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Afghanistan as a Strategic Fault Line: How Global Power Rivalries Sustain the Taliban's Rule

Abstract

Afghanistan has once again emerged as a central node of regional and global strategic competition, where extremist groups operate with unprecedented freedom under the Taliban's rule. While theoretical proposals for stabilizing the country—such as establishing a democratic, inclusive, and nationally legitimate government—remain essential, their practical implementation has repeatedly failed. This failure cannot be understood solely in domestic terms. The persistence of instability is deeply intertwined with geopolitical interests: major powers continue to treat Afghanistan as a strategic pressure point, a buffer zone, and a proxy arena for their own competition. Extremism, in this context, is not merely a security threat but a tool leveraged for international strategic objectives. As long as Afghanistan remains embedded in these competing paradigms, any prospect for peace will be undermined. This article argues that Afghanistan's future depends on a rare form of international consensus—one free from strategic interests. Without such coordination, the country will persist as a hotbed of extremism, a theatre for proxy conflicts, and a humanitarian crisis. Only through

a combination of domestic unity and coherent global policy can Afghanistan transition from perpetual conflict to sustainable peace.

Introduction

The collapse of the Afghan republican government in August 2021 and the rapid return of the Taliban marked a dramatic turning point in the country's modern history. Afghanistan has not only regressed politically but has also become a haven for extremist networks that extend their reach well beyond its borders. Groups such as ISIS-K, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda, and regional affiliates exploit the political vacuum and limited governance capacity to train, recruit, and deploy operatives across South and Central Asia, with ripple effects reaching Europe and the Middle East.

Many analyses emphasize domestic shortcomings—tribal fragmentation, weak institutions, ideological rigidity, and corruption—but such explanations alone are insufficient to account for the Taliban's persistence. Afghanistan remains a strategic fault line, a geopolitical arena where the interests of the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and India intersect and often conflict. Instability in Afghanistan is therefore both a consequence of and a tool for external agendas. Extremism is not merely a security challenge but a deliberate instrument used by global powers to advance broader strategic objectives.

Theoretical solutions for stabilizing Afghanistan, such as replacing the Taliban with a democratic, inclusive, and representative government, are clear and widely discussed. Yet, these reforms face immense practical obstacles. Internal fragmentation, ethicised politics, weak institutions, and divided opposition fronts are compounded by the active involvement of international players who exploit extremism and instability for political leverage. This article examines Afghanistan's predicament through the lens of global power rivalry, arguing that the Taliban's resilience is less a reflection of domestic legitimacy than a product of geopolitical fragmentation.

Historical Roots of Afghanistan's Instrumentalizations

Afghanistan's role as a strategic buffer and a geopolitical fault line has deep historical roots. Its location—landlocked, mountainous, and bordering multiple

civilizations—has repeatedly drawn the attention of external powers seeking influence in South and Central Asia. During the 19th century, Afghanistan was central to the Great Game, in which the British and Russian empires vied for regional supremacy. Afghan territory frequently became a buffer for imperial ambitions, often at the expense of domestic governance and sovereignty.

The Cold War further amplified Afghanistan's geopolitical significance. The 1979 Soviet invasion prompted the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia to support Mujahideen fighters as proxies, creating a militarized society with entrenched extremist networks that continue to shape the political landscape. Following the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, the country descended into civil war, during which regional sponsorship facilitated the rise of the Taliban. Supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and tacitly tolerated by other regional actors, the Taliban emerged as a vehicle of strategic influence rather than an autonomous political force.

The post-2001 U.S.-led intervention briefly replaced the Taliban with a republican system backed by Western institutions. Despite massive investment in state-building, Afghanistan's political institutions remained fragile, ethnic, and political divisions persisted, and corruption flourished. The 2021 U.S. withdrawal and the swift Taliban takeover were therefore not sudden shocks, but the predictable outcome of long-term strategic manipulation by external powers. Afghanistan has repeatedly been treated as a geopolitical instrument rather than a sovereign priority, a pattern that explains why internal reform alone has consistently failed.

The Taliban as a Strategic Asset in Global and Regional Rivalries

The Taliban's return to power illustrates their role as a strategic asset for multiple external actors. Their governance provides a manageable form of instability: sufficient to advance regional and global agendas, but limited enough to avoid triggering uncontrollable conflict that might threaten neighbouring states.

Taliban rule functions in multiple strategic dimensions. First, it creates instability in Central Asia, indirectly constraining Russian influence while providing Moscow with a reason to engage diplomatically. Second, it influences Iran through border management, water disputes, and cross-border militia networks. Third, it exerts pressure on China, especially concerning Uyghur militants, which

Beijing monitors closely in relation to Xinjiang security. Fourth, it aligns with Pakistan's long-standing policy of strategic depth, allowing Islamabad to maintain influence over Kabul while counterbalancing India.

Moreover, the Taliban provide space for extremist proxies such as ISIS-K and the TTP, enabling external powers to pursue objectives through controlled unrest. International efforts to "normalize" the Taliban, including limited diplomatic recognition and humanitarian engagement, have inadvertently reinforced their legitimacy and bargaining power, creating a paradox in which engagement without accountability sustains the very conditions it seeks to change.

Afghanistan as the Epicentre of Global Extremism

Under the Taliban, Afghanistan has become home to over twenty active terrorist organizations, including ISIS-K, TTP, Al-Qaeda, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Jamaat Ansarullah. Taliban tolerance, and in some instances support, of training camps and ideological propagation has transformed Afghanistan into a hub of recruitment, logistics, and cross-border operations.

This proliferation of extremist networks affects not only Afghanistan but also neighbouring states and the broader international community. Central Asia, Pakistan, Iran, China, India, and even Europe face tangible security threats as groups trained and ideologically inspired in Afghanistan carry out attacks or export radicalization. Extremism in Afghanistan has thus become a geopolitical commodity: it is a tool wielded for regional influence, pressure, and strategic leverage.

Fragmented Afghan Politics and the Limits of Internal Reform

The theoretical case for an inclusive, democratic Afghan government is strong. Yet internal political dynamics severely constrain its realization. Afghanistan remains deeply fragmented along ethnic, tribal, and ideological lines. Competing personal ambitions, divided opposition in exile, and weak civil society organizations further exacerbate the challenge. Financial and organizational limitations prevent the consolidation of any credible alternative to Taliban rule.

This fragmentation indirectly benefits external actors, allowing them to maintain influence and manage instability without assuming direct responsibility. Internal reforms, in isolation, are therefore insufficient; they cannot overcome the combined effects of domestic division and strategic manipulation by global powers.

Why Theoretical Solutions Fail in Practice

Efforts to implement political solutions in Afghanistan consistently collide with external agendas. Major powers have little incentive to support a strong, unified Afghan government. Managed instability allows them to prevent unfavourable regional alignments, use extremist groups as leverage in broader strategic contests, and maintain Afghanistan as a low-cost instrument of influence.

As a result, the gap between theory and practice remains stark. Electoral democracy, constitutional reform, and national reconciliation—all theoretically sound—are repeatedly undermined by both internal fragmentation and external interference. Afghanistan's sovereignty and political agency are therefore constrained by the interests of actors who view the country as a strategic chessboard rather than as a sovereign state.

The Missing International Consensus

A sustainable solution requires an interest-free international consensus. Such a consensus would entail ending proxy support for extremist groups, coordinating sanctions and incentives, providing regional security guarantees, and agreeing on legitimacy and recognition standards.

Currently, global divisions reinforce Taliban rule. The United States emphasizes counterterrorism, China prioritizes economic access and infrastructure projects, Russia seeks regional influence, Pakistan maintains strategic depth, and Iran balances ideological opposition with pragmatic engagement. This fragmented approach ensures that the Taliban remain entrenched, with continued access to resources and politically continue their rule without legitimacy.

Only through coordinated agreement among global and regional powers, free from immediate self-interest, can Afghanistan begin a transition toward sustainable governance, sovereignty, and peace. Such coordination would enable domestic reform efforts to take root, allowing Afghan-led political solutions to succeed where they have repeatedly failed in the past.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's current crisis is not solely a domestic failure; it is a product of structural and strategic calculations by global and regional powers. The Taliban's resilience and the proliferation of extremist networks are less reflective of domestic legitimacy than the outcome of a carefully managed geopolitical environment. Throughout history, Afghanistan has repeatedly served as a buffer, a proxy arena, and a low-cost lever for external powers seeking regional influence.

While theoretical solutions—such as establishing a democratic, inclusive, representative government—are necessary, they face immense practical barriers. Internal fragmentation, weak institutions, and divided opposition are compounded using extremism and instability as instruments of global competition. Without a coordinated, interest-free international consensus, no domestic reform effort can succeed.

The urgency is clear: Afghanistan faces escalating terrorism, humanitarian collapse, and regional destabilization. Sustainable peace requires both domestic unity and aligned international engagement prioritizing sovereignty, human security, and long-term stability. Only under these conditions can Afghanistan transition from a proxy battlefield and extremism hub to a nation capable of self-determination, dignity, and genuine peace.

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