made some efforts to pressure the Taliban regime not to provide safe havens to terrorists by sending back hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan, a country already suffering from abject poverty and still unable to establish a stable and sustainable economy.[83] This seemed to have yielded results, as recently as July 2025, when Pakistan's Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Ishaq Dar, stated that the Taliban had assured Islamabad that Afghan soil would not be used for terrorist activities against Pakistan.[84]

The Taliban have also recently shown receptiveness to Pakistan's concerns over TTP safe havens in Afghanistan, as high-level visits by Pakistani officials took place in Kabul.[85] Certain sources suggest that the Taliban Government has asked the TTP to surrender, as Pakistan and Afghanistan are likely to coordinate closely in their counter terrorism efforts.[86] However, that does not seem to be a convincing case. The UN 2024 report explicitly notes that the Taliban Regime is either unable or unwilling to manage the TTP

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[79] Al Jazeera Staff, "Pakistan Tells US Afghan Troop Withdrawal Is 'Logical Conclusion,'" Al Jazeera, August 16, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/pakistan-us-afghan-troop-withdrawal-is-logical.

[80] Hameed Hakimi, "Analysis: Why Have Pakistan's Ties with the Afghan Taliban Turned Frigid?" Al Jazeera, December 28, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/analysis-why-have-pakistans-ties-with-the-afghan-taliban-turned-frigid.

[81] Mir Asfandyar, "In a Major Rift, Pakistan Ramps Up Pressure on the Taliban," United States Institute of Peace, November 16, 2023, https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/major-rift-pakistan-ramps-pressure-taliban.

[82] Rehman and Mingjin, "Pakistan and the Taliban."

[83] Asfandyar, "In a Major Rift, Pakistan Ramps Up Pressure on the Taliban."

[84] DID Press Staff, "Taliban Government Assures Pakistan to Curb Terrorism," *DID Press Agency*, July 28, 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, https://en.didpress.com/17154/.

[85] Afghanistan International English [@AFIntl_En], "Pakistan's Foreign Ministry has said that the Afghan Taliban have shown a willingness to address Islamabad's concerns over the presence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants operating from Afghan territory. https://afintl.com/en/202507259329 https://t.co/GS0W5howQX," Tweet, X, July 25, 2025, https://x.com/AFIntl_En/status/1948729164766339311.

[86] Ali K. Chishti Official [@thewirepak], "The Taliban govt in Afghanistan has asked the TTP to surrender or face consequences. Pakistan is closely coordinating with Kabul. Cross-border militancy threatens both states decisive CT cooperation is underway.," Tweet, Twitter, July 1, 2025, https://x.com/thewirepak/status/1940110774807986600.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

threat.[87] The claims made by the report are more credible, as despite assurances from the Taliban, cross-border terrorism persists.[88]

To further pressure the Taliban regime in this regard, Pakistan targeted TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan, and Taliban forces retaliated. The negotiations between Pakistan and the Taliban to reach a permanent ceasefire and a solution to cross-border terrorism collapsed after a round of talks in Doha and Istanbul.[89] Meanwhile, the recent visit of the Taliban government's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to New Delhi sent a soft signal that Kabul and New Delhi currently enjoy relatively better relations. Ironically, the Taliban, who once fought against "infidels" in their own interpretation, now appear to be aligning with them against a Muslim-majority state. Analysts argue that the Taliban's support for the TTP stems from their perception that Pakistan has long been an ally of the "*kafirs*."

In short, the strategic culture of Taliban 2.0 is no different from that of a conventional state that prioritizes its national interest above all else. In the present context, Kabul not only considers closer ties with New Delhi as serving its national interest but also seemingly views Pakistan as a state unworthy of alliance.

S.No.	Aspect	Historical Alignment (1990s)	Post-9/11 Ambivalence (2001-21)	Post-2021 Engagement (2021-Present)
1.	**Primary Objective**	Establish a friendly regime in Afghanistan for strategic depth	Balance US cooperation with Taliban support to maintain influence	Secure Taliban cooperation to counter TTP and stabilize bilateral ties
2.	**Nature of Support**	Military, logistical, and diplomatic aid	Covert support with selective cooperation with the US	Diplomatic engagement with a focus on counterterrorism
3.	**Key Challenges**	International condemnation (UN resolutions)	Accusations of "double game" and TTP emergence	TTP attacks and border tensions
4.	**Ideological Alignment**	Strong, based on shared Islamic conservatism	Moderate, complicated by the US alliance	Weakened by TTP-related tensions
5.	**Outcome**	Strengthened Taliban regime	Strained relations with the US and Afghanistan	Ongoing tensions with diplomatic efforts

[87] Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Fifteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2716 (2023) Concerning the Taliban and Associated Individuals and Entities*, S/2024/499 (United Nations Security Council, 2024), 26, https://doc s.un.org/en/S/2024/49.

[88] Suparna Banerjee, "The Resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban – Implications for Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations," *PRIF BLOG*, January 21, 2025, https://blog.prif.org/2025/01/21/the-resurgence-of-the-pakistani-taliban-implications-for-afghanistan-pakistan-relations/.

[89] "Truce Talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan Collapse in Istanbul," France 24, October 29, 2025, https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20251028-truce-talks-afghanistan-pakistan.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

Table 4: *Comparative Analysis: Summary of the key aspects of Pak-Taliban strategic relations across three phases.*

Implications for Pakistan

Security Challenges

The Taliban's strategic culture has profoundly exacerbated Pakistan's security landscape since their takeover of Kabul in August 2021. The TTP has emerged as one of the greatest security concerns for the country, as the group allegedly maintains safe sanctuaries in Afghanistan.[90] Reports suggest that TTP attacks surged from 282 in 2021 to 367 in 2022, 881 in 2023, and 482 in 2024. This marks a 153 percent increase in attacks between 2021 and 2024, along with a 105 percent rise in fatalities. Notably, 96 percent of these attacks occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, largely due to its proximity to Afghanistan's capital. These statistics position Pakistan as the second-most impacted country by terrorism globally.[91]

Because of their common Deobandi radicalism and theological affinities, the Taliban are reluctant to dismantle TTP networks, which enables the TTP to strengthen its operational capabilities and unite splinter units under commanders like Noor Wali Mehsud.[92] Targeted attacks on Pakistani security forces have resulted from this, including an ambush in December 2024 that killed 16 soldiers and prompted Pakistani airstrikes in the provinces of Khost and Paktika in Afghanistan.[93] Additionally, spillover violence has been exacerbated by the existence of other groups, like as the so-called Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan; in 2024, ISK carried out 25 attacks in Pakistan, but fewer people were killed than in previous years.[94]

Through improved border security and intelligence cooperation with allies like China and Iran, Pakistan's military measures, such as Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, which began in June 2024, seek to reduce these threats; nevertheless, the Taliban's tolerance for terrorists hinders these efforts.[95] Attacks jeopardize the Chinese investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), putting pressure on Pakistan's already precarious stability and resulting in both direct casualties and economic damage.[96] Analysts contend that Pakistan's counterterrorism successes from earlier operations have been directly undermined by the Taliban's strategic preference for domestic unity over regional security

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[90] *Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report* (US Institute of Peace, 2024), 60, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/ssg-final-report-counterterrorism-afghanistan-pakistan.pdf.

[91] Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Vision of Humanity (hosted at Vision of Humanity, produced by the Institute for Economics & Peace), 2025), 111, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf.

[92] Shahzad Akhtar and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16, no. 3 (2023): 285–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2023.2280924.

[93] Amira Jadoon, "Decoding Pakistan's 2024 Airstrikes in Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks*, March 7, 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/decoding-pakistans-2024-airstrikes-in-afghanistan/.

[94] Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*.

[95] Marvin G. Weinbaum and Naade Ali, "US Disengagement and New Regional Security Dynamics in Afghanistan's Neighborhood," Middle East Institute, February 28, 2025, https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-disengagement-and-new-regional-security-dynamics-afghanistans-neighborhood.

[96] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Taliban's Three Years in Power and What Lies Ahead," Brookings, August 14, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-talibans-three-years-in-power-and-what-lies-ahead/.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

commitments, turning Afghanistan into a hotbed for extremism.[97] In line with the US intelligence assessments, this dynamic raises the possibility of a wider regional crisis as unchecked militancy could further destabilize Pakistan's security landscape at home.[98]
In essence, the Taliban 2.0`s governance model integrates self-interpreted *Jihadist* elements into the state structures, which perpetuates a cycle of violence that Pakistan struggles to contain without cooperation from the Taliban regime.[99]

Border and Sovereignty Tensions

The Durand Line, which the Taliban reject as an international border because they see it as a colonial artifact that divides Pashtun populations, is the main source of the escalation in border tensions between Pakistan and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.[100] Due to the Taliban's resistance to Pakistan's attempts to fence its border, this ideological attitude has exacerbated sovereignty conflicts and resulted in frequent confrontations. Cross-border violence increased in late 2024, as seen by Pakistani airstrikes in December that targeted TTP hideouts in the Afghan provinces of Paktika and Khost, killing 46 civilians, according to Taliban allegations, and causing Afghan troops to retaliate by attacking Pakistani installations.[101] The recent clashes between the border forces of the two countries also caused hundreds of casualties. These events, which included heavy-weapons battles that took place overnight close to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, caused Pakistani casualties and demonstrated how the porous border allowed militants to infiltrate.[102]

These problems are made worse by the Taliban's strategic culture of allowing foreign militants, such as by relocating TTP terrorists instead of expelling them, since Pakistan charges Kabul with harboring dangers that compromise its territorial integrity.[103] Challenges to sovereignty also include trade disruptions and refugee flows; Pakistan has shut down borders, including the Torkham crossing, in January 2024 and expelled more than a million Afghan refugees since 2023 in an attempt to put pressure on the Taliban, but this has resulted in more economic retaliation and humanitarian crises.[104] According to reports, border-related incidents have increased by 45% in 2024. The Taliban have been

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[97] Nader Nadery, "Unraveling Deception: Pakistan's Dilemma After Decades of Promoting Militancy in Afghanistan and Beyond," Wilson Center, September 26, 2023, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/unraveling-deception-pakistans-dilemma-after-decades-promoting-militancy-afghanistan-and.

[98] Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *2025 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, U.S. Government, 2025), 31, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf.

[99] "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban," International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban.

[100] Hakimi, "Analysis: Why Have Pakistan's Ties with the Afghan Taliban Turned Frigid?"

[101] Zia Ur Rehman, "Tensions Escalate After Pakistan Pounds Afghanistan With Airstrikes," The New York Times, January 1, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/01/world/asia/pakistan-afghanistan-taliban.html.

[102] AJ Staff, "Afghan Taliban Hit 'Several Points' in Pakistan in Retaliation for Attacks," Al Jazeera, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/afghan-taliban-hit-several-points-in-pakistan-in-retaliation-for-attacks.

[103] International Crisis Group, "The Taliban's Neighbourhood."

[104] Abid Hussain, "After a Year of Hostility, Pakistan and Afghanistan Seek Diplomatic Reboot," Al Jazeera, April 22, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/22/after-a-year-of-hostility-pakistan-and-afghanistan-seek-diplomatic-reboot.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

constructing outposts and exchanging gunfire, as evidenced by confrontations that have killed Taliban fighters in Kunar province.[105]

Given that illegal operations like drug trafficking—45% of Afghan opiates pass via Pakistan—increase violence in border regions like Balochistan and ex-FATA, this has wider ramifications for Pakistan's sovereignty.[106] As demonstrated by Pakistan's hybrid coercive policy of economic sanctions and military operations, the Taliban's stubbornness, which is founded in Pashtun nationalism, runs the risk of turning into a full-scale battle.[107] In total, these conflicts make it harder for Pakistan to maintain control over its western border, thereby complicating regional stability and internal governance.

Diplomatic and Strategic Dilemmas

On the diplomatic front, the Taliban's strategic culture continues to cast doubts on the consistency between the regime's words and actions. Initially, Islamabad viewed the Taliban's takeover of Kabul as a strategic gain, but it soon had to abandon this optimism due to the Taliban's inaction against the TTP. This eventually led to a policy shift toward coercive measures, such as the expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and the imposition of certain trade restrictions.[108] Though high-level diplomatic engagements took place between the two—such as Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar's visit to Kabul in April 2025 to reboot mutual ties focusing on trade, security, and connectivity—they yielded only limited progress due to mutual accusations.[109] The recent collapse of talks between the Taliban and Pakistan in Istanbul[110] is a similar diplomatic dilemma.

As Kabul seeks alternatives to Pakistani leverage, the Taliban's evolving ties—most notably with India through economic initiatives such as the Chabahar Port—have put Pakistan's regional dominance in jeopardy.[111] Strategically, Pakistan struggles with the Taliban's failure to uphold counterterrorism pledges made in the 2020 Doha Agreement, which has prompted calls for international oversight of compliance.[112] This challenge is compounded by Pakistan's need to avoid isolation from the West while simultaneously aligning with nations such as China and Russia, which engage with the Taliban in a more pragmatic manner.[113] Negotiation challenges have also arisen; in 2022, Taliban-mediated talks with the TTP collapsed due to rigid demands, undermining trust and reigniting violence.[114] Consequently, Pakistan has adopted a cautious stance, prioritizing pressure

[105] KabulNow Staff, "Two Taliban Members Killed in Clash with Pakistani Border Guards in Kunar," KabulNow, June 15, 2025, https://kabulnow.com/2025/06/two-taliban-members-killed-in-clash-with-pakistani-border-guards-in-kunar/.

[106] Ilam Khan and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Borderland Struggles: The Consequences of the Afghan Taliban's Takeover on Pakistan," *The Round Table* 114, no. 1 (2025): 34–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2466193.

[107] Banerjee, "The Resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban – Implications for Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations."

[108] Asfandyar, "In a Major Rift, Pakistan Ramps Up Pressure on the Taliban."

[109] Nadia Zaheer Ali et al., "The Future of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Taliban Diplomacy," *Journal for Social Science Archives* 3, no. 1 (2025): 1168–83, https://doi.org/10.59075/jssa.v3iS1.196.

[110] "Truce Talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan Collapse in Istanbul," France 24, October 29, 2025, https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20251028-truce-talks-afghanistan-pakistan.

[111] Sibghatullah Ghaznawi, "Shifting Alliances: The Taliban's Evolving Ties with India and Pakistan," *South Asian Voices*, March 19, 2025, https://southasianvoices.org/geo-m-af-n-shifting-taliban-ties-03-18-2025/.

[112] *Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report*.

[113] International Crisis Group, "The Taliban's Neighbourhood."

[114] Akhtar and Ahmed, "Understanding the Resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan."

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

over normalization, as evidenced by its decision not to formally recognize the Taliban Government despite sending envoys.[115]

Moreover, the Taliban's internal power dynamics further complicate diplomatic relations between the two countries. Authority is highly centralized under Haibatullah Akhundzada, which limits diplomatic flexibility.[116] The regime also faces pressure to establish an inclusive government, a prospect that appears unlikely in the near future. Since the majority of those who fought foreign forces within the Taliban were Pashtuns, now that they govern, it is improbable that they will relinquish their demand to rule. Additionally, the Taliban has blamed Pakistan for its internal issues and has consistently denied providing support to the TTP, further straining diplomatic ties.

Ideological Spillover

The Taliban's ideological framework has spilled over into Pakistan, inspiring and empowering local extremists, particularly the TTP, which adopts the same ideology. In Afghanistan, the regime's expansion of its version of *jihad*-promoting curricula risks fueling further radicalization, which could also lead to a rise in Islamic conservatism within Pakistani society.[117] Such an ideological alignment allows the Taliban regime to accommodate the TTP by providing sophisticated weapons left behind by the United States, thereby enhancing the latter's campaign against Pakistan's "un-Islamic" state.[118] Such ideological fervor has suppressed progressive voices, while heightening sectarian tensions, with groups like the TTP and ISK actively exploiting anti-Pakistan sentiment among religious conservatives and ethnic Pashtuns.[119] The TTP has been recruiting from the tribal areas by invoking the Taliban's victory against "infidel" forces (the US and its allies) in Afghanistan and exploiting local grievances over governance and repression.

Pakistani officials also allege that a few militant factions of Baloch separatists maintain safe havens in Southern Afghanistan, like Kandahar, Nimroz, and Helmand.[120] These regions are said to be difficult to control tightly by the Taliban, and militants have been present there even during the US-led Afghan government in the recent past. A few splinters have enjoyed active support there, while the current regime tends to provide passive support to them.[121]

Pakistan's 2025 anti-extremism policy, which emphasizes social media and curricular reforms, attempts to combat this, but it is up against the established radical networks.[122] The Taliban's triumphs have given Baloch separatists and other groups more

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[115] Hussain, "After a Year of Hostility, Pakistan and Afghanistan Seek Diplomatic Reboot."
[116] Felbab-Brown, "The Taliban's Three Years in Power and What Lies Ahead."
[117] Haroun Rahimi and Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Rule at 2.5 Years," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 17, no. 1 (2024): 41, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/taliban-rule-at-2-5-years/.
[118] *Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report*.
[119] Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*.
[120] The Newspaper's Staff Reporter, "Asif Terms Afghanistan 'Source of Terror,'" *Dawn*, March 28, 2024, https://www.dawn.com/news/1824215.
[121] Ayush Verma et al., "The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan: Evolution, Tactics, and Regional Security Implications," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, April 2025, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-baloch-insurgency-in-pakistan-evolution-tactics-and-regional-security-implications/.
[122] Abid Hussain, "Can Pakistan's New Anti-Extremism Policy Defeat Rising Armed Attacks?" *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/25/can-pakistans-new-anti-extremism-policy-defeat-rising-armed-attacks.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

confidence to target foreign and governmental assets.[123] According to analysts, this ideology has the potential to further destabilize Pakistan and pave the way for wider regional *jihadist* unification if it ignores underlying issues such as socioeconomic marginalization.[124] By emphasizing religious principles over secular standards, the Taliban's governance model subtly criticizes Pakistan's system, deepening internal divides and making deradicalization initiatives more difficult.[125]

Element of Taliban's Strategic Culture	Description	Repercussions for Pakistan	Strategic Studies Framework Insight
Jihadist Ideology	Central duty of holy war, as in "Rules of *Jihad*"	Fuels TTP alignment, increasing domestic attacks	Johnston's realpolitik: Views conflict as zero-sum, limiting negotiations
***Pashtunwali* Traditions**	Honor, resistance, ethnic ties, and resistance to foreign intervention	Exacerbates the Durand Line disputes, cross-border militancy	Cultural realism: Shapes adversary perceptions, complicating sovereignty
Insurrectionist Preference	Armed overthrow of accommodation	Undermines 'strategic depth', leading to autonomy	Idealpolitik spectrum: Predicts unlikely settlements, urging policy shifts
Historical Narratives	References to past resistances	Risks of radicalization spillover in Pashtun areas in Pakistan	Non-state actor adaptation: Implies proxy backfire, need for collaboration

Table 5: Core elements of the Taliban's strategic culture, their implications for Pakistan, and insights from strategic studies frameworks.

Comparative Analysis

The policy orientations of four states, Iran, Russia, China, and India, toward the current Taliban regime are worth examining to draw a comparative understanding of Islamabad's approach. All three have prioritized stability, security, and economic gains over the Taliban. Iran, despite having a Shia-majority population and a history of strained relations with the Sunni Taliban, engages with Kabul through a lens of pragmatism. It had provided arms to the Taliban during the years of insurgency.[126] It has formalized ties with the regime by handing over the Afghan embassy in Tehran in 2023 and is also pursuing water-sharing agreements. Tensions persist between the two—such as disputes over the Helmand River dams and Iran's deportation of Afghan refugees following Pakistan's example—yet Iran

[123] Weinbaum and Ali, "US Disengagement and New Regional Security Dynamics in Afghanistan's Neighborhood."
[124] International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban."
[125] Ali et al., "(PDF) The Future of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations."
[126] Sajjan M Gohel, "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 3, no. 3 (2010), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss3-art5.pdf.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

continues to maintain relations with the Taliban regime and even cooperates with it in counter terrorism efforts against ISK.[127]

Russia officially recognized the Taliban government in July 2025, marking a significant shift in its foreign policy, as the very group (Taliban) once known as the *Mujahideen* had fought against the former Soviet Union in the 1980s. It is evident that the Taliban and Moscow share anti-Western sentiments, which have brought them closer. Moscow has also delisted the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations and is fostering counterterrorism cooperation with them following the Moscow attack in 2024. Both sides are also advancing trade and energy projects.[128]

China has also accredited a Taliban ambassador in Beijing, positioning itself as a key partner of the Taliban regime. It is integrating Afghanistan into the BRI via infrastructure and mining deals. It, however, limits its large-scale investments due to instability in Afghanistan.[129]

India's approach toward the Taliban regime reflects a cautious pragmatism shaped by its security concerns and regional competition with Pakistan and China. Although New Delhi had maintained close ties with the former Afghan Republic and was initially reluctant to engage with the Taliban, it has gradually adopted a policy of limited engagement. For India, engagement with the Taliban is driven by the dual objectives of safeguarding its developmental investments and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for anti-India militant organizations.[130]

In essence, China, India, and Iran avoid formal alliances with the Taliban government, while Moscow has gone an extra mile in this regard. All four states are opting for transactional engagement with the Taliban government, which contrasts with Western isolationism. However, Tehran's sectarian caution differs from Moscow's bold recognition, Beijing's economic focus, and New Delhi`s dual objectives.

Pakistan`s overidentification with the Taliban: Strategic vs Ideological Miscalculation

Pakistan, given the history of its relations with the Taliban, tends to overidentify with the group, often blending strategic proxy cultivation with ideological affinity through shared Deobandi roots. This overidentification has proven to be a profound miscalculation, as the Taliban have evolved from an asset to a liability—from a source of "strategic depth" to a "strategic concern." Strategically, Islamabad's primary objective in supporting the Taliban was to prevent the group from falling under Indian influence. However, since the Taliban's

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[127] Vinay Kaura, "Iran-Taliban Ties: Pragmatism over Ideology," Middle East Institute, April 11, 2024, https://mei.
edu/publications/iran-taliban-ties-pragmatism-over-ideology.

[128] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Russia-Afghanistan Relations in the Aftermath of the Moscow Attack," *Brookings*, March 28, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-afghanistan-relations-in-the-aftermath-of-the-moscow-attack/.

[129] Ihsanullah Omarkhail and Abdullah Zahid, "Afghanistan's Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats," *Asian Journal of Political Science*, March 5, 2025, 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2025.2473887.

[130] Yashraj Sharma, "Afghan Foreign Minister in India: Why New Delhi Is Embracing Taliban Now," Al Jazeera, accessed October 28, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/14/afghan-foreign-minister-in-india-why-new-delhi-is-embracing-taliban-now.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

return to power, their continued support for the TTP has become a major concern for Pakistan's internal security.[131]

Ideologically, too, Pakistan`s doctrine of labelling "good" and "bad" Taliban backfired, for TTP is using a similar approach against the state, which is exacerbating domestic extremism.[132] Such overreliance clearly overlooked the Taliban's autonomy, leading to tensions between the two neighboring countries. This strategic miscalculation is now more evident in the rise of terrorism within Pakistan, where ideological solidarity has blinded strategic foresight, thereby risking regional instability.[133]

Taliban`s Strategic Autonomy

The Taliban demonstrates strong strategic independence in international affairs, using Afghanistan's geostrategic location to broaden alliances and fend off outside pressure on counterterrorism or governance. Under Haibatullah Akhundzada, they have prioritized internal cohesion and have been actively involved in the region since 2021, welcoming Chinese investments, Indian and Iranian diplomacy, and Russian recognition without compromising on women's rights or inclusivity. Negotiating independently on projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) and the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000), balancing competitors like the UAE and Qatar for economic benefits, and refusing to demolish TTP sanctuaries despite Pakistani demands are all examples of this autonomy.[134] The Taliban violates international standards by fostering their version of *jihadist* education and keeping relations with Al-Qaeda. They do this by avoiding becoming overly dependent on any one entity and using their lack of recognition as leverage to obtain concessions.[135] Although this strategy ensures the regime's existence, it also exacerbates regional tensions and isolation.

Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

The following can be a feasible future course for Pakistan in the short, mid, and long term:

Short-term (0-2 Years)

a) Pakistan should formalize trade with Afghanistan without recognizing the government until the Taliban regime delivers on its commitment to denying safe havens to the terrorist groups causing violence in Pakistan.
b) It should establish 24/7 hotlines at the corps-province level for pre-announced patrol windows, and an airspace deconfliction protocol to avoid rapid escalation after cross-border incidents.
c) The repatriation of Afghan refugees should be used as a tactic to pressure the regime, but not to the extent that the already dissident Pashtun community begins to perceive it as unfair to their fellow Pashtuns. This measure should be applied with caution, only when necessary, and always within the bounds of human rights.
d) Military operations in the past have backfired, causing mounting dissent among Pashtuns in the tribal areas of KP. Therefore, the provincial police should be empowered, properly trained, and equipped with advanced technology, and

[131] Malik Ayub Sumbal, "Why Pakistan's Foreign Policy to Afghanistan Backfired," March 12, 2025, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/asian-kaleidoscope/why-pakistan-s-foreignpolicy-to-afghanistan-backfired/.
[132] Banerjee, "The Resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban – Implications for Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations."
[133] *Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report*.
[134] Toghrul Seyidbayli, "U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Realignment of Eurasian Rival Powers," *Journal of Strategic Security* 18, no. 2 (2025): 215–39, https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.18.2.2499.
[135] *Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report*.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

strengthened cooperation between the military and the police should be ensured to ensure peace in the province.

e) As for Afghanistan's border with Balochistan, it can also be managed effectively through enhanced collaboration and by empowering the provincial police and border security forces.
f) Provincial governments of KP and Balochistan should be taken on board for any decision regarding peace in these provinces.
g) Federal-provincial tensions should be reduced for better cooperation in this regard.[136]
h) Since China is not hesitant in including Afghanistan in its BRI projects, Islamabad should also offer Afghanistan its inclusion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), on the condition of its support in countering cross-border terrorism, for mutual and transactional engagements.
i) China can also play a pivotal role as a mediator between the two and influence Afghanistan not to provide active or passive support to terrorist outfits that perform terrorist activities across the border in Pakistan.
j) Diplomatic efforts should be accelerated to complete the fencing of the Pak-Afghan border, which cannot be achieved without support from the Afghan side.
k) Pashtun representatives should be given leading roles in diplomatic missions to Afghanistan, as the Taliban can better relate to them, and it is human nature for people to have a soft corner for those from their own ethnicity. Pashtun representatives also have a deeper understanding of *Pashtunwali* and a more accurate sense of the lifestyle and mindset of fellow Pashtuns in Afghanistan.
l) Online moderation and mosque/community engagement should be fast-tracked to blunt ideological spillover in Pakistan from TTP recruiting, mostly in Pashtun belts.

Long-Term (2-5 Years)

a) Commerce (banking channels, customs digitization, transit guarantees) should be further formalized while holding de jure recognition of the Taliban until durable counterterrorism benchmarks are met.
b) The border crossings should be fully digitalized with biometric gates and joint market zones to reduce friction. Security should be enhanced by installing camera towers, thermal-imaging cameras, drone-based thermal-imaging systems, kamikaze drones, radars, infrared cameras, and sensors.
c) The border forces of both countries should cooperate in securing the frontier and must be trained to effectively operate these systems and technologies.
d) Pakistan should come out of its over-identification trap and keep a transactional posture like India, Iran, China, and Russia toward the current regime in Afghanistan.
e) If Kabul itself, Istanbul, Doha, or any other actor hosts talks with the TTP again, Pakistan should participate with clear red lines (e.g., no amnesty for major crimes and no territorial concessions), phased incentives, and a snap-back clause, as past failures justify a stricter framework.

[136] PTI [@PTIofficial], "The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Peace Jirga, held in the provincial assembly on November 12th, issued a 15-point communique emphasizing dialogue with Afghanistan, internal peace initiatives, and provincial rights. 1- Prioritize talks with Afghan govt 2- Consult KP on Afghan policy," Tweet, Twitter, November 13, 2025, https://x.com/PTIofficial/status/1988819970487382269.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

f) Pakistan should curb local recruitment drivers for the TTP, particularly in KP and Balochistan. Targeted development in these provinces is essential, including better-equipped policing, fairer judicial systems, and increased employment opportunities for youth, in order to undercut the grievances that the TTP and similar groups exploit.
g) The National Action Plan should be implemented in letter and spirit to establish peace in Pakistan.[137]
h) An all-party committee should be formed to oversee the peace process with Kabul.[138] A permanent mechanism for dialogue should be established under the authority of this committee.
i) Internally Displaced People (IDPs) should be rehabilitated[139] for lasting peace, particularly in KP.
j) Pakistan should deepen issue-based ties with Iran, China, and Russia, and multilateralize counterterrorism reporting to maintain pressure on the Taliban regardless of bilateral dynamics.
k) Pakistan should establish an institutionalized verification regime by involving a third party—possibly China—to annually review data on counterterrorism efforts. A data-driven "CT Scorecard" could be developed jointly, incorporating metrics such as cross-border attacks, disrupted facilitators, and denial of safe havens.
l) It should make efforts to scale sustained programs like education reform, local media literacy, and rehabilitation of defectors so that the ideological shocks from Afghanistan do not reignite militancy at home.
m) Pakistan, for once and all, must decide that it will never be a part of someone else's war in the future.

Pakistan should use phase incentives, such as trade and CPEC add-ons, to incentivize verifiable CT moves. It should keep kinetic responses precise and closely coupled with hotlines to minimize the risk of skirmishes and spirals. The given policies should be adjusted based on monthly indicators, such as incident counts and recruitments, within terrorist groups. Pakistan should deal transactionally, verify relentlessly, and keep doors open for conditional cooperation.

Conclusion

The strategic culture of the Taliban—rooted in religious orthodoxy, Afghan traditions, and a legacy of resistance—has evolved from Taliban 1.0 to Taliban 2.0, fundamentally altering the security and strategic landscape of South Asia. For Pakistan, the Taliban's transformation from a strategic asset to a source of insecurity underscores the limitations of its long-held doctrine of "strategic depth." The resurgence of the TTP, persistent border disputes, and the erosion of Islamabad's leverage highlight the costs of overidentifying with

[137] Umer Farooq and Arif Hayat, "KP Peace Jirga Demands Centre Prioritise Talks with Kabul, Consult Province on Afghan Policy," Dawn, 12:03:22+05:00, https://www.dawn.com/news/1954653.
[138] PTI [@PTIofficial], "The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Peace Jirga, held in the provincial assembly on November 12th, issued a 15-point communique emphasizing dialogue with Afghanistan, internal peace initiatives, and provincial rights. 1- Prioritize talks with Afghan govt 2- Consult KP on Afghan policy," Tweet, Twitter, November 13, 2025, https://x.com/PTIofficial/status/1988819970487382269.
[139] PTI [@PTIofficial], "The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Peace Jirga, held in the provincial assembly on November 12th, issued a 15-point communique emphasizing dialogue with Afghanistan, internal peace initiatives, and provincial rights. 1- Prioritize talks with Afghan govt 2- Consult KP on Afghan policy," Tweet, Twitter, November 13, 2025, https://x.com/PTIofficial/status/1988819970487382269.

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

the Taliban on ideological grounds. Moreover, the group's autonomous diplomacy with regional powers and its ideological spillover into Pakistan's domestic politics complicate Islamabad's policy choices. These dynamics reveal that Pakistan must recalibrate its approach, shifting from reliance on religious affinity toward pragmatic, transactional engagement aligned with its national security imperatives. Ultimately, only a nuanced policy framework can mitigate the repercussions of the Taliban's evolving strategic culture for Pakistan's stability and regional security.