

Instrumental Use of Extremist Groups in Afghanistan: The Indo-Pak Rivalry and the Future of Playing with the Cards of Extremism and Religious Schools

Preface:

In a five-day official visit to India, Taliban's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, visited the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary located in Uttar Pradesh, India — an institution famously known as “the Al-Azhar of South Asia.”

Founded in 1866 by Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, and Zulfikar Ali Deobandi, and inspired by the reformist ideas of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi and his sons, the Deoband school became the central theological institution of Islamic revivalism in the Indian subcontinent.

Soon after its establishment, branches of this seminary expanded throughout South Asia, including in present-day Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban identify themselves as ideological followers of the Indian Deobandi school, though most of their leaders were educated in Pakistani Deobandi madrasas, which are indeed extensions of the original Indian Deoband network.

Recent images showing the warm reception of Minister Muttaqi at Darul Uloom Deoband reveal the cordial welcome extended by the school's administrators.

This visit occurs while the Taliban, under the banner of Deobandi teachings, enforce the harshest socio-religious policies on the Afghan population, especially women — banning them from education, employment, and public life. Such actions constitute a form of gender apartheid, fundamentally contradicting divine principles and the authentic message of Islam.

Introduction:

The strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan has deep historical roots. For both states, Afghanistan represents a crucial sphere of strategic depth — Pakistan seeks influence for its eastern security buffer, whereas India strives to counter Pakistan's leverage and secure its political and economic interests in Kabul.

Rather than engaging in full-scale direct confrontation, both powers have opted for a less costly method: advancing objectives through proxies and local actors — a phenomenon widely analyzed in international relations literature as the “instrumental use of non-state armed groups.”

Historical evidence and tracing patterns of state sponsorship demonstrate that such policies

often produce unintended consequences, including sectarianism, radicalization, and long-term regional instability.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. State Sponsorship and Instrumentalization: Scholarly studies show that states occasionally employ terrorist or extremist groups as covert instruments to pursue low-cost foreign policy objectives. Yet, what begins as a “strategic blessing” often turns into a “strategic curse” once these groups gain autonomy or create irreversible blowback.
2. Role of Madrasas and Ideological Networks: Religious educational institutions such as madrasas, and intellectual schools like the Deobandi movement, have played pivotal roles in shaping the ideological homogeneity between the Taliban and certain Pakistani militant groups.
3. Proxy Rivalry between India and Pakistan: Research and policy reports indicate that Indo-Pakistani competition has turned Afghanistan into a battleground of proxy influence — each side accuses the other of using non-state militant groups to expand its strategic footprint.

Case Study: Pakistan

Mechanisms: Pakistan’s military and intelligence institutions, particularly the ISI, have for decades cultivated ties with jihadist networks and Deobandi madrasas to reinforce influence across the tribal belt and Afghan frontier. These connections have ranged from organizational support and logistics to political facilitation.

Consequences: Such long-term patronage has empowered semi-militant networks, undermined the legitimacy of central governments in Kabul, and fostered mutual dependency between proxy groups and their sponsors. However, this model has also produced strategic blowback within Pakistan itself — the rise of cross-border militancy and persistent domestic insecurity.

Case Study: India

Policies and Instruments: India has attempted to increase its influence and counter Pakistan by strengthening diplomatic, economic, and developmental ties with successive Afghan governments and selected non-state actors.

Limitations: India’s strategic culture and constraints prevent it from engaging in armed proxy wars at the scale of Pakistan. Therefore, New Delhi relies primarily on soft-power tools — political, economic, cultural, and informational influence — to project power within

Afghanistan.

Mechanisms of Influence: Madrasas, Ideological Networks, and Intelligence Agencies

1. Ideological Networks (Madrasas): Deobandi-oriented schools form a cross-border religious and cultural network that serves as a soft-power platform for influence. These institutions not only train clerics but also sustain transnational ideological linkages between Afghan and Pakistani Deobandi circles.

2. Intelligence and Mediation: Intelligence organizations play an operational role by providing logistical, educational, and political guidance to militant networks. Yet, these interactions are never fully controllable and often yield unintended strategic and transnational repercussions.

Future Analysis: Security and Strategic Scenarios

Scenario 1 – Controlled Continuation of Proxy Rivalry: States continue employing extremist groups as low-cost ground forces for regional influence. This perpetuates instability and turns Afghanistan into a permanent zone of managed chaos.

Scenario 2 – Blowback and Loss of Control: Proxy groups evolve beyond their sponsors' control, launching retaliatory operations even against their benefactors, thus triggering a transnational security crisis that spills beyond borders.

Scenario 3 – Regional Agreement to Curb Instrumentalization: Should regional actors — with the mediation of extra-regional powers — establish mechanisms of trust and monitoring, the instrumental use of militant groups may decrease.

Risks and Points of Crisis

- Reverse Dependency: Once instrumentalized, these groups may seek independent political power and legitimacy, becoming uncontrollable actors in domestic politics.
- Cycle of Blame and False Operations: Mutual accusations of proxy warfare between India and Pakistan can escalate into retaliatory operations and increased military tension in the region.
- Legitimacy Erosion: State sponsorship of extremist actors undermines the political and moral credibility of sponsoring states, inviting economic sanctions, loss of trust, and global condemnation.

Policy Recommendations (Medium-Term and Practical)

1. Regional Transparency and Accountability: Promote a regional dialogue framework under neutral mediation to prevent the sponsorship of militant proxies and enhance cross-border monitoring.
2. Separating Religious and Security Engagements: Encourage investments in reform-oriented educational institutions and civic programs to depoliticize religious education and prevent ideological manipulation.
3. Reducing the Incentives of Proxy Warfare: Through targeted sanctions, oversight mechanisms, and political incentive packages, eliminate the short-term motives for proxy exploitation.
4. Supporting Political Inclusivity in Afghanistan: Assist in the creation of a comprehensive and inclusive political process that integrates religious actors peacefully and deters them from violent instruments of influence.

Conclusion

The instrumental use of extremist groups for short-term geopolitical gain may appear strategically efficient, yet historical evidence and policy analysis reveal that such practices yield severe long-term risks: regional instability, escalating extremism, and internal blowback for the sponsoring states themselves.

Afghanistan, as the epicenter of this proxy rivalry, requires regional and international cooperation to escape the destructive cycle of instrumentalization by neighboring powers.

India's recent intelligence-driven initiative — arranging the visit of Taliban Foreign Minister Muttuqi to Darul Uloom Deoband — indicates New Delhi's intention to redefine the ideological landscape: by connecting Afghan Taliban leaders with Indian Deobandi scholars, India seeks to dilute Pakistan's spiritual and ideological influence over the Taliban and reclaim religious leverage that Islamabad historically enjoyed.

Thus, both India and Pakistan are deeply engaged in a competitive manipulation of extremist and religious movements in Afghanistan as strategic instruments for regional advantage. This dangerous game, however, risks perpetuating endless instability, undermining both regional security and global peace.

With highest respect,

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