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Beliefs and International Legitimacy

The Janus Face of the Taliban's Political Worldview and Value Rationality

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Abstract

This article analyses the inter-connection between the Taliban's international fortunes and their political worldview and value rationality. Drawing on their discourse and expert interviews, the paper offers an explanation for the Taliban's return to Kabul and hitherto lack of explicit official recognition despite their manifold external relations. Spanning three decades, the Taliban's ideational canon has proved to be a double-edged sword in their pursuit of international legitimacy. As insurgents (2001–2021), it underpinned their remarkable battlefield and governance resilience, contributing to their restoration to power. As rulers (1996–2001 and 2021–present), it has put them on a collision course with certain international norms and security interests, precipitating the downfall of the first Emirate and lingering concerns about the second. This enquiry into the Taliban's creed is not only crucial for grasping the intricacies of their precarious international standing but also addresses a shortcoming in Western scholarship, where the role of the group's value system in wearing down—and ultimately outlasting—the Western occupation is often overlooked.

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Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took over Kabul and resurrected their government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Twenty years earlier, the United States and the anti-Taliban Afghan coalition known as the Northern Alliance had removed the Emirate from power. But since 2001, the Taliban have crawled out from under the boot, staged a protracted insurgent comeback, and ultimately restored their control over their homeland. A milestone that paved the way to the Taliban's return to Kabul was the 29 February 2020 Doha Agreement. Under this accord, the US effectively recognised the Taliban as the paramount political force in Afghanistan. This transformative legitimacy episode "was the event to lit the fuse" of the group's ensuing diplomatic boom and nascent international rise (Maley and Jamal 2022, 50).

Now in power, the Taliban's current external ties and diplomatic interactions have by far eclipsed those of their 1996–2001 international pariah regime. However, the Emirate has not been officially recognised by any other state. While China stands out as the sole country that has dispatched an ambassador to the Taliban government, it has refrained from explicitly equating this diplomatic overture with formal recognition of the Emirate (Al Jazeera 2023). Nevertheless, a current international consensus seems to hold that an armed intervention to remove the Taliban from power may exacerbate the destabilisation of Afghanistan and its surrounding region. This consequently means that, for many countries, the Taliban rule could be tolerable or justifiable, even if not rightful.

As such, the Taliban's triumphant return to Kabul poses some puzzling questions: how did the group persevere for two decades against a mighty Western military coalition and, in the process, upgrade its international position from an outcast to a de facto government and candidate for state normalisation? Why has no country officially recognised the Taliban despite their undisputed domination of Afghanistan and their growing diplomatic interactions? What explains the group's internal inconsistency as they seek international recognition but enact policies that work against this objective?

Given the relative novelty of the second Emirate, there is a paucity of research on the latter two questions. The article seeks to address this gap. Regarding the first question, existing scholarship has offered multiple interrelated answers, which are discussed below. However, what has been clearly missing in these answers is a thorough examination of the significance of the Taliban's agency, ideas, logic, and emotions in shaping their remarkable political trajectory.

Therefore, this paper argues that a comprehensive understanding of the Taliban's domestic power position and precarious international standing is not possible without taking into account their worldview and rationality. Worldview is understood here as the ideational roadmap—including ideology, culture, identity, and beliefs—to understand the self and navigate the external world. Rationality, on the other hand, denotes making reasoned decisions in pursuit of set goals.

Worldview and Rationality: Scope, Manifestation, and Significance

It would be fallacious to assume that the Taliban's worldview and rationality, rather than their and other actors' interests and tangible capabilities, were the determinants of the group's international fortunes. Ideas and material conditions are co-constitutive. They are not explanatory rivals. Hence, the main point of this article is that beliefs have a profound impact on identities and preferences and, consequently, on political behaviour and decision (Clark 2005, 14). As Max Weber illustrates, "the 'world images' that have been created by ideas have, like *switchmen*, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Weber 1958, 280, emphasis added). In other words, the Taliban's ideas impact their power and quest for international legitimacy not by themselves, but through their manifestation in, and construction of, the Taliban's perceptions of who they are and what matters most for them.

The Taliban are deliberate and rational actors. It should not be misconstrued that this paper suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, what set the group apart from its Afghan and foreign adversaries was the apparent extent to which professed values and ideology featured in each actor's calculus of interest and action on the ground. Evidently, more so than in the case of the Taliban, the politics of these adversaries were generally motivated by what Weber (1978, 24–5) calls instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*)— material calculations to increase benefits and decrease costs. In contrast, considering the Taliban's past track record, the group has, at some critical junctures, adhered to value rationality (*Wertrationalität*). That is, "a conscious belief in the value for its own sake ... independently of its prospects of success" (ibid.).

In reality, both rationalities are inseparable. However, they differ in the perception of the cost and the depth of devotion to the goal. Instrumental rationality relies on a straightforward means-end calculus, based on which an objective may be modified or even abandoned, if it turns out to be too costly. Utility maximisation is what drives this kind of rationality. On the other hand, value rationality is grounded in a conviction in the inherent importance of the objective itself, regardless of the associated costs. Commitment to deeply held beliefs, values, or principles is what fuels this rationality.

Therefore, value rational behaviour may embrace lingering hardships and great personal sacrifices (Varshney 2003, 86).[1] In this light, this paper's ideational approach to understanding the Taliban's international legitimacy is significant for three primary reasons.

First, this approach complements the literature's frequently cited (alternative) explanations for the Taliban's return to power and resurgence as a governmental player in 2021. These necessary, but insufficient, causal arguments include: Pakistani sanctuaries and aid, the Afghan Republic's corruption and predation, US wrongdoings and changing priorities, and regional realignments and developments. Despite their causal salience, these explanations are marred with limitations that warrant attention.

One key shortcoming is that these explanations focus solely on macro or external political conditions. This overlooks the agency of the Taliban as purposeful actors and the impact of their own decisions and actions. Additionally, the advent of some of these conditions—such as the Taliban's post-2001 Pakistani support and rapprochements with Iran and Russia—depended on the group demonstrating its capacity to fight and its reliability as a military actor (Giustozzi 2019, 31). Furthermore, the intensity of these conditions and their causal potential grew as time progressed. That is, their explanatory power was minimal when the stakes for the Taliban's insurgency were extremely high and failure seemed all but inevitable.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's defeat in 2001, the surviving members could have fled Afghanistan, defected, or melted into rural hinterlands. Certainly, many did. However, others chose to rebel against the US military during a period when no country appeared willing to help them. Why then did early insurgents decide to fight, knowing that their demise was almost certain? The answer, this article argues, is potentially rooted in these insurgents' commitment to their identity and religious beliefs. They deemed preserving their dignity against foreign oppression, defending Islam, and liberating Afghanistan from 'infidels' to be precious goals, in themselves, that no costs seemed high enough to deter the persistent pursuit of these ends. Put differently, these rebels' value rationality underpinned their choice

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[1] History is replete with instances where large numbers of volunteers step forward to defend their nations against external invaders or occupiers, risking their lives in pursuit of freedom and independence. These individuals, far from acting irrationally, exemplify rational actors guided by a profound devotion to what they hold dear and value most. As social analysts, following Max Weber's interpretive sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*), our job is not to judge these values as good or bad or whether they are worth fighting for. The focus should rather be on understanding (*verstehen*) how they influence the actions and decisions of those who believe in them. As discussed in subsequent sections of this paper, the Taliban's decision to go to war with the US in October 2001 instead of surrendering Osama bin Laden—which they perceived as an abandonment of their Afghan and religious values—stands as a striking example of value rationality.

to combat a formidable enemy despite the dangers they might face. It was this intrinsic causal force that drove the Taliban's insurgency when all other favourable exogenous conditions were yet to exist.

Second, exploring the political role of the Taliban's ideational canon can offer insightful answers to questions that realist and structuralist interpretations of the Afghan conflict fail to address. This is to hold the view that "neglecting ideology would leave major war-related phenomena unexplained" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). Material considerations alone cannot explain why the Taliban occasionally behaved in ways that precipitated the international isolation and destruction of their first Emirate in 2001. Nor can such considerations explain the paradox that despite the Taliban's pursuit of international normalisation, their post–2021 Emirate seems to drift further away from that goal with almost every new decree issued by their leadership.[2] Likewise, 'rational choice' analyses are ill-equipped to comprehensively account for the Taliban's imperviousness to international sanctions and economic pressures (see Malejacq and Terpstra 2023), which persists despite the group's dire need for foreign funds and assistance to address the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Third, a focus on the Taliban's creed and ideology is important not only for its causal significance in shaping their international positioning, but also because it is often overlooked in Western discussions of the group's insurgency (see Malkasian 2021, Chapter 1).[3] Since the Taliban's idiosyncratic religious interpretations lie at the heart of their worldview, it is conceivable that disregarding the role of religion in how the war in Afghanistan unfolded was meant to avoid the erroneous framing of the conflict as a clash of civilisations. Another plausible explanation could be that the Western tendency to downplay the "influence of religion on politics and war … stems from a prevalent feeling that religion is a private, not a public, matter" (Wrigley 1996, 85). The Western privatisation of religion is not universally shared in other world regions, particularly not in Afghanistan, where "Islam … is no longer just a religion, but a collective identity and unique bond that brought together disparate ethnicities" (Howeidy 2001, 14).

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[2] The decrees concerning gender equality and human rights are particularly problematic.

[3] "The literature to date has respectfully neglected this explanation. Although there are studies of Islam in Afghanistan, the possibility that Islam and resistance to occupation played a role in America's Afghan War has gone oddly unnoticed, almost shunned".

The Study's Premises and Scholarly Context

Having outlined the significance of this ideational approach to the Taliban's politics and legitimacy, it is important to note the underlying assumptions of this paper. Firstly, the Taliban's value system is neither static nor ahistorical phenomenon that can be properly studied in isolation from the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which the group came into being and continues to develop.[4] In addition, it is almost impossible to get into the heads of the Taliban and define what they truly believe in or what their genuine motivations are. The interest here is not to make claims *about* the Taliban, but rather to study the claims *of* the Taliban. That is, to let them represent themselves. Lastly, the Taliban are a composite rather than a uniform group. Consequently, their political conduct arises partly from the dynamic interactions among several factions of members and leaders, each with differing levels of ideological rigidity and political adaptability.[5]

Cognisant of the distortions in some normatively-loaded Western analyses of Afghanistan and the Taliban (see Manchanda 2020), this paper considers a multitude of voices and perspectives. Whereas the study is anchored in the Taliban's own discourse and Arabic scholarship on them,[6] it also draws on ten semi-structured

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[4] Draconian policies continue to be enforced under the Taliban's current rule in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, there is evidence suggesting a departure from certain bafflingly strict edicts imposed during the 1990s. These include the arbitrary detention of men without beards, the public destruction of entertainment media, and prohibitions on photography and kite flying.

[5] The binary distinction between Taliban 'dogmatists and 'pragmatists' is a simplification that risks obscuring the group's internal complexities. While such categorisations may be analytically useful, they should be employed cautiously as they may misrepresent the fluidity and heterogeneity of the Taliban. It is important to acknowledge that this paper itself occasionally resorts to these labels for heuristic purposes. A Taliban member's position on a given issue may not align consistently with a broader ideological categorisation. For example, Sirajuddin Haqqani, currently the Taliban's interior minister, was—and perhaps still is—widely perceived as an 'extremist' due to his involvement in high-profile suicide attacks that killed both foreigners and Afghans. However, his stance on issues such as girls' education following the withdrawal of US forces has led some to consider him relatively more 'moderate' in comparison to others within the movement.

[6] The selection of Arabic-language primary sources by and about the Taliban extends beyond mere authorial preference. Arabic serves as a principal medium of communication for the group, despite not being their native tongue. It holds significant importance within the organisation. This is exemplified by the publication of *The Islamic Emirate and Its System* by the Taliban's Chief Justice, Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani, which outlines the group's governing philosophy and aspirations. Published exclusively in Arabic in April 2022, this work represents the Taliban's first manifesto of its kind. The status of its translation into Pashto or Dari remains unclear, potentially limiting accessibility for non-Arabic readers. In fact, the Taliban exhibited over the years a sustained inclination toward disseminating their ideology, news, and narratives to Arabic-speaking constituencies. This is evident in publications such as *Talib* (student of religion) magazine,

interviews with Afghan, American, and European experts and officials.[7] Furthermore, diverse primary and secondary sources in English, Arabic, Pashto, and Dari (Farsi) languages are consulted. This inquiry aims to expand the scholarly contributions on rebel legitimacy, traditionally focused on domestic rather than international politics. In particular, it addresses the literature examining the role of norms, beliefs, and discourse in the legitimisation processes of armed Islamist groups (see, for instance, Boutz, Benninger, and Lancaster 2019).

Although much in the world, and in the Taliban, has changed over the last three decades, the following sections advance the argument that the Taliban's value system—notwithstanding its evolution, adaptations, and contradictions—has substantially underpinned their domestic and external fortunes. The group's international legitimacy reached its lowest point with the ousting of its government in 2001 and peaked with the Doha Agreement in 2020, culminating in the subsequent re-establishment of the Emirate in 2021. After a brief introduction to Afghanistan and the Taliban, these pivotal moments are examined.

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produced during the 1990s primarily for an Arab fighter audience within Afghanistan, and *Al-Somood* magazine, launched in 2006 with the intent of reaching a global Arab and Muslim readership. Furthermore, utilising Arabic sources here aims to include perspectives from Arabic-speaking non-Western observers, critics, and analysts of the Taliban. This approach seeks to highlight substantially relevant literature that has been underrepresented in discussions and debates about the Taliban, thereby balancing and enriching the scholarly understanding of the group, which has often been dominated by Western perspectives.

[7] The author conducted ten semi-structured interviews and three informal talks in English and Arabic between October 2022 and July 2023. These conversations took place both in-person in Berlin and a nearby city in Germany, as well as online via Zoom, WhatsApp calls, and WhatsApp audio messages. The participants included seven Afghans: two senior officials of the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; an assistant to a senior leader in the current Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; an Afghan expert and independent reporter on Afghan affairs; and three Afghan migrants in Eastern Germany with diverse backgrounds, one of whom served in the former Afghan National Army. Additionally, the interviewees included two US experts: Dr. Barnett Rubin, a distinguished scholar on Afghanistan and senior advisor to former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, and Andrew Watkins, a leading Afghanistan analyst at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP); two German specialists on Afghanistan: a peace practitioner and a security expert; an Australian scholar and international lawyer; and Graeme Smith, a senior analyst on Afghan politics and society at the International Crisis Group (ICG).

From Villages to the Capital: The Taliban's Emergence and Rule

Endowed with a picturesque and rugged landscape, Afghanistan is a home to a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic communities. Most of the population resides in rural areas, where life is largely detached from the capital, Kabul. In these villages, literacy rates are low, and day-to-day affairs are governed by traditional customs overseen by local elders and *Mullahs* (clerics).[8] Throughout history, Afghans have fiercely resisted imperial incursions and aggressions. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani[9] noted in 1879, during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, that the Afghans[10] are an "extremely religious" and "warrior nation" whose "nobility of soul led it to choose a death of honour over a life of baseness under the authority of the foreigners" (Al-Afghani 1879, Chapter 3).[11] According to Hafizullah Haqqani (1997, 37), "the religious factor has played a principal role in the political changes in this country."[12]

In 1994, the Taliban[13] (students of religion) emerged as a Pashtun local defence force in response to the unchecked chaos and brutality that had engulfed Kandahar since

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[8] Governmental authorities may also be occasionally sought for arbitration and intervention.

[9] Al-Afghani is a prominent figure in the Islamic revivalist movement in the 19th century and a strong advocate for pan-Islamic resistance against European colonialism.

[10] In his 1879 book *Sequel to the Statement on the History of the Afghans*, al-Afghani used what he termed "the Afghan race" as a synonym for the Pashtun community.

[11] This paper is not oblivious to the connection between al-Afghani's characterisation of Pashtuns (or the Afghans) and his broader political agenda, which strategically leverages Islam as a counterbalance to Western imperialism. The Afghan populace, composed of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmen and other ethnicities, exhibits a diverse spectrum of intra- and inter-community beliefs and practices associated with the interpretation of the religion and its role in private and public spheres. This is exemplified by the contrasting perspectives and ideologies of royals, communists, Mujahideen, and the Taliban. Nevertheless, al-Afghani's representation aligns with the prevailing perspective in contemporary scholarship by Arab and non-Western Muslim analysts of Afghanistan, which places a strong emphasis on Afghan religiosity. This focus is comparatively less prominent in the works of most non-Muslim Western experts. Such disparity is both significant and unsurprising.

[12] "In that country, [religious scholars and figures] hold great importance and complete authority, and they have significant influence over the people. The elites, dignitaries, and princes fear them, as the hearts of the common people are in their control. They have the power to incite the public against any prince or high official whenever they wish" (Al-Afghani 1879, Chapter 4; see also Thabet 1934, 228).

[13] Talib is the Arabic word for student. Taliban is the plural of Talib in the Pashto language.

the onset of the civil war among Mujahideen factions in 1992.[14] Many of the Taliban received their education in regional Deobandi *madrasas* (religious schools or Islamic seminaries) of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. According to Fahmy Howeidy (2001, 105–6), despite the remarkable legacy of Darul Uloom Deoband, founded in 1867 in British India, the madrassas that followed its model became bastions of intellectual stagnation, imitation of the ancestors, problematisation of women, obsession with non-essential matters of the individual's external appearance and behaviour, and absolute loyalty to the *Sheikhs* (religious leaders).[15] While these properties are characteristic of most Salafi (and jihadi) currents in the Islamist milieu, a hallmark distinction, among others, between Hanafi and Salafi schools of thought is the former's inclusion of local customs (*'Urf*) as a secondary source of Sharia law.[16] Hence, *Pashtunwali* (the Pashtun traditional values),[17] which the Taliban seem to view exclusively as *the* Afghan culture,[18] takes on a religious significance and power in the group's worldview.[19]

Thanks to their religious standing and their ability to restore order and quell widespread violence, the Taliban—despite their draconian practices—were welcomed in various regions of Afghanistan and supported by neighbouring Pakistan, reaching the outskirts of the capital within less than a year of their rise to power. Shortly before taking over Kabul and establishing the first Emirate in September 1996, the group's founder, Mullah Mohammed Omar, declared before an

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[14] Some analysts and political stakeholders in Afghanistan and beyond assert that the Taliban was created by Pakistan's intelligence services. In a rare cassette recording broadcast in 1996 on the Taliban's radio station غر شريعت (*the Voice of Sharia*) Mullah Mohammed Omar addressed this claim by providing a lengthy and detailed account of the movement's origin (Haq Speech 2020, [06:50]; see also H. Haqqani 1997, 95-104).

[15] Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, a co-founder of the Taliban and its former ambassador to Pakistan, described in his 2010 book *My Life with the Taliban* how the Talibs distanced themselves from the degenerate Mujahideen fighters during the 1980s Jihad: "We wanted to stay clean, to avoid sinning, and to regulate our behaviour." The Taliban as a movement did not yet exist during the resistance against the Soviet occupation. However, many students of religion, some of whom would later establish the Taliban, participated in the resistance as individual foot soldiers or in collective fronts under different commanders.

[16] The 'Urf is valid so far as it does not contradict higher-ranking sources of Sharia such as the Quran and the *Sunnah* (sayings and deeds of Prophet Mohammed).

[17] The Pashtunwali underscores the values of honour, hospitality, and justice.

[18] See Timor Sharan in (Norwegian Afghanistan Committee – NAC 2022, [32:00]).

[19] It is important to note that the contact and subsequent partnership between the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the 1990s fostered the influence of Salafi jihadism, essentially a synthesis of Wahhabi teachings and Qutbi militancy, on the Taliban's ideological development. This influence did not become distinctly evident until the US invasion of Afghanistan and the ousting of the Taliban in 2001. Nonetheless, the Taliban both intersect with and diverge from mainstream Sufism, Salafism, political Islamism, and jihadism. The author argues that this hybrid doctrinal position is primarily conditioned by the evolution of the Deobandi madrassas over the years and the Taliban's local cultural and social identity.

Ulama (religious scholars) gathering in Kandahar that the Taliban's ultimate goal was "to implement the *Deen* (religion) of Allah in his land" (H. Haqqani 1997, 107). The congregation concluded with consecrating Omar as *Amir ul-Mo'mineen* (Commander of the Faithful).

The Taliban were the first unified clerical rebels in Afghanistan's history to seize and retain power without ceding it to royals or political elites (H. Haqqani 1997, 44; Terpstra 2020, 1153).[20] They ruled despite their lack of prior knowledge of state politics and administration. Not only that, but even the most of Taliban's "visual experience itself was so limited and poor" (Howeidy 2001, 64). Many had not witnessed city life with their own eyes or lived it before they moved to urban centres as conquerors and governors.[21] For the Taliban, their Pashtun villages appeared to be the reference model of Afghanistan and Islam. As a result, although they were devout and spartan, their political profile was insular and inept.

Ultimately, the Taliban sought to create what they believed to be a pure Islamic regime in which, through them, God rules. The victories against more experienced local adversaries, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud, reinforced the group's conviction that God was on its side and had granted it power (Sharp 2003, 484). Hence, the professed priority of the Taliban leadership was to maintain God's favour and remain vigilant against foreign influences and worldly interests that might compromise the purity of their way of life.

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[20] The Taliban represented a unique and cohesive Pashtun military force, characterised by its strictly clerical composition, from foot soldiers to the supreme leader. This force, at least in its earliest days, was comprised almost entirely of Talibs (madrasa students), Mullahs (those with incomplete madrasa education), and Mawlawis or Ulama (fully educated religious authorities). Their domination of Afghanistan stands in contrast to historical cases, such as when some Ulama supported Habibullah Kalkani, who was not a cleric but rather a "bandit", as described by Thomas Barfield (2010, 191), during his rebellion against Amanullah Khan in 1929. Furthermore, the Taliban's clerical nature differs from the heterogeneous Mujahideen factions of the 1980s, which included a mix of ethnicities and ideologies. Unlike the Taliban, many Mujahideen leaders—except for notable figures like Jalaluddin Haqqani, Mohammed Nabi Mohammedi, and partially Burhanuddin Rabbani—were educated in modern secular institutions, as exemplified by Ahmed Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Despite their religious motivations in the anti-Soviet jihad, no Mujahideen faction managed to effectively rule over Afghanistan as a whole or to declare its leader as the 'commander of the faithful' in the country. Instead, these factions controlled distinct territories and engaged in a civil war marked by widespread lawlessness, extortion, rape, and marauding.
[21] For more on the political and social horizons and knowledge of the early Taliban, see Hafizullah Haqqani (1997) and Ahmed Rashid (2010).

Defying the World: The Downfall of the First Emirate

As the ruling authority in Afghanistan (1996–2001), the first Emirate viewed external recognition as a natural entitlement predicated on its 'effective control' of the country. While this view seemed consonant with international law, it failed to appreciate that international practice differs. Practically, recognition of other governments has consistently been a state's discretionary choice stemming from its strategic interests and ideological character. In essence, the Taliban based their claim to legitimacy on their domestic power and appeared to believe that whatever happens within Afghanistan's borders is a matter of sovereignty unrelated to their right to international legitimacy.

At the time, it was a matter of consensus among both Westerners and Islamists that the Taliban's diplomacy and foreign policy were unsophisticated (see Cristol 2019; Howeidy 2001). Abu Musab al-Suri (1998, 29), a renowned jihadi strategist and Taliban loyalist, remarked that the group demonstrated a "general ignorance of world affairs, including regional and international politics". This knowledge deficit in conjunction with the Taliban's suspicion of outsiders and their schemes placed the group on a collision course with foreign players in its region and beyond.[22]

Solidarity with Foreign Militants: The Taliban as a Security Threat

Early on in their relationship, Taliban officials assured Osama bin Laden and the Arabs around him—who came to Afghanistan to join the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad—that "you are the *Muhajirun* [migrants] and we are the *Ansar* [supporters]" (Al-Suri 1998, 34). This pledge of solidarity invoked the exemplary brotherhood between Muslims who fled persecution in Mecca and those who sheltered them in Medina in the early days of Islam. Within Taliban circles, bin Laden was evidently regarded as a noble "servant of the Muslims" and "great Mujahid" (Mutma'in 2022, 182–83).[23] Beyond this

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[22] Scepticism towards external actors and their agendas is a deeply embedded feature of the Afghan political landscape. This stems from a long and tumultuous history marked by foreign interventions and incursions, a legacy that has profoundly impacted not only the Taliban but all Afghan political actors.

[23] Bin Laden provided the Taliban with considerable financial and military support, including the assassination of their principal domestic rival, Ahmed Shah Massoud, on 9

reverence, it seems that the group's decision to shelter him was likely based on his status as a fellow Muslim and guest.[24] Accordingly, a potent confluence of religious and cultural precepts seems to have underpinned the Taliban's position. These were epitomised by the *Hadith* of Prophet Mohammed that "A Muslim … should not oppress [his Muslim brother], nor should he hand him over [to an oppressor],"[25] and traditional Pashtun values, based on which a guest is not to be harmed or surrendered to an enemy.

Like the Arabs, the Taliban also sheltered other foreign Islamist militant groups bent on challenging the territorial control or central authorities of neighbouring states. For this reason, the Taliban morphed into a security challenge to countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, India, and Iran (Rashid 2010, 5). In December 1999, when the Indian Airlines Flight 814 was hijacked to Kandahar, Mullah Omar issued a revealing directive of the Taliban's policy priorities at the time. "If the hijackers are Muslims, we will support them according to the Sharia teachings, but if they are Hindus we will hand them over to the Indian government to establish relations with it", stated the Taliban's leader (Mutma'in 2022, 204).

Concerned about the security threats emanating from Afghanistan, neighbouring countries funded and supported the Taliban's domestic rival, the Northern Alliance. The question remains as to whether the regional opposition to the Taliban was a cause or a result of the group's tactless policies. Yet, this has little bearing on the fact that the Taliban's self-perceptions of sovereignty, honour, hospitality, and religious brotherhood largely guided their practical reckoning.

However, despite regional unease with the Taliban, external recognition of the group was not entirely absent. On 25 May 1997, Pakistan was the first country to officially recognise the Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates followed suit.[26] But the Taliban failed to hold on to their few friends. The group broke its promise to the Saudis to hand over bin Laden and

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September 2001. Arab and other foreign fighters bolstered the Taliban forces and helped them repel major offensives against Kabul launched by other warring factions.

[24] While Steve Coll (2018) and Carter Malkasian (2021), among others, endorse the hospitality thesis, Nelly Lahoud (2022, 31) claims that "the relationship between Arabs and the Taliban in Afghanistan was not based on guest-and-host dynamics."

[25] Hadith no. 2442 in the Book of *al-Mazalim* (Oppressions) in Sahih al-Bukhari, one of the two most authoritative collections of Prophet Mohammed's sayings and deeds among Sunni Muslims.

[26] These countries' decision to officially recognise the Taliban was likely influenced by a constellation of geopolitical calculations. These included containing the regional influence of Iran, a long-standing competitor of Saudi Arabia, and India, a historical rival of Pakistan. Additionally, the anticipation that the Taliban would cooperate in stemming drug trafficking and fostering stability in Afghanistan, conducive to regional trade and economic development, likely played a role.

insulted the Saudi chief of intelligence Prince Turki al-Faisal over the issue in September 1998.[27] Pervez Musharraf (2006, 214), then president of Pakistan, acknowledged the Taliban's behaviour towards his country as a departure from conventional political norms, stating that "God knows that the Taliban gave us enough cause" to cut diplomatic ties with them. Islamabad, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi would eventually rescind their recognition of the Taliban due to the shifting dynamics in the group's relationship with al-Qaeda and the US.

Unlike most of the Taliban's neighbours, the US started off on cordial terms with the group. The two parties held numerous meetings on a range of issues, including drugs and terrorism. However, it was not until al-Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on 7 August 1998 that the Taliban were considered beyond the pale. Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef (2010, 138), then Taliban ambassador in Pakistan, opined that the US was ready to "drop all its other demands and formally recognise the Emirate if [bin Laden] was handed over". The Taliban, nonetheless, maintained that bin Laden was innocent and refused to expel him. Then, al-Qaeda attacked the US on 11 September 2001 and a new era for Afghanistan and international politics was heralded.

On 20 September 2001, the Emirate's existence was put in jeopardy by President George W. Bush's (2001) ultimatum to the Taliban to "hand over the terrorists or … share in their fate." To better understand how the Taliban would handle the crisis, it is pertinent to remember that Pakistan was also confronted with a similar choice: "you're either with us or you're not" (State Department 2001). In response, President Musharraf faced a difficult decision. His instrumentally rational choice was to abandon Pakistan's alliance with the Taliban and join the so-called war on terror. In his own account, taking the side of the US was to protect his country and advance its national interests (Musharraf 2006, 201).

The Taliban's interpretation of the American threat differed: they saw it as a forced choice between preserving their government or worldview. The stance of Mullah Omar was clear: "We will not ask Osama to leave or turn himself in. … We understand that [the Americans] can badly damage us but their demands are more devastating

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[27] A June 1998 meeting between Prince Turki al-Faisal and Mullah Omar initially suggested a path towards Osama bin Laden's extradition, then a pressing issue due to the bin Laden's threats against the Saudi royal family (Der Spiegel 2004). However, by 19 September, following the US embassy bombings in Africa, tensions had risen dramatically. Prince al-Faisal, frustrated by the lack of progress, met Mullah Omar again and demanded action. Instead of addressing the concerns of one of his few allies in the world, Mullah Omar scathingly rebuked al-Faisal, accusing Saudi Arabia of working on behalf of the 'infidels': "Persecuted Muslims are waiting for your help … On the contrary, you turn the Muslims over to the enemies, you came here on their orders" (Mutma'in 2022, 174). This fiery exchange exposed the ideological schism and fracturing relationship between Riyadh and Kabul, ultimately leading to a severing of diplomatic ties.

for our religion and faith" (Mutma'in 2022, 229–30). Considering the imminent war to be "the will of God" (Coll 2018, 61), Mullah Omar led the Taliban to sacrifice their lives and regime for what they believed in. With no single nation on their side, the Taliban fell shortly after the US invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001.

The Taliban's Purist Utopia: A Negation of Western Norms

The Emirate's relations with the West were tense. Not bereft of justification, the Taliban didn't believe that the Western denial of its legitimacy was due to its repressive domestic rule (Harpviken 1999, 866). After all, the Burhanuddin Rabbani government, which the Taliban toppled in 1996, and other regimes with dismal human rights records were unreservedly recognised globally. The group had a different explanation for such denial. This was the "inveterate rancour against Islam" of the West, which would not embrace the Taliban until they abandoned their principles and religion (Howeidy 2001, 71). An *Ayah* (verse from the Quran) that Taliban members would occasionally cite to back this conclusion was one addressed to the Prophet, telling him that non-Muslims "will never be satisfied with you until you follow their way."[28] The Taliban's choice was to stick to their values, because "no one has ever abandoned them and gained anything, not even the satisfaction of the infidel [Western] states" (van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018, 261).

Nevertheless, the Taliban sought to join these states at the United Nations. They understood that seizing Afghanistan's UN seat from the Rabbani government would legitimise and consolidate their domestic rule (Al-Suri 1998, 108–9). Although the group's endeavour to join the international body was unsuccessful, it was a point of contention with its foreign jihadi companions, who viewed UN membership as a violation of the concept of *Hakimiyyah* (the supremacy of God's sovereignty and rule) in favour of international principles and regulations. In defence, the Taliban claimed that they had appended a condition to their UN credentials that their government would not abide by any UN document or rule contradicting the Sharia (ibid., 112).

In international media, the Taliban were often presented as the reification of the "enemy picture of Islam" that is so dominant in the West (Harpviken 1999, 864). Positive aspects of their rule, like prohibiting opium cultivation and pacifying Afghanistan, were mostly overlooked. Instead, the attention was focused on the undeniably extreme practices of the group's *Hisba* (morality police) who administered public punishments, including amputations, stonings, and lashings of wrongdoers. Women, in particular, endured violent treatment and severe

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[28] Ayah no. 120, *Surat* (chapter) al-Baqarah.

restrictions, such as beating for wearing improper attire, bans on education and work, and limited access to healthcare.

In the preceding years, despite the continued suffering and violation of Afghan women's rights in the territories controlled by the Mujahideen, Western attention prioritised supporting the latter in their war against the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Communist state and the global rise of the ideals of human rights and democracy, the world started to closely examine the Taliban's treatment of women. The historical momentum was on the side of international feminist and human rights organisations, which called for the isolation and penalisation of the Taliban. Although the anti-Taliban advocacy campaign was most resonant in Washington, in the US-Taliban meetings, women's rights took a back seat to the bin Laden issue. When the US sanctioned the Taliban in 1999, the cited reason was the group's "support of Usama bin Ladin", and not their violations of the Afghans' rights and freedoms (Clinton 1999).[29] The US and international ostracism of the Taliban continued until the Emirate was overthrown in 2001.

Dazzling the World: The Rise of the Second Emirate

By December 2001, the Taliban were defeated and the Bonn Agreement gave Afghanistan a new foreign-backed regime led by Hamid Karzai. The rapid collapse of the Emirate and the initial enthusiasm for the new government made the Americans believe that they conclusively triumphed. But it was not long before the Taliban re-grouped and launched their 'defensive jihad' against US and NATO forces.[30] Within

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[29] Some analysts opine that in the run-up to the invasion of Afghanistan, imperial and white feminism fuelled a legitimating discourse for the Western military operations, which at the time were partly depicted as a 'rescue mission' for Afghan women (see Abu-Lughod 2002; Zakaria 2021, Chapter 4).

[30] It has been widely reported that following their defeat, the Taliban offered to recognise the legitimacy of, or even participate in, the emerging political setup in Afghanistan in exchange for allowing Mullah Omar and the group's members to live in peace and dignity (see, for instance, Coll 2018, 141; Gopal, 2010; Thomas 2021, 3). However, this did not happen as US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld made it clear that a dignified life for Omar was unacceptable to the US. Consequently, the occupying army relentlessly hunted down, imprisoned, tortured, and killed Taliban leaders and members. The Taliban fighters realised that laying down their weapons would not benefit them. Still, although in early 2002, some Taliban figures, such as Mullah Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil and Mawlawi Arsalan Rahmani, approached the new Western-backed regime, promising cooperation, there are strong indications that the Taliban's supreme leadership did not

two decades of the insurgency, a dazzling shift in the dynamics of the Afghan conflict and the international standing of the Taliban occurred when the US extended an olive branch to them in February 2020. This transition would not have happened without the Taliban's resilience in both battle and governance. The potential role of the group's identity and cultural beliefs in their resurgence is explored in the following paragraphs.

The Strength Within: The Crux of the Taliban's Military Resilience

"It is not enough to fight. It is the spirit, which we bring to the fight that decides the issue. It is *morale* that wins the victory" (Vaughn 1983, 28). These words of US general and statesman George C. Marshall underscore the importance of some factors that various investigations of the Taliban revival overlook. These are the non-material sources of power and resilience derived from the warriors' beliefs, "for it is what men *believe* that makes them invincible."[31] With this in mind, it becomes pertinent to enquire: what did the Taliban—both in words and deeds—claim to believe?

The Taliban posited that their jihad against the US is an anti-colonial resistance and a sequel to their countrymen's freedom struggle against the Russians and the British in earlier times (Baradar 2023; RTA Pashto 2023). In this way, the rebellion, in and of itself, had for the Taliban what Timur Kuran (1995, 30) calls "expressive utility." That is, the armed insurgency served to voice the rebels' rejection to live a "reduced mode of being" (Varshney 2003, 93), suffering humiliation and cruelty under foreign rule. The "righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul" (Gamson 1992, 32) triggered the determination of some insurgents to give, in blood, an unequivocal expression of their self-worth and values. This is further underscored by the fact that the Taliban were an army of volunteers, who—at least until very late in the insurgency—expected to lose much and gain little, if anything, in the material sense.

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intend to recognise or reconcile with the Karzai government. For instance, the first issue of the Taliban's Al-Somood Magazine (2006, 2) distanced the movement from these figures and described them as "traitors and agents of the enemies of religion and the homeland". In addition, until his disappearance from the public eye, Mullah Omar insisted on resisting the occupation and its agents (Mutma'in 2022, 250). Furthermore, Mullah Zaeef's words in what seems to be his last press conference on 6 December 2011, were unequivocal. He declared that "Amir ul-Momineen agreed to surrender Kandahar and other places peacefully to the leaders of tribes, *not* to Hamid Karzai" and that he believed not a single "Talib wants to participate in this puppet government … [and be] slaves of [the] Americans" (AP Archive 2015, [2:38 - 5:37]). Zaeef announced that the Taliban fighters "should go home" and "wait for a suitable time in the future" (ibid.). This rhetoric contradicts reports of the aborted reconciliation and barely indicates that the Taliban leadership considered total capitulation to the new regime.

[31] George C. Marshall, quoted in Congressional Record (1964, 22548, emphasis added), Vol. 110, Part 17.

Quoting the millennia-old declaration of the legendary Muslim commander Khalid ibn al-Walid to the Persians, the Taliban warned the Americans that "[we] love death as you love life" and that in jihad there is no defeat, only "victory or martyrdom" (Al-Somood Magazine 2011, 1). Both ends are described in the Quran as "the two best things".[32] Seeking martyrdom—the apex of value-rationality—featured prominently in the Taliban's speech and operations.[33] Hibatullah Akhundzada (2016, 3), the Taliban's current *Amir* (supreme leader), cautioned "the American occupiers" in July 2016 that the Afghans "consider martyrdom in confrontation with you a cherished goal of their life." This statement echoed that of Mullah Omar's Eid al-Adha message in 2011: "Our people do not bow to foreigners, nor do they accept retreating from their stance and beliefs … Life is not so dear to us that we would sacrifice our religion for it. Verily, our lives and our deaths both were and will be for God" (Omar 2011, 3).

In a February 2023 conversation, a suicide bomber,[34] who signed up for the mission but the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan had occurred before his name topped the martyrs-in-waiting list, vented frustration with his new role in life as a government worker: "Martyrdom would make me much happier than being a bureaucrat" (Oaks 2023). The Taliban's death-embracing attitude sharply contrasted with the focus of Western forces on having no casualties. "How do you win a war without casualties?", questioned Gilles Dorronsoro on the conflicting logics of these forces: defeating the insurgent Taliban and incurring no human losses (Carnegie Endowment 2010, [09:02]).

A force multiplier of the Taliban's morale was the remarkable internal unity that dovetailed their multiple command centres. Members of the group strictly followed the Quranic orders to the believers to "obey" their leaders[35] and refrain from internal disputes "lest you lose heart and your power depart".[36] The Taliban were not oblivious to the manner in which partisanship and internal discord fractured the ranks of the Mujahedeen and led the nation into a harrowing civil war. Consequently, they regarded internal cohesiveness and absolute subservience to the commanders as the way to secure the "moral victory in jihad" (A. A. Akhundzada 2016, 34–35). The renowned Taliban top commander Jalaluddin Haqqani believed that "unity was the reason why the whole world failed" to defeat the group.[37] The Taliban's 2010 *Layeha* (code of conduct) was also clear evidence of their "obsession with group cohesion and consolidation" (Johnson, DuPee, and Shaaker 2017, 191).

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[32] Aya no. 52, Surat al-Tawbah.
[33] Describing the Talib's spirit in the 1980s jihad, Mullah Zaeef (2010, 26) stated: "Just as normal people are eager to get married, we were desperate for martyrdom".
[34] In the Taliban's parlance and worldview, the suicide bomber is a 'martyrdom seeker'.
[35] Aya no. 59, Surat al-Nisa'.
[36] Aya no. 46, Surat al-Anfal.
[37] Quoted by his son Sirajuddin Haqqani, then deputy Amir of the Taliban, in Al-Somood Magazine (2016, 6).

The Taliban's commitment to what they considered their core values had detrimental consequences for their international politics as rulers, but it provided them with immense resilience as insurgents. Many Taliban combatants perceived the battlefield as a stage where righteousness and malevolence clashed. Empowered by this Manichean certainty, they persisted on the field with fierce determination and sacrificed their lives for their cause.

However, if the Taliban's sole advantage had been their morale and battlefield performance, the US military power could have neutralised it. Yet, during the 20-year occupation of Afghanistan, diverse domestic and foreign conditions contributed to the insurgency's expansion and triumph. Chief among these, though beyond the scope of this article, is the shift of Washington's primary national security interest from counter-terrorism to great power rivalry with Beijing.

Legitimacy by Contrast: Enemies and Neighbours for the Taliban

The struggle for Afghanistan extended beyond the battlefield to the realm of governance values and practices. The Taliban's on-the-ground actions seamlessly synchronised with their articulated commitments to liberating Afghanistan and establishing an Islamic government. In stark contrast, the conduct of the US eroded the trust in its professed aim to help the Afghans in building a modern state, rendering it mere empty rhetoric.

Despite an initial tide of hope, the legitimacy of the US liberal democratic project was quickly called into question. The US collaborated with local strongmen and warlords, infamous for drug trafficking, predation, and corruption, to lead the new regime (Coll 2018, 268). The Afghan police, tasked with protecting civilians, were perceived by the people as "the main criminals" (Rubin 2007, 67). The justice system was vulnerable to bribery and external influences.[38] National elections were marred by fraud, with foreigners, not Afghans, deciding the winner of the highest office (SIGAR 2022, 36). Reflecting the extent of incompetence and malpractices within the Afghan Republic, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2023, Chapter 16) once joked that "corruption was "a feature, not a bug," as it was all that held the [Kabul] government together."

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[38] Beyond the judiciary, where justice appeared to be occasionally subject to bidding, Timor Sharan (2023, i) contends that the broader state apparatus itself functioned as a primary marketplace for transactional exchanges and rent-seeking behaviors among political elites and networks.

Kabul failed to dispel its depiction as a Western puppet by the Taliban. It was unable to protect innocent Afghan lives from being lost in American night raids and air strikes.[39] The Republic also could not safeguard the livelihoods of small farmers and loggers, which were affected by poorly-conceived American anti-drugs policies.

Despite substantial influx of foreign capital into Afghanistan, benefiting select groups in Kabul and beyond, the average Afghan still struggled to attain security and dignity in their life (see Weigand 2022). The actions of the US and its local allies inadvertently lent credence to the Taliban's claims regarding the inhumanity of the US occupation, the moral bankruptcy of Western democracy, and the assault on Afghanistan's Islamic identity (see Al-Sharky 2006, 24). Incidents such as the burning of copies of the Quran at Bagram prison and the desecration of Taliban corpses by US soldiers in 2012 served as catalysts, inciting religious fervour among many Afghans and dealing a crushing blow to the self-respect of those who were cooperating with foreigners.

Consequently, the legitimacy of the insurgency was rising with every perceived injustice inflicted on the defenceless people by foreign forces and the warlords.[40] Not inconceivably, many Afghans joined the ranks of the Taliban which appeared to redress grievances, protect the villagers, and fight for Islam and the Afghan way of life.[41] The Taliban's shadow policing and Sharia courts in particular were highly popular due to their perceived relative impartiality, efficiency, and conformity with the culture and beliefs of most rural Afghans. Many analysts argue that the insurgent Taliban's legal order has significantly contributed to the legitimation and triumph of the group (see Baczko 2021).

Furthermore, with the Pakistanis resuming their crucial support for the Taliban around 2003, the local popularity of the group fuelled the durability of its military campaign.[42] This, from 2005 onwards, encouraged some regional countries, such as Iran, to gradually back the anti-US insurgency, and some European diplomats to clandestinely engage with the Taliban within the next biennium. Nonetheless, it was the ineffectiveness of the 2009-2011 US troop surge in quelling the insurgency that prompted then US President Barack Obama to recognise that the military destruction

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[39] In Afghanistan, civilians suffered violence and death at the hands of all warring parties, including Western forces, the Afghan government, and the Taliban.

[40] "This became particularly visible in the case of the Taliban, with members explaining that they joined the group after experiencing perceived injustice" (Weigand 2022, 287).

[41] In the eyes of others, the Taliban used targeted assassinations and intimidation against Afghan officials, Ulama, and those who demonstrably rejected the group's ideology and politics. The Taliban particularly focused on the individuals they viewed as collaborators or obstacles to the resistance against the Kabul government and its Western allies.

[42] Pakistan became increasingly alarmed by the consolidation of Indian influence in Kabul with the rise of the Northern Alliance, a long-standing Indian ally, to power in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The US focus shifting in 2003 towards Iraq further heightened these concerns. In response, Pakistan recalibrated its regional strategy and renewed its support for the Taliban.

of the Taliban was no longer a feasible objective. As a consequence, exploratory direct meetings between the US and the Taliban started on 28 November 2010 in Munich, Germany (Coll 2018). These talks would mark the inception of a decade of cumulative mainstreaming of the group as a principal political force in Afghanistan.

Throughout this decade, opposition to both *Daesh* (the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISKP) and the US presence in Afghanistan broadened the Taliban's regional appeal, turning some of their former enemies into allies (see Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020). Russia opened up to the group in 2014, eyeing a common ground in their desire for the US departure from the region (Mujahid 2016, 6). This rapprochement was further facilitated by the emergence of a Daesh affiliate in eastern Afghanistan between 2014 and 2015, which posed a threat to regional security and stability. The Russian Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, noted that the interests of Russia and the Taliban "objectively coincide" in combatting Daesh (Reuters Staff 2015).[43]

Indeed, the Daesh phenomenon had a universal legitimising effect on its competitor jihadi groups in Syria and elsewhere. It made them appear, in comparison, more tolerant and reasonable—"moderate extremists" (Hoffman 2018). The Taliban were no exception. With Daesh's attacks on European capitals like Paris, Brussels, and Berlin, some international perceptions of the Taliban as a lesser evil were taking shape. Capitalising on this perceptual shift, the Taliban leveraged their anti-Daesh operations while reinforcing their self-representation as a nationalist and Islamic organisation that would pose no harm to anyone once Afghanistan was liberated.

On Their Own Terms: The Taliban's Doha Diplomatic Triumph

Before the Obama administration steered its Afghanistan policy towards peace negotiations, reconciliation with the Taliban had been President Karzai's "dream throughout his presidency" (Partlow 2016, 381). However, the Taliban did not reciprocate. They were acutely aware that negotiating with Karzai would "confer legitimacy on [his] puppet government" (Ghaznawi 2009, 14). Therefore, excluding the Afghan government from peace talks was one of several red lines that the Taliban imposed, and the Americans never crossed.

During these talks, the 'conventional' Taliban showed no inclination to compromise on their demands. Neither did they accept any request that could tarnish their

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[43] Prior to initiating hostilities against Daesh, the Taliban's Shura Leadership Council addressed Daesh's central leader and his followers as "brothers" and "Mujahideen," attempting to persuade them to integrate their Afghan branch (Daesh in Khorasan) into the Taliban's ranks (see Mansour 2015, 2-4). It was only after this overture was disregarded that the Taliban considered Daesh a religious enemy and a Western conspiracy.

doctrinal purity or jihadi legitimacy. For instance, the group declined to break from al-Qaeda because "it is impossible … to "cut ties" with any Muslim" (Rubin 2022). This was a remarkable position, especially when contrasted with that of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, which severed ties with its parent organisation in July 2016, "recognizing that the costs of al-Qaida membership outweigh the benefits" (Watts 2015). Put differently, the Taliban's unwavering prioritisation of ideology over realpolitik reveals a doctrinal rigidity exceeding even that of some within al-Qaeda fold.

Nonetheless, several aspects have also been 'unconventional' in the insurgent Taliban. Unlike the first generation, who hung televisions and cassette tapes from trees and were cut off from the wider world, the rebel generation embraced new technologies. They used social media, emails, and mobile phones to connect with, and propagate their messages to, the globe. The multi-lingual *Alemarah* website and the Arabic *Al-Somood* magazine, launched in 2005 and 2006 respectively, offer a glimpse into the evolution and sophistication of the post-2001 Taliban. Learning from past lessons, particularly in utilising media and communication means, the Taliban cadres developed into more political and expressive beings. They adapted their messaging to resonate with both neighbouring and Western audiences. In the group's new discourse, concepts such as sovereignty, independence, international law, human rights, economic development, and even environmental concerns co-existed with its persistent dogmatic narratives of the conflict (see Al-Baluchi 2017, 18).

This is not to say, as Gopal and van Linschoten (2017, 44) claim, that the Taliban's "views have broadened and morphed into an ideology that appears much closer … to mainstream Islamism … in the Arab world." It was the Taliban's rhetoric, rather than their ideology, that resembled that of some political Islamists. In fact, if the insurgents were drawing closer to any group, it was foreign Islamist fighters. These fighters were the comrades in arms against Western forces, from whom the Taliban learned how to appropriate new media tools and guerrilla warfare techniques. Still, the Taliban's experience—as refugees, insurgents, emissaries, and leaders—exposed them to different shades of Islamist and political influences in Pakistan, Iran, the Gulf States and elsewhere. This unprecedented interaction with the outside world considerably bolstered the group's knowledge and politicisation.

Substantively, the Taliban were not approaching mainstream Islamism. Instead, they pioneered a jihadi trend in which the struggle is nationally bounded and strategically communicated.[44] The Taliban leveraged present-day technologies and contemporary

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[44] Prioritising the 'near enemy' (e.g. domestic ruling elites) over the 'far enemy' (e.g. Western powers) is not new in jihadi discourse. This debate has been a persistent theme within the broader jihadi current for decades (for more details, see McGregor 2003). However, the Taliban's persistent focus on battling US and NATO forces solely on the

political parlance to outwardly legitimise their cause. In doing so, they used different political communication tactics such as what can be referred to as *resonant narratives* and *calculated ambiguity*. The first is about framing the conflict in universally legitimate ideals like freedom and justice, akin to the discourse of ordinary national liberation movements or political parties. The second is prone to favourable interpretations from disparate audiences. For instance, the July 2015 Eid al-Fitr message of Mullah Omar enunciated that "out of our religious responsibility, we [the Taliban] recognise all the legitimate rights of all Afghans, including minorities" (Al-Somood Magazine 2015a, 3).[45] While both the Taliban's supporters and detractors may have converged on praising this announcement, they likely diverged on what constitutes 'legitimate rights'.

The more experienced and knowledgeable Taliban reached out to the US in 2010 to achieve what had been hitherto unattainable through the force of arms. They sent a message to President Obama outlining "the necessary steps required for confidence building" (Coll 2018, 563–64). These steps included releasing the Taliban's Guantanamo prisoners, lifting sanctions, and opening a political bureau for the group in Qatar. The US granted them most of what they had demanded. On 18 June 2013, the Taliban's representation bureau in Doha was inaugurated. The office carried the name of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' and flew its white and black flag, which sparked Karzai's fury against this "attempt to confer legitimacy on the insurgents" (BBC News 2013). The Americans requested the removal of the nameplate and the banner, but the Taliban did not acquiesce, and the office was eventually shut down. Still, this development marked a turning point that highlighted the Taliban's political weight and broke their international isolation. Since then, engaging with the group has no longer been universally tabooed or stigmatised.

While the Taliban's open talks with the Americans stalled, their dialogue with regional and Western interlocutors continued. Some European states sought to assist the Taliban and the Kabul government in developing their negotiation capacities to facilitate the peace talks. In 2015, the Taliban met with delegations representing Afghan civil society and human rights organisations in different capitals like Doha and Oslo. They also met Kabul officials for the first time in Murree, Pakistan, on 15 July that year in the presence of American and Chinese observers (International Crisis Group 2021, 5).

Afghan soil, coupled with their modernised communication strategies, has effectively revived this nationally-bounded approach as a potential path forward for contemporary jihadi movements. Indeed, groups, such as Syria's *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, among others, would be inspired by the Taliban's way.

[45] The Taliban published the message in the name of Mullah Omar, who was actually dead at the time.

At the time, the Taliban were facing external ideological outbidding from Daesh and internal unrest surrounding the leadership succession after the death of Mullah Omar in 2013. To dispel any confusion about the Taliban's character under his command, the new Amir, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, reminded the group's commanders and fighters that "[w]e—besides the armed struggle—engage in politics but in the right time and according to the conditions defined by the Islamic Sharia, … this who wants to reconcile with us must submit to our demands … we will continue our jihad until the Book of Allah rules the land of Afghanistan … and these are among our principles that we will never compromise on" (Al-Somood Magazine 2015b, 4). This statement encapsulated the Taliban's perspective on politics and negotiations.

Therefore, when the Trump administration resumed overt diplomatic talks with the Taliban in September 2018, the group remained unyielding. A year earlier, President Trump tried to intimidate the Taliban by increasing the number of US troops in Afghanistan and relaxing restrictions on US airstrikes against the group. In response to the US belligerence, the Taliban published an open letter to the American people on 14 February 2018. In this letter, they framed their rebellion in terms of "international rules", "national sovereignty", "natural and human right[s]", and "the right to form a government consistent with the beliefs of our people" (Mujahid 2018). They also reaffirmed their commitment to prevent threats to others from Afghanistan and to have positive relations with all countries.

The Taliban faced Trump's 'strategic confusion' with 'strategic patience,' until his failed military escalation and impatience with the war brought him back to the negotiations table. In the latest round, Washington's demand that the Taliban renounce al-Qaeda was once again rejected. They even denied that al-Qaeda was the perpetrator of the 11 September attacks despite bin Laden's admission of responsibility in 2004 (Wall Street Journal 2004). The Taliban additionally reiterated their refusal to negotiate with the Kabul government and insisted on omitting any reference to it in the forthcoming agreement.

After Zalmay Khalilzad, then top US envoy to Afghanistan, was ordered to secure a withdrawal arrangement at any cost, various US objectives were forfeited, and a draft agreement, largely in line with the Taliban's conditions, was finalised.[46] On 29 February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a withdrawal and peace accord, commonly known as the Doha Agreement. In this accord, the US government effectively positioned the Taliban on par with the Afghan government in Kabul, recognising them as a principal Afghan political force. However, Washington expressly refused to confer legitimacy on the group as a potential governing body.

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[46] For instance, the US ultimately abandoned its objective of maintaining counter-terrorism and intelligence-gathering capabilities in Afghanistan following its withdrawal.

The Emirate in Two Worlds: Antagonistic West and Cordial Region?

The Doha Agreement delivered a clear message to domestic and international stakeholders that the US was disengaging from its client regime in Kabul. The accord also foreshadowed the Taliban's imminent return to power. Interested parties subsequently recalibrated their assessments, increasingly hedging their bets by acknowledging the Taliban's seemingly unstoppable rise. By 15 August 2021, the combined effects of this accord and the Taliban's rapid territorial gains culminated in the downfall of the Republic and the reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate.

Before, and shortly after, the re-establishment of the Emirate, the Taliban continued to assure the world about their future regime. "We are committed to … a new, inclusive political system … in which all Afghans have equal rights," wrote Sirajuddin Haqqani (2020) in the *New York Times*. In his July 2020 Eid al-Adha message, Amir Akhundzada (2020, 3–4) stated that the Islamic Emirate "wants good dealings with all countries" and that "we do not think about monopoly of power". A message to the American people from the Taliban's co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in 2021 reiterated that the Emirate is committed to "guarantee all women rights" and "freedom of expression" according to the Sharia (Baradar 2021). Despite this rhetoric's appeal, the rights and freedoms that the Taliban pledged to ensure were not clear. This is not because of the omnipresent safeguard clauses like 'according to Islam' or 'within the framework of the Sharia,' in the Taliban's statements and speeches, but because 'Islam' and 'Sharia' in this context are what the Taliban interpret them to be.

However, the Taliban's chief justice, Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani, dispelled much of this confusion in April 2022 by offering a rare, detailed look into the group's governance theory and aspirations with his book, *The Islamic Emirate and Its System*. This publication introduced a form of articulation previously absent in the Taliban's intellectual repertoire—a 'credo' of sorts. The fact that the book's foreword was written by the Amir, and its chapters were reviewed and endorsed by the Ulama, highlights this work's representative and canonical status within the group. It stands as a significant exposition of the political worldview of the Taliban, or at the very least of their more doctrinaire circle, to which Abdul Hakim and Akhundzada belong.

A thorough reading of this treatise reveals some key insights. First, the Taliban view their Emirate as the world's *only* truly Islamic system. Unlike all other "revenue-generating governments," the Emirate is a "guiding government" whose mission is

to guide people towards God, improve their morals, and enjoin good and forbid evil (A. H. Haqqani 2022, 20–21). "Guarding the religion" is the Emirate's overriding priority (ibid., 44). Second, in the Emirate, some human rights take on atypical meanings. For instance, freedom of expression means that "every Muslim has the right to explain the precepts of Islam and communicate its provisions" and "not … that everyone has a right to promote [whatever] he wants" (ibid., 42-43).

Third, some centuries-old political thoughts, institutions, and strictures are revived. The 'will of the people' and 'popular sovereignty' are considered impious and polytheistic concepts because the exclusive prerogative to authority and legislation "belongs to no one but God" (ibid., 27, 160). As such, contemporary elections are un-Islamic and "part of the *Jahili* (ignorant) democratic system imported from the infidels" (ibid., 70). Therefore, the Amir is to be chosen only by a coterie of Ulama and notable figures (*Ahl al-Hall wal 'Aqd*) for a lifetime tenure. Ordinary people, including women, have no right to participate in this selection process (ibid., 47-8). As a general matter, women's involvement in politics "is not permissible" because their innate duty is to stay at home to bear and raise children (ibid., 151). Finally, the Taliban harbour deep suspicions of contemporary education. They believe that delving deep into modern sciences is "destructive for the belief" (ibid., 242) and that allowing pupils to study them separately from religious ones is "an egregious harm" (ibid., 246).

On the ground, the Taliban turned their ideas into practical actions, including reinstating public corporal punishments and curtailing freedom of media and speech.[47] They also subjected "former security officers and perceived enemies, including security personnel in the former government or alleged members or supporters of [Daesh]" to "arbitrary detentions, torture, and summary executions" (Human Rights Watch 2022). Girls and women, in particular, have borne the brunt of a series of edicts aimed at erasing their presence from public life (United States Institute of Peace 2023). The Taliban's directives banned them not only from schools, universities, workplaces, but also from recreational facilities and even female-exclusive spaces like beauty salons. The UN described the Taliban's prohibition of Afghan women from working for the Organisation as "unlawful under international law", forcing the UN "to make an appalling choice" between helping the Afghan people and upholding international norms (UNAMA 2023).

Just as in the 1990s, the Taliban's aspiration to live by what they believe to be the true "Islamic rules" and "unadulterated Afghan culture" (ARTE 2023, [08:05]) puts them at odds with cultural and religious perceptions of many Pashtun and non-Pashtun

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[47] In the post-Islamic Republic era, the Hazara Shia community has suffered lethal attacks perpetrated by Daesh and faced restrictions on their religious observances.

Afghans.[48] Moreover, it contradicts certain universal human rights and Western norms, which poses normative challenges for democratic countries engaging with the Emirate. An official acceptance or endorsement of the Taliban government could provoke domestic backlash from concerned citizens and lead to unfavourable electoral consequences for incumbent governments in these countries.

For some reason, this is not the case with other authoritarian and sectarian regimes with which the West maintains good relations. One notable difference is the entrenched negative portrayal of the Taliban as 'the enemy other' in Western media and public perception. The Western press devotes extensive coverage to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the harsh living conditions endured by millions of people under the Taliban rule. This crisis has worsened due to economic sanctions, sharp reduction in international aid, and natural disasters. In contrast, the noteworthy efforts of the Taliban to stabilise the economy, enhance citizen security, and combat narcotics often receive limited or sceptical media attention. In this context, any earnest attempt to normalise relations with the Taliban in Western capitals constitutes a risky political gamble (see Allegretti 2023).

Regardless, the Taliban persist in pursuing external legitimacy on their terms. They continue to tighten their domestic grip while calling on the US and other nations to lift sanctions and work with them (Muttaqi 2023a). The US views the Taliban's belief that they can take "draconian, barbaric steps" against women and minorities while simultaneously seeking "a path to improved [international] relations" as a "faulty illusion" (Price 2023). In the State Department spokesperson's words, the Taliban "cannot expect to have it both ways" (ibid.).

Still, a major concern for the US is the security conundrum in Afghanistan. The Taliban still shelter groups such as al-Qaeda and the anti-Pakistan Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The upsurge in TTP attacks against Pakistan, and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul after the Taliban seized power cast doubt on the credibility of the Emirate's counter-terrorism commitments (SIGAR 2023, 123). Given that most foreign fighters in Afghanistan—except Daesh—have pledged loyalty to the Taliban and fought alongside them for the past 20 years, it seems unlikely that the Emirate would forcefully target these allies.[49] China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran have consistently voiced their shared security anxieties regarding the presence of groups like the anti-China Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), TTP, and Daesh within Afghanistan (MFA China 2023).

These countries, nonetheless, have kept their embassies in Kabul open and permitted Taliban-approved diplomats on their soil, effectively amounting to a quasi-official

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[48] Especially the younger, urbanised, and more globally connected generations.
[49] In August 2023, the Taliban decreed that cross-border attacks on Pakistan are not jihad (Dawn 2023).

recognition of Taliban rule. Through both discursive and practical means, this quartet, along with other states like Uzbekistan and Qatar, have effectively been normalising the status of the Emirate in regional politics. For instance, neighbouring countries often describe the Taliban as "the Afghan interim government" (ibid.) or "the interim Afghan authorities" (MFA Uzbekistan 2023). They also engage in high-level official meetings with Taliban leaders, who are frequently invited to participate in regional forums and initiatives. Among these are regular meetings of foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbouring states and China's Belt and Road Forum. Undeterred by the gulf of values separating the Taliban from the Western world, regional countries have demonstrated their readiness to deepen their ties with the group, for they stand to benefit from Afghanistan's stability and integration into regional connectivity projects.

Notably, for China, the significance of Afghanistan may extend beyond direct economic and security objectives. As an aspiring global power, China seeks to bolster its influence and weaken that of the US in Asia. Beijing also endeavours to establish itself as a diplomatic and soft power counter-weight to Washington by highlighting the distinction between their roles in international politics. Contrary to the US legacy of war, human suffering, and disregard for Afghan culture, China promotes its engagement with the Taliban as a peaceful, mutually beneficial partnership aimed at fostering development in Afghanistan without violating its sovereignty or interfering in its internal affairs (PRC Embassy in Afghanistan 2023).

On the heels of the US "failure" in Afghanistan (Observer Network 2021), China's potential contribution to improving the well-being of Afghans could boost its self-portrayal as a champion for stability and prosperity on the world stage. Towards this end, and in a significant upgrade of the Chinese-Afghan relations, Chinese President Xi Jinping received the credentials of the Islamic Emirate's ambassador Bilal Karimi to Beijing in January 2024. This diplomatic recognition appears not only as a calculated manoeuvre to safeguard Beijing's interests in Afghanistan but also to assert its leadership through a ground-breaking initiative that no other country has undertaken thus far. Despite deepening its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, China has meticulously avoided framing this as formal recognition of their government. This cautious approach likely reflects lingering doubts about the group, while allowing China to leverage the prospect of 'official recognition' in future dealings with the Emirate.[50] In practice, however, Beijing's interactions with the Islamic Emirate resemble those with a legitimate government.

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[50] Following President Xi Jinping's reception of Karimi, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin was asked whether this move constituted a formal recognition of the Taliban (MFA China 2024). In response, Wenbin framed the act as a "normal diplomatic arrangement" for receiving an ambassador from the "Afghan interim

It is worth noting that Beijing and Kabul share a common aspiration for a global order that prioritises Westphalian norms of national sovereignty and non-intervention in the affairs of other states, over human rights and democratic governance. This is important because China's ascendance has disrupted the long-established liberal international order, opening a possibility for a different world system to emerge. In this changing global context, the Taliban may find themselves in a more favourable position to gain international recognition compared to the 1990s, a period marked by the unrivalled supremacy of US power and norms.

In April 2023, the Taliban's foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi (2023b) delivered a speech in Samarqand, Uzbekistan, asserting that "our region particularly, will play a key role in this new world order." Implicit in his statement was the claim that both supporting the Taliban and recognising their government would be important for achieving this potential regional role. Muttaqi maintained that the Emirate functions as a force for stability in Afghanistan and cooperation in the region (ibid.). He cautioned that any alternative to the Taliban government could result in a turbulent descent into regional instability and crises (ibid.).

The Taliban is currently the sole authority in Afghanistan. This fact means, in the words of Iran's former ambassador in Kabul, Bahadur Aminian, that Iran—and other countries with interests in Afghanistan—"has no choice" but to work with them (Afghanistan International 2022). Aminian acknowledged this reality even as he described the group as "a disaster" and likened it to "the Mongol army" that needs to become civilised (ibid.). Plausibly, then, the longer the Taliban government maintains a firm grip on power, the higher the likelihood of its recognition by other nations in the future.

Although no country has yet officially recognised the Emirate as a legitimate government, the Taliban are aware that any future recognition, if it were to happen, would likely originate in their region. For this reason, they have anchored their diplomacy and public relations in the language of political neutrality, shared economic gains, and regional stability and security. The Taliban's apparent willingness to address the concerns and interests of regional states, particularly China, marks a significant departure from their dogmatic and dismissive attitude towards their neighbours during the 1990s.

However, the Taliban's belligerence and sense of insecurity, possibly due to wider isolation and lack of recognition, have paradoxically fuelled their occasional border

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government" (ibid.). This normality, in itself, is essentially what recognition is about. However, in his follow up, Wenbin deflected the question: "You asked whether China officially recognizes the Afghan interim government, I would like to say that China believes that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community" (ibid.).

clashes with some neighbours, particularly Iran and Pakistan. This seemingly serves as one way for the group to over-asserts its national pride, autonomy, and sovereignty. In addition, the Taliban have rejected or ignored the demands that they considered incompatible with their worldview such as breaking with militant groups, building a broad-based government, and respecting women's rights. These requirements for upgrading the Emirate's international standing were put forward not only by the US and the West, but also by China, Russia, and regional countries.

Indeed, the group's intransigence makes it reputationally damaging for other countries to officially or explicitly recognise them, leaving even their closest interlocutors cautious, if not suspicious. This intransigence also appears to be a factor in the delay of the UN Credentials Committee's decision on Afghanistan's UN seat, despite the Taliban's undisputed control of the country, as acknowledged by former president Ashraf Ghani himself (Reuters 2021). Should they be granted a seat at the UN, it would be an unprecedented, almost irreversible recognition of the legitimacy of the Emirate.

Ultimately, the Taliban could have improved their global reputation by fulfilling promises made in Doha, such as allowing girls to attend schools and women to work, which are consistent with Islamic teachings (Afghanistan News 2022). However, it seems that Kandahari doctrinaires within the group exert more influence in internal debates over these matters than the governors in Kabul or the diplomats in Doha. The doctrinaires seem to place little value on external acceptance or recognition, fearing that extensive interaction and cooperation with foreigners may compromise the purity of their belief system.[51] On several occasions, Amir Akhundzada made it clear that he will not engage with the external world in any way that would contravene Sharia law as interpreted by the Taliban (Gul 2023): "We pledged to Allah ... [to] refrain from taking any action that endangers, undermines Islam" (Tolo News 2023).

Conclusion

In the Taliban's triumphant odyssey between 1994 and 2023, the group's political worldview and value rationality have played a significant—though not exclusive—role in shaping their international fortunes. Although the Taliban have evolved

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[51] The opposition of these rigorists to moderate policies, even those mainstream within the Muslim world, stems from a self-perceived role as guardians of doctrinal purity. They view any concession, however minor, as a potential gateway to religious decline.

throughout the years as political and expressive actors, the unwavering commitment to their idiosyncratic national identity and ideological beliefs has proved to be a double-edged sword in their quest for international recognition.

As insurgents (2001–2021), the Taliban's ideational canon was an immense source of resilience in the fields of battle and governance. Their fighters' morale and pursuit of martyrdom in defence of their creed and dignity endowed them with an invincibility that Afghan and foreign adversaries seemed to lack. It was the group's internal righteous anger that initially drove the insurgency when all other supportive exogenous conditions were yet to exist. The Taliban's combat capability played a role in facilitating the Doha Agreement. This accord legitimised the group as the pre-eminent Afghan political power. The subsequent takeover of Kabul, while not enough to generate formal recognition from other states, was essential for the Taliban's claim to be Afghanistan's legitimate ruling power.

Throughout the protracted years of insurgency, the Taliban's organisational and communicative strategies have progressed significantly. Leveraging modern technologies, they have incorporated non-dogmatic discourses to promote their insurgency as a just struggle for independence, national sovereignty, and prosperity of Afghans. The group has adeptly tailored its external messages to address regional and international concerns and present itself as a responsible political actor.

As rulers (1996–2001 and 2021–present), the Taliban's policies, shaped by their unique doctrinal interpretations and cultural principles, put them in conflict with international values of human rights and democracy. These policies also led some regional and global powers to view the group as a security threat. This culminated in the US-led overthrow of the first Emirate, and the persistent perceptions of the second Emirate as a normative and security liability. However, the Taliban's record of enduring twenty years of US military coercion and the absence of viable alternatives to their post-2021 rule have compelled many countries to engage with them. China and Afghanistan's neighbours established diplomatic and commercial ties with the group and normalised its participation in regional forums. In contrast, the US and the West adopted a more sceptical and adversarial stance.

Despite the Taliban's disregard for the demands of both regional and international actors to sever ties with foreign militants, establish a representative government, and uphold human rights, they are cognisant that their best chance for gaining official recognition lies within their region. Therefore, the group has projected more responsiveness to the concerns of its neighbours, especially Beijing.

Ultimately, although the prospect of the Taliban attaining widespread international legitimacy appears remote in the near future, formal regional recognition remains within reach. To achieve that, the Taliban need to empower their more politicised leaders over the dogmatists, heed the expectations of the Afghan people and the

broader global Muslim community, and genuinely address the strategic concerns of their neighbouring countries, particularly regarding security.

Otherwise, an entirely uncompromising political line risks perpetuating the Taliban's contentious position on the world stage. Their singular conviction of divinely ordained 'policies' translates to an unwillingness to negotiate. This, coupled with their conceptions of upholding 'doctrinal purity' and 'sovereign autonomy' results in an eschewal of political compromise and bargaining—hallmarks of peaceful international relations. Consequently, absent significant alterations beyond mere rhetoric in the Taliban's political setup, the long-term well-being of the Afghan people would likely be further imperilled.

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