

# Evacuation Operations, Great-Power Competition, and External Operations Terror Threats in Post-Drawdown Afghanistan

## Mapping Out the Path Ahead

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Within months of the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover, Afghanistan emerged as the global epicenter of human rights atrocities, terrorism, and hostile actions by our great-power competition (GPC) near-peer state adversaries, and organized crime in the forms of human trafficking, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, and conflict mineral mining of rare earth elements (REE) that could prove challenging to US supply-chain resourcing and trade policy for decades to come. The domestic policy implications of the US withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the US-trained, advised, mentored, equipped, and financed Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) will also be the subject of policy discussions and military white papers for decades to come.

Our leaders cannot afford to look backward. Instead, we must understand the new operating environment and frame the threat landscape, which should incorporate three primary lines of effort (LOE): post-drawdown humanitarian aid and evacuations, confronting the GPC in theater, and countering nonstate armed groups and their operations. This white paper frames these three collective challenges to inform leaders and policy makers of potential solutions nested under current administration priorities, guidance, and policies.

### **Introduction: Proposed Priority Lines of Effort (LOE)**

#### ***Priority LOE #1: Post-Drawdown Humanitarian Aid and Evacuation Efforts***

The Taliban have implemented a style of governance reminiscent of medieval times. We are watching. In real time, one of the worst human rights atrocities

against underserved communities and vulnerable populations seen globally since the 1990s conflict in the Balkans or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group's claim of an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The first elicited involvement from the Clinton administration, while the latter resulted in a global "Defeat ISIS" campaign. Afghanistan's degraded financial system, skyrocketing unemployment, and food and medical shortages have resulted in a humanitarian crisis only rivaled in modern times by Venezuela under the Maduro regime.<sup>1</sup> Despite our hostilities with Nicolas Maduro's Bolivarian Revolutionary authoritarian regime, the United States announced on 22 September 2021 that we would provide \$247 million in humanitarian assistance and \$89 million in economic and development assistance to the most vulnerable Venezuelans.<sup>2</sup>

Under its strict Deobandi Salafist interpretation of Islam, the Taliban's "Islamic Emirate" regime has implemented the most significant gender inequality measures anywhere in the world. Women and girls have lost basic rights, face education and employment restrictions, and have been subjected to increased physical abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking. Members of the LGBTQ community; religious/ethnic/racial minorities, such as the Shiite Hazaras, Uighurs, and population groups from the Panjshir; and individuals who worked with US and NATO forces as diplomats, interpreters, law enforcement officers, and members of the military, all face an extraordinary risk of violence, torture, human trafficking, and execution.

The most immediate risk ahead of us is a ripe kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) environment, wherein the Taliban utilize other Sunni violent extremist organizations (VEO) as proxies to leverage a humanitarian crisis by holding American citizens (AmCits) and our special immigrant visa (SIV) allies hostage. This offers the Taliban the opportunity to enrich their coffers and gives its Chinese and Pakistani partners hostage-negotiating leverage in other major policy issues. In line with current US government policies on gender equality, violence against women, LGBTQ rights, and human trafficking, we should also prioritize evacuation of these population groups—lest we lose legitimacy in the international community for not defending underserved communities when it counts the most.<sup>3</sup> We are additionally concerned about China's, Russia's, Iran's, and Pakistan's exploitation of the information environment, where they are messaging the world that the United States does not honor its responsibilities to its partners and allies.<sup>4</sup> The continued evacuation of AmCits and at-risk Afghans must precede any other soft-power counter-Taliban and counter-Chinese malign influence efforts in and around Afghanistan to ensure these adversaries do not disrupt our larger priorities in the region, as the failure to do so could obstruct our ongoing efforts.

We can accomplish successful evacuations without military intervention or the use of private mercenaries, whose presence and operations within Afghanistan's geographic territory in a post-drawdown environment could instigate an international incident with GPC implications—particularly if done in a vacuum without official overt or back-channel coordination. Those private-sector organizations assisting in these efforts should be humanitarian-centric, apolitical, and nested within the official policies and priorities of the White House, Congress, and the interagency. Rescuing Americans and our allies from humanitarian crises should never be relegated to partisanship, and failure to do so would have geostrategic consequences that extend far beyond Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

The White House recently approved a proposal by the Joint Chiefs for public/private-sector partnerships to coordinate the evacuation of US citizens and Afghan allies.<sup>6</sup> We strongly concur with this policy and believe that our first post-drawdown priority concerning Afghanistan must be to secure funding, intergovernmental diplomatic engagement, and interagency support to these public/private-sector partnerships. We envision this construct as focused on humanitarian assistance operations that lay the framework for post-drawdown evacuation efforts.

### ***Priority LOE #2: Great-Power Competition in Afghanistan***

The second and most significant risk in post-drawdown Afghanistan is the medium- to long-term ramifications of Chinese REE extraction as a primary LOE in China's geostrategic plan. The National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) released a report titled "Protecting Critical and Emerging U.S. Technologies from Foreign Threats" on 22 October 2021. The report outlined five critical emerging technologies "*that may determine whether America remains the world's leading superpower or is eclipsed by strategic competitors in the next few years,*" and included the following:

1. Artificial intelligence;
2. Bioeconomy;
3. Autonomous systems;
4. Quantum computing; and
5. Semiconductors.<sup>7</sup>

These areas of emerging technology focus require significant reserves of rare earths and a high availability of advanced semiconductors. China's planned REE mining operations in Afghanistan align with Beijing's intention to seize Taiwan for its semiconductor industry. Companies like Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) and United Microelectronics are dominant forces in the global semiconductor supply chain. While these semiconductor "microchips"

are very small, they are comprised of numerous microelectronic components and REEs, including silicon. Silicon is required to manufacture the wafers (substrates or slices) of semiconductors used in integrated circuits and solar cells. Taiwan has an abundance of this material, and China intends to seize it.<sup>8</sup> China is engaged in an operation to compete with the United States in emerging technology while also gaining control of global technology supply chains. China intends to couple these high technology efforts with its global telecommunications infrastructure development projects so that it not only controls technology hardware but additionally gains long-term control of the information environment.

China's plans to seize Taiwan, lay telecommunications infrastructure around the world, and mine precious REEs are components of its larger malign influence plan. The US government must address with authorities, budget appropriations, and resourcing targeted as a functional problem set. If relegated to the geographic combatant command (GCC) areas of responsibility (AOR) construct, we risk limiting shared understanding and whole-of-government solutions to this global China-centric problem set via geographically siloed, canalized operations. Any prospective solutions should be nested within the framework of Executive Order (EO) 14017, *America's Supply Chains*.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Priority LOE #3: Countering Nonstate Actors, Organized Crime, and Terrorist External Operations***

To accomplish its objectives in Afghanistan, China intends to financially incentivize Pakistan—and, by extension, Sunni VEOs, to mitigate the risks those insurgent groups present to REE mining operations. Sunni terror groups in Afghanistan will be dramatically enriched through these incentives, enabling the Taliban to maintain governance and provide safe haven for Sunni VEOs with external operations (Ex-Ops) ambitions to attack the United States, our allies, and our interests at home and abroad. Observers also expect these organizations to profit significantly from transnational organized crime, including cross-border weapons proliferation, rampant human trafficking, gemstone and mineral mining/smuggling, and money laundering to operationalize hostile state actions, organized crime, sanctions evasion, and terrorist financing. The Taliban is likely to consolidate, professionalize, and industrialize the narcotics trade, which, as of recent years, includes not only opiates but also hashish and industrial-scale methamphetamine production. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate could potentially emerge in a short time as the world's top drug cartel and narco-state.<sup>10</sup>

We are additionally concerned by the potential of the Taliban declaring an Islamic caliphate in a manner like ISIS. The global impetus for a Defeat ISIS-like

coalition or US military re-engagement in Afghanistan is unlikely in the short term. The power vacuum, subsequent funding, and recruitment that would undoubtedly come from such a declaration by the Taliban would be a significant threat to the homeland. Thus, a post-US drawdown environment will provide insurgents with attack ambitions, with the power vacuum, protection, and funding needed to reconstitute, train, plan, and execute attacks on the United States and US and allied interests at home and abroad.

## **Section One: Post-Drawdown Humanitarian Aid and Evacuation Efforts**

Without a US military presence, we are most immediately concerned with an environment ripe for imminent KFR events forming around AmCits, other Westerners, and Afghan SIV partners. Rampant human rights atrocities have been committed against underserved population groups that have been disenfranchised under Taliban rule. This includes women and girls—particularly those women who previously played prominent roles in society, such as judges, journalists, activists, doctors, and teachers. Additional underserved communities vulnerable for exploitation include religious, ethnic, and racial minority groups such as the Shiite Hazaras and Uighurs (who are not recognized under the Taliban's brand of Deobandi Salafist Islam), members of the LGBTQ community, and prepubescent boys used as *bacha bazi* sex slaves.<sup>11</sup>

Media outlets reported six airplanes carrying American and Afghan citizens were being held hostage at the Mazar-i-Sharif airport in early September 2021. The US Department of State indicated that the “Taliban will not let them leave,” and “The Taliban is basically holding them hostage to get more out of the Americans.” While speaking with Fox News television host Chris Wallace, Congressman Michael McCaul, the lead minority Congressman on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said: “In fact, we have six airplanes at Mazar-i-Sharif airport, six airplanes, with American citizens on them as I speak, also with these interpreters, and the Taliban is holding them hostage for demands right now.” He additionally added: “We know the reason why is because the Taliban want something in exchange. This is really, Chris, turning into a hostage situation where they're not going to allow American citizens to leave until they get full recognition from the United States of America.”<sup>12</sup>

This incident should serve as a warning for the prospect of a more robust KFR environment to come. The Taliban have surely calculated the risks associated with a large-scale KFR scenario and likely might be waiting for a post-drawdown environment where the number of AmCits and other Western citizens still in coun-

try has dwindled to low numbers to ensure they will not be met with a military response. If the Taliban engages in KFR operations, we suspect it may employ other Sunni VEOs—such as Islamic State–Khorasan (ISIS-K)—as proxy “strawmen” to provide a layer of separation and aura of plausible deniability around these operations.<sup>13</sup> The more time elapses after the US withdrawal, the higher the likelihood of a KFR environment materializing. If this scenario were to play out, it could risk payments aggregating in millions of dollars or more, which could serve to further enrich the Taliban’s coffers and fund other Sunni VEOs with Ex-Ops ambitions. This scenario must be avoided. The best practice in the current operating landscape would likely utilize existing relationships between Westerners with surrogate networks in country to either move evacuees by land or to coordinate for chartered aircraft out of a major airport to another jurisdiction for medical screening and patriation administrative processing—but the latter risks a direct KFR-initiating confrontation.

US citizens, citizens of our Western allies, Afghans with SIV, and their families are in a unique risk category for violence and exploitation that should exceed our risk appetite and merit immediate action. Other population groups are also at risk of torture, violence, and sexual exploitation at the hands of the Taliban. At highest risk are women, girls, members of the LGBTQ community, and ethnic and religious minorities. These are communities that the United States and its Western allies defend and advocate for on the world stage. Any ongoing humanitarian assistance opportunities intended to aid these underserved communities would nest within current US policy. We must not miss the opportunity to do right by these groups at the time of their most dire need and comply with current US humanitarian policies.

To further enumerate the imminent necessity to extract our citizens and allies from country and support the most oppressed, let us explore the current human rights environment just two months after the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan:

### **Human Rights Atrocities**

- *Human trafficking*: Post drawdown, Afghanistan has emerged as the world’s most prolific human trafficking state, ranging from child soldiers and forced labor to child brides, sex slaves, and systemic rape by members of the Taliban.<sup>14</sup>
- *Women’s and Girls’ Rights, Exploitation, and Threats to Prominent Women*: It is the policy of the United States to champion equal rights for women and girls across the globe, and to end violence against women.<sup>15</sup> Media reports and

numerous personal stories shared by victims and their families have revealed horrific treatment of prominent women by the Taliban. This specifically includes women who performed the duties of activists, those who have worked with the US Department of State, schoolteachers, medical doctors, judges, actresses, and journalists. Reported incidents and threats against these women include some of the following:

- The Taliban have banned education for girls over 12 years old. According to Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, who survived a Pakistani Taliban assassination attempt at 15 years old: “Afghanistan is now the only country in the world that forbids girls’ education.”<sup>16</sup>
- Women have been denied the ability to receive employment in the government but have been allowed to work in some fields, such as medicine, due to the Taliban’s religious views that medical care for females must be conducted by other females so that a man does not touch them.<sup>17</sup>
- In early September 2021, a dozen Taliban “special forces” ran into the crowd of protesting women in Herat and fired their weapons into the air, sending demonstrators fleeing.<sup>18</sup>
- Threats to women activists to “skin their children alive” in front of them, and then “rape them to death” in front of their husbands.<sup>19</sup>
- A woman was reportedly lit on fire for “bad cooking.”<sup>20</sup>
- Prominent women have reported that the Taliban marked their homes with a large “X” to send a message to Taliban fighters that they are free to rape, kidnap, and harm these women as *ghanimat* (spoils of war).<sup>21</sup>
- *Child Brides*: Taliban fighters have reportedly gone door-to-door and forced families to give up their daughters as young as 12 years old to the Taliban for forced marriages or direct human trafficking. Taliban commanders allegedly ordered imams in various areas to bring them lists of unmarried females between 12 to 45 years old for their soldiers to marry because they viewed them as *ghanimat* to be divided up among the victors. There are also reports that some areas have been required to place a marking on the front of their home once their daughter turns 12. These children are sometimes forcefully married to men in their 50s or 60s and raped without consent. The penalty for families that refuse to comply with this was reported as death. Girls in ethnic and religious minority sects such as the Shiite Hazaras of Uruzgan and Daykundi, or the families of the National Resistance Force (NRF) resis-

tance fighters in the Panjshir, were reportedly trafficked into underground sex trafficking networks.<sup>22</sup>

- *The Bacha Bazi Boys: Bacha bazi* is a slang term used in some parts of Afghanistan for the “dancing boys,” and refers to the sexual exploitation of male children forced into prostitution. Many of the boys exploited are prepubescent. Horrific stories have emerged over the years of little boys chained to beds and gang-raped to the point of near death. If these children survive and are released, they face public shaming and are often shunned from their community. In 2011, two US special forces soldiers severely beat an Afghan local police commander who, when confronted, laughingly confessed to having chained a 12-year-old missing boy to a bed and savagely raped him for weeks. Those soldiers were involuntarily separated and later reinstated, leading to US legislation named “Mandating America’s Responsibility to Limit Abuse, Negligence and Depravity.” This law became known as the Martland Act, which was named after SFC Charles Martland. In a post-drawdown environment, these efforts by the United States are invalidated in Afghanistan and could lead to greater *bacha bazi* exploitation.<sup>23</sup> Both the Martland Act and US policy on human trafficking support humanitarian assistance operations for these victims.
- *LGBTQ Community*: A Taliban judge issued an order that makes members of LGBTQ community eligible for the death penalty. The approved methods of execution are either by stoning or by dropping a nine-foot wall on top of the victim, burying him or her under heavy rubble in which he or she cannot escape, only to die of dehydration if the initial impact failed to cause immediate death.<sup>24</sup> The United States is a world leader in advocating for the protection of the LGBTQ community. Afghanistan is now the most dangerous place in the world for members of the LGBTQ community. The official US policy is that no one deserves to face violence for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Our policies should match our actions by evacuating members of this underserved community.<sup>25</sup>
- *Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Minorities*: The Shiite Hazaras of the mountainous areas of central Afghanistan; the Uighurs; the people of the Panjshir Valley; and other minority groups—or those persons in areas where there has been resistance to Taliban rule—face the highest risks of sexual assault, human trafficking, torture, and execution. According to the 20 January 2021, White House EO on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government: “It is therefore the policy of my Administration that the Federal Government should pursue a



comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality. Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our government.” The whole of our government includes the Department of State, USAID, and numerous other agencies with international mandates. Thus, we should apply this thinking beyond our borders and back humanitarian assistance operations that support the protection and evacuation of these underserved communities vulnerable under a Taliban-led Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

- *Violence Against Males Who Have Worked with US Forces:* Men who have worked with Western forces have publicly and on widely disseminated videos been executed by being shot in the back of the head or having their throats slit and/or have been brutally tortured, including being lashed hundreds of times. The severity of the lashings in some cases was so severe that it caused internal bleeding and damage to organs.<sup>27</sup> Our intelligence community and military rely on international relationships built on trust. For us to maintain that trust in the international community, we must maintain our promises and support those who have fought side-by-side with our military personnel, including those who have operated as translators or information sources to our intelligence community. Failure to extract these personnel could damage the reputation of the US intelligence community in the international community for decades to come and could degrade our capabilities to build relationships and surrogate networks.
- *Extreme Poverty and Cash, Food, and Supply Chain Shortages:* The general humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is rapidly deteriorating, with citizens running out of fiat currency and unable to withdraw additional funds from the nearly defunct banking system. Additionally, foreign aid is far short of necessity, and many Afghans are unable to find employment. The United Nations’ World Food Program indicated that nearly the entire population of 40 million people could fall below the poverty line in coming months, and that 95 percent of Afghans are not getting enough food to eat. Unfortunately, this has led to reporting that some families are so desperate, they have given up their children to pay off debts, leading to broken families and human trafficking concerns.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to the Taliban takeover, health clinics were dependent on foreign funding. Currently, most of these clinics are running out of essential resources and basic medicines. Many doctors and nurses have not been paid in months.

Advocacy organizations are urging other countries to continue providing humanitarian aid. “To pause the lifesaving funding because we’re still negotiating female rights would be utterly wrong,” said Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council. The United States halted its aid to Afghanistan upon leaving the country but has since announced it would send \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance.<sup>29</sup> Engaging Afghanistan with humanitarian assistance—such as medical aid, food, and clean drinking water—could enable negotiating leverage to facilitate evacuation operations and other policy issues, while also limiting the potential of engaging in direct terrorism financing.

The aggregation of these human rights atrocities perpetrated by the Taliban in the power vacuum of the US withdrawal should be countered strongly by the United States and its allies. Before considering punitive economic levers, such as sanctions, we should first prioritize evacuating AmCits, SIVs, prominent women, and their families, all of which face the greatest danger under the Taliban’s regime. The completion of such a humanitarian operation presents the United States and our allies with options to leverage all our soft-power authorities and capabilities for nonmilitary intervention. Those options are discussed in the *Policy Recommendations* section of this white paper.

## **Section Two: Great-Power Competition in Afghanistan**

### **Great-Power Competition in Afghanistan: China–Pakistan Strategic Overview**

China and Pakistan stand to gain the most from the Taliban’s rapid takeover and ongoing governance of Afghanistan, while Russia and Iran may stand to lose more than they had anticipated. Beijing and Islamabad have both made public statements in support of the Taliban’s new Islamic Emirate regime and appear to have synchronized messaging in the information environment. Both nations provide humanitarian aid to support the Taliban’s legitimacy and governance. China and Pakistan have mutual interests in Afghanistan that include the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); REE extraction; and countering India, the United States, and NATO in the region. These LOEs are contingent upon the stability and security assurances offered through partnerships that China and Pakistan maintain with each other, the Taliban regime, and other major Sunni VEOs operating in Afghanistan.

Beijing’s priorities in Afghanistan include China’s CPEC/BRI interests, securing REE mining, and countering the Afghan-based Uighur ethnic minority and are likely to include the projection of regional airpower through Bagram Airfield.

China has previously attempted mining projects in Afghanistan that have been hampered by security concerns. China perceives an incentivized Pakistan as a key ally to help manage REE mining security concerns associated with various Sunni VEOs operating within Afghanistan, due to the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service's longstanding and well-established relationships with al-Qaeda (AQ), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Taliban. While the Taliban does not recognize the Uighur Muslim minority, other VEOs might feel differently about China's dehumanizing treatment of an estimated 3.5 million Uighur Muslims in concentration camps across Xinjiang, China. Beijing likely feels generous in financially incentivizing Pakistan (and by extension various insurgent groups) not to obstruct China's efforts, with the understanding that Beijing's control over rare earths—coupled with its efforts to control the global semiconductor industry—would have numerous geostrategic ramifications in emerging technology and supply chain controls. Countering these Chinese malign influence and supply-chain controls has direct implications for Pres. Joe Biden's EO 14017, which provides for interagency authorities focused on China-centric supply-chain risks.<sup>30</sup>

As China attempts to instill controls with Pakistan and the Taliban to ensure that no other great power gains a foothold in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, there may be a limited window of time available to prevent this hypothesis from fully materializing. We view Pakistan as a “gatekeeper” for Chinese operations in Afghanistan. Soft-power actions that deter hostile Pakistani operations that violate US national security interests may help amplify effects to deter and degrade Chinese GPC malign influence and REE mining operational successes in Afghanistan.

Concurrent to the US withdrawal, former President Ashraf Ghani fled to the United Arab Emirates.<sup>31</sup> The Taliban almost immediately consolidated power over every province and district in Afghanistan, except for the Panjshir Valley. The Panjshir Valley, canalized between historically challenging mountainous terrain, served as the headquarters for the NRF, an anti-Taliban collective that includes former Afghan commandos and law enforcement officers. Former Vice President Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, the son of the symbolic leader of the same name known as the “Lion of Panjshir,” lead the NRF. Saleh and Massoud appear to have fled Afghanistan, and the Taliban have largely seized the Panjshir Valley, leading experts to believe that many of the group's remaining resistance fighters have left Afghanistan for neighboring jurisdictions, presumably to reconstitute. Open-source media articles, social media, and surrogate networks appear to have corroborated Pakistan's involvement supporting the Taliban militarily to degrade

the NRF's capability in the Panjshir Valley and help the Taliban consolidate power over this pocket of resistance.

Pakistan ISI Chief Lt Gen Faiz Hameed met Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul shortly after the US withdrawal. Within approximately one day of this meeting, the anti-Taliban NRF was attacked in the Panjshir Valley with kinetic airstrikes. Hameed was reportedly involved in these kinetic airstrike operations against the NRF. Analysts and open-source reports indicate that Pakistani special operations teams, ISI intelligence officers, and Pakistani Air Force assets collectively participated in this operation to degrade the NRF's capabilities to resist and reconstitute. NRF leader Ahmed Masood claimed that the NRF had been attacked by Pakistani Air Force drones using smart bombs (with guidance systems potentially given to the Pakistani Air Force by the United States) only one day after Hameed's arrival in Kabul. Masood also advised that Pakistan provided intelligence to the Taliban in the form of detailed aerial maps of NRF strongholds.<sup>32</sup> Pakistan may have used MK-82 500-pound bombs using US Air Force-, Lockheed Martin-, and Raytheon-developed, GBU-12 and GBU-10 Paveway laser-guided bomb kits to strike the NRF in the Panjshir. The United States provided Pakistan with 1,000 such kits in 2010 to support Islamabad "in its offensive against militants on the Afghan border." At the time, the US military assistance had been branded as "underscoring Washington's role in backing Pakistan's months-long campaign against Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants." Then-Air Force Secretary Michael Donley had then stated that "the Pakistani Air Force was playing 'a big part' in operations against the Islamist extremists."<sup>33</sup> Pakistan has thoroughly and indisputably supported the Taliban, the HQN, and AQ for years.

Other rumors indicate that Pakistan used Chinese-provided CH-4 drones, which look nearly identical to the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper (likely due to China's constant theft of intellectual property). The presumption is that these systems are compatible.<sup>34</sup>

China, Pakistan, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, AQ, the HQN, and ISIS-K have formed an alliance that appears to be scoped around the extraction of Afghan-sourced REE by China. The aggregate valuation of Afghanistan's unmined REE ranges wildly from \$1–6 trillion USD. China has long maintained mining contracts in country but was obstructed by US/NATO presence and a deteriorated and disputed security environment. We assess China views a favorable post-US drawdown security situation for its REE mining as something it can "purchase" through Pakistan by requiring that Islamabad manage relationships with the various Sunni VEOs in Afghanistan on China's behalf.

REEs are essential to every technology that we value, ranging from satellites to cell phones, fighter jets, semiconductors, and elements of critical infrastructure. One of the REE-enabled industries we are most concerned about in a post-drawdown as it pertains to Afghan resources is the electric-vehicle battery (EVB) industry. President Biden signed an EO on 5 August 2021, aimed at making 50 percent of vehicles zero emission in the United States by 2030, aggressively increasing demand on electric vehicles (EV). According to the Pew Research Center, about 2 percent of new car sales are currently electric.<sup>35</sup> Some states have set deadlines for when new gasoline combustion powered cars will no longer be allowed to be sold.

To implement President Biden's plan, we face significant obstacles in China's near-monopolistic control of 80–90 percent of the global EVB market. The two most critical resources that make up EVBs are lithium and neodymium. China is about to mine vast swathes of these two REEs from Afghanistan at a time when the American auto industry is rapidly transitioning to EVs.

The most common type of EVBs are lithium-ion and lithium polymer, due to their high energy density relative to their weight. As a result, lithium-ion battery technology has been prevalent in portable electronics, laptop computers, smartphones, and many other applications since the 1990s. While the global supply of unmined lithium deposits is still relatively ample, the bigger issue is that lithium reserves are depleting in areas where extraction is easier, leaving only marginal resources that cost more per metric ton to exploit than their relative value. By 2028, there is anticipated to be a global shortfall of 800,000 tons of lithium.<sup>36</sup> Exploiting Afghan-sourced lithium could further strengthen China's power over global supply chains. According to a Pentagon memo leaked to *The New York Times* in 2010, Afghanistan's Ghazni province has enough lithium to make it the "Saudi Arabia of lithium."<sup>37</sup> Experts agree that lithium and REEs are only economically viable in maritime shipping (not as air freight), and Afghanistan is a landlocked country. Here China has a significant advantage over the United States, as "the most accessible deep-water ports are the Chinese-built ports in Gwadar, Pakistan, and Chabahar, Iran."<sup>38</sup> Additionally, China maintains a territorial border with Afghanistan via Badakhshan Province, home to the Wakhan Corridor, which is a strategically important component of the BRI and CPEC trade initiatives. This means that China might be able to ship these minerals by land, avoiding costly air freight and maritime shipping options altogether.

Rare earth magnets are the main component of an EVB that deals with driving-range capability. Those magnets are made with neodymium, which is widely seen as the most efficient way to power EVs. Neodymium magnets can make the difference between an EV with a range between charges of 200 miles versus 600

miles. China currently controls 90 percent of the global neodymium supply. Prices of neodymium oxide more than doubled during a nine-month rally last year and are still up 90 percent. In June, the US Department of Commerce said it is considering an investigation into the national security impact of neodymium magnet imports.<sup>39</sup>

Global transition to EVs is estimated to require an 87,000-percent increase in REE supply by 2060.<sup>40</sup> Supply for the United Kingdom to transition its 31.5 million gasoline-powered vehicles to EVs would require 207,900 tons of cobalt, 264,600 tonnes of lithium carbonate, 7,200 tonnes of neodymium and dysprosium, and 2,362,500 tonnes of copper. The global REE supply requirements are 40 times greater, requiring mineral supplies to increase from 400 kilotonnes in 2020 to 11,800 kilotonnes in 2040 to cover the global demand posed by EVs.<sup>41</sup> This dramatic increase poses numerous supply chain challenges that are currently centered around China.<sup>42</sup>

This economic issue will inevitably become a national security disaster if not mitigated now. Supply-chain obstructions used as instruments of economic power can influence, intimidate, and alter the diplomatic and military policies of other nations. The Afghan/China REE issue is a recipe for economic disaster in the Western automotive industry. Coordination between Pakistan and the various Sunni VEOs in Afghanistan is a result of the wealth they project stemming from China to facilitate extraction of REEs.

The coalition of state and nonstate actors supporting Chinese REE mining operations maintains varying motivations, ranging from monopoly of REEs to trade routes, security, governance, financial profit, and ethnic cleansing. This section aims to provide a high-level overview of China's, Pakistan's, and the Taliban's priorities in this relationship. Subsequent sections provide corroboration, additional context behind these relationships, and an overview of the involvement of other Sunni VEOs.

***China's main priorities in this coalition are as follows:***

1. **REEs:** To provide for safe and secure extraction of precious REEs to influence, disrupt, and control supply chains that raise China's standing in global diplomatic, military, economic, and trade relations.
2. **Security:** Ensure safety and security of CPEC and BRI trade routes.
3. **Uighurs:** Deter, deny, and degrade the Afghan-based Uighur Muslim population; or worse.
4. **NATO Deterrence:** Counter the United States and NATO in the region, potentially to include securing Bagram Airfield to both project airpower and

to embarrass and undermine the United States in the information environment.



**Figure 1.** Left: Open-source available images taken 2 October 2021, of Bagram Airfield, Parwan. Right: Aerial photographs taken shortly thereafter, proclaiming to indicate the presence of Chinese aircraft.

On the evening of 2 October 2021, photographs posted through open sources by Parwan locals showed Bagram Airfield lit up with lights at night. The base had not been illuminated since US forces cut the power to the base and abandoned it in the middle of the night. Open-source rumors and contacts in the area advised that the Chinese military had occupied the base to conduct “inspections” and were employing local Afghans for various functions around the base. Analysis of open-source aerial photographs resulted in claims that Chinese military aircraft had landed on Bagram Airfield. Rumors from locals indicated that the leader of Chinese intelligence met with Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in Bagram.<sup>43</sup>

**5. Counter India:** Counter India in the region.

**6. Pakistan as Proxy Manager:** China intends to employ Pakistan as the “parent in the room” to manage and mitigate risks associated with various ethnic, religious, tribal, and organizational divisions that could degrade the security situation and disrupt China’s other priorities in Afghanistan.

**7. Recognize Taliban:** China intends to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and likely intends to foster friendly relations with other Sunni VEOs based in Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure China’s own security around REE extraction points and employ proxy forces to accomplish future Chinese gray-area initiatives in the region. Recent open-source intelligence reports indicate that the Taliban is engaged in high-level meetings daily at the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup>

***Pakistan's main priorities in this coalition are as follows:***

1. **Trade Initiatives:** Financial incentivization through CPEC and BRI trade initiatives with China.
2. **Profit for Security:** Likely financial incentivization to guarantee security of REE extraction points. China likely sees Pakistan as the preferred partner to manage and mitigate the complex cultural, tribal, historic, religious, and other divisions between Afghans and various insurgent groups (including the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), AQ, ISIS-K, HQN, and other VEOs) from security threats to major extraction projects.
3. **IMF Loans:** Hedging risks of adverse financial actions by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the West. The IMF is currently providing quarterly loan disbursements to Pakistan due to challenging economic conditions. If the IMF were to find Pakistan in violation of the conditions set forth in its IMF agreements, it could be detrimental to the Pakistani economy. Negative Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reviews (up to an including “blacklisting”) and pressure from the West, which maintains significant clout and voting rights within the IMF, could lead to a high-risk economic environment for Pakistan, up to and including its de-risking from international financial markets and sanctions. The backing of the Chinese state, its banking, and trade relationships, provides Pakistan insurance against worst-case economic conditions that may be more probable considering recent derogatory revelations about Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup>
4. **Afghanistan as a Proxy State:** We believe Pakistan views a Taliban-run Afghanistan as a potential proxy state, and Islamabad is leveraging the ISI and the HQN terrorist group to instill Pakistan’s influence into the Taliban-run government. Islamabad was the first to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but Pakistan’s involvement in ensuring the Taliban’s victory was far more nefarious than that.

***Taliban Islamic Emirate's main priorities in this coalition are as follows:***

1. **Funding:** The Taliban-led regime runs the risk of not being recognized by most of the world’s nations. Perhaps more significant, Afghanistan may become a fully sanctioned jurisdiction. Financial institutions around the world will de-risk Afghanistan, leaving the country isolated from the international banking system and unable to receive IMF loans and international infrastructure and development projects. Economic investment is the single most important factor in the Taliban’s ability to maintain power and govern. The Taliban do not care about the REEs present in their country. This is a regime



that has perpetrated some of the worst human rights atrocities in our lifetimes. It is not concerned that those REEs should belong to the Afghan people. Instead, the Taliban will receive significant financial incentives from China to ensure the security of Chinese REE mining operations.

**2. Governance:** The Taliban's primary concern is to instill governance. The Taliban lacks an understanding of how to employ all the various levers and agencies of government to effectively manage a society. They lack the knowledge and experience to perform simple governance tasks, such as managing international airports and airspace deconfliction. The Taliban will seek China's and Pakistan's assistance to perform these vital functions.

**3. Deterrence:** The presence of great powers like China and regional powers like Pakistan in a Taliban-run Afghanistan serve the Taliban's desire to deter US and NATO forces from returning militarily to Afghanistan in the event the West reconsiders the withdrawal in light of potential future deteriorating human rights conditions, Ex-Ops terrorism activity, or GPC concerns. Based on its history, the Taliban will remain cautious of any powerful nation's military operating within its borders. However, unlike the Soviet Union and United States, the Chinese and Pakistanis are recognizing the legitimacy of a Taliban-led government. So long as their stance remains the same, the Taliban are expected to allow for a continued presence of Chinese and Pakistani forces where it benefits the Taliban's priorities.

### ***GPC in Afghanistan: Russia, Iran, Turkey Strategic Overview***

The Russians realize that Beijing oversees this Afghanistan-based coalition that includes Pakistan and four Sunni VEOs. Moscow also realizes that Pakistan is the indirect gatekeeper, and that is why the Russians approached Pakistan about security cooperation going forward.<sup>46</sup> The Russians will attempt to engage the Pakistanis in their long-term goal of pursuing the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) oil pipeline and may be concerned about Chinese influence being used to discourage Pakistani and Afghan involvement in this project. Moscow will reinforce Russian relationships with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to hedge against these concerns and ensure that a diminishing security environment in Afghanistan does not spill over into Russia. Moscow is attempting to publicly portray itself as a neutral player whose priorities in Afghanistan will not undermine other great powers, but Russia may find that its influence in Afghanistan has waned considering Chinese economic programs that leverage Pakistan and Sunni VEOs as proxies to achieve Beijing's own priorities.<sup>47</sup>

Iran had high hopes for a relationship with a Taliban-run Afghanistan. However, cracks are already beginning to emerge in that plan. Chief among Tehran's

goals was for the Taliban to be recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan globally, for Kabul's assets to be unfrozen, and for Afghanistan to maintain access to the international financial system. Historically, Iran has used *hawala* auctions in both Afghanistan and Iraq to trade its battered Iranian Rial (IRR) currency (also known as the Toman) for other fiat currencies, such as the US dollar.<sup>48</sup> However, it does not appear that the international community will recognize the Taliban, that the Taliban will be able to access Afghan assets frozen by the IMF, or that Afghan financial institutions will be able to clear the US dollar—all of which effectively serve as a death sentence for any financial institution with a global correspondent capability. Just a few years ago, punitive damages to Pakistan's Habib Bank Limited (HBL) by the New York Department of Financial Services (NYDFS), which included fines of \$225 million USD and the loss of its New York correspondent clearing branch, were detrimental to the Pakistani banking system and economy. The Afghan banking system is far more vulnerable now that Pakistan's system was then. Due to its own US-sanctioned, severely degraded economy and currency, Iran acutely understands the soft power of the US financial regulatory system and sees Afghanistan's loss of USD clearing as a critical fail point in Iranian–Taliban relations.<sup>49</sup>

Iran's second hope for Afghanistan was to have an excellent trade partner. The ongoing violence and disenfranchisement of Shiite groups such as the Hazaras and population groups in Herat will be a major point of contention for Iran. Iran's power emerges from the religious leadership wing and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) ability to leverage a centralized command-and-control structure over hundreds of Shiite militia groups (SMG) globally. If Tehran were to ignore violence against Shiite groups in Afghanistan by the Taliban regime, Iran would risk losing legitimacy among hundreds of other groups that currently answer to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Tehran also hoped that the Taliban regime could serve as a mutual interlocutor to solidify a more robust relationship with China that would help Iran hedge against US and partner-nation scrutiny and to evade Western sanctions. However, Beijing stands to gain little from this relationship, and it adds a dynamic of complexity for China to have to play middleman in Islamic sectarian politics between Iran and Pakistan. While Iran publicly claims to be happy about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the post-drawdown environment may not have emerged in the manner Tehran had hoped. US policy makers should keep this in mind in any ongoing discussions around a new Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran as a point of leverage for the United States that will make Iran more desperate for a resolution. In mid-October 2021, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was quoting Russian president Vladimir

Putin's talking points on the prospect for the United States losing global legitimacy if it were to renege on the next JCPOA. Behnam Ben Taleblu, a senior fellow specializing in Iranian security and political issues at Washington's Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, indicated that Iran's "Eastern orientation" foreign policy intended to utilize Russia and China to "turn the superpower into the supplicant" and to "tempt Washington into premature sanctions relief." We believe Iran values Russian military influence and Chinese economic influence in such a scenario but may find a warmer partner in Russia than China for JCPOA relief talks.<sup>50</sup>

We are beginning to see what appears to be further cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria, where both are supporting the mostly Shiite regime of Bashar al-Assad and countering new incursions of Turkey into Syria.<sup>51</sup> If Moscow does not gain the foothold Russia hoped in Afghanistan due to China and Pakistan, it may pivot toward increased cooperation with Iran in the region. Tehran also may shift toward increased cooperation with Russia to ensure Iran's security interests and to increase opportunities for sanctions evasion, potentially going so far as to leverage Russia to assist in JCPOA negotiations on its behalf. It is important to remember that Russia and Iran also have mutual interests in the energy industry and in Venezuela, which has security and energy industry implications.

Russia in turn ironically may view the United States as an ideal partner on the Afghanistan problem set going forward. Moscow has likely assessed that the probability of the United States militarily re-entering Afghanistan in the short-to mid-term is very low. However, Moscow likely understands the US priority to evacuate AmCits and SIVs from Afghanistan and recognizes that the Afghan-bordering countries of Pakistan, Iran, and China are not friendly for US facilitated extractions. Therefore, Moscow may attempt to leverage Russian influence in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to aid US evacuation efforts in exchange for humanitarian aid, a seat at the table in JCPOA discussions, and security cooperation in Syria—up to and including the re-evaluation of the Assad regime by the United States.

Russia will likely use the Syria conflict to paint Bashar al-Assad as the victim of ISIS's re-emergence and reconstitution from its al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) days. Additionally, Moscow will highlight ongoing Turkish aggressions in Syria against Assad, while concurrently portraying Iran-backed SMGs as having played a pivotal role in ISIS-Core's defeat, portraying the Turks as undermining US relationships with the Kurds, and using these points of justification to show mutual interests ahead of serving as a potential intermediary in JCPOA talks.

Separately, trade relations apparently halted between Iran and Turkey in mid-October 2021. This follows news that Turkey signed a trilateral defense agreement

with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Iran immediately responded with the announcement of a bilateral security agreement with Armenia. These actions, taken in aggregate with the current security situation in Syria, portray a new era “Caspian Sea Scenario” with GPC implications. While Turkey’s agreement with the natural gas wealthy Shiite Azerbaijani regime no doubt caused shock and dismay in Iran, the situation also presents complex risks in the Caucasus region for Russia. We expect Moscow will seek considerable discussions with the United States on these issues for security assurances. These collective considerations could serve as part of Moscow’s indirect plan to counter Chinese GPC emergence that is beginning to encroach on Russia’s priorities, while still projecting strength, deterrence, and risk mitigation in the face of NATO.

### **Section Three: Nonstate Actors, Organized Crime, and Terrorist External Operations**

*I think the intelligence community currently assesses that both ISIS–K and Al Qaeda have the intent to conduct external operations, including against the United States, but neither currently has the capability to do so. We could see ISIS–K generate that capability in somewhere between 6 or 12 months. I think the current assessments by the intelligence community is that Al Qaeda would take a year or two to reconstitute that capability, and . . . we have to remain vigilant against that possibility.<sup>52</sup>*

—Colin Kahl, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy

### **The Hybrid Threat in Post-Drawdown Afghanistan**

The funding of a terrorist organization is crucial to its ability to wage insurgency, and to plan and execute Ex-Ops attacks outside of its primary jurisdiction of operations. Our doctrinal and institutional views of terrorism and transnational organized crime have changed significantly since 11 September 2001. Back then, we viewed AQ as a group of mujahideen funded by wealthy Saudi oil financiers and networked through the Pashtun people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Twenty years later, we recognize the direct “hybrid threat” network convergence between terrorism and organized crime, such as drug trafficking. This has resulted in many terrorist groups themselves developing into hybrid threats that emit the characteristics of not only a terrorist group but also those of a criminal syndicate and/or elements of a hostile state actor. Certainly, in the case of the Taliban’s new Islamic Emirate, the Taliban now clearly fits the characteristics of a drug cartel, terrorist group, and hostile state actor.

*Hybrid threat* is the network intersection between one or more state or nonstate threat organizations operating in at least two threat classifications. Those threat classifications could include terrorism; hostile foreign intelligence operations; or-

ganized crime in the form of drug, weapons, or human trafficking; or offensive cyber operations.



**Figure 2.** Left: “Hybrid Threat” convergence theory. Right: Hybrid Threat Finance (HTF) targeting doctrine. Source: Section 2’s Threat Finance Academy (TFA) (s2fis.com)

*Hybrid threat finance (HTF)* is the theory that those network intersections are often materialized transactionally, meaning that hybrid threat networks are in fact *networks* as a direct result of their financial relationships. In the modern day, most terrorist organizations are predominantly funded through their own criminal enterprises. This includes various revenue-generation events, such as KFR, fraud, and the organized criminal trafficking of narcotics, weapons, humans, antiquities, minerals, gemstones, and endangered wildlife. Terrorist organizations have also found ways to enforce a *zakat* (religious tax) on civilians in areas where they have seized territorial control. This tax can range from utilities, such as the Taliban’s control of the Kajaki Dam, to paid highway checkpoints, and traditional income taxes that would normally be paid to one’s government. Terrorist organizations also engage in fundraising via witting and unwitting donors to nongovernment organization charities and, occasionally, raise direct funds in cryptocurrency through the Dark Web.

Revenue generation is not the only critical component to terrorism finance. The ability to obfuscate and access funds for operational sustainment through money laundering is one of the most important success or failure criteria of any terrorist group. Understanding the importance of revenue generation and money laundering to terrorism helps to inform the process used by the US government to engage in counter threat finance (CTF) preventative and forensic targeting practices.<sup>53</sup> Terrorist organizations often rely on unconventional and Islamic banking practices to launder their ill-gotten proceeds. This includes the use of cash-intensive dealer-brokers known as *hawwaladers*, who operate *hawala* currency exchange businesses. These *hawwaladers* accept debts from their counterparts on behalf of cus-

tomers and log those debts on handwritten and digital ledgers. When debts are small, *hawaladers* can settle them through remittance programs like Western Union or MoneyGram, programs like PayPal, or general-purpose reloadable (GPR) “open-loop” prepaid cards. When a large amount of debt has accumulated from one *hawalader* to another in Afghanistan, that debt is often settled by an intermediary known as a *saraf*, who operates a sarafi exchange business. The sarafs have access to accounts in the formal banking system and can settle debts through wire transfers, online automated clearing house transfers, or cryptocurrency.

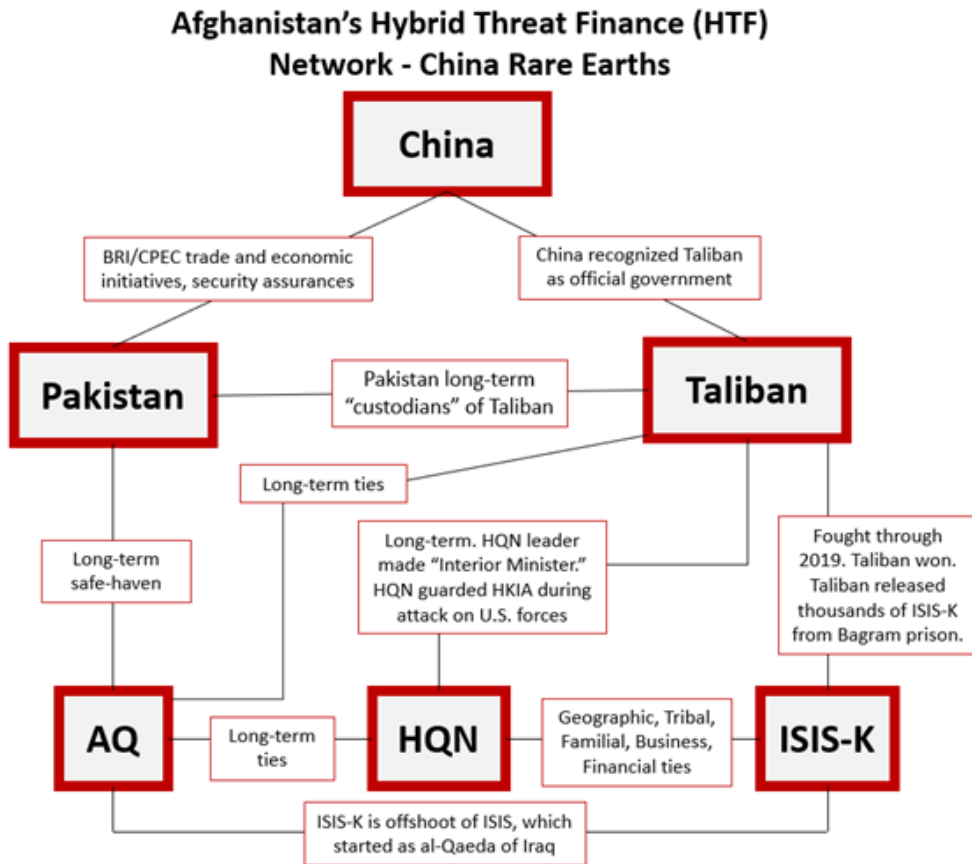
### Counter Threat Finance Targeting Philosophies

*Preventive Targeting:* Targeting source illicit revenue-generating activities as they occur, to prevent the enemy’s ongoing operational sustainment (preventive measures).

*Forensic Targeting:* Forensic analysis of the enemy’s placement, layering, and integration of funds designed to provide anonymity to their illicit funding source(s). Used to identify, freeze, seize, and retrace assets to high-value individuals (forensic measures).<sup>54</sup>

The United States and its allies have not recognized the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and have worked with the IMF to ensure that the Taliban’s new regime does not have access to the billions of dollars in coffers that had been intended for the previous US-backed government. Additionally, the United States has cut off US dollar clearing to the Afghan banking system—a banking death sentence that has led to a global de-risking of the Afghan banking system.

China and Pakistan intend to fill this void by funding and laundering the proceeds of terrorism in Afghanistan in exchange for the monetary and supply-chain controls they gain through REE extraction. Beijing and Islamabad have taken the approach of recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate power in Afghanistan and presenting themselves as business partners to help with revenue generation and governance. Afghanistan- and Pakistan-based VEOs intend to utilize the support of the Chinese and Pakistani banking systems as intermediaries to regain access to the global financial system. China’s banking sector is notorious for privacy laws used to facilitate global money laundering and terrorist financing. China’s incursion into Afghanistan to extract resources is also a tremendous funding opportunity for the VEOs. In the current environment, the Taliban and other VEOs operating within Afghanistan’s geographic borders have limited capability to transact internationally, which is thought to be a critical component of terrorist financing necessary to execute Ex-Ops attacks on the West.



**Figure 3. Relationship between Afghanistan's hybrid threat finance network and China's desire for REEs**

We assess the current primary HTF network model in Afghanistan to include China, Pakistan, the Taliban, ISIS-K, AQ, and HQN. These VEOs likely see this relationship as mutually beneficial, as the environment for revenue generation through China/Pakistan financial incentivization and the trafficking of narcotics, minerals, gemstones, people, and weapons are nearly unobstructed. Additionally, the prospect for utilization of the Chinese and Pakistani financial systems will enable these groups to access, operationalize, and relocate funds globally to facilitate ongoing governance and Ex-Ops aspirations. We believe these groups view the relationship with China and Pakistan as a business partnership that is unlikely to interfere with their operations.

The Taliban has maintained longstanding good relationships with AQ and the HQN, which have been well-corroborated over decades of research and academic white papers. These relationships were further cemented through recent open-

source reporting. Osama bin Laden's former security chief, Amin ul-Haq, returned to his hometown in Nangarhar to a celebrity welcome captured on video one day before the US withdrawal, after taking refuge in Pakistan for the past two decades.<sup>55</sup> We believe that the Pakistani ISI intelligence service has long provided safe haven to AQ members. Additionally, AQ amir Ayman al Zawahiri released his first video in four years to congratulate the Taliban after the US withdrawal.<sup>56</sup> On the HQN side, the Taliban promoted Sirajuddin Haqqani as the interior minister of its Islamic Emirate. That role mirrors the position of Pakistan's interior minister, who recently admitted that Pakistan has served as the "custodian" to the Taliban for the past two decades. We also observed HQN's Badri 313 unit placed in charge of security at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) prior to an ISIS-K attack that killed 13 US service members. The HQN is believed to have strong ties with Pakistan's ISI, oftentimes functioning as a proxy for ISI operations. In fact, most of these VEOs have had long-term positive relationships with one another, with the exception of the relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K. However, we believe that ISIS-K will "turn their turbans," an old Afghan reference meaning to shift one's loyalties in favor of the victor, to find mutual ground.

***Understanding the Taliban/ISIS-K Relationship and the 26 August 2021 ISIS-K Suicide Attack on Abbey Gate at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), Kabul***

Explaining the relationship between the Taliban and ISIS-K is complicated; however, it is a critical relationship to understand in a post-US drawdown environment. Although the news cycle of stories suggests ISIS-K is in a full-fledged conflict with the Taliban,<sup>57</sup> there is most likely a working agreement between the two organizations, up to and including the Taliban's use of ISIS-K as a proxy force. The Taliban's relationship with ISIS-K has long been contentious. ISIS-K and the Taliban were involved in significant fighting for years until mid- to late 2019, when the Taliban nearly obliterated ISIS-K, pushing the latter's remaining fighters through Nangarhar Province back into Pakistan.

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized Bagram Airfield uncontested from the ANDSF. According to Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, the number of ISIS-K prisoners in Bagram prison was "in the thousands." Upon seizing the prison, the Taliban executed ISIS-K leader Abu Omar Khorasani and eight of his deputies but released thousands of ISIS-K fighters. The Taliban could have executed these prisoners instead, but it did not. The simple act of executing ISIS-K's leadership



and releasing the rank-and-file fighters appears to indicate that the Taliban may have placed conditions upon their safe release.<sup>58</sup>

On 26 August 2021, just 11 days after the Taliban's release of these prisoners, known ISIS-K terrorist Abdul Rehman al-Loghri detonated a suicide vest at the Abbey Gate of HKIA, killing 11 US Marines, one Sailor, and one Soldier and 170 Afghan citizens. Eighteen additional US troops and many additional Afghan citizens were wounded. We have not observed any credible information indicating that members of the HQN or Taliban were killed. According to Congressional hearings on the suicide attack, al-Loghri was among those released on 15 August 2021 from Bagram Airfield after the Taliban seized the base.<sup>59</sup>

At the time of the attack, the Taliban had entrusted airport security to the HQN's Badri 313 unit. There were no Taliban or HQN Badri 313 members reported killed or wounded during this suicide attack. Members of ISIS-K and the HQN are believed to maintain familial, tribal, business (smuggling), and financial (*hawala*) ties along the eastern Afghanistan border with Pakistan.

The complex history of Sunni terrorism has made it challenging for Westerners to understand the alliances and rivalries among various groups. In Afghanistan, Westerners are currently struggling to understand where ISIS-K fits in the Sunni VEO landscape. We take the position that ISIS-K may in fact be currently operating as a proxy force for the Taliban. This is in contrast with other analysts who believe that ISIS-K is still involved in a large-scale conflict with the Taliban. This distinction is important for policy makers, who, according to recent media reports, were or are deliberating the possibility of intelligence sharing with the Taliban against ISIS-K. Weeks after the attacks, during US/Taliban meetings in Doha, Qatar, the Taliban emerged from the talks indicating that the group refused to cooperate via intelligence sharing with the United States against ISIS-K. The Taliban's refusal to ensure that Afghanistan does not emerge as a global hub for terrorism Ex-Ops is a clear violation of the Doha Agreement.<sup>60</sup>

These collective activities appear to demonstrate operational precoordination and an ongoing working relationship among the Pakistani leadership (and by virtue the ISI), the Taliban, AQ, the HQN, and ISIS-K and indicates that the Taliban may have leveraged ISIS-K as a proxy strawman layer of separation to oversee and/or facilitate the attack on US service members and Afghan civilians at HKIA on 26 August 2021. We are concerned that the public face of their relationship may remain contentious for the Taliban to continue to leverage ISIS-K members for operations that require "plausible deniability," including KFR operations. If there is a working relationship between the Taliban, AQ, HQN, and ISIS-K to operate in Afghanistan for mutually agreed upon and beneficial deliverables, we grow concerned about the prospect of the Taliban potentially declar-

ing an Islamic caliphate to consolidate power and increase funding from the Islamic world.

### **Prospect for a Taliban-led Caliphate Declaration and a Risk Comparison to ISIS's Former De Facto Caliphate**

As Afghanistan emerges into the global hub of terrorism, the prospect for an Afghan-sourced, facilitated, and/or financed Ex-Ops terrorist attack by a Sunni VEO against the United States, its interests globally, and its allies will now be higher than at any point in history. The partnerships of AQ, ISIS–K, and HQN, presumably facilitated through Pakistan's ISI, with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, is laying the framework for a potential caliphate declaration that would be indescribably more dangerous and capable than ISIS ever was in the height of its self-proclaimed de facto caliphate.

ISIS was born through a confluence of events that included AQI's reconstitution after former president Barrack Obama's campaign promised an Iraq withdrawal order, the Muslim Brotherhood's hijacking of the Arab Spring movement in North Africa (and that that organization's subsequent takeover, loss, and expulsion from Egypt during the Mohamed Morsi era), and the proliferation of young Sunni jihadists to Syria to fight the Shiite forces of Bashar al-Assad. ISIS never had legitimate state recognition, true governance, major nation-state partnerships, or major nonstate Sunni VEO partnerships. While they stumbled into the Captagon business, they never possessed a truly global drug empire like the Taliban does; nor did ISIS accumulate the level of conventional arms the Taliban just seized from the ANDSF.

The Taliban is not just stronger than ISIS was at its inception; it is almost incomparably stronger. Despite this, it took three distinct, unfriendly, and powerful groups to destroy and reseize ISIS's de facto territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria. That included the United States and some NATO allies augmenting the Kurds; Russia augmenting the military forces of Syria's Assad regime; and Iran's IRGC, its Quds Force, and the support Tehran's forces received from numerous SMG. These efforts were not resisted or countered by any other major nation-state, except for Turkey's incursion into bordering Kurdish held territories, which were efforts that occurred late in the conflict and were focused on limiting the capabilities of the Kurds rather than prohibiting the degradation of ISIS. The political impetus to repeat such a Defeat ISIS-like coalition effort in the international community currently does not exist and is highly unlikely to exist any time soon. Rather, the opposite is most likely, with China, Pakistan, Iran, and potentially, to

a lesser extent, Russia collectively focusing operations on preventing the United States, NATO, and other partners from militarily re-entering Afghanistan.

Although many national security policy experts believe we will be back in Afghanistan soon, our capacity to reverse course in the near to mid future is limited due to the full collapse of the Afghan government, leaving the Taliban with billions of dollars' worth of military equipment, involvement of near-peer state adversaries filling the vacuum post the US withdrawal, and the extent that those adversaries value the potential economic opportunities of REE mining, energy pipelines, and other trade deals—as well as the resolve of those nations to prevent the United States from securing an air base in Afghanistan that could be used to kinetically strike their interests.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **1. Department of State:**

#### *a. DOS/Foreign Service:*

- i. Recognize the NRF as an ally of the United States, up to and including the initiation of diplomatic engagement—and, if the conditions are right, recognition of the NRF as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.
- ii. Formally refuse to recognize the Taliban's Islamic Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.
- iii. Engage with allies and neutral jurisdictions on the prospect of accepting additional Afghan refugees.

#### *a. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs:*

- i. Budget appropriations for training to assist Afghan refugees with assimilating into Western cultures. Of particular concern is a 27 August 2021 study from the Center for Immigration Studies that reviewed the crime rates for Afghan refugee men living in Austria. That study revealed that Afghan men living in Austria were 22.1 times more likely to engage in rape, 35.7 times more likely to engage in robbery, and 10.1 times more likely to engage in violence against police officers.<sup>61</sup> Cultural sensitivity, criminal law, and assimilation training are necessary assurances to help facilitate additional refugee patriation pacts and mitigate the risks associated with culture shock, lack of understanding of our Western laws, and assimilation issues.

#### *a. US Agency for International Development (USAID):*

- i. Humanitarian assistance (HA) assurances to the Taliban regime and NRF in exchange for safe facilitation of US- and ally-supported

evacuation of AmCits, SIV, Priority 2 (P2), and prioritized high-risk individuals and their families.

ii. HA operations should prioritize medical needs. Additional appropriations are needed for lodging, medical screening, and legal documentation support. Time constraint hurdles in Afghan refugee medical screening have primarily involved:

3. Medical:

a. COVID-19: Waiting for testing results (nonrapid test), contact tracing, and isolation periods.

b. Tuberculosis: Many individuals from the region demonstrate false positive Tuberculosis results and require follow-on chest X-rays to mitigate Tuberculosis diagnosis.

3. Legal/Documentation Support:

a. Many Afghans do not possess passports, or their passports have expired.

b. Some Afghans do not have Tazkeras (Afghan identification cards), or they have expired.

c. Some Afghans have presented fraudulent or fictitious documentation, which makes positive identification challenging. Counterintelligence (CI) screenings via interviews and screenings through various databases (Office of Foreign Assets Control [OFAC], terrorist, and other watchlists) are challenging without positive identification.

2. Department of Treasury:

a. Conduct a thorough review on the conditions set forth in Pakistan's IMF loans, their periodic reviews, and loan disbursement cycles. There may be sufficient derogatory information available to impact Pakistan's ability to access additional loan disbursements going forward. We recommend engagement with the IMF, World Bank, Egmont Group, and FATF on this and other programs. We recommend significant US engagement on the next Pakistani FATF mutual evaluation through the presentation of derogatory information that corroborates Pakistan's direct impact in violating the terms of its loans, foreign aid support, military aid support, and other international agreements through terrorism financing and actions hostile to the United States, NATO, and other allies. We should share derogatory information with partner and international authorities on Pakistan's performance incident to their FATF and IMF periodic reviews, which considers recently demonstrated and corroborated material and financial support to terrorism, corruption, and

hostile actions against the United States and NATO interests.<sup>62</sup> There is a historical precedence to IMF loan disbursements being blocked in Kenya for similar reasons. The United States should explore these options.

- a. *Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN)*:
  - i. Issuance of public release instructing US regulated financial institutions to issue suspicious activity reports (SAR) around key industries and relationships that associate Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban REE mining operations, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services, and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS).
- a. *Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC)*:
  - i. Targeted designations intended to degrade key industries and relationships that associate Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban REE mining operations, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services, and UAS.
  - ii. Refugee screening support.
- 3. New York Department of Financial Services:**
  - a. Regulate financial institutions in line with NYDFS Part 504 guidance to monitor and report suspicious activity associated with the nexus of Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban REE mining operations, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services, and UAS.
- 4. US Department of Commerce:**
  - a. Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS):
    - i. Targeted-entity listing packages associated with the Chinese, Pakistan, and Taliban nexus around REE mining, BRI/CPEC initiatives, financial services and UAS.
    - ii. US Export License restrictions.
- 5. Department of Defense:**
  - a. Counterintelligence (CI):
    - i. CI support to refugee screening.
  - a. Information Operations (IO):
    - i. Pakistan is actively engaged in an online IO campaign generating propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation that strongly refutes, counters, and attacks Westerners promoting the well-corroborated stories listed above. These IOs are friendly toward China and the Taliban; attempt to mitigate public connections to AQ, HQN, and ISIS-K; and appear to be precoordinated and aligned with the messaging campaign coming out of China. This behavior is not restricted to media outlets. Rather, it predominantly takes place in social media campaigns by individual account posters, in a coordinated and concerted manner.

ii. A cross-GCC dedicated IO apparatus incorporating elements of INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, SOCOM, the interagency, and allied jurisdictions to counter Chinese malign influence, REE mining, intellectual property theft, ongoing planning to seize Taiwan, efforts to lay telecommunications infrastructure globally, hostile military maneuvers, and trade/economic intimidation tactics. These efforts should also target Pakistan as a gatekeeper to China's operations in Afghanistan.

iii. IOs should inform the world clearly and concisely of China's intent to do the following:

1. Control global supply chains via dominance in technology, REE mining, intellectual property theft, and complex corporate beneficial ownership of US and other jurisdictions' high technology companies.

2. Control, propagate, and suppress the information environment via ownership of the telecommunications infrastructure (satellites, ocean lines, and cell towers), hardware (ZTE, Huawei), software, and data/internet, leading to loss of personal and national independence for compliant jurisdictions.

3. Utilize all elements of Chinese national power to intimidate, threaten, and potentially invade noncompliant jurisdictions.

iv. These aggregate efforts should accurately depict China as a less-desirable partner than the United States, whose foreign policy does not seek to strip partners of their independence, individual rights, or an information environment free from suppression.

v. This effort should be scoped to refute, delegitimize, and counter an apparent Chinese, Pakistani, and Taliban Islamic Emirate coordinated information campaign using propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation to control the information environment surrounding their relationships with one another and with other Sunni VEOs in Afghanistan.

## **6. Department of Homeland Security:**

- i. Refugee screening support.

## **Summary**

A post-US drawdown Afghanistan plays a significant role in the GPC with China and is likely to serve as the global epicenter of Ex-Ops terrorist threats to the homeland for the near-term future. Beijing believes China can win the GPC if it can dominate in emerging tech and IOs. Both of those LOEs require it to

extract significant REEs to choke the United States out of critical supply chains. The threat of Afghan-sourced terrorists engaging in Ex-Ops attacks against US and allied interests are anticipated to be viable within 6–12 months.

An allied, interagency, soft-power-centric solution may have the dual benefits of degrading Chinese REEs extraction operations and threat finance denial of terrorist financing/money laundering by various Afghan-based Sunni VEOs to plan, sustain, and operationalize proceeds into high-profile attacks. For US and allied force denial and degradation operations to be successful, we assert that HA operations are necessary to evacuate remaining US persons, Westerners, valuable SIV applicants, and additional high-value vulnerable persons from Afghanistan. We are concerned that failing to do so could enable a ripe environment for KFR, which could give our enemies negotiating leverage that counters our soft-power capabilities. While the US military no longer occupies Afghanistan, the fight for this nation is far from over. We encourage our leaders to formulate a strategy to assist in the process of devising post-drawdown solutions that counter our state and nonstate adversaries' Afghanistan-based operations. ✪

#### **Maj Gen Buck Elton, USAF, Retired**

Major General Elton retired in October 2020 after 31 years of service. He flew MC-130H, MC-130E, and MQ-1s in Air Force Special Operations Command; commanded at the squadron, group, wing, and task force levels; and was the commanding general of the Special Operations Joint Task Force in Afghanistan. He also served as the deputy commanding general of Joint Special Operations Command, the deputy director for special operations and counterterrorism on the Joint Staff, and director of operations of the US Special Operations Command.

#### **CPT Joshua Fruth, US Army Reserves**

Captain Fruth is the cofounder and chief strategy officer of risk consultancy Section 2 Financial Intelligence Solutions (s2fis.com) and was previously the director of anti-money laundering advisory services at New Jersey-based Matrix International Financial Services (Matrix-IFS). Josh served in the public sector as a US Army Intelligence Officer, civilian Police officer, and federal contractor. He completed assignments within CENTCOM, INDOPA-COM, US Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (USACAPOC), US Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM), the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Special Operations Joint Task Force–Afghanistan (SOJTF-A), and US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry & Security (BIS). Mr. Fruth spent a decade as an inner-city law enforcement officer, combating the criminal trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and persons and interdicting gang, domestic, and sexual violence.

Fruth is a published contributor, trainer, and keynote speaker featured by various major national and international media outlets and technology, financial crime, and banking associations. He is an honor graduate of the Special Operations Forces Captains Career Course (SOFCCC) at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWC), distinguished honor graduate of the Basic Intelligence Officer's Course (MIBOLC) at the US Army Intelligence Center of Excellence (USAICoE), and a graduate of the Fort Benning School of Infantry and Ohio OPOTA Police Academy. Josh previously reported to Maj Gen Buck Elton as his lead advisor on counter threat finance and counternarcotics.

#### **Dr. Vanessa Neumann**

Dr. Neumann is a Venezuelan–American entrepreneur, author, diplomat, and global political thought leader. Since 2010, Dr. Neumann has led the Latin American consultancy she founded, Asymmetrica, specializing in resolving complex investor issues (including litigation) by finding diplomatic, political, and commercial solutions that are of-

ten outside the scope of more traditional approaches. Her first commercial book, *Blood Profits*, was published in 2017; a Brazilian edition, *Lucros de Sangue*, followed in 2018.

In 2019–2020, Dr. Neumann took a sabbatical to serve as ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland for the interim president of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó, whom she accompanied to a bilateral meeting at Number 10 Downing Street with UK prime minister Boris Johnson. During her tenure, she set a global precedent by freezing \$2.2 billion in sovereign gold bullion at the Bank of England, away from the kleptocratic and illegitimate Maduro regime. Dr. Neumann has done fieldwork in the reintegration of Colombian paramilitaries and was consequently the academic reviewer for the US military's Special Operations Command (SOCOM) teaching text on counterinsurgency in Colombia, ARIS Series. In 2018 she launched the *Golden Hydra* report on illicit finance in South America's Tri-Border Area at the US Congress and testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 2019. Previously, she served four years in the Task Force Against Illicit Trafficking at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

She holds a PhD in political philosophy from Columbia University and a current fellowship at Yale University's Global Justice Program.

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