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Taliban's Factionalism Threatens Their Own Sovereignty

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During the Chinese civil war in the 1940s, the Japanese invasion of China forced two ideologically opposed governments, the Communists and Nationalists, to cooperate to repel Japan. This coalition, dubbed the Second United Front, would last until the expulsion of Japan from China at the end of the Second World War. Although allies in a war for their people's sovereignty, the alliance was purely for the sake of rejecting imperialism. The vastly separate interests of the Chinese Communists and Nationalists would force the dissolution of the coalition, and the sides continued fighting as they were before Japanese intervention. The threat of coalition founded on mutual hatred collapsing could very well be unraveling in Afghanistan. When the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, American outlets reporting on the occupation of Kabul by the Taliban portrayed the army as a unified entity. However, the Taliban is similar to the Second United Front. It is made from multiple interest groups with contradictory goals and strategic interests of the separate Taliban factions. Now, this division is threatening the cohesion of the original anti-Western coalition.

At its founding, the Taliban was a uniquely ethnic Pashtun movement, the dominant Afghan ethnic group. It adhered to the tenets of an anti-colonialist and fundamentalist school of Islam that was prominent in Pashtun society: the Deobandi school. They derived from it two prominent aspects of their ideology, state Sharia law and international revolution. With the success of the Taliban, the ethnic makeup of its coalition has expanded to compensate for the diversity of the demographics of Afghanistan, of which the Pashtun are only a plurality. The contemporary factional divides in the Taliban are mostly a matter of ethnic chapters progressing to the logical endpoint of the Taliban ideology, ideological expansion using ethnic power bases.

For example, on Dec. 25, 2025, three insurgents related to the Jamaat Ansrullah, an ethnically Tajik chapter of the Taliban were intercepted on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border by Tajikistan border guards. Their group's goal is to found an Islamic caliphate, similar to Afghanistan, in Tajikistan, and the ruling Taliban chapter in Kabul responded to this incident by releasing a statement made by spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid that read, "No one will be allowed to use Afghanistan's territory to harm its neighbors." However, less than a year later, the Taliban's directives would be disobeyed by a subordinate chapter. On March 22, 2025 in Ghulam Khan Kalay, and again on April 6 of the same year in Hassan Khel, a sect of the ethnically Pashtun chapter, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, were caught infiltrating the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This sect was ideologically set on the annexation of Pashtun provinces in Pakistan and the overthrowing of Pakistan's government. These instances demonstrate a contradiction between the Taliban's intentions and the rising number of affiliated non-state actors attempting to use Afghanistan as a launching point for their insurgency. This shows that the de-facto authority in Kabul does not unilaterally have the ability to enforce their will on the territories they claim to own.

The ramifications of these rogue groups using Afghanistan as a launching point for insurgency is violent foreign response. It further isolates the Taliban diplomatically and demands response from affected neighbors. Typically, there are two potential paradigms for this response against governments who cannot control affiliated groups within their borders. The first is direct action against the non-state actors. Striking the actor is to ignore the Taliban as a potential power broker between actors, thus violating the Taliban's sovereignty. It has the potential to provoke a response from the Taliban and further escalate transnational tensions. The second route is to pressure the weakened Taliban coalition, which is currently not well suited for conventional warfare and could be easily repelled by neighboring armies. In pressuring the Taliban to manage its own border, a country could leverage its superior military, threatening to hold the Taliban responsible for infiltrators and forcing them to redirect resources into policing their factions.

In both scenarios, the Taliban risks debilitating destabilization if it cannot manage its own factions. Disobedient Taliban factions holding independent relationships with other nations without any oversight could lead to security issues for the ruling Taliban authority. If these groups could be persuaded to work against their coalition's interests, it could set a precedent of decentralization where external actors would treat regions of Afghanistan as though they are controlled by separate governments. This would destroy the ruling Taliban's legitimacy and erase the concept of Afghan sovereignty. If the Taliban cannot portray itself as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, not only could it invite the separate chapters to begin infighting, but it could also invite foreign alternatives to current Taliban rule. If this infighting erupts on ethnic lines, the very concept of Afghanistan as a state could cease to exist.



Taliban insurgents turn themselves in to Afghan National Security Forces at a forward operating base. Since taking control of Afghanistan, the Taliban has fractured into several factions along ethnic lines. PHOTO COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS