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Abstract: Since their emergence in 1994, the Taliban have played a significant role in shaping the internal politics of Afghanistan and its relations with other countries. This study analyzes the major causes and wide-ranging effects of the Taliban's return to power after the 2021 withdrawal of the United States Armed Forces. It also argues that their resurgence was not an isolated event. It was the result of internal failures in governance. These failures were combined with strategic miscalculations by external actors. Together, these factors contributed to the resurgence. The study uses qualitative and analytical methods. It is based on official reports, academic sources, and journalistic accounts. The research applies a cause-and-effect approach to identify the main internal and external factors. The post-2001 Afghan state faced serious internal weaknesses. Corruption was widespread, and many political groups were excluded from power. The security forces also depended heavily on foreign support. These problems reduced the government's legitimacy and created a power vacuum. Externally, the U.S.-led strategy focused mainly on military action. This approach alienated many local communities. At the same time, the peace process had major flaws. It strengthened the Taliban while weakening the position of the Afghan government. The group received external support and access to safe havens, which strengthened its position. The consequences were severe. At the domestic level, the takeover led to a serious decline in human rights. Women and girls were especially affected. It also intensified the humanitarian crisis. Regionally, the Taliban's return has increased instability. It has encouraged militant groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and created new diplomatic challenges for neighbouring states. For Pakistan, the Taliban's resurgence raises the risk of domestic terrorism. It also places additional pressure on the country's fragile economy and may lead to greater political isolation. At the same time, regional rivals such as India may try to take advantage of instability along the border. The study concludes that lasting peace requires inclusive political settlements and legitimate governance. Military solutions imposed from outside cannot ensure sustainable stability.

Introduction

The Taliban emerged in Afghanistan due to a power vacuum and widespread instability. This situation

developed after the Soviet–Afghan War. It was further intensified by a brutal civil war among former Mujahideen factions that had earlier received support from the United States. These incidents created widespread despair and a strong public desire for order. In this situation, the Taliban emerged from Islamic madrasas. Their main aim was to restore peace and stability in the country. They also sought to end the civil war among the Mujahideen factions. The Taliban gained rapid popularity after capturing Kandahar in 1994 and later the capital Kabul in 1996. After taking power, they proclaimed Afghanistan as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. During their first rule (1996–2001), the Taliban enforced a strict interpretation of Sharia. Their policies led to serious human rights violations, particularly affecting women. After the September 11 attacks, the United States blamed al-Qaeda for the attacks. The U.S. government demanded that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders. The Taliban refused this demand. As a result, the United States led a military invasion of Afghanistan. By October 2001, the Taliban government had been overthrown (Abbas, 2015). However, their defeat was not permanent. The leadership reorganized in Pakistan and started a long insurgency that lasted about twenty years. They used cross-border safe havens, local grievances, and guerrilla warfare tactics. Gradually, they regained strength and territory. By 2018, they were contesting or controlling many districts in Afghanistan. Their return to power was facilitated by the 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban, which prepared the way for the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Taking advantage of this situation, the Taliban launched a rapid offensive in 2021 and captured Kabul. This development undermined many of the fragile socio-economic and human rights gains achieved over the previous two decades. After regaining power, the Taliban re-established a strict system of governance. They restricted civil liberties, banned girls' education, and suppressed political dissent. At the same time, Afghanistan has been facing a severe humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, their rigid ideology limits their ability to address the basic needs of the population. It also prevents them from gaining international recognition. As a result, this cycle continues. It shows the lasting strength of militant ideology. Such ideology often grows in conditions of state failure and foreign intervention. Consequently, it leads to human suffering, regional instability, and ongoing global security challenges (Bergen, 2021).

Significance and Scope of the Study

This study is important because it offers a sophisticated understanding of various internal and external factors that led to the Taliban's comeback and its far-reaching effects. Policymakers, academics, and security analysts can benefit from the research's insights into foreign geopolitical factors and internal governance shortcomings. The results add to the discussion of post-conflict reconstruction, conflict settlement, and ways to keep such state failures from happening in vulnerable areas.

Methodology

In order to investigate the internal and external causes influencing the Taliban's revival in Afghanistan, this study uses qualitative and analytical approaches. Research data is collected from primary and secondary sources like official reports, books, journal and newspaper articles, policy papers, and academic literature. The political, social, and security ramifications are evaluated using a cause-and-effect paradigm, with a focus on how they may affect regional and international stability.

Background of Taliban's Roots of Resurgence

Soviet Union's departure from Afghanistan in 1989 and struggle for central power between Mujahideen and the Soviet-backed communist regime triggered civil war which later spread among the mujahideen factions. This power vacuum influenced the Taliban's ascent to power in 1994. The Taliban, primarily Pashtun students graduated from Pakistani Islamic madrasas swore to impose Sharia laws in

Afghanistan and restore order after occupying Kabul in 1996. However, the Taliban administration was isolated globally due to its strict reign, which was marked by the repression of women, the destruction of cultural artifacts, and the imposition of harsh religious edicts. The Taliban were overthrown by a US led invasion because they had given asylum to al-Qaeda, the organization blamed for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. However, the Taliban were not vanished after their defeat in 2001. They transformed themselves and launched struggle against the US led government in Afghanistan and gradually expanded their influence in rural areas over the course of the next 20 years. It was a wonder that the Taliban who apparently out of the picture in 2001 was able to pull off such a remarkable comeback. The explanation is in a complicated web of external factors, internal Afghan dynamics, and the strategies of faulty international actors (Bergen, 2021).

Causes of the Rebirth of the Taliban in 2021

A few of the reasons behind the Taliban's resurgence are listed below:

Failure of State-Building and Governance

The failure of international state-building initiatives was one of the main reasons for the Taliban's comeback. The Afghan government was weak, frail, and incredibly corrupt in spite of the enormous world financial assistance. The Afghan people found it difficult to accept the administration, which they frequently saw as an imposition of foreign powers. This lack of legitimacy was caused by several factors (Barzegar, 2021).

Corruption: Corruption plagued every level of the Afghan government, from the top officials to the local bureaucrats. According to Transparency International's 2021 report, Afghanistan has consistently been ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world; the number was 174th out of 180 countries until 2021 (Transparency International, 2022). The public's perception of the government as incompetent and self-serving was exacerbated by pervasive corruption, which also made it more difficult for the state to deliver necessary services. Due to the public's decreased trust in the government, the Taliban were able to establish themselves as a more stable and uncorruptible alternative (Goodson, 2014).

Ineffective Institutions: The international world has overlooked the local power structures and tribal dynamics that have historically governed Afghanistan in favor of concentrating largely on creating centralized institutions. The Taliban were able to take advantage of frustrations and position themselves as a credible alternative because of this gulf between the Afghan government and its citizens, particularly in rural areas. (Jones, 2017).

Failure to Foster Inclusive Politics: In Afghan society, ethnic and tribal differences are ingrained. In the Pashtun-dominated south and east, where the Taliban had the largest base of support, the US backed Afghan government, which was controlled by urban elites, frequently neglected to interact with rural, tribal, and underprivileged people (Rubin, 2002). The impression that the government did not serve the interests of all Afghans was strengthened by this exclusionary politics, which deepened tensions (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Strategic Miscalculations by International Forces

The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan can be directly linked to a series of strategic miscalculations and policy errors made by international forces, particularly the United States and its NATO allies. These missteps not only weakened the position of the Afghan government but inadvertently empowered the Taliban. It allowed the group to re-establish itself both militarily and politically. One of the most consequential mistakes was the prioritization of a military-centric approach over a comprehensive, long-term political settlement. Instead of prioritizing inclusive governance and national reconciliation, the foreign coalition's vigorous counterinsurgency operations following the

initial collapse of the Taliban government in 2001 were aimed at militarily destroying the Taliban. A notable example of this was the troop surge under President Barack Obama (2009 -2013), during which an additional 30,000 American soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan. This drive temporarily reduced the Taliban's operational capabilities, but it did not solve the underlying sociopolitical and economic problems that motivated the insurgency (Jones, 2021).

Furthermore, the heavy reliance on military might often cause alienation among the local population. The murders of civilians, night raids, drone strikes, and destruction of property fueled widespread hostility and suspicion toward both foreign troops and the Afghan government they supported. These incidents often reinforced the Taliban's narrative of resistance to foreign occupation and won them sympathy and support from disillusioned rural populations (Jones, 2017). These issues were made worse and the fragile power system was further undermined by the 2020 Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the United States. By excluding the Afghan government from the negotiation process, the agreement undermined Kabul's legitimacy and positioned the Taliban as an equal and legitimate political player on the international stage. Taliban leadership gained confidence from the wording of the deal, which set a deadline for the withdrawal of NATO troops (Jones, 2022).

It incentivized the Taliban to escalate their military operations, as they anticipated that the withdrawal of foreign troops would leave a power vacuum they could readily exploit. Additionally, the premature release of thousands of Taliban prisoners as part of the peace process strengthened the group's ranks at a critical time. These strategic miscalculations like an over-reliance on military force, alienation of local populations, and flawed peace negotiations cumulatively eroded the legitimacy and capacity of the Afghan state while simultaneously boosting the Taliban's morale and strategic positioning. As a result, when international forces withdrew, the Taliban were well-prepared to launch a swift and decisive campaign to reclaim control over Afghanistan (Partlow, 2021).

Foreign Support and Safe Havens

External assistance helped the Taliban maintain their insurgency for more than 20 years. Particularly, Pakistan has been charged with giving the Taliban asylum and logistical support. Although Pakistan denied these allegations, however, there was evidence that certain members of its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) saw the Taliban as a useful tool to oppose Indian influence in Afghanistan. Taliban combatants were able to freely pass, reassemble, and launch operations due to the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Rashid, 2010).

Safe havens and foreign assistance have been crucial in sustaining terrorist activity and creating instability in areas that are prone to violence. Pakistan has frequently been at the center of this dynamic because of its geographic location and political history, especially when it comes to the Afghan War, sectarian conflict, and the larger war on terror. Foreign assistance to militant organizations in Pakistan was formalized during the Cold War as a component of larger geopolitical plans and great game. For example, in the 1980s, the United States and Saudi Arabia supported the Mujahideen battling the Soviet Union in Afghanistan financially and logistically. With its tribal areas acting as safe havens for these fighters, Pakistan emerged as a frontline state in this struggle. These changes had long-lasting effects, establishing the nation's armed groups' infrastructure and militancy culture. (Rashid, 2021).

The Afghan war was hardly the only instance of foreign support for extremist organizations. Pakistan's religious and sectarian environment was greatly impacted by Saudi Arabia's export of its Wahhabi ideology and financial backing for Sunni religious seminaries (madrasas). With organizations like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) becoming important players in the sectarian strife, these seminaries became into havens for sectarian militancy. This outside intervention deepened

domestic conflicts and gave sectarian violence the resources and justification it needed to thrive (Nasr, 2006). However, the sectarian division was exacerbated by Iran's backing of Shia organizations in Pakistan, especially Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafariya (TNFJ). Pakistan's internal security and stability were undermined by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which made the country a battlefield for proxy conflicts between these regional powers (Partlow, 2021).

Safe havens have made the problems caused by foreign assistance even worse. Historically, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, which are now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, offered uncontrolled areas where militant groups could gather, practice, and attack with little hindrance. Additionally, the porous border with Afghanistan made it easier for terrorists to move across the border, giving organizations like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda a comparatively safe operating environment. The issue still exists since these regions have not been fully integrated politically and socially, even after military operations like Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad attempted to destroy these safe havens (Javed et al, 2025; Javed et al, 2025).

Most significantly, safe havens and foreign funding have given terrorist organizations a vicious cycle of impunity and dependence. These groups have been able to evade scrutiny and continue their activities by obtaining foreign funding and taking sanctuary in ungoverned regions. In addition to sustaining violence, this dynamic has undermined investor trust and diverted resources from Pakistan's socioeconomic advancement in favor of security. The issue has been made worse by the international community's contradictory position on militancy. After supporting terrorist organizations throughout the Cold War, the United States and its allies denounced Pakistan for harboring these same actors after 9/11. The confidence between Pakistan and its international allies has been damaged by this dishonesty, making it more difficult to combat extremism cooperatively. According to international counterterrorism operations have been hampered by the selective support for particular groups motivated by strategic concerns rather than a moral opposition to all kinds of extremism (Abbas, 2015). Pakistan needs to take a number of measures to address the issues raised by safe havens and foreign assistance. This entails increasing border control, integrating excluded people into the national mainstream, and lowering reliance on politically charged foreign aid. In order to combat militancy, international actors must also take a consistent and collaborative stance, putting long-term stability ahead of immediate geopolitical advantages. Pakistan can only expect to get past the history of foreign aid and safe havens that continue to jeopardize its peace and growth by implementing such measures (Abbas, 2015).

Ethnic and Tribal Dynamics

Understanding Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal dynamics was essential to understanding the course of the conflict and the resulting sociopolitical division brought about by the Afghan Mujahideen's comeback. Afghanistan's ethnic makeup has long been significant to its governance and conflict dynamics, with Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks among its largest ethnic groups. These dynamics, which were impacted by both internal and external factors during the Mujahideen's resurgence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, had a significant impact on the opposition to Soviet rule. However, this period also solidified the fractures that continue to undermine Afghanistan's stability and unity. Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, have long dominated the Mujahideen movement and held governmental power. Due to their shared ethnic and tribal ties, many Pashtun tribes supported Mujahideen parties such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. This connection allowed the Mujahideen to leverage tribal loyalty networks for recruiting, funding, and operational support. However, other ethnic groups, especially Tajiks and Hazaras, felt excluded from the resistance

movement's decision-making processes due to the overrepresentation of Pashtuns in leadership roles (Rashid, 2021).

The Tajiks, who were mostly found in northern Afghanistan, were also heavily involved in the Mujahideen resistance movement. They were led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, popularly known as the "Lion of Panjshir." Massoud gained a lot of sympathy in non-Pashtun areas because, in contrast to Pashtun groups, his strategy placed an emphasis on inclusivity and localized administration. But during the post-Soviet civil war, disagreements between Pashtun and Tajik factions frequently weakened the Mujahideen's unity and erupted into open warfare (Coll, 2004).

During this time, the Hazaras, an ethnic group that is primarily Shia, experienced systematic marginalization. The Hazaras, who have historically faced discrimination from Afghanistan's Sunni-dominated political structures, first had difficulty establishing themselves inside the Mujahideen movement. But with Iran's help, they finally united under the name of Hezb-e-Wahdat, a Shia political and militant organization. The foundation for future sectarian conflict was laid by this alliance with a foreign Shia state, which widened ethnic and sectarian divisions, especially among Sunni Pashtun groups (Roy, 1986).

Utilization of Ethnic Tribes: The Mujahideen's ethnic and tribal divides were exacerbated in large part by outside forces. The main supporters of the resistance, the United States and Pakistan, mostly used Pashtun-dominated groups like Hezb-e-Islami and Burhanuddin Rabbani's Jamiat-e-Islami to transfer weapons and aid. In addition to marginalizing non-Pashtun people, this preferential treatment led to power disparities that stoked interethnic conflict. The Mujahideen were further divided along ethnic lines at the same time by Uzbekistan's support of Abdul Rashid Dostum's Uzbek militia and Iran's assistance for Shia groups like Hezb-e-Wahdat. The overall efficacy of the resistance was undermined by these splits, which also planted the roots for the catastrophic civil war that ensued after the Soviet exit (Barfield, 2010).

Pashtun Mujahideen: Significant difficulties were also brought about by tribal tensions within the Pashtun-dominated Mujahideen. The formation of a single command structure was hampered by the Pashtun tribal system, which is defined by a dispersed and frequently tense network of local leaders. Conflicts between Mujahideen factions for resources, territory, and ideologies were common. This disunity later contributed to the political disintegration of Afghanistan and made it more difficult for the Mujahideen to put up a united front against the Soviets (Dorronsoro, 2005).

Crucially, the Mujahideen's reliance on tribal and ethnic ties to mobilize had a lasting effect on Afghanistan's attempts to establish a state. Although these networks gave resistance to its organizational structure, they also strengthened tribal and ethnic allegiances at the expense of national cohesion. Warlordism emerged in post-Soviet Afghanistan as tribal and ethnic leaders put their followers' interests ahead of the general welfare of the country. This dynamic was most noticeable during the 1990s civil war, when the nation became even more divided as erstwhile Mujahideen factions turned against one another in a struggle for control of central government. Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal dynamics during the Mujahideen's revival were both advantageous and disadvantageous. These factors strengthened the fissures that would eventually threaten Afghanistan's security even as they made it possible for disparate populations to unite against a common foe. These divisions were made worse by outside operations, leaving a legacy of fragmentation that still hinders Afghanistan's attempts at nation-building and reconciliation. The necessity of inclusive governance that cuts across ethnic and tribal lines in order to promote a united and cohesive Afghanistan is a crucial lesson to be learned from this time (Goodson, 2014).

Collapse of the Afghan Military

The Afghan National Army's (ANA) demise was one of the primary factors contributing to the Taliban's quick capture of Afghanistan. The ANA was not equipped to defend the nation after the withdrawal of the US soldiers in August 2021, even after years of training and billions of dollars in aid. This collapse was caused by multiple factors, including:

Dependence on the US Support: The ANA was fundamentally reliant on sustained American support for critical operational functions including intelligence, airpower, and complex logistics. When the United States withdrew its assistance, these essential capabilities were abruptly removed. Consequently, the Afghan military found itself without the necessary framework to independently sustain combat operations, leading to its rapid collapse. The loss of aerial support, real-time battlefield intelligence, and supply chains proved decisive, stripping the ANA of the means to effectively organize and confront insurgent forces. This dependence, cultivated over years, meant that the withdrawal of external support directly resulted in the dissolution of its fighting capacity.

Lack of Will to Fight: A lot of Afghan soldiers didn't want to fight for a government that they thought was dishonest and uninterested in them. Entire military battalions resigned peacefully in the last months prior to the Taliban's takeover, frequently engaging in negotiations with them to prevent violence ("US withdrawal prompted collapse of Afghan army," 2022).

Impacts of the Taliban's Rebirth

Human Rights and Women's Rights: The Taliban's return to power has had an immediate and severe impact on human rights, particularly for women and girls in Afghanistan. During their previous rule from 1996 to 2001, women were largely excluded from public life, education, and employment. Despite initial assurances in 2021 that women's rights would be respected "within the framework of Islamic law," reports indicate that similar restrictions have been reimposed. Access to education for girls has been sharply curtailed, with secondary schools closed in most provinces (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Women have also been barred from most government positions and are now required to wear the burqa in public. These measures represent some of the most visible and immediate consequences of the Taliban's resurgence. Further actions, such as the closure of beauty salons which resulted in the loss of approximately 60,000 jobs for women demonstrate a continued assault on women's economic participation. Beyond employment, these closures also eliminated one of the few remaining women-only spaces outside the home, which had served as an essential source of community and support. This is especially significant given the Taliban's broader dismantling of services for women and girls facing domestic violence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Humanitarian Crisis: While Afghanistan was already facing a dire humanitarian situation before the Taliban's return to power, the crisis has intensified dramatically since August 2021. By 2025, an estimated 22.9 to 23.7 million people more than half the population are expected to require urgent assistance. This deepening emergency is driven by systemic economic collapse, severe food insecurity, climate-induced disasters, and the continued erosion of women's rights. The economy, once heavily dependent on foreign aid, has virtually collapsed following the suspension of most development assistance and the freezing of approximately \$9.5 billion in Afghan central bank reserves in 2021. As a result, millions now face the threat of starvation, with over half the population experiencing acute food insecurity heading into 2025. The Taliban-led administration is unable to consistently pay public sector salaries or deliver essential services, compounding the effects of the economic breakdown (Afghanistan, 2025). Compounding these challenges, the remnants of the COVID-19 pandemic have further strained an already fragile healthcare system, while ongoing conflict and displacement continue to overwhelm

limited resources. The Taliban's inexperience in governance, coupled with international sanctions and isolation, has only deepened the suffering. As a result, millions of Afghans remain heavily dependent on humanitarian aid for survival (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2021).

Regional Instability: The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan has had a significant impact on South Asia, Central Asia, and other regions. Given Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads of many politically sensitive and economically significant regions, the events in Kabul have raised fears about terrorism, refugee displacement, drug trafficking, and shifting geopolitical alignments. Below is a more detailed examination of the responses and impacts of the Taliban's reappearance on particular neighboring states and regional powers.

Regional Shifts and Afghanistan (2021-2025)

Pakistan

Pakistan and the Taliban have a complicated and conflicting relationship. Pakistan has historically played a key role in aiding the Taliban throughout their rise in the 1990s because it viewed them as a proxy group to safeguard its strategic depth in Afghanistan and counterbalance Indian influence. Islamabad's security apparatus, primarily through the ISI, maintained close ties with Taliban leaders and provided safe havens, especially in areas like Quetta. Pakistan's long-term objective of an Afghan government independent of India is supposedly being achieved with the Taliban's return to power, but the reality has proven more complex and worrisome for Islamabad. The emergence of TTP, an umbrella group of Pakistani terrorists with operational and ideological ties to the Afghan Taliban, has resulted in serious security concerns. Since 2021, the TTP has expanded its attacks on Pakistani military and civilian targets, especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Islamabad's generally fruitless efforts to broker ceasefires or negotiate with the TTP, sometimes with the assistance of the Afghan Taliban, have escalated tensions along the Durand Line (Javed & Shafiq, 2022).

Furthermore, Pakistan faces a destabilizing ripple effect from Afghanistan, where a newly confident Taliban regime has shown little willingness or capacity to rein in militant groups such as the TTP. This has heightened fears in Islamabad over the security of its own volatile western provinces. Complicating matters are persistent economic pressures, a continuing influx of Afghan refugees, and vulnerable border controls all straining Pakistan's internal stability. Diplomatically, relations have grown increasingly tense. Despite its long-standing backing of the Taliban, Pakistan now struggles to exert meaningful influence over an autonomous and ideologically driven leadership in Kabul (Jones, 2021; Rashid, 2021). This represents a dramatic reversal from the optimism in Islamabad following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. For years, Pakistan's security establishment saw a friendly Taliban government as the perfect strategic buffer, pursuing a dual policy of public cooperation with successive Afghan administrations while privately nurturing the Taliban's resurgence. That strategy, however, has now collapsed spectacularly a breakdown starkly illustrated by a unprecedented Pakistani airstrike on Afghan soil in 2025. At the heart of the rupture lies the issue of the TTP. Pakistan had anticipated that its Taliban allies would dismantle or expel the group, which it blames for a sharp escalation in violence on its soil including over 2,400 security force fatalities in just the first nine months of 2025. The Taliban, however, regard the TTP as Pakistan's internal problem. Early mediation efforts failed in 2022, and Kabul's reluctance to confront its ideological brethren stems from both deep bonds forged during conflict and a pragmatic fear that cracking down could strengthen an even more extreme rival: the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) (Hakimi 2025).

Iran

Iran's approach towards Afghanistan under Taliban rule is shaped by a confluence of security, sectarian, and economic concerns. The most immediate and sensitive issue is the treatment of Afghanistan's Shia Hazara minority, with whom Iran shares deep ethno-religious and cultural ties. During the Taliban's earlier rule in the 1990s, widespread atrocities were committed against Hazaras, and fears of renewed persecution loom large in Tehran's strategic calculations. Iran has adopted a dual-track strategy. On one hand, it has cautiously engaged with the Taliban diplomatically to secure its interests, reopening its embassy in Kabul and maintaining contact with Taliban officials. On the other hand, Tehran has maintained and even strengthened ties with various non-Taliban factions, including some Hazara militias and elements of the former Northern Alliance, to hedge against potential Taliban overreach (Hamdard et al, 2023). Economically, Iran is deeply concerned about increased drug trafficking. Afghanistan remains the world's largest producer of opium, and instability threatens to amplify the flow of narcotics across Iran's eastern frontier. Iran already bears the burden of one of the highest rates of opiate addiction globally, and border management becomes increasingly critical. Furthermore, water disputes over the Helmand River, vital for Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, have re-emerged as contentious issues with the Taliban authorities. Iran also fears a refugee crisis, as tens of thousands of Afghans have sought refuge within Iranian territory, straining social services and economic resources in an already sanction-strapped Iranian economy (Barzegar, 2021).

India

From 2021 to 2025, India-Afghanistan relations underwent a cautious and pragmatic transformation, shifting from outright non-engagement to a calculated, interest-based interaction with the Taliban regime. Following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, India evacuated its embassy and suspended diplomatic ties, refusing to grant formal recognition due to concerns over the regime's legitimacy, treatment of minorities, and ties to terrorist groups. However, driven by imperatives to counter Pakistani influence, prevent Afghan territory from being used by anti-India militants like IS-K, and secure its strategic investments and regional connectivity aspirations, New Delhi initiated a discreet outreach. This involved providing humanitarian aid (including wheat and vaccines), maintaining a small technical team in Kabul for project oversight, and engaging in backchannel talks, often facilitated by Qatar. These efforts gradually built a working relationship with the Taliban's de facto authorities, particularly the pragmatic faction led by Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. The outreach was mutually beneficial: for the Taliban, it offered a hedge against their deteriorating ties with Pakistan, a potential source of economic support, and a gradual pathway to international legitimacy; for India, it was a realpolitik move to safeguard core security interests and maintain a foothold in the region. This careful diplomacy culminated in Muttaqi's landmark visit to India in October 2025, which symbolized a significant normalization and resulted in India's commitment to fully reopen its embassy in Kabul. Thus, by late 2025, the relationship had evolved into a tactical, though not formally recognized, engagement focused on immediate strategic gains regional stability and counter-terrorism assurances for India, and diplomatic survival and economic hedging for the Taliban fundamentally altering the traditional India-Pakistan rivalry dynamics in Afghanistan (Azami & Mollan, 2025).

China and Russia

From 2021 to 2025, China and Russia pursued distinct but parallel paths of pragmatic engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan, ultimately converging in a shared strategy of prioritizing strategic interests over ideological conditions for recognition. Initially, both powers maintained operational ties with the de facto authority while withholding formal diplomatic recognition, adhering to a cautious international

consensus that demanded human rights reforms. China focused on securing core interests: obtaining Taliban assurances against threats to Xinjiang from groups like IS-K, exploring Afghanistan's mineral resources, and providing consistent political cover at the UN, all while keeping its embassy active in Kabul. However, by 2025, Beijing's initial position as a primary partner had diluted, as the Taliban diversified its foreign engagements with India, Iran, and Gulf states, leaving China's economic ambitions like extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor stalled by security concerns and a refusal to be the first to grant official recognition. In contrast, Russia systematically deepened its engagement, driven by counter-terrorism cooperation against IS-K, concerns over narcotics trafficking, and a desire to reclaim influence in Central Asia. This culminated in a decisive break from the international consensus in July 2025, when Russia became the first country to formally recognize the Taliban government, elevating its diplomatic presence and signaling that strategic imperatives had definitively outweighed the conditional demands of the West. Together, their approaches China's designed, risk-averse incrementalism and Russia's bold, recognition-granting move undermined the unified conditional stance, encouraging a regional shift toward managed engagement and solidifying the Taliban's contested but increasingly operational role in the international arena (Chen, 2025).

Global Terrorism and Extremism

Global terrorism and extremism have been greatly impacted by the Afghan Taliban's comeback, especially following the United States' exit from Afghanistan in 2021. In addition to redefining the geopolitical dynamics of South and Central Asia, the Taliban's return to power following a two-decade insurgency has given extremist organizations around the world more confidence. A critical examination of this evolution shows how the Taliban's philosophy, style of government, and partnerships have fueled violent cycles, hampered international counterterrorism initiatives, and encouraged the growth of extremist movements around the world. The prolonged and ill-coordinated attempts by the United States and its allies to pacify the region have directly contributed to the Taliban's resurgence as a ruling force in Afghanistan. The 2020 Doha Agreement, which cleared the path for the U.S. exit, marginalized the Afghan government while giving the Taliban considerable legitimacy. For jihadist organizations, this alleged triumph over a world powerhouse acted as a rallying cry, reaffirming the idea that persistent insurgency and ideological dedication could defeat even the strongest opponents. The Taliban's victory has given fresh life to organizations like Al-Qaeda, which remained close to the Taliban even after the latter promised to cut ties (Giustozzi, 2022).

Extremist beliefs have been made easier to spread by the Taliban's governing style, which is based on a rigid interpretation of Islamic law. Their policies have been widely criticized, especially those pertaining to minority protection, women's education, and human rights. However, extreme organizations that see the Taliban as a template for the establishment of theocratic regimes find resonance in these practices. This dynamic has not only given local insurgencies in nearby nations more confidence, but it has also given jihadist groups around the world a model to follow. For instance, the Taliban's success in regaining power via brutality and ideological tenacity has served as an inspiration for organizations like Boko Haram in Nigeria and ISIS branches in Africa and Southeast Asia (Jones, 2022).

Other extremist groups have taken advantage of the authority vacuum created by the Taliban's ascendancy, which has also undermined regional security. The Taliban's adversary, the IS-K, has taken advantage of the disarray in Afghanistan to increase the scope of its activities. Instability has been exacerbated by IS-K's high-profile attacks against Taliban officials, religious minorities, and civilians. IS-K and the Taliban's rivalry have exacerbated international terrorism by fostering a competitive environment in which organizations strive to outdo one another in violent acts to establish authority

and credibility (Riedel, 2021).

Beyond Afghanistan, the Taliban's comeback has broader ramifications. With organizations like TTP gaining power from the Taliban's success, Pakistan, which has long been accused of aiding the Taliban, is seeing a rise in militancy inside its borders. States in Central Asia have voiced concerns about the spread of extremist ideas and cross-border insurgencies, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Despite their practical interactions with the Taliban, China and Russia are concerned about the rise of Islamist militancy in their respective Caucasus and Xinjiang regions (Kaleem & Iqbal, 2023).

The reappearance of the Taliban has weakened counterterrorism narratives promoted by Western countries around the world. The limitations of military deployments as a tactic to counter extremism have been made clear by the swift fall of the Afghan government and the disorganized withdrawal of foreign forces. Both jihadist organizations and anti-Western propaganda, which portrays the retreat as a sign of waning Western influence and power, have gained confidence as a result of this move. These kinds of stories could encourage the recruitment of extremist groups around the world, especially in areas where socioeconomic issues coincide with anti-Western attitudes (Byman, 2021).

Crucially, the Taliban's comeback exposes how the international community has failed to address the underlying issues that lead to extremism in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Radical ideas were able to flourish because of decades of foreign involvement, corruption, and poor governance. The Taliban were able to reestablish their networks and take advantage of public unhappiness with foreign occupation because there was no comprehensive, long-term plan for restoration and reconciliation after 2001. Violence has been sustained by this cycle of indifference, not only in Afghanistan but also in other areas linked to international terrorist networks. The resurgence of the Taliban also poses serious questions regarding international aid and resource control. Afghanistan has become a focus point for international powers and criminal networks due to its advantageous position and unexplored mineral richness, which includes rare earth metals. Global security is directly threatened by the Taliban's capacity to use these resources to finance their government and maybe aid affiliated extremist organizations. Furthermore, as marginalized groups become more vulnerable to radicalization, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan which is made worse by international sanctions and aid restrictions provides an ideal environment for the recruitment of extremists (Katzman, 2021).

By empowering jihadist organizations, upsetting regional stability, and eroding counterterrorism narratives, the Afghan Taliban's comeback has had a substantial impact on international terrorism and extremism. International efforts to combat terrorism are complicated by the geopolitical repercussions of the Taliban's return, while its government model and ideological impact continue to inspire extremist forces around the world. A complex and well-coordinated strategy that puts long-term stability, regional collaboration, and addressing the socioeconomic causes of extremism first is needed to address these issues. Without these initiatives, the cycle of violence brought on by the Taliban's comeback is probably going to continue, with serious ramifications for international security (Katzman, 2021).

New Regional Dynamics and Tension for Pakistan (2026)

During first quarter of 2026, military clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan represent a tragic low point in their long-troubled relationship. Pakistan asserts that for years it pursued diplomacy, supported by friendly nations and the bond of Muslim brotherhood, to resolve outstanding issues. It alleges, however, that the Afghan Taliban regime not only rejected these overtures but actively facilitated terrorist groups like the TTP from Afghan soil. When economic pressure through closed trade routes failed to deter cross-border attacks that killed hundreds of civilians and targeted Pakistani border posts, Pakistan claims it was left with no choice but to respond with force. In a series of operations, Pakistani

forces reportedly struck militant hideouts inside Afghanistan, destroying over 130 posts. This action, framed as a new policy of zero tolerance, came at the cost of 12 Pakistani soldiers' lives. This military intervention marks a stark reversal of Pakistan's historical "strategic depth" doctrine, underscoring its failure. For many, this moment closes a historical circle: a frontline state in the war against the Soviet Union now finds its current predicament rooted in the adventurist policies of that era, particularly under General Zia-ul-Haq. Internationally, there is a united desire to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a haven for global terrorism. Diplomatic efforts by China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are already underway to de-escalate. However, these border clashes are far more than a security incident; they are a multi-faceted strategic challenge with profound implications. History warns that war brings only loss. In any conflict, Afghanistan would likely be the biggest casualty. Already isolated and with an incomplete political process, the Taliban regime has failed to fulfill its Doha commitments, and its alignment with anti-Pakistan forces is seen by some as contrary to the spirit of Islam. The potential consequences of sustained tension are dire. Regional powers, and others like India and Israel, could exploit the instability. A deeper refugee crisis would burden neighbors, while both fragile economies would suffer, with border communities hit hardest. Conflict would empower extremists, not defeat them. This escalation is not an isolated event but the culmination of years of accumulated grievances. The core question is whether leaders on both sides will learn from the past. Afghanistan remains a sensitive chapter in Pakistan's security calculus, as instability there directly impacts Pakistan's own tribal belt. This crisis is ultimately a declaration of the failure of diplomacy. Border disputes, mutual accusations of state-sponsored terrorism, and deep mistrust have locked both nations in a dangerous cycle. The true victims are civilians, for whom war offers no solutions. If peace is the genuine objective, both nations must choose wisdom over emotion, making their shared border a bridge for cooperation, not a battlefield. Conflict only empowers non-state actors, whose influence expands when states confront each other. Economically, disrupted trade undermines prospects for regional integration, such as access to Central Asian markets. This volatility also invites major powers to engage in proxy politics. The most lasting cost, however, is the human toll: displacement and spreading hatred create wounds that are slow to heal. The current tension must be seen as a stark warning, not an inevitable path to war. This moment demands a return to dialogue over force and cooperation over blame. If this path is not chosen, the fire on the border will not be contained, threatening to engulf the entire region. Given recent global events, Pakistan's leadership must also remain acutely aware of other hostile intentions toward its national assets, and prioritize the country's future above all else (Nizami, 2026).

Conclusion

The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan represents a complex interaction of internal vulnerabilities and external miscalculations spanning four decades. What emerged from the power vacuum of the Soviet withdrawal evolved through cycles of foreign intervention, flawed state-building and strategic errors that ultimately enabled a militant ideology to reclaim power in 2021. The collapse of the internationally-backed Afghan government cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, it resulted from cumulative failures: pervasive corruption that eroded public trust, institution-building that ignored local dynamics, military dependency on US support rather than sustainable capacity and peace processes that legitimized the Taliban while marginalizing the Kabul government. These internal weaknesses were exploited through external support networks, particularly cross-border sanctuaries that sustained the insurgency for two decades. The consequences of this resurgence have been profound and multifaceted. Within Afghanistan, the Taliban's return has triggered a humanitarian catastrophe, with over half the population requiring urgent assistance, while women and girls face systematic exclusion

from public life. Regionally, the power shift has redrawn diplomatic alignments, forcing neighbours into pragmatic engagement while simultaneously empowering militant networks like the TTP, which now threaten Pakistan's stability. Globally, the Taliban's victory has reinvigorated extremist movements, demonstrating that persistent insurgency can defeat superior military powers. This psychological boost to jihadist organizations worldwide complicates counterterrorism efforts and challenges the narrative of Western-led security frameworks. As of 2026, the region stands at a critical juncture. The escalating Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions represent not merely a border dispute but the culmination of decades of accumulated grievances and failed diplomacy. The historical irony is stark: Pakistan, once the architect of the "strategic depth" doctrine through Taliban patronage, now faces the blowback of that policy through increased TTP violence and diplomatic isolation. Breaking this cycle requires recognizing that military solutions alone cannot address the underlying dynamics. Sustainable peace demands inclusive governance that transcends ethnic divisions, regional cooperation that prioritizes stability over strategic competition, and international engagement that addresses root causes rather than symptoms. Without such comprehensive approaches, Afghanistan will remain trapped in recurring cycles of conflict, with consequences that extend far beyond its borders.

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