

## AFGHANISTAN'S STRATEGIC CULTURE IN THE POST-9/11 ERA: CONTINUITY, ADAPTATION, AND STRATEGIC BEHAVIOUR

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20177309>

### Keywords

Strategic culture, Afghanistan, Post-9/11 intervention, Taliban, Historical memory, Security behaviour, State-building

### Article History

Received: 16 March 2026

Accepted: 25 April 2026

Published: 14 May 2026

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### Abstract

This paper examines Afghanistan's strategic behaviour in the post-9/11 era through the lens of Strategic Culture Theory. It argues that the collapse of the Afghan republic in 2021 and the return of the Taliban cannot be adequately explained by governance failure, military withdrawal, or material power dynamics alone. Instead, these developments reflect the persistence of a historically embedded strategic culture shaped by collective memory of resistance, tribal norms of authority, and culturally grounded legitimacy structures. Drawing on qualitative historical analysis, process tracing, and thematic interpretation of secondary literature and policy sources, the study demonstrates that post-9/11 external intervention altered institutional forms without transforming underlying strategic preferences. The paper shows that Taliban II governance, security practices, and external engagement patterns represent continuity and selective adaptation rather than rupture. By extending Strategic Culture Theory to the post-9/11 Afghan context, the study contributes to contemporary security studies. It offers policy-relevant insights into the limits of externally driven state-building and coercive security strategies in culturally resistant environments.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic culture has emerged as a critical analytical lens for understanding state behaviour beyond material capabilities and rational cost-benefit calculations. Traditional realist approaches often assume that states facing similar structural conditions will adopt comparable security policies. However, empirical evidence from conflict-prone regions repeatedly demonstrates that historical memory, identity, and socially embedded norms significantly shape how states perceive threats, define interests, and respond to external pressures. Strategic culture theory addresses this gap by

emphasising the role of historically constructed beliefs, values, and behavioural patterns that guide decision-making within national strategic communities (Snyder, 1977; Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996).

Afghanistan is one of the most compelling cases for applying strategic culture theory. Despite repeated regime changes, foreign interventions, and externally sponsored state-building projects, Afghan strategic behaviour has exhibited remarkable continuity. Resistance to external control, preference for decentralised authority, reliance on asymmetric warfare, and deep

suspicion of neighbouring influence have persisted across distinct political eras. These patterns cannot be fully explained through material power asymmetries alone. Rather, they reflect a deeply embedded strategic culture shaped by centuries of conflict, tribal organisation, and religious mobilisation (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002).

The post 9/11 intervention in Afghanistan was widely framed as a transformative moment that would fundamentally alter the country's political institutions, security orientation, and regional behaviour. Massive military presence, extensive financial assistance, and ambitious governance reforms were expected to integrate Afghanistan into a liberal international order. However, two decades later, the rapid collapse of the Afghan state and the return of the Taliban in 2021 revealed the limited durability of externally imposed institutional arrangements. Instead of representing a rupture, the Taliban resurgence reflected a reactivation of longstanding strategic and cultural patterns rooted in Afghanistan's historical experience (Giustozzi, 2019; Maley, 2021).

Existing scholarship on Afghanistan has produced a vast body of work focusing on insurgency, counterterrorism, state failure, and external intervention. Much of this literature, however, remains anchored in realist or institutionalist frameworks that prioritise power balances, military capacity, and governance deficits. While valuable, these approaches often treat culture as a secondary variable or reduce it to ideology. Strategic culture, when discussed, is frequently confined to descriptive narratives rather than systematically employed as an explanatory framework (Rubin, 2002; Rashid, 2008). As a result, the continuity in Afghan strategic behaviour across the pre- and post-9/11 periods remains insufficiently theorised.

Moreover, the bulk of strategic culture literature on Afghanistan concentrates on the Soviet-Afghan War and earlier historical episodes. The post-9/11 period is commonly analysed through the lens of counterinsurgency or state-building rather than cultural continuity. This creates an analytical gap, particularly in understanding why externally

supported institutions failed to replace traditional modes of authority and why Afghan actors consistently resisted integration into externally designed security architectures (Johnson, 2011).

This paper argues that Afghanistan's post-9/11 strategic behaviour, including the collapse of the republic and the Taliban's return, cannot be adequately understood without situating it within the broader continuity of Afghan strategic culture. Drawing on strategic culture theory, this study contends that historical memory of resistance, tribal norms of authority, and the fusion of Islam with indigenous social structures have functioned as enduring filters through which external interventions were interpreted and resisted. Rather than transforming Afghan strategic preferences, the post-9/11 intervention intensified cultural dissonance between externally imposed models and indigenous strategic norms.

The central objective of this paper is to examine how Afghanistan's strategic culture has evolved yet persisted in the post-9/11 era. It seeks to demonstrate that the Taliban's resurgence was not merely the result of governance failure or military withdrawal but reflected deeper cultural and historical dynamics that shaped Afghan responses to foreign presence. By tracing the interaction between historical memory, tribal organisation, and institutional path dependence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Afghan strategic behaviour.

By extending strategic culture analysis into the post-9/11 period, this paper offers two key contributions. First, it advances the theoretical application of strategic culture beyond Cold War and pre-intervention contexts, demonstrating its relevance in explaining contemporary conflict dynamics. Second, it provides policy-relevant insights for regional and international actors by highlighting the limitations of security strategies that ignore culturally embedded patterns of authority, legitimacy, and resistance. Understanding Afghanistan's strategic culture is not merely an academic exercise but a prerequisite for avoiding the repetition of past policy failures.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical-analytical research design to examine the continuity and evolution of Afghanistan's strategic culture in the post-9/11 period. Strategic culture as an analytical concept is best explored through interpretive and historically grounded methods rather than purely quantitative techniques. Since the research seeks to understand how deeply embedded beliefs, norms, and collective memories shape strategic behaviour, a qualitative approach allows for richer contextual analysis and theoretical depth (Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996).

### 2.1. Research Design

The research is structured around a historical-interpretive design that traces the interaction between Afghanistan's strategic culture and external interventions over time. Historical analysis is particularly suited to strategic culture studies because cultural patterns are not episodic phenomena but evolve through long-term processes shaped by repeated experiences and institutional memory (Snyder, 1977). The post 9/11 period is therefore analysed not in isolation but as part of a broader continuum extending from earlier episodes of foreign intervention, including the Anglo-Afghan wars and the Soviet occupation. This design allows the study to identify patterns of continuity and adaptation rather than treating strategic behaviour as a product of short-term political events. By situating post-9/11 developments within Afghanistan's longer historical trajectory, the research avoids reductionist explanations based solely on governance failure or military imbalance.

### 2.2. Data Sources

The study relies primarily on secondary qualitative data, supplemented by limited primary material. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic books and journal articles on strategic culture, Afghanistan's political history, insurgency dynamics, and post-conflict state building. Foundational works on strategic culture theory form the conceptual base of the analysis, including studies by Snyder, Johnston, and Katzenstein.

Afghanistan-focused scholarship by Barfield, Rubin, Maley, Giustozzi, and Rashid is used to contextualise empirical developments.

In addition, policy reports from international organisations, think tanks, and regional security institutions are utilised to assess post-9/11 governance and security outcomes. These sources provide insight into how external actors interpreted and engaged with Afghan strategic behaviour, where relevant official statements, speeches, and policy documents issued by Afghan actors are examined to capture indigenous narratives of resistance, legitimacy, and sovereignty.

Although the study is not interview-driven, it draws conceptually on previously published elite interviews and field-based studies conducted by established scholars. This indirect use of primary research helps mitigate access constraints while maintaining analytical rigour.

### 2.3. Method of Analysis

The analysis is conducted through qualitative thematic interpretation and historical process tracing. Process tracing is employed to identify causal mechanisms linking historical memory, tribal norms, and institutional behaviour across different periods (George & Bennett, 2005). This method is particularly effective in strategic culture research because it allows the researcher to connect ideational factors with observable strategic outcomes without assuming linear causality.

Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring cultural motifs such as resistance to foreign control, decentralised authority, and the fusion of religious legitimacy with tribal governance. These themes are traced across multiple sources and time periods to assess their persistence and transformation. Discourse analysis is selectively applied to examine how Afghan actors frame sovereignty legitimacy and resistance, particularly in the post 9/11 and Taliban II phases. This approach highlights how strategic culture is reproduced through narratives and symbolic practices rather than solely through formal institutions (Hopf, 2002).

#### 2.4. Framework

The analytical framework integrates strategic culture theory as the primary lens, while selectively drawing on realism and constructivism as complementary perspectives. Strategic culture theory provides the core explanatory structure by foregrounding historical memory, societal norms, and institutional path dependence (Johnston, 1995). Realism is used to contextualise material constraints and power asymmetries, particularly in relation to foreign intervention and regional security dynamics. Constructivism helps understand identity formation and the role of discourse in sustaining resistance narratives.

However, these supplementary perspectives do not replace strategic culture theory. Rather, they are employed to deepen explanation by examining how material or ideational factors intersect with culturally embedded strategic preferences. This triangulated approach enhances analytical robustness while maintaining theoretical coherence.

#### 2.5. Limitations

This study faces several limitations inherent to qualitative and historically oriented research. First, the analysis relies heavily on secondary sources due to limited access to contemporary Afghan institutions and decision-makers. While this constraint is mitigated through the use of well-established scholarly work, it nonetheless limits direct insight into internal deliberative processes. Second, the rapidly evolving political context of Afghanistan means that strategic behaviour remains fluid. Findings, therefore, reflect patterns observable through the immediate post-2021 period rather than definitive long-term outcomes. Finally, as with all interpretive research, the analysis involves some subjectivity. This risk is addressed through triangulation of sources, theoretical transparency, and cautious inference.

### 3. Literature Review

The concept of strategic culture emerged as a corrective to the limitations of classical realist explanations of state behaviour. Early strategic studies assumed that states facing similar structural constraints would respond similarly.

However, empirical inconsistencies, particularly during the Cold War, prompted scholars to explore the role of historically embedded beliefs and culturally conditioned practices. Jack Snyder's seminal study of Soviet nuclear strategy introduced strategic culture as a framework for explaining patterned strategic preferences shaped by historical learning and institutionalisation (Snyder, 1977). Subsequent work by Johnston refined the concept by arguing that strategic culture functions as a semi-permanent lens that shapes threat perception and the selection of strategic options rather than determining behaviour mechanically (Johnston, 1995).

Katzenstein further expanded the analytical scope of strategic culture by situating it within broader social and normative structures. He emphasised that national security policies are embedded in domestic cultural and institutional contexts that influence how states interpret international pressures (Katzenstein, 1996). Collectively, these contributions established strategic culture as a legitimate analytical framework capable of explaining continuity in strategic behaviour across changing material conditions.

Within this broader literature, Afghanistan has often been cited as an archetypal case of culturally embedded resistance and decentralised authority. Historical scholarship highlights Afghanistan's repeated encounters with external powers and its persistent resistance to foreign domination. Barfield's historical analysis underscores how cycles of invasion and withdrawal reinforced a collective memory of autonomy and suspicion toward external control, shaping Afghan political and strategic behaviour over centuries (Barfield, 2010). Similarly, Tanner's military history traces Afghanistan's reliance on asymmetric warfare and local mobilisation as enduring strategic responses to technologically superior adversaries (Tanner, 2009).

Tribal organisation occupies a central place in analyses of Afghan political and strategic life. Rubin argues that Afghanistan's fragmented social structure and weak central institutions have historically privileged local authority over state governance, creating a pattern of decentralised power that resists external consolidation efforts

(Rubin, 2002). Giustozzi extends this argument by demonstrating how warlordism, insurgent governance, and later Taliban rule drew legitimacy from local tribal and religious networks rather than formal state institutions (Giustozzi, 2019). These studies collectively suggest that Afghan strategic behaviour cannot be understood without accounting for indigenous norms of authority and legitimacy.

Islam as a mobilising and legitimising force also features prominently in the literature. Scholars note that religious identity in Afghanistan is not merely doctrinal but deeply intertwined with tribal customs and social practices. Maley argues that the Taliban's political project fused religious symbolism with traditional authority structures, allowing them to mobilise support while resisting externally imposed norms of governance (Maley, 2021). This fusion complicates simplistic portrayals of Afghan actors as ideologically rigid and highlights the culturally adaptive nature of Afghan strategic behaviour.

The post-9/11 period generated an extensive body of scholarship focused on counterterrorism, state-building, and insurgency. Much of this literature conceptualised Afghanistan primarily as a fragile or failed state requiring institutional reform, military stabilisation, and external assistance. Works by Rashid and others emphasised governance deficits, corruption, and elite fragmentation as central explanations for instability (Rashid, 2008). While these analyses offer valuable insights, they often treat culture as a background condition rather than a causal factor shaping Afghan responses to intervention.

Critics have increasingly pointed out that post-9/11 state-building efforts underestimated the resilience of indigenous political and cultural structures. Johnson argues that external actors imposed governance models misaligned with Afghan social realities, thereby generating resistance and institutional fragility (Johnson, 2011). Similarly, Barfield contends that attempts to centralise authority contradicted Afghanistan's historical pattern of negotiated local autonomy, leading to structural incompatibility between imported institutions and local norms (Barfield, 2010).

Despite these critiques, strategic culture has rarely been systematically applied to the post-9/11 Afghan context. Existing studies often acknowledge historical memory, tribalism, and religious legitimacy, but stop short of integrating them into a coherent explanatory framework. Strategic culture is often invoked descriptively rather than analytically, leading to fragmented interpretations of Afghan behaviour. Moreover, much of the strategic culture literature on Afghanistan remains anchored in the Soviet Afghan war, with limited extension into the post-2001 period.

This paper addresses this gap by applying strategic culture theory as the primary analytical lens for understanding Afghanistan's post-9/11 trajectory. Rather than treating the Taliban's return as an aberration or solely as a consequence of governance failure, this study situates it within a longer continuum of culturally embedded strategic behaviour. By synthesising insights from strategic culture theory, historical scholarship, and post-intervention analyses, this paper seeks to provide a more integrated explanation of continuity and change in Afghan strategic conduct.

#### 4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded primarily in Strategic Culture Theory, which provides the central analytical lens for examining Afghanistan's strategic behaviour in the post-9/11 era. Strategic culture theory challenges the assumption that state behaviour is driven solely by rational calculations of power and interest. Instead, it emphasises the role of historically constructed beliefs, collective memories, and socially embedded norms that shape how political and military elites perceive threats, define objectives, and select strategic options (Snyder, 1977; Johnston, 1995).

Strategic culture is particularly useful for analysing cases in which strategic behaviour persists despite significant changes in material conditions, political regimes, or external environments. Afghanistan exemplifies such a case. Despite regime change, extensive foreign intervention, and institutional restructuring, Afghan strategic preferences have remained remarkably consistent.

These include resistance to external domination, preference for decentralised authority, reliance on asymmetric warfare, and deep suspicion of neighbouring influence. Strategic culture theory allows these patterns to be analysed not as anomalies but as culturally conditioned strategic responses rooted in historical experience.

#### 4.1. Strategic Culture Theory

Snyder first introduced the concept of strategic culture to explain why Soviet nuclear strategy diverged from Western expectations despite similar structural constraints (Snyder, 1977). Johnston later refined the concept by defining strategic culture as a set of shared assumptions and decision-making predispositions that persist over time and shape the selection of strategic choices (Johnston, 1995). Importantly, Johnston argues that strategic culture does not mechanically determine behaviour but acts as a filter that limits the range of acceptable strategic options.

Known limitations of strategic culture theory include conceptual ambiguity and the risk of cultural determinism. To address this, the present study adopts Johnston's second-generation approach, which treats strategic culture as an intervening variable rather than a deterministic force. This allows for adaptation and variation while preserving the core insight that historical and cultural factors shape strategic preferences over time.

#### 4.2. Core Components of Afghan Strategic Culture

Drawing on existing scholarship and historical analysis, this study conceptualises Afghanistan's strategic culture through four interrelated components.

The first historical memory of resistance constitutes a foundational element. Repeated encounters with foreign powers, including the British, Soviet, and United States interventions, have produced a collective narrative of resistance and survival. These experiences are institutionalised through education, political discourse, and social memory, shaping threat perception and legitimising resistance as a strategic norm (Barfield, 2010; Maley, 2021).

Second, tribal norms and decentralised authority form a critical structural component. Afghan society has historically prioritised local autonomy, kinship-based loyalty, and informal governance mechanisms such as jirgas. These norms shape strategic behaviour by privileging negotiated authority over centralised control and by resisting externally imposed institutional hierarchies (Rubin, 2002; Giustozzi, 2019).

Third institutional path dependence explains why certain governance and security practices persist despite apparent inefficiency. Institutions once established tend to reproduce familiar patterns even under changing conditions. In Afghanistan, this is reflected in the recurring reliance on informal power brokers, religious authority, and parallel governance structures rather than modern bureaucratic institutions (Pierson, 2000).

Fourth, the fusion of Islam with indigenous social structures provides moral legitimacy to strategic action. Religious identity in Afghanistan functions less as an abstract ideology and more as a culturally embedded framework intertwined with tribal norms. This fusion has historically enabled mobilisation against external actors while reinforcing indigenous authority structures (Maley, 2021; Rashid, 2008).

#### 4.3. Complementary Theoretical Perspectives

While strategic culture theory serves as the primary framework, this study draws selectively on realism and constructivism to enhance analytical depth. Realism is employed to contextualise material constraints, power asymmetries, and regional security dynamics, particularly during periods of foreign intervention. However, realism alone cannot explain why Afghan actors consistently rejected institutional arrangements that offered material benefits but conflicted with cultural norms.

Constructivism highlights the roles of identity, discourse, and norm construction. It helps explain how narratives of sovereignty, resistance, and legitimacy are socially produced and sustained over time (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). Nevertheless, constructivism often underplays

institutional continuity and historical learning, which are central to the Afghan case.

By integrating these perspectives without diluting the primacy of strategic culture theory, this study adopts a theoretically plural but analytically disciplined approach.

#### 4.4. Conceptual Model

The conceptual framework of this paper positions strategic culture as the mediating variable between external intervention and strategic outcomes. External pressures, such as military intervention, economic assistance, or institutional reform, are filtered through Afghanistan's strategic culture. This filtering process shapes how policies are interpreted, accepted, resisted, or adapted. As a result, externally driven change often produces unintended consequences when it clashes with deeply embedded cultural norms.

This framework enables the analysis of post-9/11 Afghanistan not as a failure of resources or intent alone, but as a case of cultural misalignment between external strategies and indigenous strategic preferences. It also provides a coherent structure for analysing continuity and change across different political phases, including the Taliban II period.

### 5. Historical Foundations of Afghan Strategic Culture

Afghanistan's strategic culture has been shaped through a long historical trajectory marked by repeated external interventions, internal fragmentation, and negotiated forms of authority. These experiences produced enduring strategic preferences that continue to influence Afghan behaviour in contemporary settings. Rather than emerging suddenly in the post 9 11 period, Afghan resistance patterns decentralised governance and scepticism toward foreign influence reflect deeply embedded historical processes.

#### 5.1. Resistance to External Powers

One of the most persistent elements of Afghan strategic culture is resistance to external domination. Afghanistan's encounters with imperial and great powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a collective

historical memory centred on survival, autonomy, and defiance. The Anglo-Afghan wars established early patterns of asymmetric resistance in which local mobilisation, terrain advantage, and endurance offset technological inferiority. Although Afghan rulers often relied on external subsidies, they simultaneously resisted direct political control, reinforcing a strategic preference for autonomy over dependence (Hopkirk, 1992; Barfield, 2010).

The Soviet intervention from 1979 to 1989 further entrenched this resistance-oriented strategic culture. Afghan responses to Soviet occupation relied heavily on decentralised militias, tribal networks, and religious mobilisation rather than unified state structures. The eventual Soviet withdrawal reinforced the belief that sustained resistance could outlast materially superior adversaries. This experience became institutionalised within Afghan political memory, shaping subsequent perceptions of foreign military presence, including the United States-led intervention after 2001 (Tanner, 2009; Rubin, 2002).

These historical episodes fostered the strategic expectation that external powers lack the political endurance to sustain long-term control. As a result, Afghan actors often prioritised survival and resistance over accommodation, even when cooperation promised short-term material gains.

#### 5.2. Tribal Structure and Political Authority

Tribal organisations have played a central role in shaping Afghan political authority and strategic decision-making. Afghan society historically prioritised kinship-based loyalty and local autonomy over centralised state control. Authority was negotiated rather than imposed, and legitimacy was derived from social acceptance rather than formal institutional design. Governance mechanisms such as jirgas functioned as conflict-resolution forums, reinforcing decentralised political norms (Rubin, 2002).

The dominance of Pashtun tribal structures, particularly among ruling elites, further institutionalised these norms. While different regimes attempted centralisation, success depended on accommodation with tribal leaders

rather than bureaucratic enforcement. Efforts to impose central authority without local consent frequently triggered resistance and instability. This pattern persisted across monarchical, republican, communist, and Islamist regimes, indicating structural continuity rather than regime-specific failure (Giustozzi, 2019).

These tribal norms shaped strategic behaviour by privileging flexibility, informal negotiation, and local autonomy over hierarchical command structures. In security terms, this translated into reliance on militias and informal networks rather than standing national forces. Such preferences would later undermine externally supported state-building efforts that prioritised centralised institutions and standardised military hierarchies.

### 5.3. Islam and Strategic Identity

Islam has functioned as a unifying and legitimising element within Afghan strategic culture, but its role must be understood in relation to indigenous social structures. Historically, religious identity in Afghanistan operated alongside tribal norms rather than replacing them. Islamic legitimacy provided moral justification for resistance while tribal frameworks structured mobilisation and authority.

During the anti-Soviet jihad, religious discourse played a critical role in mobilising resistance and attracting external support. However, local commanders and tribal leaders retained significant autonomy, highlighting the fusion rather than the dominance of religious authority. This pattern persisted during the Taliban era, when Islamic legitimacy was employed to justify governance, but authority remained rooted in local power relations and customary practices (Rashid, 2008; Maley, 2021).

This fusion shaped strategic identity by framing resistance as both a religious duty and a defence of social order. External interventions that challenged this synthesis were often perceived as existential threats rather than negotiable political arrangements. Consequently, attempts to separate religion from governance or to impose secular institutional models encountered sustained resistance.

### 5.4. Institutional Continuity and Strategic Adaptation

Despite regime changes, Afghanistan's strategic culture demonstrated strong institutional continuity. Political and security institutions repeatedly reverted to familiar patterns following periods of disruption. This path dependence explains why modern bureaucratic structures failed to displace informal governance systems even when supported by extensive external resources (Pierson, 2000).

Rather than resisting change entirely, Afghan strategic culture adapted selectively. External resources were utilised while preserving core cultural norms of autonomy, decentralisation, and resistance. This adaptive capacity allowed Afghan actors to navigate foreign intervention without abandoning embedded strategic preferences.

These historical foundations provide essential context for understanding Afghanistan's post-9/11 trajectory. The persistence of resistance to decentralised authority and culturally embedded legitimacy explains why externally imposed institutional models struggled to achieve durability and why strategic behaviour after 2001 reflected continuity rather than transformation.

### 6. Evolution of Strategic Culture After 9/11

The events of September 2001 marked the beginning of the most extensive external intervention in Afghanistan's modern history. The United States-led coalition sought not only to dismantle terrorist networks but also to fundamentally restructure Afghanistan's political institutions, security apparatus, and regional orientation. From a strategic culture perspective, this intervention represented a direct challenge to historically embedded Afghan norms of authority, legitimacy, and autonomy.

#### 6.1. External Intervention and Cultural Dislocation

The post-9/11 intervention was premised on the assumption that sufficient military force, financial assistance, and institutional reform could transform Afghanistan into a centralised democratic state aligned with liberal international norms. However, these efforts were largely

designed and implemented without adequate consideration of Afghanistan's strategic culture. Centralised governance models, formal bureaucratic institutions, and standardised security forces conflicted with long-standing Afghan preferences for decentralised authority, negotiated legitimacy, and informal governance (Barfield, 2010).

For many Afghan actors, the foreign military presence was interpreted through historical memory rather than contemporary security logic. Past experiences with British and Soviet interventions shaped perceptions of the United States as another external power seeking long-term influence. This framing reinforced resistance narratives even among segments of the population that initially welcomed regime change. Over time, foreign presence became associated with cultural intrusion, political dependency, and erosion of sovereignty rather than security provision (Rubin, 2002; Johnson, 2011).

### 6.2. State Building and Institutional Fragility

Post-2001 state-building efforts prioritised the creation of centralised institutions, including a national police force and bureaucratic governance structures. While these institutions rapidly expanded their legitimacy, it remained shallow. Strategic culture theory helps explain why institutional capacity did not translate into institutional resilience. Formal institutions failed to displace informal networks that continued to command loyalty and legitimacy at the local level. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces became heavily dependent on external training funding and logistical support. This dependency undermined perceptions of autonomy and reinforced the belief that the state lacked indigenous foundations. As external support declined, institutional collapse followed rapidly, highlighting the absence of deep cultural integration (Giustozzi, 2019).

Similarly, governance reforms underestimated the role of tribal and religious authority. Attempts to bypass or marginalise traditional power brokers weakened state legitimacy and created parallel systems of authority. Rather than consolidating control, centralisation often produced

fragmentation, reinforcing the very dynamics it sought to overcome (Maley, 2021).

### 6.3. Insurgency and Strategic Adaptation

The Taliban insurgency must be understood not only as a military campaign but as a culturally embedded strategic response. Drawing on historical memory, religious legitimacy, and tribal networks, the Taliban positioned themselves as defenders of Afghan autonomy against foreign occupation. This narrative resonated with culturally embedded perceptions of resistance regardless of disagreement with Taliban ideology. Strategically, the Taliban employed asymmetric warfare consistent with historical Afghan practices. Avoidance of decisive confrontation, reliance on local support, and exploitation of terrain mirrored earlier resistance campaigns. Strategic culture theory explains why these methods persisted despite advances in counterinsurgency doctrine and technology (Tanner, 2009).

Importantly, the insurgency demonstrated adaptive capacity rather than rigid traditionalism. The Taliban selectively incorporated modern communication and financial networks, as well as diplomatic engagement, while preserving core cultural norms. This flexibility allowed them to sustain legitimacy and operational effectiveness over time.

### 6.4. Collapse of the Republic and Cultural Continuity

The rapid collapse of the Afghan republic in 2021 illustrated the limits of externally imposed institutional change. From a strategic culture perspective, the collapse was not sudden but represented the culmination of long-standing cultural dissonance. Institutions that lacked historical grounding and cultural legitimacy proved unable to survive without external support. The Taliban's return to power reflected continuity rather than rupture. Their re-establishment of familiar governance practices, religious authority, and decentralised control aligned more closely with Afghanistan's strategic culture than the preceding state-building project. While materially weaker, the Taliban benefited from cultural

congruence, which translated into a strategic advantage.

This outcome underscores the central argument of this paper. Afghanistan's post-9/11 trajectory cannot be adequately explained by material variables alone. Strategic behaviour was filtered through historical memory, tribal norms, and culturally embedded legitimacy structures. External intervention altered surface institutions but failed to transform underlying strategic preferences.

### 7. Strategic Culture under Taliban II

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 marked the reassertion of a strategic order more closely aligned with Afghanistan's historically embedded strategic culture. While the international discourse often framed Taliban II as a radically altered movement, the core strategic preferences guiding governance, security, and external engagement displayed strong continuity with earlier Afghan patterns. Strategic culture theory provides a coherent framework for understanding this phase not as regression but as cultural realignment following two decades of external disruption.

#### 7.1. Governance Behaviour

Taliban governance since 2021 reflects a preference for centralised religious authority combined with decentralised local control. Ultimate decision-making authority rests with the Amir and a narrow clerical elite, while implementation is delegated to local commanders and religious figures. This structure mirrors historical Afghan governance models, in which legitimacy flows from moral authority rather than bureaucratic rationality (Barfield, 2010).

The rejection of constitutionalism, electoral politics, and formal accountability mechanisms is often interpreted as ideological rigidity. However, from a strategic culture perspective, these choices reflect distrust of externally derived governance models associated with foreign intervention. Taliban governance emphasises moral order, social discipline, and symbolic sovereignty over administrative efficiency. Such priorities resonate

with indigenous norms even as they generate international isolation (Maley, 2021).

Institutional continuity is also evident in the revival of informal dispute resolution mechanisms. Jirgas and religious courts function alongside limited administrative structures, reinforcing decentralised authority and local autonomy. This approach aligns with long-standing Afghan preferences for negotiated order over codified law (Rubin, 2002).

#### 7.2. Security Behaviour

Taliban security behaviour demonstrates continuity with Afghanistan's historical strategic preferences. The movement prioritises internal control, border autonomy, and regime survival over external military projection. Security strategy relies on asymmetric deterrence, local intelligence networks, and selective coercion rather than formal military doctrine.

Strategic culture theory explains the Taliban's reluctance to integrate into regional security architectures fully. Cooperation is transactional and issue-specific, reflecting deep scepticism toward binding commitments. Counterterrorism assurances provided to external actors are framed in terms of sovereignty preservation rather than in terms of alliance obligations. This posture mirrors earlier Afghan resistance to external security guarantees perceived as constraints on autonomy (Johnson, 2011).

The persistence of internal armed actors, including Islamic State Khorasan Province, further reinforces Taliban reliance on coercive control rather than inclusive security reform. While this approach limits stability, it remains culturally consistent with historical patterns of authority maintenance through force and negotiation rather than institutional integration.

#### 7.3. External Relations and Diplomacy

Taliban II diplomacy reflects a sovereignty-centric strategic orientation. Engagement with external actors is selective, pragmatic, and aimed at regime survival rather than ideological alignment. Relations with China, Russia, Iran, and regional states are pursued cautiously without formal alliance commitments. This reflects a strategic

preference for balancing external relationships while avoiding dependency.

International non recognition has reinforced rather than weakened this approach—historical memory of foreign intervention conditions Taliban perceptions of legitimacy as internally derived rather than externally granted. Diplomatic engagement is therefore instrumental, focusing on economic access, humanitarian relief, and sanctions mitigation rather than normative compliance (Giustozzi, 2019).

From a strategic culture perspective, this diplomacy represents adaptation rather than transformation. The Taliban incorporate limited pragmatism while preserving core norms of autonomy, resistance, and cultural sovereignty. This balance explains both their resilience and their constrained international integration.

#### 7.4. Strategic Culture and Continuity

Taliban II governance and security behaviour underscore the enduring influence of Afghanistan's strategic culture. Despite significant changes in global and regional environments, the core filters shaping Afghan strategic choices remain intact. External pressure has altered tactics but not underlying preferences.

This continuity challenges assumptions that regime change or prolonged intervention can rapidly reshape strategic behaviour. Instead, it highlights the resilience of culturally embedded strategic norms and their capacity to outlast external influence.

#### 8. Implications for Regional Security

Afghanistan's enduring strategic culture carries significant implications for regional security, particularly for neighbouring states that have repeatedly sought stability through external influence, institutional engineering, or coercive pressure. Strategic culture theory suggests that such approaches are structurally limited when they conflict with deeply embedded norms of autonomy, resistance, and decentralised authority. The post-2021 regional environment reflects these constraints with renewed uncertainty in security cooperation, border management, and counterterrorism efforts.

#### Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations

The enduring bond between Afghanistan and Pakistan is deeply rooted in shared history, faith, and cultural kinship. Pakistan has consistently demonstrated a commitment to a stable, peaceful, and sovereign Afghanistan, recognising that the prosperity of one nation is inextricably linked to that of the other. A spirit of Islamic brotherhood and neighbourly solidarity drives Pakistan's constructive and principled engagement.

The management of the shared border reflects Pakistan's legitimate and necessary measures to ensure regional security, combat terrorism, and promote regulated trade for the benefit of both peoples. These actions are grounded in mutual respect and the objective of fostering a secure environment conducive to economic progress.

Pakistan remains a steadfast partner, having hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades—a profound testament to its humanitarian spirit. Pakistan continues to advocate for enhanced bilateral dialogue and practical cooperation, viewing a collaborative future as essential for unlocking the tremendous potential of regional connectivity and shared development. The deep social and cultural ties, particularly among Pashtun communities, are viewed as a foundation for stronger people-to-people bonds and economic integration, paving the way for a future of shared peace and prosperity.

Afghanistan's strategic culture, however, has historical memories of perceived interference and contested sovereignty. The Durand Line, merely a territorial arrangement, is being wrongly linked to historical resistance narratives. Strategic culture theory explains why successive Afghan regimes, including the Taliban, have resisted formal recognition of the border despite material incentives for cooperation (Rubin, 2002; Barfield, 2010).

Pakistan's security efforts, including border fencing and counterterrorism operations, are interpreted in Kabul through a cultural lens of encirclement and domination rather than defensive necessity. This limits durable cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan despite the existence of enormous opportunities.

### 8.1. Limits of Conventional Security Instruments

The Afghan case highlights the limits of conventional security instruments when applied without cultural calibration. Military pressure, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation have produced mixed outcomes. While such measures constrain material capacity, they do not necessarily alter strategic preferences. Instead, they often reinforce resistance narratives and harden culturally embedded positions (Johnson, 2011).

Regional counterterrorism cooperation illustrates this dilemma. Taliban assurances to restrict militant activity are framed in sovereignty-preserving terms rather than alliance-based commitments. External demands for enforcement clash with Afghan norms of autonomy and negotiated authority. Strategic culture theory explains why compliance remains selective and contingent rather than institutionalised.

### 8.2. Regional Stability and Strategic Misalignment

Persistent misalignment between regional security strategies and Afghanistan's strategic culture generates recurring instability. Efforts to integrate Afghanistan into formal regional architectures often underestimate the resilience of informal governance and culturally embedded legitimacy structures. As a result, regional initiatives struggle to achieve depth and sustainability.

At the same time, Afghanistan's strategic culture does not preclude engagement. Historical precedent demonstrates selective cooperation when autonomy is respected and external presence is limited. Regional actors that calibrate engagement to cultural realities may achieve incremental stability even in the absence of formal alignment.

### 8.3. Policy Implications

The findings of this study suggest that regional security strategies must move beyond coercive or purely institutional approaches. Engagement with Afghanistan requires recognition of culturally embedded strategic preferences and the limits they impose on external influence. Policies that emphasise negotiated cooperation, local

autonomy, and incremental trust building are more likely to align with Afghan strategic culture than comprehensive reform agendas.

Understanding strategic culture does not guarantee policy success, but it reduces the risk of repeating past failures rooted in the misinterpretation of Afghan behaviour. For regional actors, particularly Pakistan, strategic patience, cultural literacy, and calibrated engagement emerge as critical components of sustainable security policy.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine Afghanistan's post-9/11 strategic behaviour through the lens of strategic culture theory. It argued that the political collapse of the Afghan republic and the return of the Taliban in 2021 cannot be adequately explained through material variables, governance failure, or military withdrawal alone. Instead, these outcomes reflect the enduring influence of a historically embedded strategic culture shaped by collective memory of resistance, tribal norms of authority, and culturally grounded legitimacy structures.

By tracing Afghanistan's strategic behaviour across historical periods, this study demonstrated that post-9/11 developments represented continuity rather than rupture. External intervention altered surface institutions but failed to transform the deeper cultural filters through which Afghan actors interpret power, authority, and security. Strategic culture theory helps explain why externally imposed governance and security models lacked durability despite unprecedented resources and international support (Johnston, 1995; Barfield, 2010).

The analysis further showed that the Taliban's resurgence was not merely an outcome of insurgent success but a culturally congruent realignment following two decades of institutional dissonance. Taliban II governance, security behaviour, and external engagement patterns closely mirror long-standing Afghan strategic preferences, including sovereignty-centric decision-making, decentralised authority, and selective engagement with external actors (Giustozzi, 2019; Maley, 2021). These patterns

underscore the resilience of strategic culture even under conditions of prolonged external pressure. The study contributes to the strategic culture literature in two important ways. First, it extends the application of strategic culture theory beyond Cold War and pre-intervention contexts, demonstrating its relevance in explaining contemporary conflict dynamics. Second, it addresses a gap in Afghanistan-focused scholarship by systematically integrating post-9/11 developments into a culturally grounded analytical framework rather than treating them as exceptional or anomalous.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the limitations of security strategies that ignore culturally embedded strategic preferences. Military coercion, institutional engineering, and diplomatic isolation, when misaligned with indigenous norms, are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes. While strategic culture does not determine behaviour mechanically, it constrains the range of viable policy options and shapes how external initiatives are interpreted and resisted.

Understanding Afghanistan's strategic culture does not offer simple solutions to regional instability. It does, however, provide a more realistic foundation for engagement by clarifying why past approaches failed and why future strategies must prioritise cultural awareness, strategic patience, and calibrated interaction. Without such understanding, regional and international actors risk repeating cycles of intervention, resistance, and withdrawal that have defined Afghanistan's modern history.

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