

# The Research of the Foreign Relations of the Afghanistan Taliban during the First Administration

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## Abstract

This paper examines the foreign relations and international impact of the Taliban during their first period of rule from 1996 to 2001, focusing on interactions with global and regional powers amid the backdrop of the Afghan Civil War. The Taliban's rise to power reshaped Afghanistan's political landscape and posed challenges to the international order through its strict Islamic governance and strategic alliances. Despite limited international recognition, the Taliban engaged in diplomatic and military relations with key actors, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Russia, and neighboring Islamic states. These interactions were shaped by a complex mix of ideological alignment, security concerns, and economic interests. By analyzing the Taliban's foreign policy during this period, the study provides insights into their approach to governance and international relations, offering a framework to understand the potential foreign policy strategies of the newly re-established Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The study highlights the Taliban's influence on regional stability and the global response to Islamic extremism, drawing lessons from history to assess the future implications for the international order.

## Keywords

Afghan Civil War, Taliban, Islamic States, Global Powers, Regional Powers, International Order

## 1. Introduction

The rapid collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban's resurgence to power in 2021 marks a critical moment in the history of the region. This

event has triggered widespread global concern, raising questions about Afghanistan's future trajectory and its role in international politics. The Taliban, known for their strict interpretation of Sharia law and complex interactions with the international community during their first rule from 1996 to 2001, now face a remarkably similar situation. The challenges they must confront—internal ethnic tensions, regional instability, and strained relations with global powers—mirror those of two decades ago.

The Taliban's first reign, despite its brief duration, offers a compelling case study in international relations, particularly within the frameworks of ideological state behavior and strategic pragmatism. During this period, the regime's foreign policy was shaped by both ideological commitments and pragmatic needs, which aligns with Walt's "Balance of Threat" theory that explains how states align based on perceived ideological and security threats rather than pure power balancing. Although the Taliban failed to gain broad recognition from the international community, they engaged strategically with neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as well as major powers like the United States and Russia, driven by security interests, economic incentives, and ideological alignment. This engagement reflects elements of constructivist theory, which emphasizes how shared ideologies and identities shape foreign policy behavior. Islamic fundamentalism as a foreign policy driver also contextualizes the Taliban's approach, similar to that of other ideologically motivated regimes, as discussed in Kepel's *Jihad*. The Taliban's interactions with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, for instance, reveal strategic dependencies rooted in ideological solidarity and regional security imperatives (Rubin, 2002). Such calculations resonate with Schroeder's analysis of historical alliances, where shared religious and ideological goals complement realpolitik aims to establish a state's regional legitimacy. These frameworks offer insight into how the Taliban navigated a complex political landscape while remaining constrained by both ideological rigidity and the pragmatic need for alliances.

Understanding the foreign policies of the Taliban's initial rule is crucial to anticipating the decisions the current regime might make. The first Taliban regime had a profound impact on both regional dynamics and the global order, particularly through its association with terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. This history of complex relations with international actors, alongside their radical domestic policies, resulted in a combination of diplomatic isolation and selective engagement, which reshaped Afghanistan's geopolitical position. By analyzing the foreign relations and policy choices of the Taliban during their first period of rule, this study seeks to draw insights into how the Taliban's past might inform their future actions on the global stage.

This paper will delve into the intricate foreign relations of the Taliban between 1996 and 2001, exploring their interactions with world powers, neighboring countries, and regional actors. By examining the patterns of their foreign policies, it becomes possible to assess the potential avenues and limitations of the current

Taliban regime's foreign relations. As Afghanistan once again stands at the crossroads of geopolitical interest, the legacy of the Taliban's first rule offers a critical framework for understanding the challenges that lie ahead.

## **2. The Rise of the Taliban and Its First Rule**

### **2.1. The Rise of the Taliban and the Path to Unification**

The term "Taliban" means "Islamic religious students" in Pashto. These students, often young men from poor, rural backgrounds, formed the core members of the Taliban organization (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: p. 299). Initially, Taliban members, as part of the "Mujahideen" (Afghan jihadists), fought alongside other anti-Soviet warlord groups to resist the Soviet invasion. During this period, the distinctiveness of the Taliban members began to emerge: the ideology they studied in school required them to transcend local tribal and religious boundaries, focusing on the goal of establishing a unified Afghanistan (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: p. 299). After the Mujahideen decisively defeated the Najibullah regime, their actions deeply disappointed the Taliban, as they continued to engage in civil war. The Afghan people, who had driven out the Soviet forces, did not experience peace, and gradually became disillusioned with the new government established by the Mujahideen. The Taliban capitalized on this growing discontent, and their leader, Mullah Omar, chose to break away from the Mujahideen and pursue the path of seizing power through military force.

After officially entering the Afghan civil war as an armed force, the Taliban quickly pacified the southern regions of Afghanistan, and then launched a nationwide "jihad," achieving significant success. Within three months, they occupied 12 provinces in the south, providing the Pashtuns in the region with a unified government. In January 1995, they captured the Ghazni region and then advanced into the eastern mountains. By February of that year, they had already seized Charasyab and expelled Hekmatyar's Islamic Party. Although this initially pleased the Rabbani government and its supporters, the Taliban soon turned their attention to them. Over the following six months, Massoud's and Ismail Khan's forces engaged in several large-scale battles with the Taliban near the outskirts of Kabul. With substantial military support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Taliban gradually wore down the Rabbani government, which lacked strong external support. Ultimately, the Rabbani regime was unable to resist. In September 1996, they abandoned Kabul, and the Taliban seized the capital, achieving near-complete control of Afghanistan and commencing their first rule. It must be acknowledged that the Taliban achieved the first nominal unification of Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion.

### **2.2. The Taliban's Governance Ideology**

The Taliban's first period of rule began in 1996. In March of that year, the Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, convened a meeting in Kandahar. This meeting gathered 1200 Taliban clerical leaders, and during the conference, Mullah Omar offi-

cially established the early Islamic Caliphate system for the Taliban regime—a system with strong feudal characteristics. At the same time, the modern Grand National Assembly system, which had gradually formed in Afghanistan, was officially abolished. This indicated the Taliban’s attempt to consolidate local power in Afghanistan, concentrating authority within the Taliban organization. As a regime primarily based on the southern Pashtun ethnic group, the Taliban naturally carried elements of Pashtun nationalism. Thus, the Taliban’s governance ideology at this time was a combination of fundamentalism and extreme nationalism.

Firstly, to ensure the smooth implementation of religious rule, the Taliban employed a two-pronged approach, addressing both legal and social order aspects. Upon assuming power, the Taliban established Pashtun traditional Islamic law as the sole legal system in Afghanistan. This law, based on fundamentalist principles of “restraint,” banned all forms of entertainment, including music, films, and photography, and prohibited the celebration of any non-Islamic holidays (including Afghanistan’s Independence Day) (Ansary, 2014). Additionally, the Taliban enacted extremely oppressive penalties for women, barring them from all schools, workplaces, and government institutions, and mandating that women wear the “chadri” (a black robe covering the entire body). Furthermore, women were required to be accompanied by a male relative when going out, and strict gender segregation was enforced in social interactions (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: p. 241). The legal system also reinstated a series of harsh punishments rooted in Islamic traditions, such as amputation and stoning. (Ansary, 2014: pp. 191-194) Moreover, the Taliban established a unique department known as the “Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Vice,” a paramilitary organization comprised of Taliban followers that could impose corporal punishment on individuals violating Sharia law. While this measure significantly reduced crime rates, it also plunged society into an atmosphere of terror akin to the Inquisition (Rubin, 1999).

Secondly, the Taliban pursued “Greater Pashtun Nationalism” through a combination of centralization of government structures and brutal ethnic cleansing at the local level. The Taliban’s method of constructing the government was characterized by singularity and centralization. In addition to enforcing traditional Pashtun Islamic law, the Taliban established central and local consultative councils, with the majority of high-ranking officials being fervent Pashtun Taliban loyalists. This allowed Mullah Omar to maintain direct control over various councils. Under the guise of reform and anti-corruption efforts, the Taliban carried out sweeping “reforms” in administrative and municipal institutions, which mainly involved dismissing a large number of minority officials and women (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: p. 240). Furthermore, the Taliban engaged in brutal ethnic cleansing, primarily targeting northern Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek populations, plunging these ethnic groups into one of the darkest periods in their history, with the Hazara people, lacking strong local governance, suffering the most severe persecution (Rubin, 1999).

The rise of the Taliban and its path to power in Afghanistan reflects a combi-

nation of ideological rigor and military strategy that capitalized on widespread public disillusionment with the post-Soviet government. Initially formed from young religious students, the Taliban emerged as a powerful force during the Afghan civil war, eventually consolidating control over Afghanistan by 1996 with support from regional allies like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Under Mullah Omar's leadership, the Taliban established a governance structure based on Islamic fundamentalism and Pashtun nationalism. Their rule prioritized strict adherence to Sharia law, implementing oppressive social controls and traditional legal practices that marginalized minority groups, women, and non-Islamic cultural expressions. This uncompromising governance ideology created an atmosphere of centralized authority but also sowed discord among ethnic minorities, contributing to the regime's eventual instability.

### 3. Taliban's Foreign Relations

#### 3.1. Relations with Major World Powers

##### 3.1.1. Relations with the United States

For the United States, its relationship with the Taliban evolved alongside shifts in U.S. policy in the Middle East. During the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, Afghanistan became a focal point of superpower rivalry, where both the U.S. and Soviet Union sought to expand influence through political, economic, military, and humanitarian aid (Coll, 2004). After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S., applying containment theory, supported the Mujahideen with significant military aid to counter Soviet expansion (Rubin, 2002). However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, U.S. focus shifted toward new regional adversaries, notably Iran and Russia. The U.S. recalibrated its strategy as Iran and Russia increased their influence in Afghanistan, leading to a tentative and pragmatic interest in the emerging Taliban (Dreyfuss, 2005). This strategic pivot reflects aspects of "offshore balancing," where the U.S. sought to prevent domination by a single regional power without directly intervening (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016).

Although the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan, only a few countries recognized its regime. Among those that did were Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two steadfast U.S. allies during the Cold War. This led the Clinton administration to believe that the extreme Taliban regime might serve as a bulwark against Iran and potentially reduce or eliminate Afghanistan's cultivation and export of narcotics. In 1996, U.S. Middle East policy official Zalmay Khalilzad stated that the Taliban, unlike Iran, did not promote anti-American fundamentalism. He suggested that the U.S. should acknowledge the Taliban, offer humanitarian aid, and help rebuild their economy (Zalmay, 1996). This shows that to counterbalance Iran, the U.S. government initially considered integrating the Taliban into its strategic orbit, making Afghanistan a pawn in its efforts to contain Iran.

At the same time, Afghanistan's economic prospects attracted significant interest from U.S. businesses. Shortly after the Taliban took control of southern Afghanistan, California-based Unocal began considering constructing an oil pipe-

line through southern Afghanistan to efficiently export oil and gas from Turkmenistan. As a result, this U.S.-Saudi joint venture began engaging with the Taliban. In July 1997, Unocal, the Pakistani government, and the Turkmenistan government signed an agreement for a \$2 billion investment to build an oil pipeline through southern Afghanistan, connecting Daulatabad with Sui. In October of that year, Taliban representatives visited Ashgabat and then the U.S., where Unocal facilitated meetings between the Taliban and the U.S. government (Crist, 1997; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). If the Taliban had not aligned with Al-Qaeda, this “business-driven” approach might have led to U.S. recognition of the Taliban regime.

However, after Taliban leader Mullah Omar forged an alliance with Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda solidified. The existence of terrorist training camps established by Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan became an open secret. The Taliban’s sheltering of an organization that had carried out multiple terrorist attacks against the U.S. government and military caused U.S.-Taliban relations to deteriorate rapidly. In August 1998, U.S. cruise missiles struck several Al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan. At the same time, Unocal withdrew all its employees. By December, under growing domestic pressure, Unocal abandoned the project. Thus, all ties between the U.S. and the Taliban were severed. The 9/11 attacks further enraged the U.S. government, leading to full support for the anti-Taliban “Northern Alliance.” In November of that year, the U.S. Army’s Special Forces 595th team, part of the Green Berets, arrived in Bagh-e Badakhshan to support the Northern Alliance. The arrival of U.S. forces marked the beginning of the “War on Terror,” and the Taliban regime was officially designated a terrorist organization to be eradicated by the U.S.

### **3.1.2. Relations with Russia**

Russia and Afghanistan share a long and complex history, but for the Afghan people, this relationship has left a largely negative legacy. Afghanistan has frequently served as a “chessboard” for competing major powers, starting with the “Great Game” between the Russian and British Empires, where both interfered with Afghanistan’s territorial sovereignty to control Central Asia (Hopkirk, 1992). This imperial competition created a foundation for later foreign influence and conflict within Afghanistan. In 1979, the Soviet Union, under Brezhnev, intervened militarily in Afghanistan, leading to a prolonged and costly conflict between the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the U.S.-supported Mujahideen forces (Arnold, 1983). The manpower, resources, and economic strain of the Afghan war have since been seen as pivotal in weakening the Soviet Union and contributing to its collapse, illustrating the enduring impact of Afghanistan as a strategic yet challenging location for major powers (Rubin, 2002).

With this history of failure in Afghanistan in mind, post-Soviet Russia adopted a cautious approach to the Afghan issue. However, Russia’s policies were also driven by its own national security interests. As the Taliban rapidly gained ground, Russia’s Foreign Ministry declared, “Russia is surprised to see the dangers this

conflict poses to the state and the instability it causes in the region.” (Brattvoll, 2016) Moscow believed that Pakistan’s support for the Taliban was intended to pressure Russia and disrupt its partnership with India, preventing India from acquiring advanced Russian military equipment. Additionally, Russia’s hostility toward the Taliban regime was partly a reflection of its domestic concerns. Since the formation of the Russian Federation, Moscow has faced threats from “Islamic extremist separatism,” particularly in Chechnya. As a result, when the Taliban, another extremist Islamic group, came to power, Russia adopted a wary stance to prevent Taliban expansion northward. Russia’s policy toward the Taliban was to refrain from recognizing the regime while strengthening defense ties with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, all while maintaining dialogue and contact with the Taliban (Brattvoll, 2016).

To this end, Russia not only enhanced security cooperation with former Soviet republics such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan but also provided advanced weapons and combat training to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, thereby preserving its influence and deterrence in Afghanistan. At the same time, Russia did not entirely close off diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. Before 9/11, Russian officials had multiple meetings with the Taliban, hoping to broker internal reconciliation in Afghanistan. For instance, after a Russian passenger plane was forced to land in Kandahar by the Taliban, Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Kaboulov met with Mullah Omar and other top Taliban leaders to negotiate the release of the Russian crew (Brattvoll, 2016). Finally, Russia did not abandon efforts to resolve the Afghan issue through international cooperation. In 1999, Russia joined the “6 + 2” group, which included Afghanistan’s six neighboring countries as well as the U.S. and Russia, aiming to peacefully resolve the Afghan civil war (Brattvoll, 2016; Ruttig, 2014). Thus, during this historical period, Russia’s approach to Afghanistan was cautious, aiming to avoid military action wherever possible.

## 3.2. Relations with Islamic Countries

### 3.2.1. Relations with Iran

Since 1979, Iran’s relationship with Afghanistan has fluctuated along with changes in Afghanistan’s domestic situation. This is a key component of Iran’s “dual-track diplomacy,” which prioritizes national security. Under this diplomatic policy, Iran has consistently supported local armed groups in its unstable neighboring regions under the banner of the “Islamic movement,” creating spheres of influence, buffer zones, and formal or informal underground organizations. This has allowed Iran to extend its influence beyond its borders, effectively building an “invisible defense wall.” As part of this strategy, Iran has long pursued a covert policy of dividing Afghanistan into its own “spheres of influence.” (Hunter, 2003; Milani, 2006) For example, after the Soviet withdrawal, Tehran increased its support for Shia political factions within the Afghan Mujahideen government and northern minority warlords (including the Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara ethnic groups). This support included well-known warlords such as General Dostum of the Uzbek faction and Ismail Khan, a regional warlord from Herat province.

Tehran initially believed that this arrangement would ensure its territorial security. However, the rapid rise of the Taliban took Iran by surprise, as the local forces Iran had supported were easily defeated by the Taliban. After the Taliban achieved near-complete control of the country, they did not forget Iran's support for its adversaries and adopted a hostile policy towards Tehran. The Taliban's stance was backed by their allies, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, who portrayed Afghanistan as a stronghold against Iran, gaining support from the United States, which also began unofficial contacts with the Taliban regime. Subsequently, the Taliban regime escalated its hostility towards Iran by closing the Iranian embassy in Kabul and accusing Tehran of openly interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs by supporting the Northern Alliance, pushing the two countries to the brink of war. Moreover, after capturing Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of the Northern Alliance, the inexperienced Taliban regime abducted and brutally killed eight Iranian diplomats and one journalist. Taliban forces also ransacked the Iranian Cultural Center in Mazar-i-Sharif, set fire to its library, and intensified ethnic cleansing against the Hazara tribes, who practiced Shia Islam, the same faith as Tehran's regime (Treyster, 2001). This series of actions left no room for reconciliation between Iran and the Taliban regime.

In response to the Taliban's hostile policies, Iran's reaction was remarkably restrained. Iran's strategy during the Taliban's rule comprised three key elements:

1) Refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban government: Iran consistently stated that the Afghan crisis could not be resolved through military means, calling for necessary consultations and negotiations to form an inclusive, multi-ethnic government to achieve national reconciliation.

2) Providing extensive support to the Northern Alliance: Iran supplied not only direct technical and military aid but also sent advisory teams to train Northern Alliance personnel, significantly improving the quality of their fighters. Iran's support proved highly effective, and up until 2002, it was the primary source of military aid and training for the Northern Alliance. Later, the Afghan Karzai government acknowledged that "without Iran, the Northern Alliance would have struggled to survive until the moment the U.S. launched its War on Terror." (Johnson, 2004)

3) Avoiding direct military conflict with the Taliban regime: Despite the murder of its diplomats, Iran displayed exceptional restraint, opting to deter the Taliban by amassing troops along the border rather than engaging in open warfare (Milani, 2006).

### **3.2.2. Relationship with Pakistan**

From both foreign academia and Pakistan's own perspective, the rise and eventual takeover of the Taliban were largely facilitated by Pakistan's support. This assistance was driven by national security concerns, particularly Islamabad's need to prevent encirclement by hostile fronts and to address the sensitive "Pashtunistan" issue (Rashid, 2000). Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan had been a key supporter of the Mujahideen, and, when the Taliban emerged, Islamabad



increasingly shifted resources to them, viewing the group as a stabilizing force with the potential to establish a pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan (Weinbaum, 1991). However, despite being one of only three UN members to recognize the Taliban in the late 1990s, Pakistan harbored doubts about the Taliban's stance on "Greater Pashtunistan," as the Taliban's influence could potentially reignite Pashtun separatist sentiments in Pakistan's own border regions (Grare, 2006). India capitalized on this tension, utilizing Pakistan's concerns over Pashtun nationalism to counterbalance Taliban influence and strengthen its own strategic position in Afghanistan, thus countering Pakistan's regional objectives (Fair, 2009). This triangular dynamic between Pakistan, the Taliban, and India underscores the complex interplay of security, ethnic identity, and geopolitical rivalry in South Asia.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban operated on two levels: government and religious. On the governmental side, Pakistan aimed to open a trade corridor to Central Asia, boosting its economic interests. The key figure here was Pashtun leader Naseerullah Babar. Islamabad hoped that railroads and highways could connect the western regions under Taliban control, making good relations with the Taliban crucial. As a result, Pakistan established the "Afghanistan Trade Development Group," which provided infrastructure and transportation assistance to Taliban-controlled areas. At the same time, Pakistan actively lobbied the U.S. to recognize the Taliban regime.

On the religious side, Pakistan's "Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam" (JUI) played a pivotal role by setting up Taliban schools in Pakistan's northern borders, continuously recruiting followers and fighters for the Taliban. By 1993, JUI had entered the Pakistani government, and its leader, Maulana Fazlur Rahman, became chairman of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee. Under his leadership, Pakistan secured significant funding from Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries to support the Taliban, allowing the regime to escape financial crises (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007: p. 299).

However, the outcome did not meet Islamabad's expectations. The rise of the Taliban did not resolve the Pashtunistan issue, and the regime's extremist policies faced widespread condemnation and resistance globally (Zhou, 2016). Pakistan found itself in a precarious position, compounded by internal challenges like the nuclear tests and Musharraf's military coup, which led to Western sanctions.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Pakistan was forced to re-evaluate its foreign policy. The 9/11 attacks provided Pakistan with an opportunity, as Musharraf decided to support the global "war on terror," severing ties with the Taliban and mending relations with the U.S., helping Pakistan escape its diplomatic isolation. By 2002, despite opposition from domestic religious groups and local militias, Musharraf sent federal forces to the northern borders to conduct military operations against the Taliban, earning economic aid from the U.S. (Nadiri, 2014: p. 140). Nevertheless, with the Northern Alliance taking control of Kabul, Pakistan's approach left room for flexibility. It prioritized combating Al-Qaeda rather than the Afghan Taliban and

sought to engage the Taliban's moderate factions while isolating extremists and Al-Qaeda members, aiming for a reconciliation between the Afghan Taliban and Western countries. While this approach aligned with Pakistan's national interests, it also sparked internal conflicts (Rashid, 2013).

### **3.2.3. Relations with Saudi Arabia**

Like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia showed significant interest in the Taliban from its inception. This was closely linked to Saudi Arabia's post-Cold War foreign policy, which centered on promoting Islam, safeguarding national and royal family security, and maintaining domestic stability. To expand its influence, Saudi Arabia aimed to become the leader of the Islamic world, influenced by pan-Islamism. Saudi Arabia pursued several initiatives, including establishing the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Muslim World League, which solidified its position as the leader of the Islamic world in the 1970s. To continue consolidating its leadership, Saudi Arabia naturally supported the Sunni factions and religious schools within the Afghan Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion. The Taliban emerged from a Sunni religious school on the Pakistan border funded by Saudi Arabia. After the Soviet withdrawal, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorated, leading Riyadh to take a series of actions to weaken Iran, including forming an anti-Iran alliance with the U.S. and supporting the Taliban (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007).

In this context, Saudi Arabia, alongside its traditional ally Pakistan, provided substantial support to the Taliban. First, Saudi Arabia supplied the Taliban with significant financial aid and military equipment, strengthening their forces and helping them overcome a financial crisis after achieving national unification. Second, as a close ally of the U.S., Saudi Arabia lobbied Washington to engage with the Taliban, portraying them as a "fortress against Iran." The U.S., keen to counter Iran and combat drug trafficking, naturally accepted Saudi Arabia's proposal. Lastly, to further secure U.S. trust in the Taliban, Saudi Arabia, along with Unocal, invested in infrastructure and oil pipelines in Taliban-controlled southern Afghanistan (Crist, 1997; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007).

Initially, Saudi Arabia's expectation was that a unified Afghanistan could act as a counterbalance to Iran. If Afghanistan became a Saudi sphere of influence, it would naturally facilitate Saudi investments in Central Asia, benefiting its economy. However, the Taliban's rise to power as an extremist religious force derailed these plans. The Taliban rejected peace talks and international appeals, declaring their intention to continue promoting "jihad" globally. Moreover, they harbored Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind several terrorist attacks on U.S. targets, both domestic and abroad. In 1998, to preserve its alliance with the U.S., Saudi Arabia ceased financial support to the Taliban. In retaliation, the Taliban expelled the Saudi ambassador and closed its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan, effectively severing official ties. After the 9/11 attacks, Saudi Arabia, though somewhat ambiguous in its stance, ultimately cooperated with the U.S. in combating terrorism.

### 3.3. Relations with Central Asian Countries (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan)

#### 3.3.1. Tajikistan

Despite being an Islamic country, the relationship between Tajikistan and the Afghan Taliban has been notably hostile, driven by ethnic and strategic factors. Tajikistan, with a predominantly Tajik ethnic identity, shares strong cultural and ethnic ties with the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, who resisted the Taliban's Pashtun-dominated rule. Since gaining independence, Tajikistan has consistently supported the Northern Alliance, initially sympathizing with the Rabbani regime and later extending critical logistical support to Massoud's forces, including the provision of safe havens and supply lines across its border (Rashid, 2000). During the Taliban's rule, Tajikistan faced its own domestic challenges with Islamic radical forces that received support from the Taliban, similar to Russia's conflict with Chechen separatists. In response, Tajikistan strengthened its defense cooperation with Russia, with both nations committed to stabilizing the region by enhancing military aid and securing the Tajik-Afghan border against Taliban influence (Jonson, 2006). As early as 1992, Russia and Tajikistan signed a "Mutual Defense Treaty." In response to the rise of the Taliban, the two countries expanded the scope of the treaty, committing to taking all necessary measures to protect Tajikistan's border regions (Yue, 1996; Yang, 2001).

In addition to reinforcing border defense, Tajikistan, along with Russia, increased military aid to the Northern Alliance, particularly to Massoud's faction—a practice that had already begun under the Rabbani regime. Tajikistan also allowed Russian forces to build a bridge over the Amu Darya River on its border and granted Massoud's forces access to the Kulyab military airbase within Tajik territory. These actions improved the logistical supply routes for Russia and Tajikistan, ensuring a steady flow of military supplies to the Northern Alliance-controlled regions, which enhanced their capacity to combat the Taliban (Shen, 1996).

#### 3.3.2. Uzbekistan

Similar to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan also has a significant Uzbek population in northern Afghanistan and faces threats from Islamic radicalism. As a result, Uzbekistan sought alliances with Russia and Tajikistan to counter the Taliban's influence. During the 1996 Almaty Conference, Uzbekistan and three other Central Asian countries, along with Russia, reached a consensus stating: "The victory of the Taliban poses a severe threat to national security, directly undermines national interests, and endangers regional and international stability. We declare that any actions detrimental to the stability of Afghanistan's borders are unacceptable. Whoever undertakes such actions will be considered a threat to our common interests and will receive an appropriate response." (Wang, 1996) Subsequently, Uzbek President Karimov expressed his demand for stability in Afghanistan, opposing the Taliban's establishment of a central government (Hu, 1997; Wang, 1996).

After multiple key meetings on Afghan and Central Asian security in 1997 and 1998, the Russia-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan trilateral alliance was officially formed,

with the mission of curbing the expansion of Islamic extremism in Central Asia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including the Taliban (Xu, 1998).

During this time, Uzbekistan's military support for its ethnically, warlord Dostum, remained unabated. Uzbekistan openly provided Dostum's forces with tanks, aircraft, and technical personnel, similar to Iran's efforts to establish a "strategic buffer zone." General Dostum, a skilled military commander with advanced technical weaponry, did not disappoint Uzbekistan. He successfully controlled six provinces along the Uzbek-Afghan border, creating a "strategic buffer zone" for Uzbekistan.

### 3.4. Relations with Regional Powers—India

Due to its geographical location and strategic objectives, Afghanistan has always been a focal point of India's foreign policy. Since 1947, India has maintained friendly relations with successive Afghan governments, further solidified by the signing of the India-Afghanistan Friendship Treaty in 1950. India launched several cooperative industrial, agricultural, and hydropower projects in Afghanistan, increasing its investment in the region and bolstering its influence. However, the fall of the Najibullah regime marked a sharp downturn in India's relations with Afghanistan. The primary reason for this shift was the deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan, which, in turn, affected India's stance toward the Taliban regime. The Indian government was also apprehensive about the emergence of a new Afghan regime committed to Greater Pashtunism.

During this period, India's policy toward Afghanistan was well-articulated by former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, M.H. Ansari: "India did not establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime...for two main reasons: First, the persecution of Hindus and Sikhs by the Taliban; second, the Taliban's statements regarding Kashmir, wherein they offered to provide camps in Afghanistan and assist in training pro-Pakistani militant groups operating in the Kashmir region. These issues directly affected India's core interests." (Ashraf, 2007) Thus, the Indian government viewed the Taliban primarily as a security threat.

In response, India closed its embassy in Afghanistan in September 1996, after the Taliban captured Kabul. When the Northern Alliance was formed, India swiftly escalated its support. The Indian military provided the Northern Alliance with \$10 million worth of anti-aircraft equipment and sent military advisers to assist in their fight against the Taliban regime. Additionally, India established hospitals near the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border to provide medical aid to civilians and Northern Alliance fighters and continued to deliver humanitarian assistance to Northern Alliance-controlled areas (Swami, 2008).

It is evident that during the Taliban's first period in power, India sought to marginalize the Taliban's influence in various spheres, supporting all anti-Taliban armed groups and increasing its own influence in Afghanistan. However, India's Afghanistan policy was not limited to these efforts alone. The Indian government

also forged closer ties with Iran and Russia, two other countries that refused to recognize the Taliban regime. With the backing and assistance of these three nations, the Northern Alliance mounted a resilient resistance against the Taliban regime, which continued until the U.S. launched its “War on Terror” following the 9/11 attacks.

## **4. Analysis of the Taliban’s Foreign Relations during Their First Rule**

### **4.1. The Taliban Gained Domestic Support**

As international relations scholar Bruce Mesquita pointed out, “The fundamental law of international relations is that international politics is shaped by and rooted in domestic affairs.” (De Mesquita, 2002) This suggests that a political entity’s external actions can significantly impact domestic conditions. Thus, despite the fact that the Taliban’s foreign policies led to intensified conflicts with major world powers, neighboring countries, and regional powers, the Taliban nonetheless garnered strong support from the Pashtun people and Sunni Islamic followers within Afghanistan.

As outlined in their political demands, the Taliban sought to eliminate various armed factions, establish a genuine Islamic government, and strictly implement Sharia law, cleansing Afghanistan in the name of Allah. These goals naturally attracted the support of Pashtun nationalists and fundamentalist followers. Throughout the Taliban’s rise to power and their subsequent unification of the country, southern and central Pashtun regions and Sunni religious communities frequently surrendered to the Taliban and actively joined their forces. This was in stark contrast to the fierce resistance they encountered while advancing into northern territories. The Taliban declared themselves as the defenders of Islam and the saviors of Afghanistan. Hence, their foreign policy actions reflected this ideology. The breakdown of diplomatic relations with nearly every major power and neighboring state during their first rule was consistent with their fundamentalist vision. Despite their poor foreign relations, the Taliban earned widespread support from the war-weary Pashtuns, who longed for an independent, self-governing Afghanistan free from foreign interference.

### **4.2. Cold Reception from the International Community**

Although some countries initially attempted to engage with the Taliban or incorporate them into broader strategic frameworks, the Taliban’s foreign policies ultimately distanced them from these nations. The causes of this estrangement were complex and involved both domestic and international factors.

Domestically, while the Taliban strengthened central authority through a series of measures, they exacerbated internal conflicts in Afghanistan, particularly through ethnic discrimination under the banner of “Greater Pashtunism,” extremist Islamic ideology, and a regressive approach to human rights. First, ethnic discrimination manifested in the exclusion of non-Pashtuns from government admin-

istration, particularly those who did not speak Dari, and the persecution of northern ethnic minorities, such as the Tajiks and Hazaras. This persecution culminated in massacres, like the one in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. In response, northern ethnic groups—including Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks—rallied against the Taliban under the banner of the Northern Alliance. The Taliban's oppressive policies united the northern populations in resistance, significantly bolstering the Northern Alliance's military strength. Despite their growing losses in the north, the Taliban refused to engage in peace talks with northern tribal groups, prolonging the conflict until U.S. intervention in 2001 tipped the balance.

Second, as a branch of the Deobandi movement, the Taliban's approach to social order was fundamentally rooted in Islamic fundamentalism. Non-Islamic faiths were thus seen as targets for suppression. The Taliban enacted laws requiring all Hindus and Jews to wear special identifying markers, prompting an exodus of these small religious communities. In February 2001, Mullah Omar ordered the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, claiming that such pagan relics threatened the faith of Muslims. Simultaneously, Taliban officials destroyed nearly all non-Islamic cultural artifacts in the Kabul Museum.

Lastly, the Taliban's governance led to a dramatic regression in human rights, exacerbating issues like refugee displacement, gender discrimination, and food crises. Despite bringing some stability to Afghan society, the Taliban's ultimate goal was to establish a regime dedicated to supporting Islamic "jihad," not to develop Afghanistan as a nation. The intensifying central-local conflicts under "Greater Pashtunism" only worsened the refugee crisis inherited from the Soviet invasion. By the end of 1996 alone, over 50,000 refugees had fled Afghanistan. Additionally, Afghan women suffered severe persecution under the Taliban, drawing widespread condemnation from international women's rights organizations. Finally, the long-standing food crisis worsened due to the Taliban's failure to focus on economic development. Instead, the Taliban used humanitarian aid as a tool of discrimination, restricting food supplies to minority groups like the Hazara in Bamiyan. This further alienated the international community and drew condemnation from human rights organizations and the United Nations, gradually turning international sentiment against the Taliban.

Internationally, the Taliban's support for terrorism and Islamic extremism outraged the global community. Early in their rule, the Taliban backed movements like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Chechen terrorist groups, setting up training camps for extremists from Central Asia. This destabilized the region and worsened domestic unrest in neighboring countries like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Russia. The Taliban also supported Saudi Wahhabi extremists and Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, who orchestrated numerous terrorist attacks against U.S. targets, including embassies, military bases, and civilians in the Middle East and Africa. These attacks resulted in significant casualties among U.S. citizens and military personnel.

In the Islamic world, the Taliban's extreme rhetoric and actions not only frac-

tured relations with Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan but also strained ties with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which had initially recognized the regime. Despite the growing international isolation, the Taliban made no efforts to improve foreign relations. The 9/11 attacks cemented the Taliban's status as a pariah regime, leading to a U.S.-led coalition's military intervention and the eventual collapse of the Taliban government.

### 4.3. Impact on the Global Order

Despite being widely condemned, the Taliban's first reign had a profound impact on the global order, influencing international consensus on terrorism, prompting strategic adjustments by the United States, altering the relationships of key stakeholders in Central Asia and the Middle East, and triggering a global wave of anti-American sentiment. First, the Taliban helped forge a global consensus on the need to combat terrorism. In the post-Cold War era, terrorism emerged as a growing threat, affecting countries worldwide. However, due to geopolitical rivalries and hegemonic power politics, nations struggled to effectively cooperate against international terrorist organizations. The emergence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda instilled a universal fear of Islamic radicalism, particularly among Western powers, leading to a coordinated global effort to combat terrorism and extremism.

Second, the Taliban's actions prompted a significant shift in U.S. foreign strategy, playing a pivotal role in the global move towards multipolarity. Following the Cold War, the U.S. adopted a strategy of containing China and Russia, including tacitly supporting Islamic separatist movements within their borders. However, repeated terrorist attacks by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, culminating in 9/11, caused the U.S. to dramatically reverse its stance on Islamic extremism, designating Chechen and Uyghur separatist groups as terrorist organizations. The U.S. shifted its strategic focus from countering China and Russia to addressing Middle Eastern issues.

Third, the Taliban reshaped relationships between key stakeholders in Central Asia and the Middle East. Iran strengthened its ties with Russia and Central Asian CIS countries in response to the Taliban, while post-9/11, U.S.-Iran relations thawed slightly as both faced a common enemy in the Taliban. Meanwhile, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia recalibrated their foreign policies, reassessing their relationships with Iran. Russia's defense cooperation with Central Asian CIS countries deepened, bolstering regional stability and creating space for development. The Taliban also fostered broader cooperation among major powers, with the U.S., China, and Russia increasing collaboration on political, military, economic, and intelligence matters related to terrorism. The establishment of the 6 + 2 group, which included Afghanistan's neighbors and major global powers, demonstrated a unified international effort to resolve the Afghan conflict peacefully.

Finally, the Taliban's staunch anti-Americanism sparked a wave of similar sentiment across the Middle East and the broader Third World. While the Taliban's extremist actions were condemned by the international community, their opposi-

tion to American hegemony resonated with other nations affected by U.S. policies. This backlash significantly hampered America's global influence and led some U.S. scholars and policymakers to acknowledge that Western democratic values were not universally applicable. Going forward, understanding local customs and political systems became a critical component of U.S. foreign policy.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the foreign relations and international impact of the Taliban during their first administration from 1996 to 2001, analyzing their interactions with global and regional powers amid the Afghan Civil War. The Taliban's rise reshaped Afghanistan's internal and external political landscape, reinforcing ideological governance and aligning selectively with strategic partners like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, while clashing with neighboring states and major powers. Their foreign policy was marked by a complex blend of ideological rigidity and pragmatic alliances, which drew both support and condemnation, ultimately positioning Afghanistan as a center of regional instability and a base for transnational extremism.

The analysis of the Taliban's foreign relations demonstrates how their first regime fostered both domestic support among Pashtuns and strong opposition from ethnic minorities, ultimately isolating them internationally. The Taliban's policies triggered a realignment among Central and South Asian powers and influenced U.S. foreign policy, prompting a shift towards counterterrorism and cooperation among key international stakeholders. These dynamics underscore how the Taliban's foreign policy shaped the broader international consensus on terrorism, impacted U.S. strategic focus, and reinforced regional security ties.

The findings offer critical implications for understanding the potential foreign policy trajectory of the Taliban's current administration, especially regarding regional alliances, ideological influences, and the limits of international acceptance. Future research might explore the ways in which historical patterns of ideological and strategic behavior observed in the Taliban's first rule could inform broader theories on the behavior of ideological states within the international system. Understanding these patterns not only enhances comprehension of Afghanistan's ongoing geopolitical role but also contributes to international relations scholarship by illuminating how ideological regimes interact with global powers and adapt to evolving international norms.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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