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The Evolving Information Environment in Afghanistan

Salem Ibrahimi and Sam Vincent

Afghanistan Research Network

This series highlights the work and analysis of the Afghanistan Research Network (ARN), a project convened by LSE / PeaceRep, and the Civic Engagement Project (CEP). The network brings together over 20 Afghan researchers (and several non-Afghans) with diverse expertise and backgrounds investigating a range of issues. This project aims to support Afghan researchers who were recently forced to leave Afghanistan; to ensure expert and analytical provision; inform contextually-appropriate international policies and practices on Afghanistan; and to deepen understanding of evolving political, security, and economic dynamics.

About the authors:

Mr Salem Ibrahimi is a former career professional with two decades experience in the government, private sector, and the UN in security, humanitarian and development sectors. His research interests include security studies and international relations focused on Afghanistan and the wider region.

Dr Sam Vincent is academic advisor to the PeaceRep Afghanistan Research Network, affiliated with the Conflict and Civicness Research Group at LSE.

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Key Takeaways

► Early in their insurgency the Taliban recognised the information environment as a key battlefield. They learned to harness emerging technologies as part of an increasingly sophisticated information campaign, amplifying the effects of their military operations to generate a sense of momentum and inevitability. Despite having convinced the coalition to withdraw and having overthrown the Islamic Republic, since August 2021 the Taliban have continued to wage an information war aimed at pacifying domestic and external opposition.

► The post-2002 conflict was never reducible to a government/Taliban binary, and the information environment in that period reflected the efforts and interests of a range of stakeholders. Since the collapse, however, there has been a shift in the balance of interests, regionally and globally, regarding Afghanistan. Deprived of the Republic and coalition as a common enemy, differences have emerged between Taliban sponsors and their respective protégés. The more the Taliban seeks to exert control over the post-Republic information environment, the more these intra-Taliban tensions are exposed and exacerbated.

► Internally, the Taliban confronts a choice between moderating and seeking recognition at the cost of fragmentation, or reasserting its 'messianic-eschatological' inner tendency, bolstering cohesion at the cost of international recognition. Preferring the latter, the movement is further moving into the orbit of the authoritarian states camp.

► The information environment is likely to become further restricted under Taliban rule. In assessing emerging claims about Afghanistan, researchers and policymakers should be aware of the underlying and ongoing contest between key actors and the interests reflected by particular narratives.

► Rather than imagining that the Taliban will respond to incentives as a rational political actor would, international policy should reflect on the logic of the movement's messianic-eschatological inner tendency and seek to build policy from there. Western policy debate about Afghanistan should recognise that relations with the West are only one amongst several sets of relations that the Taliban is seeking to manage and that Western policy towards Afghanistan is only one set of external forces actively seeking to shape the trajectory of the movement. In this context 'engagement' may not produce moderation – and conversely, 'withdrawal' may not drive radicalisation.

► Relying on a single line of effort is unlikely to shift behaviour. For instance, neither overreliance on military force during the intervention, nor overreliance on diplomacy during Doha at the cost of the overall strategy, resulted in a behavioural change. A more effective strategy might be to systematically raise the costs of messianic-eschatological behaviour using the full spectrum of available diplomatic, economic, and military pressures.

Introduction

The best way to understand the evolving information environment in Afghanistan is to view it from a warfare perspective, as a battlefield. Even today, three years on from the withdrawal agreement between the United States (US) and the Taliban, there is still a war going on in the eyes of many Taliban – and that war is being waged on the ideological and information front. In the eyes of these Taliban they are fulfilling a messianic mission to implement the will of God on earth, cleanse the world from evil and promote their version of virtue. They see the rest of the world as an obstacle and adversary that is trying to undermine their holy mission. This struggle has been a constant through the various incarnations of the Taliban, from its founding, first rise to power, insurgency years and now as de facto ruler once more.

What has changed over the years is the group's use of various technologies in pursuit of their struggle and the balance of interests from the region and beyond. The Taliban learned to embrace the technological trends that were transforming the information environment in Afghanistan and around the world in the post-9/11 period. They made skilful use of these technologies in pursuit of an information strategy that struck many western military observers as resembling the tenets of fourth generation warfare. Precisely how they learned to so markedly upgrade their information operations and wider strategy, and to embrace technology as they did, is yet to be disclosed, but this paper argues that they were heavily influenced by al Qaeda, and the security establishments of Pakistan and Iran, among other factors. This provision of assistance should be understood as part of a wider attempt to instrumentalise parts of the group (which was never monolithic) as their proxies, whilst the Taliban in turn struggled to balance between receiving assistance and retaining autonomy.

The evolving information environment reflects these continuing influences and dynamics. During the insurgency period the sense of a common enemy in the form of the Republic and its coalition supporters created a degree of cohesion between these influences. Since August 2021, however, the regional contest for the hearts and minds of Afghans has led to the fragmentation of the information environment, including within the Taliban movement. At the same time, the Taliban are learning how to control the information environment as a de facto authority. Their approach here suggests Pakistan's influence, since it so closely resembles Pakistan's approach to information control on its side of the Durand line. The more the Taliban attempt to exert greater control, however, the more tensions between different strands of Taliban narratives - which tend to be reinforced by regional actors - become apparent. Therefore, the contemporary information environment can be characterised by this contradictory dynamic of control and fragmentation.

Since the Doha negotiations, tensions have emerged between two distinct kinds of overarching Taliban narratives that have yet to be fully resolved. The first, useful in encouraging Western audiences to believe that the Taliban was a more moderate force than it had been in the 1990s, was the 'Taliban 2.0' narrative. This appears to have been driven primarily by Taliban delegates in the Doha office and was widely amplified and internalised. This narrative has become harder to sustain in the face of the realities of Taliban de facto control in Afghanistan. On the other hand, within the Taliban fighting core a 'Victory' narrative developed, which was amplified by regional actors. According to this narrative the political negotiations merely rubber-stamped the 'facts on the ground' created by the military success of the insurgency in breaking the will of the international coalition and creating a sense among the populace that their victory was inevitable. From the latter perspective there is no need to moderate behaviour in the ways that Taliban 2.0 seemed to suggest; why would they abandon the course that led them to victory and why would they now compromise on the ideals for which they fought for so long?

This paper examines the evolution of the information environment in Afghanistan. The first part examines the Taliban insurgency period, focusing on the evolution of Taliban information operations in response to i) the US-led international intervention, ii) the struggle for legitimacy against the Islamic Republic, iii) the struggle for legitimacy against other global jihadi movements, and iv) the impact of global geostrategic shifts and the efforts of Pakistan and Iran to adapt their Afghan policy to those shifts. The second part turns to the evolution of the information environment since the collapse of the Republic in August 2021. It focuses on four sets of tensions driving Taliban behaviour in the information environment: the global tension between autocratic and open systems of governance, the regional tension between Pakistan and Iran, intra-Taliban tensions, and Afghan domestic tensions. Having overthrown the Republic, the Taliban was seemingly in a strong position to impose control over the information environment. However, the departure of the coalition and collapse of the Republic removed a common opponent and changed the balance of interests in the region, exposing and exacerbating tensions between different elements of the movement. Paradoxically, the more the Taliban have sought to exert information control, the more these fissures have become exposed. The need to preserve cohesion in the rank and file in the face of these regional and global dynamics has stifled efforts to empower a moderating element in the movement and resulted in the reassertion of the Taliban's 'messianic-eschatological' inner tendency. As a result the Taliban is likely to continue to move closer to the autocratic camp (Iran, Russia, China) and away from the international community. As a result, the information environment is likely to close further with grave implications for Afghans and for research and policy on Afghanistan.

The Information Environment during the Taliban Insurgency

Contrary to the way that the conflict has often been imagined and portrayed, the competition to shape and control the Afghan information environment after 2002 was never simply a binary contest between the Taliban on the one hand and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on the other. In reality neither 'side' was monolithic, and a range of domestic, regional and global actors, with diverse motives and objectives, also actively sought to shape the Afghan information environment. Therefore, the shaping of the information environment in this period is better characterised as a complex web of interactions. The role of the Taliban merits special attention since, despite intense scrutiny over more than twenty years, their behaviour continues to surprise analysts and commentators. During its years as an insurgency, the Taliban's information strategy seems to have developed in response to the evolution of various rivalries and alliances. Four sets of relations were especially important. First, Taliban information operations developed to resist the US-led international intervention and its information operations. Second, with the emergence and development of the Islamic Republic the Taliban information campaign grew as the movement engaged in a struggle for legitimacy against the new state. Thirdly, changes in the global jihadi space also shaped Taliban information operations. Fourth, the overall geostrategic shifts globally and in the region influenced the way the Taliban conducted their information operations. These influences are now discussed in turn.

(i) Taliban information operations in response to the US-led international intervention

The information environment in Afghanistan changed profoundly during the years of the international intervention, which coincided with deep changes globally in the information ecosystem. This period saw the development of telecommunications infrastructure, the spread of mobile phones and internet connectivity, and widespread uptake of social media and communications apps such as Whatsapp and Telegram.[1] Accompanied by the development of a vibrant media sector during the Republic years, these technologies were initially interpreted in generally 'techno-utopian' terms as heralding greater openness and transparency. Such optimism has since come to seem naïve (Jones, 2022).

As in other countries around the world, this developing information environment has increasingly become a site of contestation in itself. During this period numerous increasingly sophisticated actors around the globe were honing techniques to harness the digitally-driven transformation to reshape information environments through strategies including misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and 'fake news'. As violent conflict developed and evolved in Afghanistan, the key actors sought to keep pace with and incorporate these developments into their information operations. There may have been an assumption that the government and NATO would be the beneficiaries of these technological developments, but over time the Taliban proved much more nimble and adept at using them to gain a competitive edge in the information struggle. The Taliban military modus operandi as a network of thinly spread operatives gave them an advantage in being able to spread information much more quickly than their adversaries, who were slow to exploit social media early on in the conflict and too centralised and cumbersome to compete with Taliban messaging in later years.

Despite the immense disparity in capabilities between the Taliban as a start-up insurgency and the international coalition, the Taliban learned how to conduct complex information operations to generate an asymmetric information advantage. The Taliban not only managed to utilise its long-held sway over traditional media of information - in this case, the mosques and madrasa network - but, with external help, also managed to evolve to exploit digital media. The main impetus for this learning appears to have been military pressure, aided by Pakistan and al Qaeda in technology adoption and adaptation. In common with other adversaries of the US and its allies, the challenge for the Taliban was to fight in a way that would negate NATO's massive 'conventional' military superiority. At first, lessons appear to have been painful and costly. Around 2005-6 the Taliban suffered a number of setbacks, discovering that their existing ways of fighting could not compete with the coalition warfighting and information operation. This battlefield experience may have drawn the Taliban leadership to the realisation that they would have to adapt. Coinciding with the expansion of telecoms which opened up the internet and digital communication, they seem to have identified possibilities for harnessing digital technologies at this time. In this early period, the Taliban softened their former ban on television, photography and movies, now using these formats to produce documentaries, interviews and footage of speeches that they disseminated as propaganda. They began to carry cameras in battle, exploiting the footage for propaganda, and commanders began to carry laptops.

Al Qaeda's global network provided vivid examples of how technology might be leveraged, as well as assistance in doing so. With al Qaeda input the Taliban embraced two strategic technologies concurrently - the deployment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and use of digital media that had not previously been very popular with the Taliban. Here the successful example set in Iraq by al Qaeda-affiliated fighters seems to have encouraged the sceptics within the Taliban to embrace the two technologies. Additionally, as the Taliban did not control territory or hold open gatherings inside Afghanistan due to the military disparity, the use of media and information technology helped to overcome limitations of access (ICG, 2008). Perhaps emulating insurgents in Iraq, the Taliban quickly learned to use visual media technology to mass-disseminate graphic images of civilian casualties attributed to the coalition and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), as well as images of coalition and ANDSF losses (ibid). Again, the embrace of technology may have been driven by realisation of the potential propaganda and political benefits it could provide. In the domains of visual and digital media, over the years, as the Taliban expanded their operations they benefited from the facilities provided to them by the Pakistani and Iranian security agencies. The Taliban used Pakistani and Iranian territories to receive and conduct training and planning sessions on a regular basis and established sophisticated digital content production studios (Waldman, 2010; Jones, 2020).

The Taliban's irregular warfare seems broadly consistent with a wider picture of trends in the evolution of irregular warfare across contexts, which have been described under a variety of headings including 'Fourth Generation Warfare' (Lind et al, 1989, 1994; Hammes, 1994, 2004) (4GW) and the '"Other" Revolution in Military Affairs' (Brun, 2010).[2] Analysts of these developments single out how irregular warriors, having accepted that they cannot defeat conventionally superior armed forces on the battlefield, have learned to concentrate on achieving victory by working to convince their adversaries that they cannot achieve their strategic objectives. For example, Hammes considers 4GW an 'evolved form of insurgency [that] uses all available networks – political, economic, social, military – to convince the enemy's decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit' (Hammes, 2004). While this perspective has provoked critical scepticism, it clearly influenced the way senior coalition commanders understood Taliban strategy. For example, General Barno, overall commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2005, saw the Taliban as a 4GW-like opponent (Giustozzi, 2007, p.98, citing Barno, 2006).[3] In the 4GW paradigm, information operations are central because they are so vital to the main objective of convincing enemy decision-makers that their strategic objectives are hopeless.

General Richards, who became commander of ISAF forces in 2006, reportedly considered Taliban propaganda efforts to be unusually sophisticated (Giustozzi, 2007, p.119). Kilcullen argues that by 2009 the Taliban were treating propaganda as 'their main effort, coordinating physical attacks in support of a sophisticated propaganda campaign', whereas coalition forces treated it as a supporting element (Kilcullen, 2009, p.58). Coalition forces appear to have been slow to recognise the political and strategic significance of an increasing pattern of violent attacks that seemed relatively trivial in conventional military terms but which were proving politically powerful because of the way they were amplified in Taliban messaging. As an American ISAF officer told the International Crisis Group in 2008, '"unfortunately, we tend to view information operations as supplementing kinetic [fighting] operations. For the Taliban, however, information objectives tend to drive kinetic operations... virtually every kinetic operation they undertake is specifically designed to influence attitudes or perceptions"' (ICG, 2008).

By 2006, their output was already far more sophisticated than it had been during the earlier Emirate period. Simple, recurrent slogans provided a rudimentary political platform, enabling the group to structure its messages and manipulate public perception of the movement while remaining broad and vague enough to find resonance across a wide cross-section of society (Kilcullen, 2009, pp.58-59). They began to communicate different messages in different languages so as to target distinct audiences with tailored messages (ICG, 2008). As well as becoming much more willing to talk with journalists, whether by satellite phone or in face to face meetings (also inviting journalists to visit 'liberated' areas), they also began to show 'a much greater ability to manipulate the press and their interlocutors' (Giustozzi, 2007). They experimented with information operations, leaking information seemingly to confuse enemies about their intentions, or attempting to divide factions within the government and create division in the international community. They continued to use old techniques, resuming the notorious shabnameh ('night letters') that were used in the 1980s. They enlisted singers to support the cause, distributing their CDs widely and cheaply. They produced magazines targeting literate Afghans, and created Voice of Sharia radio and the alemarah website to spread news and propaganda online. Along with other jihadists operating in Iraq at the same time, the Taliban also made innovative use of video cassette and DVD productions filled with 'explicit propaganda commentary and preaching' featuring increasingly targeted messaging. These messages included a recurrent series of core arguments such as that the US was an invader just like the Soviet Union, justifying jihad; that the conflict was part of a global Christian war against Islam, and that the government in Kabul was a mere puppet and therefore illegitimate (Giustozzi, 2007, pp. 121).

From September 2012, with the end of the 'surge', the Taliban faced a number of existential challenges, but were able to overcome these due to vulnerabilities in the resolve of the coalition and capacity limitations in the ANDSF. The Taliban's mismanagement of the death of supreme leader Mula Omar and then that of his successor Akhtar Mansoor, and the emergence of Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) were key turning points for the Taliban in this period. Their annual spring operations are indicative of these turning points. In 2015, two years after Mula Omar's death and a year after the 2014 elections, with the end of the NATO combat role and the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement between the US and Afghanistan and the start of the successor NATO mission Resolute Support, the Taliban launched operation Azm (meaning 'resolve' or 'determination'). The Taliban rank and file was shocked to learn that the leadership had for two years kept secret from them the news of their Supreme Leader's demise. This choice of campaign title was widely perceived as an attempt to regain momentum, indicating the Taliban's determination to proceed with its founding leader's path of resisting the republic despite the transformation in international engagement that Resolute Support entailed. In 2016, the year after the Taliban had eventually been forced to admit Mula Omar's death, they branded their annual spring operation 'Omari' after their late leader in order to mobilise the rank and file and keep momentum. Later in May in the same year, when their new leader, Akhtar Mansour, was then killed in a drone strike on the other side of the Durand Line (BBC, 2016b), the Taliban faced an internal leadership struggle in appointing his successor (BBC, 2016a). It was widely acknowledged among Afghans that Habatullah, a relatively obscure cleric with no credible fighting experience or base among the fighters, was a compromise choice handpicked by the ISI and promoted as a non-controversial figure (Tolo News, 2016). A year later, in 2017, the spring offensive was named after Akhtar Mansour and in 2018 they launched 'khandaq'/'ahzab' (referring to Medina's siege by the tribes during Prophet Muhammad's early years in Medina), indicating both that they felt themselves in a dire situation at that time and that they wished to affirm that they could still prevail. This campaign was then followed by 'fath' (victory) in 2019, the same year the negotiations between the US and the Taliban in Doha were made public, clearly signalling to their rank and file that they viewed US willingness to negotiate as US submission. In dubbing their 2019 offensive 'fath' the Taliban sought to invoke parallels with the victorious campaign of Prophet Muahammad and his companions to Mecca from Medina (Roggio, 2018; al Jazeera, 2019).

With the changing policies and shifting goals of the international intervention in the two decades, neither Afghans nor the populations of force-contributing countries were clear about the purpose of the intervention. This created room for misinformation in the form of conspiracy theories to spread and take hold. For instance, neither Afghans nor the British public could understand why British forces were deployed to Helmand, given the historical context of the Anglo-Afghan wars (Martin, 2014). The understanding among many Afghans of overwhelming US technological superiority also set expectations in ways that undermined international efforts. Many Afghans believed that the international forces could target a nail underground in the dark of the night and therefore concluded that they were allowing Taliban fighters to roam freely across the Durand line. This issue also arose around civilian casualties and night raids based on questionable intelligence; again Afghans struggled to accept that such mistakes could occur given their understanding that the foreign forces' possessed near omniscience due to their technology. A number of initial military setbacks on the part of the intervenors were also not clearly explained to the Afghan public by foreign forces. In contrast, the Taliban were quick to portray such events as Taliban success stories (examples here include the Shahi Kot operation, and the withdrawals from Musa Qala and Sangeen districts in Helmand). An additional point of contention in the information environment was Pakistan's duplicity and the international community's perceived lack of resolve to deal more firmly with Pakistani support to the Taliban (Gall, 2014; Martin, 2014).

Finally, the US focus on its invasion of Iraq, coupled with premature timeline statements and a changing and incoherent international strategy, emboldened the Taliban to persist with their terror and information operation campaign. Despite being very unpopular based on data from national public opinion surveys by the Asia Foundation, the Taliban succeeded in subjugating Afghans to their rule. In the end, direct negotiations between the US and the Taliban, and the Doha deal, from which the Islamic Republic was excluded, completely and irreversibly switched the balance in favour of the Taliban against the Republic (Coll and Entous, 2021).

(ii) The Taliban's struggle for legitimacy against the Islamic Republic

Historically, Afghanistan's information environment has been dominated by oral, informal and mythical spaces and narratives. However, during the past century the country has moved towards an increasingly formalised and written set of diverse narratives. During the Taliban insurgency and other previous volatile periods of Afghanistan's history, spaces where information is shared and ideas socialised have been at the centre of contests for legitimacy and influence by the state, non-state actors, regional and greater powers. State formation processes in Afghanistan have been deeply affected by the shifting relative powers of these actors and their diverging and converging interests, with non-state actors influenced by external powers. In the 1990s, despite using sacred religious symbols to launch an Islamic emirate as they took control over Afghanistan, the Taliban's claim to statehood was disputed. There was an active insurgency by the deposed Jamiat-e-Islami-led Interim Islamic Government, which also still had a seat in the UN General Assembly as well as diplomatic representation in some capitals. The post-9/11 Bonn Conference initiated a new state formation process that excluded the Taliban as a group. The Taliban considered the new state from which they were excluded to be an existential threat since they could not imagine surviving as a movement if the new state won popular legitimacy amongst Afghans. In this, and given their worldview, it may be futile to expect the Taliban to exist as a political movement in its modern sense similar to its ideological parent parties in Pakistan, willing to compete for a share of power in a multi-party system (Ali, 2007). This may also be the reason that they refused to admit the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a party to negotiations in Doha. For its part the Taliban's main supporter, Pakistan, viewed the Islamic Republic as a threat to its national security and an undoing of the 'strategic depth' it had sought to establish after the Cold War.

In the eyes of many Afghans the post-Bonn setup had a crucial vulnerability. It was perceived to be made up of the same individuals who were the cause of the Taliban's emergence in the first place, with extremely dubious human rights records from the civil war era and before. The US reliance on the 'warlords' in ousting the Taliban from power may have been a tactical expediency but it proved a strategic liability, including in terms of its negative impact on the information environment. As the Taliban targeted key state formation processes and projects, they focused their information war on promoting a negative image of the state in the eyes of Afghans.

To resonate and arouse popular sentiments, the Taliban strove to portray the state as corrupt and as an immoral puppet entity illegitimately imposed by invading powers, calling on Afghans to resist it and to avoid cooperation. These messages were combined with threats and brutal acts of terror to intimidate the population, particularly targeting local leaders under various pretexts, but especially claiming them to be spies and the agents of infidels.

As the Taliban launched annual spring offensives, especially after 2014, with the majority of their attacks targeted against the ANDSF (i.e., Afghans), their narratives continued to focus on the 'invaders'. They used religious symbolism to brand their annual operations and justify attacks against Afghan civilians, portraying their victims as stooges and collaborators of the invasion. The Taliban also attacked the symbols of the new state, including infrastructure and national processes such as elections (attacking polling stations) as well as services like education and health. Over time they managed to co-opt some of these services and infrastructures, establishing shadow governance structures that collected revenue and taxes (Jackson, 2018). The Taliban's continued terror campaign, a reluctant and half-hearted international strategy coupled with the limited capabilities of the Republic, led many Afghans to switch sides in the course of the conflict. The Taliban information campaign relentlessly repeated the message that Taliban victory was inevitable. In the period immediately before the collapse, most Afghan political actors were happy to receive amnesty from the Taliban with some anticipating some sort of role in the post-Republic set-up.

A final issue concerns the differences between the Taliban and the Republic in the organisational arrangements they made for information operations. Contrary to the Islamic Republic and the coalition, the Taliban did not have different structures for their information operations and public affairs. They were combined under a 'media commission', also known as the 'cultural commission', within the structure of the leadership shura (commonly known as the Quetta Shura, after the city in Balochistan where it was based) (Gall, 2014). This commission was reportedly established in 2002 in Pakistan (ICG, 2008). This merging of public affairs and psychological operations may have seemed rudimentary from a strategic communications perspective, but it proved effective for the Taliban to use public affairs as a weapon in their war. While the coalition and the Islamic Republic struggled to present a coherent narrative from the multitude of civilian and military outlets, the Taliban did not see any distinction between 'psyops' and public affairs.

(iii) The Taliban's struggle for legitimacy among the global jihadi movements

Meanwhile, changes in the global jihadi space also shaped Taliban information operations. This seems to have had an important bearing on the Taliban's adoption of technology. Technology uptake was striking to observers because it was understood to be ideologically challenging for the movement. Giustozzi remarked that 'compared to the 'old Taliban' of 1994-2001, the insurgents of 2002- … developed a passion for the new technologies completely at odds with the ostracism showed in the old days' (Giustozzi, 2007, pp.236). In addition to military pressure to adapt, Giustozzi attributed the embrace of technology to the Taliban having 'absorbed from their foreign jihadist allies a more flexible and less orthodox attitude towards imported technologies and techniques' (Giustozzi, 2007, p.13). The Taliban appear to have wrestled with two sets of competing tendencies, the first of which was the reclusiveness, simplicity and luddism of Mullah Omar. As leader of the Emirate he was rarely seen, cultivating an almost mythical status and eschewing modern technology. This may have suited Pakistani security agencies who could more easily attempt to influence this kind of opaque leadership behind the scenes. In contrast, the other tendency was the outward-facing and tech-savvy approach of bin Laden and al Qaeda. Bin Laden sought to make use of media technologies and international journalists to broadcast his message globally, clearly recognising its great political and strategic potential. Using this visual media strategy, bin Laden attracted significant attention and sympathy from the rank and file of the Taliban and beyond. Over time the 'Osama'-type approach became ascendent because it proved more militarily effective.

The pre-9/11 alignment with al Qaeda proved durable, surviving the al Qaeda schism with Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)/Islamic State (IS) over strategy. The subsequent challenge for the Taliban has been to oppose IS whilst simultaneously emulating some of their strategy, especially relating to technology adoption and digital information operations. Since 2014/15, the Taliban information campaign also reflects growing competition with an IS affiliate in Afghanistan - IS-Khorasan (IS-K) - for recruits, popular support and territory. Indeed, the Taliban's disastrous mismanagement of the leadership transition after Mullah Omar's death led many supporters, including a significant number of fighters associated with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other regional groups, to shift allegiance to IS and form the IS-K.

In the absence of mobilising figures like Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar, al Qaeda and the Taliban struggled to attract younger recruits, who were increasingly exposed to diverse interpretations of Islam thanks to the technological advances. Some of these younger potential recruits had access to a wider set of material propagated by IS through social media and other encrypted channels. The Taliban's Deobandi interpretation faced challenges from a number of fronts, but was mainly threatened by Salafi ideology which, combined with IS propaganda, could be seen as less hierarchical and more instant in terms of glory and gratification for potential recruits in search of a purpose. This issue was especially acute in the urban, educated elements of the Taliban insurgency as the rural contingents were still relatively immune to these changes due to limited internet access. Many observers saw an overlap between IS-K and Haqqani network attacks, operations and territories of interest (Gohel and Winston, 2020; Skorka, 2019). It is believed that some attacks that were apparently claimed by IS-K were actually undertaken by the same network used in previous Haqqani network attacks (Gohel and Winston, 2020). As the Taliban were negotiating with the US, they did not take responsibility for attacks that proved to negatively affect their position during the negotiations. Instead, a number of high-profile attacks that proved unpopular were claimed by IS-K. Nevertheless, the Taliban leadership took steps to overcome this issue, including strict reinforcement of the Deobandi interpretation among the rank and file, classifying members based on their ideological leanings, and even undertaking joint operations against IS-K with the international forces and the ANDSF (Morgan, 2020, Mir 2021). In their fear of Salafi ideology, the Taliban leadership also found an additional cause to deepen their existing relationships with Iranian security agencies.

(iv) The impact of global geostrategic shifts on the Taliban

Finally, geostrategic shifts globally and in the region also influenced the way that the Taliban conducted their information operations. The rise of China and an increasingly assertive Russia on the regional and global stage, and the realignment of Pakistan and Iran in response, proved especially important in shaping the way the Taliban conducted themselves militarily, diplomatically and more broadly in the information environment. The Taliban received support from Pakistan, Iran and Russia (Jones, 2020). The chaos that followed the US-led interventions in Iraq and Libya, the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria, and the perceived hesitation shown by the US over Syria were all interpreted by Pakistan and Iran as signs of US weakness. In response, Pakistan and Iran started hedging for a future in which the US was not the only global power. In turn, the Taliban took cues from both Pakistan and Iran in their behaviour in the information environment.

Pakistan joined hands with the international intervention in providing critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) and airspace to the US and its partners to take on the Taliban. These overtures proved to be astute tactical moves by the Pakistani military dictator against the backdrop of Pakistan's long-standing and strategic support to the Taliban as an ally in Afghanistan (Krishnan and Johny, 2022). While overtly continuing to collaborate with the US-led intervention, covertly Pakistan kept on hosting, supporting, training and facilitating the Taliban's return to the battlefield in Afghanistan through a dedicated cell of special forces veterans commonly known as Directorate S (Gall, 2014; Coll, 2018). In addition to the imperative to ensure its continued strategic depth in Afghanistan, as General Musharaf and other generals in the Pakistani security establishment observed the US become embroiled in Iraq, they considered it prudent to invest in the Taliban against the day when the US would eventually withdraw from Afghanistan (Gall, 2014; Coll, 2018). As the main backers of the Taliban, shifts in Pakistani and Iranian behaviour had a significant impact on the way the Taliban conducted themselves militarily, diplomatically and more broadly in the information environment.

The Pakistani security establishment endured an era of humiliation, encompassing the killing of Osama Bin Laden by US forces near Pakistan's premier military academy in Abbottabad, the US drone campaign in Pakistan, the deaths of a number of Taliban leaders on Pakistani soil, and culminating in President Trump's short-lived South Asia strategy. Against this backdrop, the Pakistani security establishment took on the daunting challenge of normalising its support for the Taliban in the domestic information environment while simultaneously seeking to evade responsibility for supporting terrorism in Afghanistan. To achieve this, it labelled the growing body of evidence of the latter as a hostile fifth-generation or hybrid warfare operation and conspiracy by its adversaries - India, the Islamic Republic and the US. This embrace of concepts such as fifth generation and hybrid warfare at the highest levels of the Pakistani security establishment may also be seen in the military's increasing role in controlling Pakistan's information environment, both through propaganda and also the repression of media freedoms. These efforts were accompanied by selective military operations against so-called 'bad' Taliban that were actually meant to entrench the Pakistani military's control over the restive region on the Pakistani side of the disputed Durand Line. Key turning points during the post-2015 era were the emergence of what commentators called the Bajwa doctrine, hybrid warfare or fifth generation warfare, and the emergence of a hybrid regime in the form of the PTI-led, Pakistani military-controlled government (Nadeem et al, 2021, Siddiqa, 2022, Sikander, 2017).

These turning points were critical to the further rise of the Taliban in the information environment both in Pakistan and Afghanistan as the group found new sympathisers in the form of a secular, celebrity-led political party, in addition to their traditional religious party brethren. This era was also marked by the controversial role of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) in mobilising the nation in support of the army in the name of protecting Pakistan, the emergence of social media 'troll armies' associated with the PTI, and an unprecedented increase in Taliban hashtag trend campaigns on social media with many users based in Pakistan (Daily Pakistan, 2016, Sikander, 2017). The ISPR's visible role in domestic politics may be interpreted as a sign of the Pakistani establishment's evolved approach to 'hybrid' political control in Pakistan (Siddiqa, 2022). Taliban leaders like Saraj and Yaqoob were now given the title of 'shahzaday' ('princelings') by commentators close to the establishment, portraying them as a new generation of Taliban, in line with the plot of a popular Turkish historical drama broadcast in Pakistan (Khan, 2020, Yasin et al, 2021). As discussed in Part III below, this phase in the manipulation of Pakistani domestic politics and policy on Afghanistan by the military would prove costly in the wake of the abrupt collapse of the Republic.

Meanwhile, Iran has a complicated relationship with the Taliban. Despite a bitter history of relations as well as a common misperception about their ideological/sectarian differences, the two have grown increasingly close. Iran's security agencies saw elements within the Taliban as useful partners to hedge against the United States and Pakistan (as well as Saudi Arabia). Some Taliban members who had historically been closer to Iran saw their westerly neighbour as an alternative to Pakistan due to geographic proximity, especially as they grew frustrated with the way Pakistan's security agencies were dealing with them (Roggio, 2010). Another factor was Iran's realisation, again especially after the US intervention in Iraq, that it needed to protect itself from being encircled by the US, leading to efforts to nurture a balancing option in the form of the Taliban. The presence of al Qaeda members in Iran, including Saif ul-Adl, the current emir of the group according to some rumours, and Osama bin Laden's family on occasion, was an additional factor in this relationship (VOA, 2023). Another aspect was the relationship between the Taliban and the Zahedan-based, pro-Iranian regime, Sunni cleric Mawlawi Abdolhamid Ismael-Zahi.

The Taliban maintained offices, a shura and received training in Iran. Despite these common interests, Iran and the Taliban nonetheless faced difficulties in justifying the relationship to their respective audiences (Roggio, 2010; Daragahi, 2021; Abdi, 2021a, 2021b). With all the complications and common interests, Iranian influence would continue to be felt in the post-collapse Afghan information environment with billboards and posters appearing in Kabul following the unique Iranian style of propaganda ("Pro-Iran groups", 2022; Samri, 2022). Finally, Iran needed to recruit fighters from Afghanistan for its war in Syria. The Taliban were apparently content with this as it also denied the Islamic Republic much-needed recruits for the ANDSF and eased the Taliban's expansion to the central regions of Afghanistan (Jamal, 2019; Schwartz, 2022).

Meanwhile, the Taliban have also cultivated relations with Iran in part to create a counterweight against Pakistani influence, especially given that Pakistan's double game has periodically involved attacking the Taliban to demonstrate commitment to the US. For example, the Taliban shifted more towards Iran after their newly-appointed Supreme Leader, Akhtar Mansoor, was eliminated in a US drone strike in Baluchistan which was widely believed to have been assisted by Pakistan both in terms of airspace provision (previous strikes in Pakistan had been confined to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and potentially targeting intelligence (Dawi and Farivar, 2016).

An additional motivation for the Taliban wanting to diversify their patrons is the pressure in the information environment about their historically close links with Pakistan and the reputational damage caused by the widespread perception - and fact - that they are being used by the ISI. They are very sensitive to this pressure and have reacted sternly whenever their links to Pakistani security agencies are exposed in the information environment (see for example Zabihullah, 2023). In addition to highlighting their relationships with other countries, from time to time they have also sought to rouse patriotic sentiments against Pakistan to hide their strategic relationship with the Pakistani security establishment.

The Information Environment since the Collapse of the Republic

With the US withdrawal and collapse of the Afghan Republic, all actors find themselves navigating a markedly different information environment. Without a common mediating platform, the various political groups that formed the Republic find it hard to come to terms on a common political agenda. Most have resorted to blame games, localised politics and transactional arrangements with the Taliban, the region and beyond, including resorting to violence against the Taliban. The limited kinetic activity against the Taliban lacks serious support in the region and beyond because it has failed to mobilise a wider political support base among Afghans who may be willing to resist the Taliban peacefully or violently. The other issue is that the region is not willing to provide a staging ground for any of the groups based on their own cost benefit calculus. Should a country in the region find fighting the Taliban beneficial or cooperation too expensive and opt to provide serious facilities, including sanctuary and logistics, the Taliban will face a much stronger resistance.

In the post-collapse era, at least four sets of tensions now appear to drive Taliban information strategy: the global tension between autocratic and open systems of governance, the regional tension between Pakistan and Iran, intra-Taliban tensions, and Afghan domestic tensions. As illustrated in Diagram 1 below, the Taliban are seeking to assert control over the information environment, wanting their narratives to go unchallenged as part of their attempt to impose their rule. However, because the Taliban is not monolithic but is made up of diverse groups that have distinct relations with outside actors at the regional and global levels, the more they try to assert control the less they are able to conceal their internal fissures and the more acute the internal contradictions become. As they increasingly seek to assert control, these tensions at the global, regional, intra-Taliban and Afghan domestic levels are therefore paradoxically driving further fragmentation of the information environment. This dynamic has implications for Taliban cohesion and control, including internal division and open confrontation but also the risk of losing supporters to IS-K. There seems to be a continuous spiral which in turn leads to further closing down of the information environment.

Diagram 1: *The contradictory dynamic of fragmentation and control*

Global PowerShifts

Taliban control
attempts

Information
fragmentation

**Domestic Pressures
+ Taliban Internal
Tensions**

Regional Competition
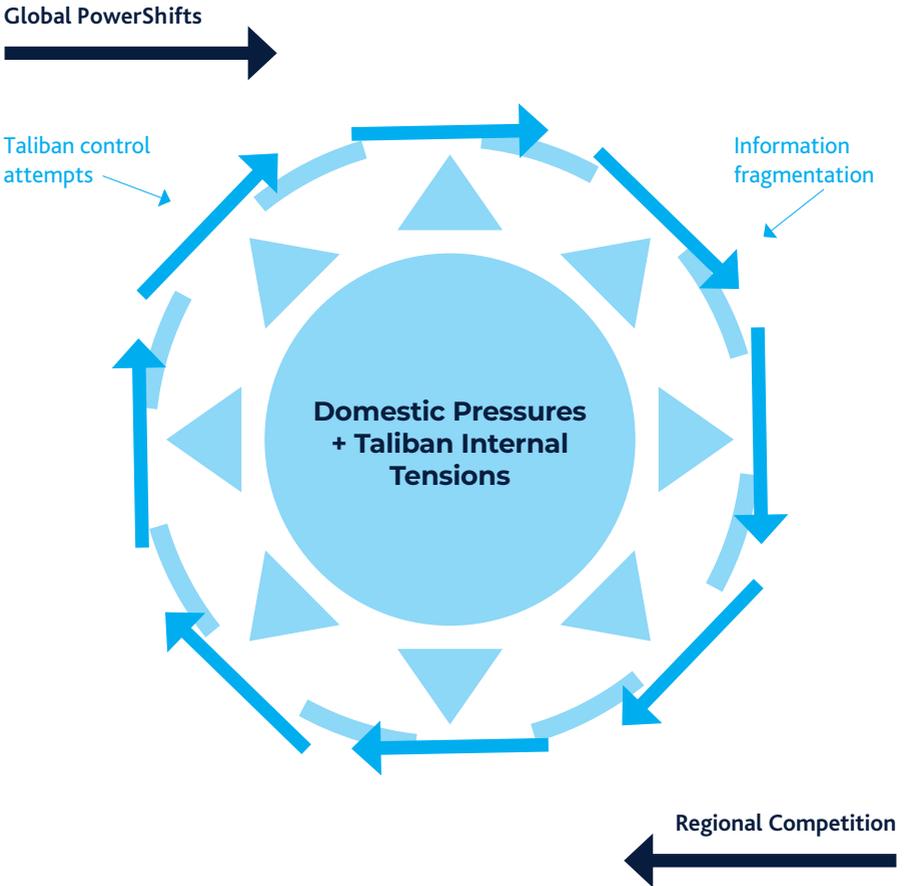
(i) The global tension between autocratic and open systems of governance

Today, the global tensions between autocratic and open systems of governance greatly affect Taliban behaviour in the information environment. Globally, the Islamic Republic's decline and collapse coincided with what some analysts now perceive to be an era in which the international liberal order is eroding (Ikenberry, 2020, p.287). The invasion of Iraq called into question the US's legitimacy as the sole superpower, for example, while the 2008 financial crisis undermined US economic power. Also termed as 'democracy in retreat', this shift greatly affected the legitimacy of Afghanistan's nascent institutions, which were pursuing a development path based on post-US intervention democratic values.[4] As the US and its allies were engaged in Afghanistan, its adversaries were honing what some scholars have described as 'sharp power', a power that "'pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries'" (Nye, 2021, citing Walker and Ludwig 2017). The impact of this was felt in two ways critical to Afghanistan's survival as a viable state. First, the 'sharp power' narratives intended for Western audiences presented Afghanistan as a case of the alliance's failure in stabilising the country and the overall impossibility of success. These messages targeted populations and decision-makers in donor countries. Second, coupled with the perception of the retreat of 'liberal internationalism', the Afghan population was presented with information intended to undermine the democratic process by portraying it as a western imposition. This narrative was meant to weaken the confidence of Afghan citizens in the democratic agenda. As the US-led world order gave way to a contested world, the region surrounding Afghanistan also increasingly became a sphere of competition for influence among rising powers, two of which lay claim to leadership in contesting the American-led order. Russian assertiveness in Europe and the Middle East is interpreted as an emerging weakness in NATO. Rising Chinese economic power and the expansion of its trade routes in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is seen as a challenge to North Atlantic economic power. An ambitious Iran with intensified adventures in the Middle East is also perceived to signify the waning of American power and influence in the region.

These global changes helped the Taliban survive initially and later contributed to its thriving and return to power. Pakistan managed to successfully test the limits of US patience for its support to the Taliban, balancing against any potential US pressure by aligning more closely to its rising ally, China, and an increasingly assertive Russia, which saw Pakistan as a potential buyer for its defence products. Both China and Russia used Pakistan and its support to the Taliban in their greater competition to undermine the US and its allies. Iran also balanced US pressures by furthering its relationship with China, Russia and the Taliban to undermine the US effort in the region, to resist US encirclement, and to exert greater influence in a post-western Afghanistan. Today, the Taliban appear to be moving even further towards the autocratic camp.

Iran and Pakistan have tried to manage their positions among these ongoing power transitions. Iran, although excluded from the global economic system, seems to have established stronger relationships with China and Russia. Pakistan seems to struggle to balance these shifting relationships, leading the Taliban to view it as a less reliable partner and to seek balance by leaning toward Iran. The US withdrawal negotiations gave the Taliban an unprecedented boost in the information environment since Russia, China and Iran all followed the US lead in forging their own bilateral diplomatic links with the group. For example, most other countries followed the US lead in assigning special representatives and, seeing the US publicly negotiating with the Taliban, each launched diplomatic initiatives of their own. For instance, Russia's Moscow Conference, held in March 2021, included the Afghan ambassador in Moscow as just another participant along with various other Afghan politicians, each representing their respective factions in the conference with the Taliban (Ruttig, 2021). Rather than being treated as the internationally recognised government of Afghanistan, such events positioned the Islamic Republic as just another faction along with other supposedly pro-Republic politicians and the opposition in the form of the Taliban. These events were also an illustration of insecurities in regional states that the US was abandoning the Republic for the Taliban or, worse, that the US would continue to work with both sides. The effect of all these events and conferences was to make the Taliban a more prominent actor in diplomacy and the overall information environment than they actually were seen by the Afghans, primarily members of the republic and the ANDSF. The majority of Afghans saw the world and factional leaders competing for time with the Taliban in the information environment. This negatively affected overall morale throughout Afghan society and weakened the resolve of those wishing to resist the Taliban, including in the ranks of the ANDSF.

In post-collapse Afghanistan, the Taliban face a daunting challenge in managing and navigating these competing global and regional tensions. On the one hand, as suggested in Taliban de facto Foreign Minister Muttaqi's recent op-ed, the Taliban 'need' American support in the framework of the Doha deal for recognition and integration in the global economic system (Muttaqi, 2023). Increasingly, however, there appears to be a division between the recognition-seeking groups centred in Kabul and Doha and the Kandahar-based leadership, which seems willing to do without recognition. While a recognition-seeking tendency exists, at the same time the group continues to rely on the continuing support of their insurgency-era sponsors, with Pakistan for now appearing to adopt a position of strategic ambiguity on this question - possibly with a view to maximising concessions from the major powers and the Taliban. With the ongoing diplomatic activity in the region, and the way they are controlling the information environment in Afghanistan, it currently seems that the Taliban are favouring partnership with the region at the cost of international recognition. Trying to conceal their diplomatic setbacks from the Afghan public, in the domestic information environment they try to portray their occasional interactions with regional diplomats and their expanding diplomatic presence in capitals in the region as indications of international recognition (for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Afghanistan, 2023; Ahmed, 2023).

(ii) The regional tension between Pakistan and Iran

During the anti-Soviet resistance, Iran and Pakistan supported various yet competing Afghan resistance groups. Iran initially supported and hosted the Shia-dominated resistance groups but, over time, expanded its support to include Northern resistance groups as well. With the rise of the Taliban with Pakistani backing, Iran continued to counter Pakistani influence through its clients. This phase concluded with the US intervention in Afghanistan, which was supported by Iran. The relationship has remained rocky between the two owing to Pakistan's historical relationship with the US, UK and Saudi Arabia and its sponsorship of Sunni militant groups active in Iran (Christensen, 2011). Pakistan, meanwhile, is also wary of Iran's promotion of Shi'ism in Pakistan and the recruitment of Pakistani Shia fighters (i.e. Zayanbyoon) by Iran for war in Syria. Iran's support for elements within the Taliban appears to be led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Council Qods Force (IRGC-QF), in competition with the ISI's historical relationship with the Taliban, and is intended to advance Iranian security goals in Afghanistan and beyond. In the post-collapse era, after the initial shock of the Haqqani-dominated cabinet, Iran was quick to push for its allies in the Taliban to receive key posts, including deputy ministerial and governor positions through Habatullah (Giustozzi 2021).

As already noted, in the pre-collapse period the Pakistani military experimented in hybrid politics and the manipulation of domestic politics and Afghan policy through deliberate information operations. After the collapse of the Republic, these experiments created fallout. As the military had to discard the PTI-led government, cracks appeared in its own rank and file and then spread to the Afghan Taliban rank and file, who are currently taking sides between ruling and opposition parties on social media (for example, Khan 2023c). A split was seen in Taliban social media, with users choosing sides for and against the rival political groups in Pakistan. Some like Mobeen Khan, a Talib social media influencer and operative, continued to support Imran Khan and condemned Fazul Rehman, the leader of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) (JUI-F) party for being part of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), the coalition that toppled Imran Khan (Khan, 2023a, 2023b). Mobeen has been detained several times by the Taliban to reign in his anti-army, anti-PDM rhetoric.

Another major split in the Pakistani security establishment that is discernible in the information environment relates to the question of how relations should be balanced with China and the US. Growing tensions between the two appear to be driving the Pakistani establishment in two opposing directions, again with considerable impact on Taliban cohesion. It may appear that a fragmented world order will give the Taliban more space to manoeuvre, as it did on their way to take Kabul. Yet in the post-collapse environment, every power will attempt to carve its share from within a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. After decades of support and patronage, as each power attempts to pull its own protégés within the Taliban in its own preferred direction it will become much more difficult for the Taliban to balance and maintain cohesion.

After an initial honeymoon period in the information environment, the Pakistani security establishment appeared dismayed at the Taliban's failure to take swift action against the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In May 2022 Sarajudin Haqqani reportedly hosted a round of talks between the TTP and ISI in Kabul, which raised hopes in Pakistan and included the release of TTP prisoners and a temporary ceasefire (Roggio, 2022a). The peace process eventually failed due to continued operations by Pakistan targeting key TTP leaders in Afghanistan, including air attacks in Khost and Kunar provinces in April 2022, as well as the targeted killing by the US of al Qaeda leader Aiman Al Zawahiri in Kabul in July 2022 – a strike that the Taliban believed to have utilised Pakistani airspace (Roggio, 2022b; al Jazeera, 2022; Gul, 2022c).

As a result of mounting TTP attacks on the other side of the Durand Line, skirmishes along the line between Taliban and Pakistani forces, and Pakistan's failure to control this mounting violence through its influence over the Taliban, it reverted to its traditional method of closing crossing points on the Durand Line, while publicly expressing frustration with the Taliban to save face in the information environment (Gul 2022a; Faiez, 2023). Multiple statements were issued at the highest levels of the Pakistani government, including the Pakistani Prime Minister's speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2022, which echoed global concerns about the terrorist threat from Afghanistan, and was rejected by the Taliban (Yousaf, 2022). As a result, the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban became openly hostile (Kaura, 2022). However, this again seemed to change after the visit of a high level Pakistani security delegation to Kabul in February 2023 (Hussain, 2023). A recent statement by Pakistan's Defence Minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, suggested that the Taliban were willing to go after the TTP but were limited in terms of capability ('TTP still using', 2023). Another statement by Pakistani Minister of Foreign Affairs Bilawal Zardari also suggested a similar change in tone, and is perhaps indicative of Pakistan realising the limits of its control over the Taliban (Lederer, 2023). Despite the fact that many families of the Taliban leaders continue to live on the other side of the Durand Line, Pakistan appears to have lost the sanctuary leverage it used to control rogue elements, as well as the behaviour of the majority of the Taliban, during the insurgency years.

In this period, the 'blame game' that used to be a constant in the relationship between Pakistan, the Islamic Republic and the international coalition has re-emerged in the information environment between Pakistan and the Taliban. In the post-collapse era, both sides have become frustrated in their efforts to realise their expectations of one another. This in turn is providing a further opportunity for Iran to bolster its position within the Taliban – a process that in turn tended to empower those members of the Taliban that were historically closer to Iran, such as the Taliban members from Ishaqzai, Noorzai and Alizai tribes closer to Habatullah's camp.

Iran is historically understood to promote Shia and Persian identities in the Afghan information environment (Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh, 2016, p.130). With the rise of the Taliban to power, however, that has changed considerably. Iran has a range of motives for seeking to work more closely with the Taliban leadership. The first is geographic, Iran seeing western Afghanistan as its sphere of influence, critical to its national security and therefore investing heavily in the Taliban in that region. Second, with increasing drought during recent years in eastern regions of Iran, its dependency on Afghan rivers flowing westwards is acute. A steady flow of water does not only require a friendly government in Kabul but also allies in the valleys, including the drug-rich Helmand valley. Third, Iran and the Taliban leadership core share an animosity towards the salafi ideology. For Iran, the spread of the salafi ideology is akin to its Saudi arch-rival's increased influence in Afghanistan. For Habatullah and the circle of clerics around him, the ideology is a challenge to their religious authority. That is why, contrary to Iran's public statements of concern about the Taliban, they have more in common with the core leadership of the Taliban than is normally appreciated.

(iii) Intra-Taliban tensions

Most observers of the Taliban recognise that the group is not monolithic and stress the need to distinguish sub-components and their respective interests. However, there is limited consensus on how best to classify the various groupings of the movement (for example, using geographic, tribal and generational differences). No one classification satisfactorily defines the Taliban as a movement, while many different classifications may be illuminating depending on the purpose for which they are intended, and the context in which such differences are projected and observed (Watkins, 2023). From signals in the information environment - ranging from Habatollah's speeches, decrees and statements to Abdul Hakim Haqqani's book to the reactions, public statements and online behaviour of other Taliban leaders and members including Seraj Haqqani and Abbas Stanikzai - however, the most consequential tension today seems to be between recognition-seeking and isolationist tendencies within the movement's leadership and rank and file (for example, Haqqani, 2020, Graham-Harrison 2022a, 2022b, Gul 2022b, Kermani 2022, Times of India 2023). This tension is significantly affecting the trajectory of the information environment in the country. At the time of this writing, contrary to widespread optimism during the Doha negotiations period about an evolved '2.0' movement, the isolationist tendency has regained ascendancy in the Taliban organisation. The remainder of this section sets out why this isolationism is likely to remain dominant, with the information environment further closing as a result.

As summarised in Table 1 below, various other tensions may be subsumed within these two diverging tendencies. For instance, the recognition-seeking tendency is also closely associated with other moderating tendencies, such as a desire to transition from a non-state actor to the status of a member state of the international system, to integrate into the international economic system, to establish state institutions and to engage with patrons and allies internationally. On the other hand, the isolationist tendency may be seen as encompassing other radicalising tendencies within the movement. This tendency appears to be driven by the need to implement Sharia as part of an eschatological worldview. It prefers the non-conventional and non-state force structure and does not find the modern state as an appropriate system of governance. The movement have been reticent about explaining their political programme in positive terms beyond asserting their interpretation of Sharia as their 'constitution'. Abdul Hakim Haqqani's recent book (in Arabic) provides a rare glimpse of the Taliban's preferred system of governance (Baryalay and Imran, 2022, Allah and Shah, 2022).

A useful illustration of the movement's internal tensions is the 'Taliban 2.0' and 'Victory' narratives on display in the information environment since 2019. These two distinct overarching narratives have come into tensions that have yet to be fully resolved. The first, useful in encouraging the Western countries to believe that the Taliban was a more moderate force than it had been in the 1990s, was the 'Taliban 2.0' narrative. This appears to have been driven primarily by Taliban delegates in the Doha office and was amplified and internalised widely, including by Western outlets such as the New York Times (Haqqani, 2020). This narrative has become harder to sustain amidst the realities of Taliban de facto control in Afghanistan. On the other hand, within the Taliban fighting core a 'Victory' narrative developed, amplified by the region (as, for example, when Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said 'the Taliban broke the shackles of slavery' (Muzzafar, 2021)). According to this narrative the political negotiations merely rubber stamped the 'facts on the ground' created by the military success of the insurgency in breaking the will of the international coalition and creating a sense among the populace that their victory was inevitable.

'Taliban 2.0' was promoted amongst a number of audiences. Domestically, it was meant to appeal to urban Afghans raised in the post-9/11 information environment and to weaken their anti-Taliban resolve. It was also intended to assure broader audiences in the region and the world that the Taliban had changed. The Taliban leadership used their Doha office as part of the information operation, promoting the 2.0 narrative in negotiations while continuing to improve their military options. By appointing delegates to Doha who had limited or no actual influence on the day-to-day fighting, most of whom were already in detention (such as Mula Baradar and the Guantanamo Five), the Taliban and Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence agency (ISI) made sure that they did not put all their eggs in the negotiations basket. Negotiations were also a risky business from the point of view of relations both with other jihadist actors and Afghan domestic politics – the Taliban were losing members to IS-K and facing legitimacy issues as they continued to fight Afghans after 2014.

It was only after the Taliban rushed to take over Kabul that the realisation sank in that the Doha office had been used by the Taliban as a front in their information warfare efforts. When the ISI chief hurriedly visited Kabul in the first days of the Taliban's takeover, it was to manage the tension between the Doha-based members of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network over the allocation of positions in the new de facto order. In the event, Pakistan seemed to retain influence when Haqqani figures and others aligned with the Pakistani security agencies gained key positions in the security sector and Foreign Ministry, while key Doha delegates such as Baradar and Stanekzai, who did seem more genuinely to be trying to compromise and moderate the movement, were marginalised.[5] To some, that visit also seemed intended to send an additional signal, reassuring US leaders who were worried about the eruption of infighting in the Taliban as their last forces were leaving Kabul (Vohra, 2021).[6]

Historically, Taliban inclined towards recognition-seeking have operated as a network. During the insurgency, the Haqqanis drew their credentials from high-profile attacks made possible by logistical advantages, know-how, financing, technology and raw material derived from regional and wider relations and dependencies. The Doha negotiators, similarly, derived advantages from their relationships with other countries and international organisations. In contrast, those tending to isolationism prefer hierarchical organisation with the leader having the final word and drawing their legitimacy from religious authority.

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Their respective approaches to governing society also diverge, overtly in terms of the pace of reform but perhaps less publicly also in terms of the content of reform and girls' education and women's role in the society generally. The recognition-seeking tendency is closely associated with a gradual reform of the society, while the isolationist tendency calls for a radical change in the society according to their interpretation of Sharia (Rahimi, 2022). Although there is no clear geographic distinction between the two tendencies, generally eastern Taliban may be associated more with the recognition-seeking tendency and the south-westerners more with the isolationist tendency. In terms of the individual leaders who have a serious following, the recognition-seeking tendency may be broadly associated with people, like Saraj Haqqani, who have limited potential to lead the Taliban unilaterally and who could not retain power without international recognition – and most notably Pakistani recognition – for long. On the other hand, the isolationist tendency is characterised by Habatullah Akhundza and his clerical entourage who do not, at least for the time being, feel that the survival of their regime requires international recognition. Ironically, the two camps also appear to rely to varying degrees on different yet competing patrons. Contrary to widely held assumptions about Pakistan's role and preferences, today it is the recognition-seeking elements that depend mainly on Pakistan, whereas the isolationist leadership increasingly leans towards Iran.

Table 1: *Diverging Tendencies within the Taliban*

Organisational Elements	Moderating Tendency	Radicalising Tendency
Goals	Recognition seeking	Sharia implementation
Beliefs and values	Political organisation/ state	Escathalogical ends, i.e. pre-set plot
Narrative	Taliban 2.0	Victory
Strategy (domestic)	Gradualist reform	Radical reform
Strategy (external)	Engagement	Isolation
Overall Structure	Network	Hierarchy
Force structure	Conventional/ conventionalising	Non-conventional
Geographic focus	Southeast/East	Southwest
Insurgency credentials	High profile attacks	Religious authority, judiciary
Leading figures	Saraj Haqqani	Habatullah Akhundzada
Regional ally	Pakistan	Iran

The dominance of the isolationist tendency within the Taliban is produced by a confluence of factors that relate to the goals, structure and strategy of the organisation. First, the essence of the Taliban's goal as a movement has remained consistent throughout their various phases, i.e. to implement Sharia, prevent vice and promote virtue. Despite the occasional outburst of the recognition-seeking tendency, the goal of forming a state for the sake of becoming a state like any other has never been as prominent as the goal of ruling Afghanistan according to their interpretation of Sharia (examples of such outbursts include (Haqqani, 2020, Muttaqi 2023, and Zabiullah Mujahid's first press conference in Kabul after the collapse). Indeed, the Taliban fought for twenty years against the state structure that the international community sought to support, portraying it as a foreign and un-Islamic imposition. Their term 'Emirate' is meant to signify that their political project differs both from the Western state or the Afghan state of the past two centuries (by rejecting the recent past and reviving the 'old past'), and from the state as it has come to be associated with IS in extremist discourse. Therefore, this ambivalence (at least) towards the state appears to be driven by a deeper, eschatological worldview and perception of their struggle by the majority of the Taliban. This 'messianic eschatological' worldview contains a conception of war that differs from the 'political' Clausewitzian conception dominant in western theory (Rapoport, 1968). The Taliban do not conceive of war as an instrument of states, as an extension of politics, or as a policy instrument to be wielded on the basis of cost-benefit calculus or instrumental rationality. Instead, they view their struggle through the lens of their teleological view of history, a final war that will bring about the end times and judgement. Having overthrown the Republic their jihad continues today in ideological form as the struggle to implement Sharia, promote virtue and prevent vice in Afghan society, with a special focus on cleansing the evil spread during the past twenty years.

The religious basis of the group's claim to authority, another consequence of the messianic-eschatological worldview, also makes it unlike most 'political' organisations in the contemporary sense. The Taliban does not claim the right to power on the basis of an appeal to popular legitimacy and support (the democratic principle). Contrary to other armed jihadi actors such as Hezbullah and Hamas, the Taliban always refused to participate in popular or electoral politics. Instead, the Taliban has consistently sought to impose what it views as a religiously mandated form of social order (governing by Sharia Law as interpreted by its representatives), irrespective of the degree of popular appeal this may happen to enjoy.

To the extent the Afghan population may not support this project, the Taliban view the society as corrupted, imperfect and in need of reform. There is little room for political debate and no compunction about using violence to crush resistance. Since their claim to power flows from claimed religious authority rather than popular will, the Taliban believe society must be changed to conform to their vision, rather than seeking to compromise or adapt their policies so as to become more popular. This worldview is incompatible with a plural political system in which groups with divergent views and agendas compete for popular support in order to gain a share of power. This perspective may also help to explain the Taliban's uncompromising negotiating position during Doha, in which they insisted on Western departure as a precondition for negotiation with Afghans.

Inside the Taliban, these core tendencies stifle the potential for the emergence of 'progressive' voices. As has been noted, during the Doha negotiations, the Taliban delegation featured potentially prominent 'moderating' voices, associated with the amplification of the Taliban 2.0 notion in the information environment. This notion was generally associated with moderating domestic behaviour in pursuit of international recognition. Taliban 2.0 was arguably more than an information operation intended to alleviate the concerns of Westerners and Afghans about the nature of the Taliban. It may have been a moment in which a more moderate and 'progressive' trajectory could have been set in motion. Without the core of the movement behind this agenda, however, it rang hollow. Even assuming that such voices reflect sincerely held views on the part of some Taliban, rather than ongoing information operations, the inner tendencies rooted in the religious basis of the claim to legitimate authority constantly undermine incipient progressive tendencies. Perhaps the Doha negotiations presented an opportunity as the recognition-seeking tendency was in the limelight during the negotiations, but the US rushed and Pakistan's intention to exploit the opportunity denied Afghans an outcome where the recognition-seeking tendency could have taken hold and gathered strength within the Taliban as an organisation.

Second, two structural characteristics make the Taliban movement prone to the rise of the isolationist tendency: a) the Taliban's re-emergence as a hierarchical organisation and; b) the Taliban's inability to envisage its own transformation from violent non-state actor to political organisation or state. The most important aspect of the Taliban's structure is the shifting way it has blended hierarchical and network forms of organisation over time. The network enabled it to survive and thrive as an insurgency, whereas the hierarchy mainly helps it manage internal conflict and rule. Post-collapse, however, the movement is gradually returning to its hierarchical shape with the Emir again at the helm, even if tensions remain just as they did in the 1990s (Brown and Rassler, 2016, p.108-109). The various elements of the Taliban who may prefer recognition and integration in the international state system are undermined by the fact that the Emir has the last word and is considered accountable only to God and responsible for the followers and people under his rule only to God. As such he cannot be the Emir ul Mumineen if he submits to the man-made rules of the international system.

The other structural aspect that affects the Taliban's trajectory towards isolation rather than recognition is whether, having become the de facto ruling authority since the collapse of the Republic, the Taliban can make the transition from being an insurgency oriented to warfighting (a non-state armed group) to becoming a 'political' actor oriented to ruling and governing. Here, the Taliban's self-perception of their success as an insurgency may create a 'success trap' in which victory has made it resistant to this kind of transformation. The Taliban reimposed their emirate immediately after taking over Kabul in August 2021. Since then they have nullified the Afghan Constitution without replacing it with another. Their model of rule is highly exclusionary, blocking all non-Taliban political groupings from participating in political debate and governance of the country. They have ended the separation of power between the judiciary, executive and legislature and reversed most of the reforms and progress made during the past twenty years in the overall governance and legal framework, and more specifically on rights. The source of legislation, ruling and appointments is now primarily the Emir and a circle of his close protégés, rather than a function of state institutions. This is a departure from any other contemporary models of governance. The Taliban sees the emirate's purpose as guiding Muslims to a better hereafter, but denies them any choice in the process (Rahimi, 2022). As we have seen, the potentially 'moderating' Doha negotiation grouping, which possibly had the potential to become a fledgling political wing, has been undercut by the logic of the Taliban's eschatological core.

The post-Bonn period afforded many armed groups in Afghanistan the opportunity to evolve towards political organisation. Various Soviet-era jihadi groups transformed to political organisations while maintaining armed wings – examples include Junbish, Wahdat, Jamiat and later Hizb. Some of these armed wings were fully integrated into the ANDSF while others were partially demobilised and disarmed. In many of these cases, the armed factions remained dominant over the political wings. For instance Ahmad Shah Masood was a commander under Burhanudin Rabbani's Jamiat e Islami, yet he wielded more power during the Soviet war and the civil war. Fahim Khan was a low-ranking commander in the same party, but he wielded more power than Rabbani during the post-2002 era. Nonetheless, after 2002 these groups did begin to transition to a path where they had to choose between moderation and exclusion. Almost all, including eventually even Hizb i Islami Gulbuddin, chose moderation for inclusion in the Republic, but not the Taliban. During the Republic period some armed group members became government ministers and governors, and various groups had members in the parliament, the senate and provincial shuras. Despite a shared past during the anti-Soviet jihad, these groups all opposed Taliban rule, and became key stakeholders in the post-Bonn state formation project.

In contrast, the Taliban did not have these opportunities, being excluded from Bonn but their worldview also having precluded them from granting any room to their competitors during their period of rule. Additionally, thanks to the sanctuary the group enjoyed in Pakistan, while the pro-Republic armed groups began to experiment with politics through their political wings, the Taliban evolved into an increasingly sophisticated armed organisation. They did experiment with shadow governance over growing swathes of territory during the insurgency, but this was only nominally centrally controlled from Quetta, Miranshah and Peshawar across the Durand Line where the various shuras were based. Despite diversity across geography, with the important exceptions of taxation and intelligence the majority of control was exercised at the local level by various local commanders. The use of violence remained the core of the group's efforts, with incipient political organisation and initiatives also subordinated to the military struggle. The source of the group's power was and remains the fighting force that it can mobilise. The ability to mobilise this fighting force does not derive from popular support but rather from the claim to religious authority and a regional network of patronage.

The Taliban is now failing to transition from non-state actor to assuming responsibility for governing the state that they have inherited largely intact. Without domestic or international legitimacy the Taliban's emirate is far from a state. In a way, since August 2021 the Afghans lack any legitimate representation on the regional and global levels. The state's integration into regional and international processes has frozen, the effects of which may be felt for generations to come. With no functioning international relations authority, others, including Pakistan and Qatar, undertake functions that are normally and solely the functions of a state representing a nation. With the majority of the officials of the Taliban emirate under UN sanctions, the functioning of institutions is further stifled. Rewarding Taliban fighters with appointments to positions of authority, an overall lack of bureaucratic discipline and technocratic decay drive millions of Afghans further to the abyss of multiple crises. The whole system seems to be obsessed with security, which is consistently presented to domestic and external audiences as a key benefit of Taliban rule. At the same time, they have been conducting a 'securitization' of sorts that focuses only on threats to their control. It is true that the level of violence has decreased considerably compared to the pre-collapse era, due to the reduction in Taliban-initiated violence. However, IS-K violence is growing deadlier and most other forms of violence and repression go under-reported (United Nations Security Council, 2023). Worst of all, the Taliban may be the only group in control of a country and state institutions who deny any role to women in society or state.

The third factor driving the isolationist tendency within the Taliban is related to strategy, and is mainly characterised by the tension between radical versus more incremental approaches to social reform. According to a recent book by Abdul Hakim Haqqani, Chief Justice of the Taliban Supreme Court, on 'The Islamic Emirate and its system', in the Taliban's view theirs is an eternal struggle to create an emirate that 'is focused on guiding people towards Allah and enjoining good and prohibiting vice', rather than on taxing or extracting wealth in order to enrich the ruling elite (which is how many Taliban portray the Republic-era state). As Rahimi reports, '[Abdul Hakim] Haqqani defines three constitutive elements of a state of guidance: 1) independent judiciary; 2) Islamic army; and 3) divine law. The author warns that "an Islamic state will not succeed without implementation of laws of Quran and Sunnah, in accordance to the understanding of the early generation of Muslims and Jurists (Mujahedeen), and this was the aim of the Jihad of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and this too is the preference of people of Afghanistan"' (Rahimi 2022). This view entails that the Taliban leadership is required to enforce their interpretation upon the Afghan society. This has created differences among the Taliban leadership, including resentment from long-term supporters and sympathisers.

The replacement of the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the controversial Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and its increased interference in mundane daily affairs such as dress codes and appearance have watered down the excitement created as a result of the Taliban 2.0 campaign (Nusratty and Ray 2022). Various Taliban leaders who were associated with the Taliban 2.0 narratives, including Siraj Haqqani and some Doha-based Taliban members, have publicly opposed this radical approach of the emir to the goal of societal reform. They agree on the need for reform but prefer a more gradual approach to achieving the reform goals.

Rather than focusing on specific tensions between sub-groups over specific issues at a particular moment it may be more insightful to consider the Taliban's enduring messianic-eschatological inner tendency, which stifles nascent progressive and moderating tendencies. Other factors, such as the rise of the hierarchical structure and the movement's overall resistance to transformation, further reinforce this tendency. Since the signing of the Doha deal, international and regional engagement with the Taliban and Afghanistan as a whole has remained transactional, and this approach has proven counterproductive by strengthening the isolationist tendency.

Considering the ongoing war in Ukraine and heightened tensions over Taiwan, it is crucial for global powers and regional players including the US, UK, European powers, Russia, China, the Gulf, and India to agree on a minimum set of arrangements required for stability in Afghanistan. It is necessary to move beyond narrow transactional threat perceptions and beyond the exclusive focus on the Taliban. Meaningful engagement with the Taliban requires an approach that recognises, checks, and balances against the messianic-eschatological inner tendency. Devising such an approach will require imagination and moving past the 'mirror-imaging' fallacy that commentators have identified as a lacuna in Western analysis and policy prescription towards the Taliban (Bergen, 2023). One avenue to balance against the isolationist tendency may be to invest time and energy exploring ways to open the Afghan information environment, including by harnessing technology, involving youth and women from across the country, with a focus on the cross-cutting themes of immigration, extremism and narcotics, seen as the key threats to the region and beyond. Another balancing force could be ending Pakistan, Iran and Qatar's monopoly over Afghanistan's diplomacy. To do this, other capitals in the region and beyond should serve as rotating hubs for diplomatic activity involving a diverse set of Afghans beyond the Taliban and the usual suspects.

(iv) Afghan domestic tensions

The Republic created a unifying narrative in the form of a constitution and polity that, while far from perfect, instilled hope for a future that Afghans could contribute to through education and participation in the social, economic and political affairs of the country. With its collapse, regional and ethnocentric narratives have replaced the unifying republic narrative. Rather than attempt to construct a unifying platform inclusive of all Afghans, the Taliban try to overcome challenges from Afghans in the information environment through attempts at coercion and control.

These efforts may be influenced by the strategies employed by Pakistan across the Durand Line. Some of the parallels include: (i) closing down of the overall information environment akin to a 'garrison approach' with increased checks and cordons, (ii) targeting indigenous popular leaders on both sides of the Durand line, especially those who are seen as less amenable to the ruling narrative, (iii) promoting a particular interpretation of Islam (in this case, Deobandi) seen as favourable to national security, and (iv) criminalising dissent including the disparaging of diaspora Afghans, especially those associated with the former Republic. A further influence is the colonial era legal framework enforced in the tribal areas on the other side of the Durand Line (Fair, 2014). However, they also appear to have learned from the Iranians, and possibly from others, in managing dissent by closing the information environment. The pattern of control and manipulation resembles the techniques of other authoritarian regimes, including the harnessing of contemporary technologies as part of the playbook of 'digital authoritarianism' (Jones, 2022). Practices include banning gatherings, granting selective access to journalists, searching personal phones, banning smartphones in sensitive locations, and making examples of dissenting voices.

In addition to intimidation, coercion and control, the Taliban also seek to control the information environment by stoking nationalistic emotions with popular statements. For example, during heightened tensions with Iran or Pakistan, Taliban leaders use populist tactics to rouse nationalist sentiments. One commonly used intimidation tactic has been to rebuke Afghans for not having joined the Taliban in their war against foreigners. Again, they interpret their lack of popular support as evidence that Afghans are morally compromised, needing reform and cleansing from the Western influence of the past two decades.

Here, there is a tension within the Taliban about the right pace of implementing these reforms. Habatullah and his followers clearly prefer a speedy reform process, implying harsh measures, while Seraj Haqqani and others prefer to take a more gradual approach, perhaps attempting to reshape the information environment to change hearts and minds rather than using blunt fear and coercion.

Given the unexpected and sudden collapse of the Republic, a number of politicians, former officials and government employees sought to return to attend to personal issues. Understanding this, the Taliban offered with some fanfare to provide protection, as part of their Taliban 2.0 information campaign. The offer of protection was interpreted as evidence of the Taliban's willingness to negotiate with their defeated opponents, an interpretation that the Taliban encouraged before it was quashed by Habatollah.

The key issues that the Taliban have struggled to control in the emerging information environment relate to the behaviour of their own leaders and members. A number of high profile cases of corruption and indecent behaviour have been brought under the public spotlight, including one involving a senior Haqqani network spokesperson and influential media operative (Mukhtar, 2022). Videos appeared on social media showing Qari Saeed Khosti being chased out of a house by a woman with a shovel, which earned the title of 'Qari belcha' or shovel for the spokesperson. In another case, video appeared of the Central Passport director's brother taking bribes and consorting with women (Ayoubi, 2022). Recently, videos also circulated celebrating the release of a Taliban commander close to Habatullah who had been accused of adultery. This video generated widespread negative reactions, including from Taliban supporters (Afghan Analyst, 2023). Such exposures in the information environment have made the Taliban's claims to fight the corruption and immorality of the Republic sound hollow, undermining a key motif of their efforts to shape the information environment in their favour. The result has been to create disillusionment for some Taliban sympathisers while for others, providing compelling evidence that the Taliban were never what they claimed.

Additional issues that have created serious problems for the Taliban in the domestic information environment have been the Taliban's harbouring of al Qaeda and Pakistan's ongoing support to the Taliban. Al Zawahiri's assassination in the most secure area of Kabul in July 2022 made it difficult for the Taliban to hide its continuing relationship with al Qaeda (BBC, 2022). The majority of Afghans, including some within the Taliban, view the past harbouring of al Qaeda as the reason for the start of the war and are therefore anxious about the Taliban's continuing relations with the group.

The existing Afghan public understanding of Pakistan's involvement in the war and recurrent reminders about continuing Pakistani support to the Taliban also make it difficult for the Taliban to maintain an independent public position in the information environment. A further issue is the difficulty the Taliban appear to have with sticking to a single narrative when managing intra-group tensions over policy. The closing down of girls' education by Habatullah has particularly brought tensions into the open. Taliban information operations have failed to fully address the two challenges of public outbursts of differences and regressive policies against the backdrop of Taliban 2.0. In response, in line with the Pakistani approach to dissent, the Taliban adopted a variety of tactics, including brute force, to undermine the sympathisers and supporters of the Republic and various other opposition groups. For example, the Taliban banned the Afghan national flag from public places through brute force to deny Afghans a symbol of their national identity, replacing it with the group's flag. The Taliban and Pakistani establishment have also been engaging in other, more discreet, information operations (Brody, 2023). For example, they have attempted to sow dissent and stir ethnic and separatist undercurrents in the opposition groups in order to deny them broader national legitimacy and support. They also campaign to deny any role or place for the Afghan diaspora based in the West, portraying them as too westernised and lacking in any authentic political agency (Khan, M.A., 2023). During the later insurgency years they used derogatory terms like 'tommies' to refer to the Afghan diaspora from the West who had returned to serve in Afghanistan in the public and private sectors. No doubt corruption and incompetence did exist in the Kabul-based elite, but painting such a diverse group of Afghans with this brush was part of the Taliban information campaign, reflecting and advancing the strategic purpose of denying Afghanistan a diverse polity.

A final issue that binds the Taliban, Pakistan and more recently Iran in the domestic public perception is their disregard for Kabul as the political capital of the country and their desire to deny Afghans a modern, viable and functioning state with independent decision-making authority and a balanced foreign policy. Pakistan and Iran both oppose an independent Kabul with diversified international relations in the region and beyond. They realise that such relations would impose limits on their control and influence over the Afghan information environment. The Taliban core, meanwhile, sees Kabul as a potentially corrupting source of power that could undermine their core power mobilisation base. Pakistani and Taliban campaigners extensively and successfully used derogatory terms like 'Kabul bubble' to discredit and deny any agency to the Kabul-based political and social activists (for example, Pakistan Strategic Forum, 2021, احمد وليد کاکړ, (Sanzar) 2021).

Conclusion

During the Doha negotiation period a narrative spread, and was widely internalised inside and outside Afghanistan, that a more moderate Taliban 2.0 had emerged, capable of inclusivity, tolerance and power sharing domestically and having the potential to achieve international recognition in the community of states. After the fall of the Republic, however, these nascent moderating tendencies were quickly snuffed out, with the Doha negotiating team in particular looking politically isolated. To maintain internal cohesion in the face of global and regional ordering shifts, competition from other jihadi groups (especially IS-K), and the loss of a common adversary in the form of the Republic and its international supporters, the messianic-eschatological inner tendency of the movement has reasserted itself at the cost of international recognition and its associated benefits. The Taliban is likely to remain in the orbit of the authoritarian camp, and to continue attempting to control the information environment as part of its ongoing struggle to consolidate its grip on the country and to reform society. At the same time, because of the shifting and diverging interests of regional Taliban patrons, these efforts at control will likely continue to expose intramural tensions and drive further fragmentation of the information environment.

The current trajectory points towards further authoritarianism, ongoing and worsening violations of basic human rights, and the entrenching of another generational cycle of conflict and revenge. In the worst scenario, this trajectory could lead to the geographic disintegration of Afghanistan and a territory hosting a variety of terrorist and criminal groups patronised by various regional countries. The implications for the region and beyond will be more security costs in the form of drugs, terrorism and illegal immigration.

Given the reassertion of the Taliban movement's messianic-eschatological tendency, it is necessary to assess the feasibility of nurturing a more moderate Taliban. A first step should be to recognise the Taliban as a militia instrumentalized by the region with a narrow eschatological core. It is conceivable that over time the group may evolve into a political entity capable of engaging politically with other Afghan actors, as with Hezbollah in Lebanon or kindred parties in Pakistan. However, this is only one of several potential trajectories. Western policy should be based on the political logic that follows from this inner tendency: the Taliban may not respond to Western policy prescriptions according to the logic of mirror imaging or the kind of instrumental rationality that analysts often attribute to political actors.

Recognising the intra-mural and regional factors at play in driving the reassertion of the eschatological tendency, it also becomes clear that the West is only one set of relations that the Taliban is seeking to manage. As a result, rather than driving moderation, Western attempts to influence the movement through incentives may actually have the opposite effect, undermining moderates and empowering the core. Habatullah may believe that further international engagement will make it more difficult to control rival elements within the Taliban since they may be strengthened by Western backing. This may help to explain why, as the West tries to push for overt engagement with the Taliban, Habatullah further isolates. An alternative approach may be to sanction the tendency rather than individuals. If engaging with the so-called moderates fails to empower them and drives further isolation, the West could instead sanction the Taliban as an organisation while creating opportunities for those who are willing to work towards a Taliban political organisation capable of engaging politically with other Afghans. Here, systematically raising the costs of eschatological behaviour would require adopting an 'all instruments of power' approach, rather than relying on single lines of effort.

It is also vital to recognise that the Taliban do not, and cannot, represent Afghanistan as a whole, and to address the loss of trust that Afghans feel towards the international system. The latter needs to demonstrate to Afghans both the will to engage based on what Afghans need and the foresight to see that the short-term expediency of doing what power politics seems to dictate will sow the seeds of longer term conflict and security challenges. Rather than focusing on the Taliban and further elevating them in the information environment, the international community should instead pursue a UN Security Council resolution that recognizes the Islamic republic as the de-jure state, affirms the legitimacy of opposition to the Taliban, and provides for a mediation mechanism through which these various political groups could engage the Taliban on a future governance model, preferably through a plebiscite. Such a step would help address both the loss of a common platform since the fall of the Republic and Afghan disillusionment with the international community, and would also have a moderating effect on the information environment in Afghanistan.

On its current course, Afghanistan will likely become further isolated from outside information and Afghans and those interested in Afghanistan will increasingly struggle to find reliable information. To mitigate the closure and fragmentation of the information environment, international actors should consider:

▶ Empowering Afghans in Afghanistan and in the diaspora to use online platforms as well as face-to-face engagement in third countries to continue to communicate and exchange information about the evolving situation.

▶ Supporting initiatives that seek to study and learn from groups investigating authoritarian conduct in similar situations elsewhere, ensuring that violations of human rights are documented and evidenced.

▶ Inviting researchers to focus on Afghanistan in ways that are both sensitive to the local and regional dynamics driving particular narratives and cautious about reinforcing them.

▶ Seeking to support initiatives that harness technology so as to better surface a wider range of Afghan voices and to support the application of the emerging suite of OSINT and related methods to mitigate misinformation, disinformation and information manipulation.

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('The situation of the ruling leader in Pakistan is getting worse The former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, was arrested by the Pakistani police near the Islamabad court a few moments ago'). [Tweet.] Twitter. May 9. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/mobeenkhan1231/status/1655891273323016193?s=20

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@PTIofficial' #ReleaseImranKhan عمران خان کی گرفتاری کو کالعدم قرار دے دیا گیا ('The nation of Pakistan welcomes the decision of the Supreme Court which annulled the arrest of Chairman Imran Khan'). [Tweet.] Twitter. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/mobeenkhan1231/status/1656656732654039044?s=20

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Endnotes

[1] Kilcullen observes, 'virtually the entire connectivity explosion happened after 9/11. Since 2001, we have seen the BlackBerry (whose first email-capable version appeared in 2002), Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006 (which between them generated social media), the iPhone and Android smartphones (in 2007 and 2008, respectively), and applications including WhatsApp (2009), Instagram (2010), Snapchat (2011), and Telegram—the messaging app of choice for Islamic State—in 2013.' He points out, '[i]n the year 2000… when Osama bin Laden was planning the 9/11 attacks from his base in eastern Afghanistan, that country—like much of the developing world at the time—had no cellphone network, no internet, and extremely limited access to news and international communications. Since then, Wi-Fi, mobile phones, and satellite television have proliferated, particularly in developing countries, while smartphones have transformed the options for nonstate actors in terms of communication, finances, and information gathering' (Kilcullen, 2020, p.63).

[2] In this view, from the late 1970s the United States and its allies pursued a high-technology-focused conception of military innovation, with the Western debate about innovation and future warfare heavily preoccupied with the implications of emerging technologies captured in terms such as 'revolution in military affairs' and later defense transformation (Adamsky, 2010; Hammes, 2004; Kilcullen 2020). In parallel, however, a series of state and non-state adversaries 'on the other side of the hill' underwent significant development of their military thought in ways intended to blunt Western technological advantages (Brun, 2010).

[3] A 2008 International Crisis Group report on Taliban Propaganda also draws on Hammes' ideas in its assessment of the role of propaganda in the overall Taliban strategy (International Crisis Group, 2008). For examples of criticism of 4GW see the contributions of Echevarria, Evans, Ferris, Freedman, Thornton and Sorensen in Terriff et al (eds), 2008. Giustozzi also notes that other coalition officers interpreted the Taliban as using Maoist techniques, but suspects that this was West Point-trained graduates superimposing what they were taught onto a messy reality. Nonetheless, he points out, early Taliban activity did involve vanguard groups first infiltrating the population and then establishing base areas, as per Mao (Giustozzi, 2007).

[4] This tension ran deeper than the global shift but was also reflected in conflicting strategies within the US-led military intervention. For instance, US counterterrorism efforts on most occasions undermined democratic processes and initiatives undertaken by the US and other allies.

[5] During the Doha negotiations Baradar was Deputy Emir for Political Affairs, placing him on the same level as Yaqoob and Saraj. Post-Doha rather than being given the political portfolio he was shuffled (effectively demoted) from political deputy to the Emir to economic deputy to the PM. Stanekzai was initially tipped for Foreign Minister but did not get the role. He was then brought back as Deputy Foreign Minister to Mutaqi. When he continued to criticise the leadership he was summoned to Kandahar to meet supreme leader Haibatullah. Since then he has spent most of his time in Dubai with his family, with occasional meetings with diplomats in Kabul.

[6] ISI Chief Faiz Hameed's cryptic message 'don't worry, everything will be okay' in the lobby of Serena Hotel in Kabul in September 2020 has been interpreted as a signal to the Americans, while the tea cup he was seen holding was interpreted as a signal to the Indians, given the significant symbolism of teacups in the contemporary information environment between India and Pakistan, embroiling Afghanistan.

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