

# Regional security implications of the hybrid war in Afghanistan

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**Abstract** – In the aftermath of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the war-torn nation has experienced a significant shift in the nature of its endless conflict. Following the Taliban regaining power by ousting the Kabul regime, Afghanistan has once again transcended as the latest geopolitical battleground for superpowers and regional state actors. The perpetual state of war in Afghanistan has converged local and transnational militant aspirations with geopolitical interests – leading to a nexus between state and non-state actors that are engaging in a hybrid war. The utilization of hybrid warfare strategies in Afghanistan by state and non-state actors has added a new dimension to the conflict, which has developed into the latest major threat to peace and security in the South and Central Asian region. As the Taliban grapples to maintain its hold on governance, their authority and legitimacy faces persistent challenges from local militants and transnational terrorist groups. This complex milieu provides a space for state actors and militant groups to operate below the threshold of a conventional war, by employing synchronized multidimensional methods of warfare. The objective of this paper is to help guide strategic thinking by understanding the applications of the concept of hybrid warfare in the context of the conflict in Afghanistan. This analysis examines the implications to regional security in South and Central Asia, by exploring the current trajectory of Afghanistan's perpetual war, which has evolved into a state of "perpetual hybridity" resulting from hybrid strategies that are directed by state and non-state actors.

**Keywords:** Hybrid warfare, Perpetual War, Perpetual Hybridity, Afghanistan, Taliban, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Regional Security, Battlespace

## I. INTRODUCTION

The changing nature of armed conflicts in the 21st Century is manifested by the advent of Hybrid warfare, which includes the synchronized use of conventional and asymmetric strategies, combined with non-military (non-kinetic) instruments of warfare that comprises – political, psychological, diplomatic, informational, cyber and economic tools, which is reinforcing the strategic

capabilities of both state and non-state actors. The dawn of hybrid warfare has empowered a state or an insurgent group to limit battlefield losses and achieve its overall strategic objectives by concentrating a minimum force within multiple operational domains (battlespaces).

The constantly evolving 'perpetual war' in Afghanistan has led to state and non-state actors contributing towards the hybridization of the conflict, which poses significant implications to the regional security in South and Central Asia. The application of hybrid warfare strategies in the Afghan theater by militant groups such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda and Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), has enabled them to influence instruments of national power, by simultaneously engaging in conventional, asymmetric and non-kinetic means of warfare. While terrorist organizations in Afghanistan contribute towards the worsening security environment, Geopolitical factors and regional rivalries are correspondingly further exacerbating the hybrid threat, which is driving foreign state actors to use non-military tools to instill their influence in the country.

Afghanistan has once again emerged as a hub for transnational terrorism following the U.S. and NATO forces ending their nearly two-decade long occupation in 2021 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023; 2022; 2021). According to the International Rescue Committee, Afghanistan topped the list of countries that has the highest risk of a deteriorating humanitarian crisis in 2022 (IRC,2022). The Global Terrorism Index of 2023 has also ranked Afghanistan at the top of its list for the fourth consecutive year, noting that transnational and regional terrorism has been thriving amidst a volatile security environment (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). The current dynamics of the perpetual war in Afghanistan is precipitated by political instability, infighting within the Taliban regime, multiple internal conflicts, the humanitarian crisis, the growing threat of transnational terrorism originating from ISKP, geopolitical competitions and regional conflicts. Many of these factors that are driving Afghanistan's perpetual war have all converged within a single theater of conflict, creating the ideal conditions for hybrid threats that pose significant implications to regional security.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This paper will delve deep into the changing nature of Afghanistan's perpetual state of war which has evolved into a hybrid war that has the potential to last for generations. Recognizing and examining these dynamics is crucial when formulating effective regional policies aimed at fostering stability, peace, and development in Afghanistan and the wider region. This study is a qualitative research that will utilize secondary data sources to shed light on the concept of 'Perpetual Hybridity'. This study will analyze the fast evolving conflict trajectory of Afghanistan, which has transitioned to a state of perpetual hybridity, thereby posing grave regional security implications to the South and Central Asian region.

### III. ANALYSIS

#### A. Within a state of perpetual conflict

The concept of a perpetual war is characterized by an ongoing conflict without a clear endpoint, with shifting objectives and elusive enemies, while the classical concept of war is based on the notion of having a victor, a vanquished, a truce, a surrender or an end result that leads to the termination of a conflict (Hoffman, 2015). Traditionally, wars were considered to consist of an identifiable center of gravity, identifiable objectives, specific battlespaces, specific opponents and clear outcomes.

Many scholars have often cited the post-9/11 "War on Terror" as an example of a perpetual war due to its ambiguous nature, lack of a defined battlefield, and the absence of a clear point of conclusion (Keen, 2006; Danner, 2005). However, the concept of a perpetual war has become ever more relevant in the context of Afghanistan. The theoretical aspects of a perpetual war in relation to Afghanistan is characterized by geopolitical interests, proxy wars, insurgency dynamics, regional conflicts, and resource competition (Gharji, 2012).

The nature of Afghanistan's conflict has transformed in many stages since the early part of the 20th Century, which is marked by numerous internal conflicts that led to the deposition and assassination of several monarchs. (Sarkees and Wyman, 2010; Hazrah ed McChesney, 1999). The involvement of foreign state actors played a key role in ending the 40-year reign of the final monarch of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah who was deposed following a coup d'état in 1973, which eventually led to a period of political turmoil that resulted in constant regime changers and political assassinations (Arnold, 1985). These events led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which evolved into an extension of the Cold War. Afghanistan eventually emerged as a decisive theater for a proxy war waged by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that was arming, training and funding the Afghan

Mujahideen in their offensive against the occupying Soviet Union forces.

Against the backdrop of the defeat and withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989, the conflict in Afghanistan took a new turn as competing Afghan militant groups were engaged in an internal conflict to gain power. The aftermath of the internal power struggle resulted in the Taliban ousting the Afghan government and capturing state power for the first time in September 1996. These events ultimately led to Afghanistan emerging as a hub for Jihadist militancy and a safe haven for Al Qaeda, which was the only major transnational Salafi Jihadist terror group at the time. The 9/11 terror attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, eventually led to the Taliban regime being toppled in 2001 by the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan after a nearly 20-year intervention led to the Taliban overthrowing the Ashraf Ghani regime and annexing state power. The perpetual war in Afghanistan continues unabated as it keeps taking a new shape through the hybridization of the conflict that is fueled by both internal and external factors that has threatened the balance of power in the region.

The absence of a clear endpoint and the multiple conflicts that are occurring concurrently has contributed to the perpetuation of the conflict in Afghanistan, which has enabled state and non-state actors to engage belligerent forces by going beyond a single battlespace, while focusing more attention towards the non-kinetic realm of warfare (Ferguson, 2022). Unlike the conflicts in Syria and Crimea, the current events have led to Afghanistan's perpetual war evolving into a perpetual hybrid conflict, which has converged geopolitical interests, internal conflicts, regional conflicts and transnational terrorism, posing a major regional security threat (Konyshev and Parfenov, 2019). This threat will continue to keep evolving by taking new forms, despite successive military interventions and counter insurgency campaigns. The hybrid threat stemming from Afghanistan can be used as a launchpad for a belligerent state and non-state actors that will seek to exploit multiple battlespaces by remaining below the threshold of a conventional conflict (Maizland, 2023).

#### B. The definitional ambiguity of hybrid warfare

Comprehending the concept of a hybrid war in the context of Afghanistan's perpetual state of conflict is essential in order to identify its implications to regional security. Over the years, the concept of Hybrid Warfare has been subject to several definitional debates due to its theoretical ambiguity and due to it containing elements of other forms of irregular or asymmetric tactics and unconventional or non-military strategies.

The term hybrid warfare initially gained attention in the paper titled 'Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars' authored by Frank G. Hoffman, who provided

a broad conceptualization of a new form of warfare which has evolved from regular and irregular warfare (2007). According to Hoffman (2009) hybrid warfare consists of the synchronization of strategies and tactics within multiple domains of operations. Hoffman (2009) has asserted that: "Hybrid threats incorporate a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts (including indiscriminate violence and coercion), and criminal disorder. Hybrid wars can also be multinodal—conducted by both states and a variety of nonstate actors." Another significant characterization of the phenomena of a hybrid threat was highlighted by Russell W. Glenn (2009) who asserts that it is, "an adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs some combination of (1) political, military, economic, social, and information means, and (2) conventional, irregular, catastrophic, terrorism, and disruptive/criminal warfare methods".

Despite hybrid warfare containing elements of asymmetric warfare, the two terms have different connotations and applications. Hybrid warfare specifically refers to the simultaneous use of a combination of conventional and unconventional warfare and/ or irregular tactics, along with the use of non-kinetic forms of warfare to achieve a specific strategic objective. On the contrary, asymmetric warfare can be distinguished from hybrid warfare, as it refers to a broader concept that encompasses various strategies and tactics used by weaker actors to overcome the military advantages of stronger adversaries (Russel, 2004).

Accordingly, hybrid warfare will entail the use of proxy forces, terrorism, covert operations, information warfare, psychological warfare, cyber warfare, lawfare, espionage, diplomacy, organized criminal activities, political subversions and economic incentives or coercion, which is blended with conventional, unconventional, regular, irregular, and asymmetric tactics. The emergence of hybrid warfare has blurred the line between war and peace as battlespaces can be extended to include non-kinetic realms of operation and it also includes the weaponizing of non-military tools such as propaganda, economic fault lines, political systems, humanitarian issues, natural resources, diplomatic channels and ethnic divisions (Stoker and Whiteside, 2020). The ability to extend the battlespace to multiple operational domains and by operating below the threshold of a conventional war, which is known as a grey zone – has empowered state and non-state actors to employ hybrid strategies as a force multiplier.

The significance of directing non-military strategies as part of hybrid warfare has been incorporated in the most recent Russian military doctrine that has been dubbed as the Gerasimov Doctrine, named after its architect, General Valery Gerasimov. This doctrine introduces the concept of New Generation Warfare, which focuses on the

psychological, political, economic, and informational aspects that are part of a hybrid warfare strategy (B rzi š, 2020).

Russia's annexation of Crimea which developed into the conflict in Ukraine and Hezbollah's engagement of Israeli forces during the 2006 Lebanon conflict, can be taken as case studies of hybrid warfare. Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine included synchronized offensives that were conducted across multiple battlespaces, which entailed cyber warfare; information operations which included psychological operations, disinformation campaigns and fake news to fuel internal social upheavals in the country; political warfare strategies to create a favourable political condition for Russia; covert special operations, espionage activities, the employment of private military contractors such as the Wagner Group; and use of insurgent groups in Ukraine as a proxy force (Wither, 2016). Similarly, Hezbollah's operational art during the 2006 Lebanon conflict against a far superior Israeli Defence Force, is a classic example of the applications of hybrid warfare by a transnational terror group that simultaneously engages in multiple battlespaces (Piotrowski, 2015; Eilam, 2016).

### C. The state of perpetual hybridity

The current trajectory of Afghanistan's conflict has simultaneously unveiled all forms of warfare including conventional to unconventional warfare, low intensity confrontations, irregular tactics, proxy wars, asymmetric warfare, political warfare, urban warfare, siege warfare, terrorism, insurgency, transnational crime, psychological warfare, cyber warfare and information warfare. The security environment in Afghanistan is continuously redefined by these simultaneous conflicts that are fought in multiple battlespaces. The evolutionary nature of Afghanistan's perpetual war has created the conditions for hybrid militant groups and ambitious state actors that are employing hybrid warfare strategies to fill the security vacuum that was followed by the U.S. and NATO withdrawal in 2021.

In order to comprehend the regional security implications to South and Central Asia, it is important to delve deeper into the factors that are driving Afghanistan towards a hybrid war. The hybrid war in Afghanistan which poses grave regional security implications is fueled by five fundamental factors:

- 1). Taliban's transition from insurgency to governance.
- 2). The nexus between state and non-state actors.
- 3). Vibrant transnational hybrid militant landscape.
- 4). Information and Ideological warfare.
- 5). Regional conflicts and geopolitical influences

Addressing the factors that have contributed towards the hybridization of the conflict in Afghanistan needs to be addressed in a multidimensional and integrated manner that would combine both kinetic and non-kinetic forces. Within a hybrid conflict landscape, both states and insurgent groups will be able to take advantage of these factors by ensuring its survival.

Despite, Afghanistan facing less armed violence in 2022 and 2023 in contrast to previous years, the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the threat of famine, worsening economic conditions and multiple internal conflicts have aggravated the ongoing hybrid war (International Crisis Group, 2022). The weaponizing of byproducts of war has further redefined Afghanistan's state of perpetual conflict, leading to the most dominant Jihadist insurgent groups in the country – Taliban, Al Qaida and ISKP engaging in an ideological and propaganda war. Maintaining dominance within the informational (propaganda), psychological, social and political battlespaces is critical for their success, as it strengthens the recruitment drive of these insurgent groups that have remained resilient, despite enduring heavy losses and strategic setbacks.

Following the Taliban's resurgence, Afghanistan is facing two notable insurgencies – (i). The republican insurgency led by the National Resistance Front that comprise of predominantly anti-Taliban secular groups, non-Pashtun communities and members of the former regime, and (ii). The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which is the Afghan affiliate of ISIS (ISIL/ Daesh) (International Crisis Group, 2023). Apart from these two major insurgencies in the country, the Taliban is encountering further security challenges that stem from defectors, tribal/sectarian militant groups and cross-border clashes with neighboring states or their proxy forces.

An inherent characteristic in most protracted social conflicts that have lasted generations is the obvious deep-rooted ethnic, religious, political or social divisions. In a hybrid war, state or non-state actors can weaponize and exploit ethnic/social divisions and fault lines, that would act as a catalyst – leading to cycles of competition and conflict. In the case of Afghanistan's perpetual war, sectarian divisions can be weaponized, while the non-military battlespaces such as the political, psychological, ideological, cyber and informational domains are utilized in a synchronized manner. The success rate of weaponizing sectarian and ethnic divisions as an instrument of warfare can be determined by the Taliban and ISKP's ability to alter perceptions and influence instruments of national power, while leveraging from the ensuing chaos and conflict that emanates from the incitement of such divisions.

Many of the non-Pashtun minority ethnic groups have come under increasing threats from regional Taliban

groups, ISKP and other Salafi Jihadist terror groups in the country, which is generating new forms of conflict drivers in an already complex and volatile security environment. The existence of several tribes and divisions within the predominant Pashtun ethnic group alone has contributed towards perpetuating the conflict in Afghanistan. The complex militant landscape has created a conducive environment for a hybrid war that would further empower state actors and militant groups to conduct operations by concealing their attribution and ensuring plausible deniability.

### **D. Transitions of a hybrid militant landscape**

The intricate nature of the militant landscape in Afghanistan has created an avenue for the perpetuation and hybridity of the conflict following the Taliban's transitioned from being the foremost insurgent group in Afghanistan to emerging as the caretaker government. Amongst the most formidable transnational terror groups operating in the country ISKP, Al Qaida and Al Qaida in the Indian subcontinent (AQI) have gained significant prominence due to its renewed capability of maneuvering within multiple operational domains (Gunaratna, 2023; Fuard, 2021).

The hybrid militant landscape has created the conditions for Afghanistan to be used as a hub for regional terrorist groups such as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP/ also known as the Pakistani Taliban), Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (TTP breakaway group), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, Jundullah (TTP breakaway group), Lashkar-e-Islam, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (LeJ), Jaish-e-Mohammed, Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami.

When examining Afghanistan's hybrid militant landscape, it must be considered that the Taliban is not a monolithic entity as it comprises of a coalition of various tribal militant groups and insurgent groups. For instance, the Haqqani Network which is the most prominent and one of the most powerful militant groups aligned with the Taliban is currently playing a significant role in their government, following the overthrow of the Kabul regime in 2021. The close affiliation the Taliban maintains with the Haqqani network and al-Qaeda, is characterized by enduring intergenerational ties dating back to the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad of the 1980s. These alliances have further solidified through the shared experience of combatting U.S. and NATO forces, as well as through familial bonds, including intermarriages.

Similarly, despite the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISKP having ideological differences, a symbiotic relationship exists between the Afghan and other regional Jihadist combatants that periodically migrate between different militant groups (Sharifi, 2020; Fuard, 2021). Therefore, a significant characterization of the perpetual war in

Afghanistan is marked by the insurgent's ability to morph and evolve within a complex hybrid militant landscape, while weaponizing non-kinetic instruments of warfare that would ensure success at tactical and strategic levels. It is within such a hybrid militant landscape, insurgencies led by the Taliban and ISKP have thrived over the years, despite being weakened due to loss of territory, leaders and combatants.

### **E. Operational Art of the Afghan insurgency**

The operational art of the Taliban is a clear depiction of the effectiveness in employing hybrid warfare strategies, which eventually resulted in a far superior force being politically, psychologically and militarily outmaneuvered. According to Benjamin Jensen (2021) who was part of the NATO led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, the Taliban had executed a fourfold hybrid strategy which focused on: isolating the Afghan military; targeting cohesion through threats by using tailored propaganda and conducting information operations; Utilizing innovative forms of terror tactics to undermine the Afghan government while creating a fear psychosis; and integrating diplomacy with its military and non-kinetic campaigns that paved the way for a peace deal between the U.S. and the Taliban, which further undermined Ashraf Ghani's government.

The resurgence of the Taliban is a testament to its resilience, despite it facing multiple superior state adversaries, while engaging anti-Taliban militant groups such as ISKP (Giustozzi, 2022). The Taliban's ability to avoid any decisive battles by blending irregular tactics, while simultaneously exploiting the non-kinetic battlespaces by conducting information, psychological, diplomatic and political warfare was one of its key reasons behind its success in effortlessly taking over Kabul (Salt, 2018).

The Taliban has been able to outlast the US forces and overthrow a democratically elected Afghan government by gaining tactical victories by using the mountainous terrain and urban battlespaces to their advantage, while avoiding any direct confrontation with the enemy (Trifkovic, 2022). However, for the Taliban to gain an overall strategic advantage, asymmetric and unconventional military strategies alone would have not sufficed. In order to outlast the U.S. and succeed in overthrowing an elected government, the Taliban had to engage in its own form of political warfare by using propaganda tools within the cyber and informational domain to discredit the Ashraf Ghani regime which was embroiled in accusations of corruption and human rights abuses.

The Taliban had executed its most successful psychological operation by giving an ultimatum for the Afghan government forces to surrender with their weapons or else the Afghan government soldiers, and their families would face death if they resisted. Psychological and

information warfare operations was a key component to the Taliban's capabilities of undermining the Afghan security forces and toppling the Ashraf Ghani government. The foundation of the Taliban's hybrid tactic was centered around exploiting the informational and ideological space by promoting their form of Islamist nationalism combined with atrocity propaganda. The abuses within the Afghan state and its close alliance with the U.S. was used as a catalyst to amplify the narratives of injustice and persecution. The online propaganda combined with the involvement in tribal politics and diplomacy, sowed the seeds of discontent against the Ghani regime, which would eventually lead to a section of the Afghan population supporting the Taliban's cause.

However, the weaponizing of atrocity propaganda and engaging in cyber politics is not a new tactic in warfare. ISIS has been able to engage in its own form of cyber politics through its online propaganda campaigns and ideological wars by exploiting the social media space. The shifting battlespaces between the physical to the online domains has added a complex layer which triggers the perpetuation of a conflict within the political, ideological and psychological space.

In the current context the conceptualization of hybrid warfare can be distinguished based on: the current evolution and innovations in warfare; a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape; the absence of a physical center of gravity; frequent engagement in cyber politics and online information (propaganda/Psypops/misinformation) campaigns; and technological advancement. Prior to the Taliban and ISKP conducting multidimensional operations, during a bygone era that did not possess the power of social media, the Sri Lankan separatist insurgent group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) successfully pioneered the integration of atrocity propaganda and cyber politics as part of their broader strategy. During the three decade long separatist war waged by the LTTE against the Sri Lankan state, the terror insurgent group effectively exploited cyber space as a battlefield that would have significant internal political and geopolitical ramifications (Vidamage, 2009). The LTTE strategy of exploiting cyber space enabled the terror group to galvanize both local and global support bases that were capable of influencing instruments of national power. The LTTE's strategy of engaging in multiple battlespaces and leveraging the non-kinetic domains is an early depiction of an insurgent's use of hybrid warfare strategies. The LTTE's non-kinetic operations that were aimed at influencing specific target audiences both locally and globally is an operational art that is now followed by ISIS, Taliban, Hezbollah and ISKP.

### **F. Regional conflicts and geopolitical influences**

Over the decades, the geopolitical interests in Afghanistan have been defined by several factors, including its strategic location, access to natural resources, economic opportunities, regional rivalries, and counterterrorism

efforts. Afghanistan is positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, and the landlocked country maintains a geostrategic nexus between multiple spheres of influence (Voje, 2021). Throughout history, Afghanistan has been dubbed as the 'graveyard of empires' especially since the balance of power in the region has been affected by events that led to the defeat of historic superpowers that includes the militaries of Alexander the Great, Great Britain, USSR and now the United States. Currently, the convergence of internal and regional conflicts, combined with geopolitical influences have added a new lay to the state of perpetual hybridity in Afghanistan, and it is paving the way for instability in the wider region.

The historical influence of the Great Game, Cold War rivalries, and contemporary power struggles exemplifies the shifting balance of power, which has been intricately connected to its regional dynamics. In the current context, countries such as USA, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, India and Russia, have substantial interests in Afghanistan and have historically played influential roles in shaping its political and security environment. Middle Eastern nations such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Turkey have continued to influence Afghanistan's internal affairs by being a key donor to the country. In recent times the Middle Eastern states have contributed towards the Taliban's efforts to transition from a militant group to a legitimate state actor, as this is evident in Qatar's role in facilitating the Doha Talks that led to the 2021 U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The events taking place in Afghanistan has attracted the attention of regional powers that are attempting to secure their interests by employing hybrid warfare strategies that are below the threshold of a conventional war. Global security expert, David Kilcullen (2020) has introduced the theory known as 'liminal warfare' which illustrates how state and non-state actors are engaging in warfare within a grey zone that does not qualify to be considered as a justification for war or retaliation. Such a condition is applicable to the current hybrid war that has engulfed Afghanistan, which has emerged as a geopolitical pivot (Chakravarty, 2021). The perpetual hybrid environment has led to state actors to conduct covert multidimensional operations to instill their influence by winning wars without fighting. The events unfolding in Afghanistan is continuously shifting the threat perceptions due to a constantly varying strategic inter-relationship between US, China, India, Pakistan and Russia that are battling to enforce a rebalance to the region (Sanaullah, 2019).

The successful results of a hybrid operation conducted by a state actor in Afghanistan is exemplified by Pakistan's premiere intelligence agency – Inter services intelligence (ISI). Pakistan's hand in ensuring the Taliban successful transition from militant to government was evident when the ISI Chief, Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, was present in Afghanistan during the concluding phase of

Taliban's offensive against NRF in Panjshir valley. Pakistan's strong affiliation with key Taliban coalition partners such as the Haqqani network has been described by the U.S. Joint Chief of Staff Mike Mullen as a "de facto extension of the ISI." ISI was able to successfully exploit vulnerabilities within the non-kinetic battlespace that enabled Islamabad to install a Taliban government and set the stage for the militant group to gain legitimacy within a large section of the international community. Trifkovic (2022) asserts, "Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan was in itself a striking example of a complex, long, and eminently successful hybrid warfare operation. It was directed directly against the U.S. and its allies, and indirectly against India, in pursuit of Islamabad's geostrategic objectives. All along, the pretense of partnership with the U.S. was successfully maintained due to the inexplicable and utterly self-defeating willingness of American officialdom to pretend that all was well, even after the killing of Osama bin Laden."

Pakistan will seek to leverage its success in the Afghan theater by trying to mediate between dissenting parties that are within the Taliban. While the ISI provides military, technical and financial support to ensure the continuity of a Taliban government, Islamabad will seek to build alliances with the many militant and tribal groups that maintain influence and power in Afghanistan. The capability of weaponizing by-products of a conflict are an essential component of hybrid warfare. Those internally displaced by war can be used as a source of human intelligence (HUMINT) and a more lethal force when operated as a state sanctioned proxy force. During all conflicts in Afghanistan, refugees have been used by ISI as proxy militants or intelligence assets, that would provide Islamabad a strategic advantage over India. The nexus between state and non-state actors will inevitably fuel more conflict within the region as this would pose direct security implications to India. Pakistan will have an option of maintaining plausible deniability when using such proxy forces to undermine India in the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir.

Afghanistan will continue to remain strategically significant to India and Pakistan, as long as hostilities and tension between the two states remain constant (Dormandy, 2007). India's geopolitical ambitions in Afghanistan are primarily driven by the objective of countering China's influence in the region and countering Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. Both these factors that have centered around Afghanistan are part of India's broader strategic priority in ensuring New Delhi's interests are secured.

Since the fall of the first Taliban regime in the wake of 9/11, India has been at the forefront of efforts to rebuild Afghanistan by becoming a leading provider of financial and humanitarian assistance (Betigeri, 2021). Despite India making significant investments in Afghanistan, the resurgence of the Taliban has altered India's influence it once maintained with the Ghani regime. The inability to counter the rise of the Taliban and the incapacity to prevent

China's expansion into Afghanistan are strategic failures on the part of India, which eventually led to Pakistan emerging triumphant in Afghanistan's hybrid war.

However, India will have to adapt to the changing regional security environment as the Afghan lesson has proved that policymakers and strategists in New Delhi will have to work towards a counter hybrid warfare strategy to undermine Pakistan's dominance in the Afghan theater. India is in a position to negotiate with anti-Haqqani network militant groups and anti-Pakistani militants, with the aim of gaining a strategic foothold in Afghanistan. India will seek to exploit any internal fractionalization of the Taliban that would lead to undermining Pakistan's hold on Afghanistan.

As a China and Pakistan backed Taliban government consolidates its power, India has realigned its foreign policy by making attempts to build strong alliances with central Asian states. In 2021, India's foreign minister S Jaishankar held wide-ranging discussions with his central Asian counterparts which had a primary focus on security, economic cooperation and the situation in Afghanistan. During this summit India and Tajikistan signed a series of agreements on security cooperation (Economic Times, 2021). India's recent interest in the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) arises from the necessity to engage with developments in Afghanistan. While this renewed engagement between India and Central Asian states may not immediately yield significant benefits for New Delhi, the potential consequences of disengagement are greater. India runs the risk of being excluded from developments in Central Asia and specifically in Afghanistan, and this risk has even led to New Delhi opening a back channel to explore the options of working with the Taliban regime (Basit, 2021). These backchannel talks eventually evolved into an Indian delegation visiting Kabul and holding discussions with senior members of the Taliban government in 2022, which indicates that India is shifting from its previous anti-Taliban stance.

China's ambitions in Afghanistan are closely aligned with Pakistan, primarily due to Beijing's role as a crucial financial ally and a counterbalance against Indian hegemony in the region. China's interest in engaging with the Taliban stems from three strategic objectives: combating terrorism that stems from ETIM (primarily Chinese Uygur Muslims), investing in mineral resources and other economic activities, and extending its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to establish regional hegemony (Russel and Berger, 2020). The militant group ETIM which maintains close links to ISKP, is using Afghanistan as a hub to conduct low intensity confrontations and terrorist attacks in the Chinese province of Xinjiang which borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. China has secured a commitment from the Taliban to counter the ETIM militants and to prevent them from using Afghanistan as a hub for their activities. In recent times ETIM militants and Uygur Chinese suicide

bombers have joined ISKP, leading to several deadly attacks targeting Chinese nationals in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By providing substantial aid packages and economic incentives to Afghanistan, China will hold significant leverage over the Taliban. The China-Pakistan partnership will be bolstered by China's substantial financial resources and Pakistan's close relationships with the Taliban, creating a strong axis with interests deeply intertwined in the affairs of Afghanistan.

The Afghan conflict has far-reaching implications at the regional level, given Afghanistan's geographical proximity to six neighboring countries: Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China (Strand and Harpviken, 2001). Each of these nations holds distinct interests concerning the conflict, leading to the pursuit of diverse political strategies. This is clearly depicted in the Iran-Afghan relations which have deteriorated significantly and is marked with regular border skirmishes following the 2021 Taliban takeover of Kabul. Iran has also been engaging in a proxy war by providing military and financial support to the National Resistance Front and other Shia Muslim minority groups that have come under the grip of persecution following the Taliban takeover. Similarly, an ensuing border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is adding further complications to the regional security environment that will have an effect on Afghanistan. The multiple regional conflicts have created an environment for war to be perpetuated by means of proxy, political subversions, diplomacy, economic sanctions, information operations, cyber operations and other non-kinetic forms that is constantly altering the trajectory of Afghanistan's conflict.

The regional security implications that have transpired due to the rise and growth of ISKP has created an opportunity for the Taliban to project an image that they can leverage within the geopolitical realm. The rise of ISKP along with the plans of withdrawing American and NATO troops from what has been viewed as an unwinnable protracted war, set in motion events that would lead to the U.S. signing a peace deal with their onetime enemy. The Doha Talks set the foundation for the Taliban to annex state power by overthrowing the government in Kabul by pledging to the U.S. to prevent Afghanistan being used as a hub for transnational terrorism by groups such as ISKP and Al Qaeda, in return for a complete troop. The U.N. Security Council unanimously backed the deal with the Taliban, which was perceived as the best of the worse alternatives considering that the global security agenda has primary focus on neutralizing ISKP, which is perceived as more radical than most other Jihadist groups operating in the country. However, the drone strike which killed Al Qaeda leader, Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul in 2022 proved that the Taliban was not sincere in its plans of preventing Al Qaeda from operating in Afghanistan. By conducting drone strikes similar to the one that killed al Zawahiri, the U.S. has clearly

displayed its intentions of continuing to be involved in Afghanistan through their “Over the Horizon” campaigns.

Much like the Taliban, ISKP has been conducting its own tribal forms of diplomacy to gain the support of tribal groups and Jihadist networks. Many regional and Pakistani based Jihadist groups have already pledged their support to ISKP which makes them a formidable contender that would challenge the Taliban’s internal hegemony in Afghanistan. While creating alliances with regional jihadist networks and winning over a significant support base in the rural parts of Afghanistan, ISKP will seek to gain a global support base that is driven by regional conflict, specifically in regions such as the Afghan-Pakistan border known as the Duran line, Baloch insurgency in Pakistan, the conflict in Xinjiang province which has led to large number of Uygur Muslims joining ETIM which collaborates with ISKP and the conflict in Kashmir. ISKP is galvanizing their support base by discrediting the Taliban, while inciting a sectarian conflict by continuing to target minority religious groups and Shia Muslims in Afghanistan. The additional layers within Afghanistan’s conflict that has also become intertwined with regional conflicts will create the justification for a regional response, leading to state actors engaging in clandestine operations, using proxy forces, surgical strikes and even creating the path for direct intervention.

Following the defeat of ISIS Central in Iraq and Syria, the resilience shown by ISKP clearly indicates that the transnational terror group has ambitions of going beyond Afghanistan which is a narrative that resonates with its ideology of rebuilding its lost pan-Islamist Caliphate in Iraq and Syria (Fuard, 2021). A 2018 UN Security Council report states that as ISIS Central continued to lose territory and combatants in Iraq and Syria, many of its foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) who are nationals of Algeria, France, Russia, Tunisia and Central Asian are migrating to Afghanistan, which has created a major cause for concern for regional security in South and Central Asia (UN Security Council, 2018).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Many analysts observe that the Taliban abandoning its previous hardline stance to appease international actors has led to dissatisfaction and defection within its ranks. A probable implication of a state of perpetual hybridity in Afghanistan is represented by the possible situation of ISKP resurrecting its Caliphate in Afghanistan by gaining territory, population and establishing its own de facto government by ousting the Taliban, thereby justifying an international military intervention to neutralize a grave transnational threat. The unfolding events has presented an opportunity for Al Qaida to regain its former glory within the Jihadist realm by conducting symbolic global scale attacks, much like the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings perpetrated by an ISIS inspired network of suicide bombers in Sri Lanka. Al Qaeda’s close ties with the Taliban will play

a major role in their ambitions of using Afghanistan as a launchpad to conduct terror activities in the region, with the aim of regaining its global appeal that has been overtaken by ISIS (Rohan Gunaratna, 2023).

The three key elements that are fueling the state of perpetual hybridity in Afghanistan are: the complex militant dynamics in Afghanistan; regional conflicts and insurgency, and geopolitical competitions. These three elements which are intertwined will create new forms of regional threats that will continue to evolve, primarily due to the shifting battlespaces that have created new centers of gravity. As long as the focus on Afghanistan’s conflict remains on the tangible factors, the lack of foresight on the non-kinetic battles will yield a detrimental outcome for regional security. In Afghanistan and in most hybrid wars the battle within the psychological, diplomatic, informational, cyber and political domains will determine the outcome of a conflict in a globally digitalized era. Due to the convergence of geopolitical interests and militant dynamics, the cycle of Afghanistan’s perpetual war has paved the way for a state of perpetual hybridity, which is threatening regional security in South and Central Asia.

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