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## **TALIBAN STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN: 2017 AND BEYOND**

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Afghanistans Taliban movement is nearly a quarter-century-old, but it is still open to various interpretations that cloud its strategy, tactics, and ultimate future aims.

To understand the Taliban's strategy, it is important to understand who they are. The Afghan Taliban call themselves the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which underscores their desire to recreate the regime they built through military conquest after their emergence in southern Afghanistan in 1994. While they are sometimes labeled nationalists, the Taliban are keen to brandish their Islamist credentials and have opposed all modern nationalist currents in Afghanistan and among the Pashtuns.

Even before 9/11, the Taliban were seen as part of a global terrorist syndicate because of hosting Al-Qaeda and its international affiliates. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is sometimes equated with yet again turning the country into a hub of regional and global terrorism.

To many Afghans and secular Pashtuns in neighboring Pakistan, the Taliban are mere proxies used by Islamabad to dismantle the Afghan state and cause permanent social fragmentation. Proponents of such a perspective argue that Pakistan's expertise in asymmetrical warfare has helped in creating this dangerous war machine, which ultimately offers no plan for creating a modern state and is likely to carry forward an enduring relationship with international terrorist networks.

The truth is that the current Taliban organization manifests shades of all three of these perspectives. Above all, they are an Islamist movement that ultimately wants to establish a unitary state to impose its version of Islamic Sharia law. In recent years, the Taliban, at least in their literature and interactions with researchers and journalists, have indicated some flexibility in accepting a tweaked version of their emirate.

Most importantly perhaps, the Taliban have repeatedly said they are not seeking a monopoly of power. However, the rule of Sunni Hanafi clerics from southern Afghanistan's Pashtun heartland and international isolation were and will be the hallmarks of Taliban power.

Critical for peace in Afghanistan, the Taliban are only likely to establish peace on their terms. Almost daily, the Taliban have reiterated their commitment to fighting the international military presence that they say is an occupation. Given that the 2014 drawdown of most international troops only hastened their military campaign, the Taliban are most likely to fight Kabul even after the U.S. and NATO military presence concludes. All this makes deciphering the Taliban strategy problematic.

It is also difficult to find a single article or document that encapsulates the Taliban strategy. Unlike their opponents, they certainly are not tied to budget cycles, are not worried about election cycles, and care little about public opinion. If one word can encapsulate the Taliban strategy, it is: patience. When U.S. President Barack Obama announced a military surge in 2009, the Taliban simply waited until their withdrawal at the end of 2014.

This simple strategy of keeping up the fight until the tide turns in their favor is aided by a commitment to deny victory to their enemy. The Taliban are helped by some key strengths. Unlike most modern Afghan political parties and warring factions, the Taliban are still a largely united movement. The loss of top leaders, their regime, and high wartime casualties and kill and capture efforts have not fragmented the Taliban into mutually hostile factions. Their unity is in stark contrast to the competition in Kabul, where endless political wrangling prevents state institutions, democracy, and the economy from strengthening.

Taliban unity is made possible by a centralized leadership. Mostly camped in neighboring Pakistan, it has overseen a decentralized war led by battlefield commanders who have increasingly gained more autonomy over finances and how to respond to local challenges. The Taliban are keen on retaining a monopoly over jihad in Afghanistan. Thus, they have challenged and opposed the emergence of Islamic State (IS) militants in the country since 2015. Former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur even wrote an open letter to IS leader Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi to warn that "the creation of a parallel jihadist front or leadership [in Afghanistan] will pave the way for disagreements, schisms, and conspiracies."

All aspects of the Taliban war are supported by complex information operations. It is noteworthy that a movement whose top leaders went to religious schools only is capable of messaging multiple audiences at the same time. While talking to domestic audiences, the Taliban run commentaries and articles on their Voice Of Jihad website and pro-Taliban websites such as Nun

Asia or Asia Today. But when the movement wants to explain positions to fellow jihadists or tap into potential donors in the Gulf it uses Arabic-language magazine Al-Samood or utilizes social media accounts exclusively in Arabic.

A low-cost war fits well into the Taliban's strategy of fighting a long-term, simmering war. Even if the movement pays some of its cadres, keeping tens of thousands of fighters occasionally active on the battlefield is not expensive. While the insurgents use drug money, it is not their exclusive funding source. Instead they rely on diversified financial resources including covert support from states and donations from individuals.

The Taliban know that superior Afghan government, NATO, and U.S. firepower will prevent them from controlling large population centers, so they have made large gains in the countryside since 2014. In an effort to sow fear and prevent their enemy from an all-out assault, the Taliban rely on attacks on Afghan cities. These particularly complex urban attacks, wherein a group of well-trained Taliban suicide bombers storm government or international facilities, boost their propaganda and undermines stability. Assassination campaigns, including those of clerics and tribal and political leaders and commando-style raids on dispersed forces also helps their war campaign.

The Afghan Taliban are a manifestation of their country's complex geopolitics. Their regime was supported by Islamabad and its Arab allies in the Gulf in the 1990s. After 9/11, rivalries such as India versus Pakistan, Saudi Arabia versus Iran, Russia versus the United States, and the United States against Iran have greatly aided their survival and capacity to spring back from extinction. For instance, Tehran and Moscow now reportedly support the Taliban because of apprehensions over IS emergence. Iran's Shiite clerical regime once saw them as Sunni adversaries while Russia feared and loathed their support for Central Asian militants then organized mostly as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Pakistan is perhaps the key to understanding the puzzle. Today, there is no love lost between the Taliban and Pakistan's powerful military. Pakistan has attempted to either negotiate with the Afghan government on behalf of the Taliban or control such a process. But it seems that the Taliban do not want to include Pakistan in their foreign and domestic affairs, noted a July 2015 article on the Taliban website titled *A Pakistani Roulette: Pakistani-Brokered Peace Talks*. The fact that the article was withdrawn only after a few hours and then Mansur was killed in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan Province in May 2016 underscores Islamabad's status as a main spoiler in Afghanistan. Despite differences and bitterness, the Taliban leaders' reliance on Pakistani sanctuaries will prevent them from independently seeking a compromise with Kabul.

The most critical element in determining the Taliban's future is their strength or weakness in relation to the Afghan government. Kabul's ability to preserve its current political system, deliver key services, and secure Afghans will weaken the Taliban substantially. While there might not be a

military solution to determining the future of the Taliban, strengthening Afghan institutions will help. Despite challenges, the current Afghan government is aided by unprecedented international support. It now has to attend to righting domestic politics in a country where tremendous social and economic changes favor reforms. A strengthening government in Kabul will be better positioned to champion a sustainable results-oriented peace process broadly backed by Afghans.

Finally, it is critical to learn from Afghanistans recent history. Kabul and its international backers need to address genuine concerns of Afghanistans neighbors and regional powers so they are not tempted to foil its march toward stability by supporting the Taliban or other insurgents.

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