

# Successful Insurgency: A Case Study of the Taliban Insurgency and Its Success in the Afghan War in 2021

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## *Abstract*

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*This article will try to analyze the strategy played by the Taliban insurgency group in the success of winning its insurgency in the Afghan conflict against the government and its international coalition, namely the US. The results of the study show that the success of the Taliban in winning the Afghan conflict is inseparable from the Taliban's ability to integrate various strategic instruments both military and non-military forces to support its insurgency. In this case, besides relying on military power, the Taliban cleverly launched a softer strategy (soft power) both by means of diplomacy, the use of social media to conduct propaganda and other softer ways. All of this was attempted for no other reason than to seek support for the legitimacy of the Taliban's insurgency movement.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rebellion in the history of human civilization is a common occurrence, and it is an event that each time has its own unique dimensions. In general, the causes of most recent uprisings can be easily linked to revolutionary situations that may explode into spontaneous revolutions and give birth to a group of leaders who then begin to organize and carry out rebellions.

Historically, the insurgency movement was initially seen as a form of resistance movement against an entity either government or state by using armed force where violence is the main way taken in the success of the movement. However, over time, especially in the 1930s to 1940s, the conditions for the use of armed force were changed to a softer power approach, such as through diplomacy efforts. This was done because a rebellion movement has political aims and objectives and is wrapped in ideological programs that in the last decade have developed to formulate goals as a form of resistance.

One of the insurgent groups that cannot be ruled out in situations and conditions or dynamics in international political phenomena is the Taliban group. The Taliban's rebellion and war against the US in Afghanistan emerged after the events that shocked the world in 2001, this event was triggered by terrorism attacks on symbols of US power supremacy, namely the Pentagon and the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11, 2001 (Widyaningrum, 2018). This was the initial cause of the Taliban insurgent movement and the beginning of a tragic story in Afghanistan.

The Taliban insurgent group has recently, especially in 2021, received attention from the world community and also from some scholars of international politics. This condition is due to its success in taking back the reins of leadership in Afghanistan. This success suddenly made the world surprised, how could the Taliban, which was a rebel group, built from nests of erratic participants and whose strength was not as great as the strength of the US and the Afghan Government, have been able to fight back and succeed in its rebel movement.

In theory, the Afghan security forces, which are predicted to number more than 300,000 people plus assistance from US forces and their allies (Iswara, 2021), should be able to win the war that has been going on in Afghanistan. However, in fact, the Afghan government and the US and its allies have always struggled in the face of Taliban resistance

on the battlefield. This fact has become a big question and has become a spotlight, especially on the Taliban insurgent group, which can indirectly be said to be the winner in this two-decade war.

Many previous writings have explained the causes of the victory of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. The first classification is related to the possible failure of international intervention to establish a strong and legitimate authority in Afghanistan. This failure has an impact on the ability of the Afghan authorities to function as a state entity, so that the co-optation of all elements of the state's power sources is fragile. Jonathan Schroden (2021) explains that the ANDSF's weak posture and low morale were caused by Afghanistan's political and security leaders, as well as the government's major failure to design and implement an effective counter-strategy as the Taliban campaign developed (Schroden, 2021).

Another cause is the lack of understanding of Afghanistan's ally, the US, in providing an assistance model to the ANDSF that is only oriented towards material capabilities without being accompanied by non-material strength assistance (eg morale). According to Schroden, non-material assistance is very important because the Taliban plays a non-material power, namely a large cohesion force that the ANDSF does not have (Schroden, 2021). This issue is also described by Anne Patterson & James Hatch (2022), whose point of emphasis is on strategic warfare and the failure to implement various policy and execution objectives. Strategic warfare here is related to the lack of clarity of Afghan, US and allied authorities in articulating credible and coherent war objectives and strategies. This condition was further exacerbated by a failure of coordination, resulting in policy changes without careful consideration (Patterson & Hatch, 2022).

Florian Weigand (2022) similarly explains that the failure was a combination of three interrelated factors; First, the various actors that were part of the intervention in the country had competing agendas, especially with the "War on Terror" undermining human rights and state-building. Second, the gap between the internationally supported Afghan state and its citizens is growing and getting bigger with time, mainly due to the implementation of risk mitigation measures that have not reached the grassroots. Third, the everyday interactions of Afghans with the state are often perceived as corrupt and extractive, making it difficult for the state to convey that it is working in the interests of its citizens (Weigand, 2022).

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Weigand's argument is reinforced by the writings of Anthony King (2022); Joseph J. Collins (2023), who overall conclude that the main factors in this defeat were the historical difficulties in governing Afghanistan, two inefficient and corrupt Afghan republican governments, an ineffective US strategy, operational shortcomings of US forces, an ineffective Afghan military, Pakistan's dual policy, and the strength and determination of the Taliban (King, 2022; Collins, 2023). The bottom line is that the Afghan authorities and the ANDSF were not designed to succeed when the US and allies began withdrawing from Afghanistan.

The next classification of previous research is an explanation of the Taliban's victory in the context of the strategies played. Aditya Gawdara Shivamurthy (2022) explained that the Taliban's victory in taking over Kabul in 2021 was inseparable from the internal mobilization strategy played by the Taliban. The Taliban in this case legitimizes its resistance by forming an identity between "us" and "them" which refers to who is a "supporter" and who is an "opponent". To support its legitimacy, the Taliban plays a western colonial/occupation narrative that focuses on issues of violence, human rights violations, and discrimination that can trigger massive resistance against the US and its allies (Shivamurthy, 2022). The use of non-material strategies is also explained by Robin Burda (2023), but in a different context. His analysis shows that the Taliban's psychological operations (PSYOP) through cyber facilities, have played a significant role in the Taliban's victory (Burda, 2023).

Reviewing some of these studies, a common thread can be drawn, namely that there is no research that explains specifically and comprehensively the soft power strategy used by the Taliban in winning the war in Afghanistan in 2021. Therefore, in this article, the author aims to analyze the success of insurgency group diplomacy, in this case the Taliban group's efforts to gain international attention or sympathy correlate with its capabilities and maneuvers at home. To achieve the purpose of writing, the author will try to answer the formulation of the problem, namely "What soft power strategy did the Taliban launch in winning its insurgency in Afghanistan?".

Through the data that has been collected and managed by the author, the main argument of this article is that the success of the Taliban in taking back the reins of government in Afghanistan is inseparable from the efforts of this group in mobilizing power to support its movement. The strategy put forward is a soft power strategy, in addition to the use of hard power strategies, in this case the Taliban emphasizes the role of

its strategy, which is to take soft efforts, for example through diplomacy, propaganda or other soft ways to gain support from the people inside and the support of the international community. The Taliban did this because of the asymmetrical conditions in the Afghan war, namely the imbalance of resources or power possessed by the Taliban as an insurgent group and the Afghan Government and its US allies as government actors.

## **II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To sharpen the analytical knife, in this article the author will use a conceptual framework related to the prerequisites for winning an insurgency movement. McCormick (2011) states that one of the most important components in an insurgency or counterinsurgency is the international community (McCormick, 2011). This is necessary because it cannot be denied that the international community has a major contribution to the success of an insurgency movement in fighting for its political interests. For this reason, many insurgent groups in several parts of the world currently make the international community an important thing to approach. Rebel movements continue to see these opportunities, and always try as much as possible to get them to gain wider support. This is because it is possible that through such external support, the expected things can be obtained such as moral, political, financial, and military support (Galula, 2006), and even sanctuary support will be easily obtained (O'Neill, 2005).

The importance of external support, in this case from the international community, so in this contemporary era many rebel groups are found to prioritize the use of softer forces such as using a soft approach or soft power strategy rather than hard power. The soft power approach referred to here is an approach that emphasizes non-physical strengths such as diplomacy that is directly related to efforts to build the image of an organization. This means that with soft power, rebel groups can influence other parties by building a positive image that prioritizes values, such as human rights, politics and other rights. These methods are then applied by rebel groups as a form of strategy to achieve their political goals.

The rebel groups' interest in softer means of appealing to the international community is not only due to their need for material resources such as weapons supplies. But as the weaker party in the conflict, these rebel groups must seek to improve the relative balance of resources at their disposal. In addition, recognition from the international community is needed to support the legitimacy of their resistance. This is so, because it is possible that the presence of both international and regional communities will have a major

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influence on the success of the insurgent movement, providing a forum where insurgents may have the opportunity to argue their aspirations for assistance from the international community (Scott, 1970). For this reason, strategies applying diplomacy as part of the soft power approach must be prioritized by rebel groups if they want to see their political goals achieved. This strategy becomes an option when the direct approach in the form of armed force no longer provides optimal results.

Furthermore, Galula (2006) said that the prerequisite for the success of rebellion is not only the strength of external support, but also support from within, namely the support of the place where they operate the rebellion. In this case, the sympathy of the people (supportive population) is the most important part to be maximized in supporting the rebellion movement. To maximize this support, what insurgency groups need to pay attention to is related to their ability to manipulate a problem. This relates to the fact that insurgency groups are not limited to the choice of a single cause, but rather are required to find an overarching cause, such as echoing the premise of anti-colonialism in society, which itself incorporates all political, social, economic, racial, religious and cultural causes. This tactic has many advantages by selecting causes specifically tailored to the various groups in society that the insurgency seeks to attract (Galula, 2006). Therefore, nothing obliges the insurgent to stick to the same cause if another one looks more favorable.

In the end, the prerequisites for the success of the rebellion that have been described are inseparable from the asymmetrical situation between strong actors and weak actors. The asymmetry referred to here is about the paradoxical conditions that occur, where the two actors involved in a war, but have a significant imbalance of power between one another. Asymmetrical in this case describes the conditions of armed conflict in which one actor can be said to have a destructive capacity that is more threatening than other actors (opposing actors) (Sullivan, 2007). This asymmetrical condition creates a dilemma for the weak, so that the weak party tries to maximize the various resources it has to balance the party that is considered strong. For this reason, Sun Tzu said that all wars are asymmetrical, because the strengths of the two belligerents try to exploit each other's weaknesses.

Efforts to exploit the opponent's weaknesses are co-opted by launching various kinds of tactics and strategies, both conventional and non-conventional. Tranova (2008) explains that strong actors in this case use more conventional power such as military or economic against weaker actors. While weak actors are more likely to use unconventional

ways to exploit the vulnerabilities of the strong. Various forms of strategic practices have represented unconventional means by the weaker party, one of which is as previously explained, namely using soft power strategies, involving various means without weapons (soft war). For example, through information warfare, through the media including online media and the utilization of advances in information communication technology (ICT), as well as other ways that can damage the opponent's strength.

In this case, the Afghan war is a form of asymmetric warfare, so to speak because there is an unbalanced situation between the forces of the Afghan government and the Taliban as an insurgent group. This asymmetric condition has pressured the Taliban to rethink tactics and strategies in the face of a stronger force (the Afghan government) than them. This is illustrated by the fact that initially the Taliban only launched a destructive strategy based on military power, has begun to see softer ways to take advantage of the opponent's weaknesses. The Taliban in this position sees the need to accommodate popular support, which is not seen as important by the Afghan government.

### **III. METHODS**

This research article is the result of qualitative-explanatory research, where the author seeks to explain the strategic linkages used by the Taliban in its success in winning the two-decade war in Afghanistan. The study used in this article is based on secondary data through a literature review, which collects various sources of data scattered both books, journal articles, and research results both in print and digital form which are considered relevant to the research. The data from the literature will be sorted into certain clusters according to the purpose of the study, and then analyzed interpretatively using the theoretical framework that has been embedded in this research, then inductively drawn conclusions to answer the existing problems.

### **IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

#### **THE TALIBAN INSURGENCY**

The emergence of the Taliban resistance or insurgency movement in Afghanistan is inseparable from the US invasion of Afghanistan. This invasion was carried out after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, where at that time there had been an attack on the symbol

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of the supremacy of US power, namely the Pentagon and the World Trade Center (WTC) by the international terrorist group al-Qaeda led by Osama Bin Laden. In response, the US quickly responded by declaring a war on terrorism (War On Terror). In response, the US published the Bush Administration's National Strategy for Combating Terrorism in February 2003, which was further updated in September 2006 (Dobrot, 2007). However, the concern after the incident was that the US immediately accused the Afghan government, namely the Taliban, of hiding Bin Laden and asked the al Qaeda leader to be extradited to the US, but the Taliban at that time refused because they believed that Bin Laden was not involved in the September 11 incident and asked the US to show evidence of Bin Laden's involvement (Sinuhaji, 2021).

The refusal angered the US and prompted Bush at the time to invade Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Bush called his military operation Operation Enduring Freedom Afghanistan (OEF-A) on the basis of freedom and democracy and eliminating the threat they called terrorists. The attack bore fruit where in the first week of December in the same year, the US succeeded in repelling the Taliban from its leadership in Afghanistan (BBCNews, 2021). After successfully defeating the Taliban, the US immediately formed an interim Afghan government under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, who at that time was considered a leader who had a smart, insightful personality. Karzai, who used to be a diplomat and had connections with the CIA, and often voiced democracy, made many parties including the US expect Karzai as a new leader and was expected to act to represent Westerners in all situations and conditions of Afghan politics. Therefore, the US supported Karzai to become president to replace Burhanuddin Rabbani on December 22, 2001 (Neuman, 2015).

After the regime change, the US at that time immediately focused on reorganizing nation-building in the context of democracy and re-stabilization of post-war Afghanistan (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). However, in the reform process, the Afghan government received various pressures and security disturbances from various insurgent groups (such as al-Qaeda, the Hikmatyar faction, the Haqqani faction, and Pakistani groups) which were affiliated with the Taliban. For this reason, it did not take long for the Taliban to rise again, and even then the Taliban was getting stronger in Pakistan and became a loose network between Taliban factions and other militant groups in various regions. In 2004, the Taliban seemed to wake up from their sleep and simultaneously launched attacks with a suicide bombing strategy, recorded in 2004 the Taliban launched 6 suicide bomb attacks. The



following year in 2005, the Taliban launched 21 suicide bombing attacks and 141 similar attacks in 2006 (Rashid, 2010).

In 2007, the Taliban's activities escalated with more bomb-throwing and increased kidnapping tactics. From 2008 to 2010, the Taliban showed their fangs more and more, embracing destructive methods and showing all the power they had. The Taliban did not hesitate to provoke a firefight with international coalition forces, and even dared to target the US international military base in Bagram (Tempo.co, 2010). Noted in 2011, the Taliban managed to shoot one of the US joint forces helicopters, the CH-47 Chinook, which killed 30 US soldiers and 8 Afghans (Taylor, 2011).

Responding to this, the US, which initially focused on nation-building, changed to supporting and providing security assistance to the new Afghan regime. The US in this case provided various forms of assistance, especially in terms of increasing the capacity of the Afghan military, as well as conducting various forms of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations. At the same time, the US and the joint forces consisting of the Afghan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF) and NATO, strengthened their military capabilities by increasing the troops involved, recorded initially 68,000 troops in 2009, in 2011 it increased to 110,000 US joint military forces involved in the battlefield against the Taliban (Gunadha, 2021). This effort gave results where in the same year the US with its joint forces succeeded in killing al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan (Hardiayanti, 2017).

However, as is characteristic of asymmetric warfare, the killing of Bin Laden did not deter the Taliban and stop its movement. Instead, after Bin Laden's death, the Taliban became more aggressive and increased the collaboration strategy it played. In this case, the Taliban not only played a military-based power strategy (hard power) but also sought soft strategies (soft power) to balance the power of the Afghan government and the joint forces of the US and its alliances. These various efforts bore fruit where in its recent development in 2021, the Taliban managed to reclaim the reins of leadership of Afghanistan from the Ashraf Ghani regime without a fight, and more than that the Taliban managed to influence the US to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan, which signaled that the Taliban regime again held the throne of leadership in Afghanistan that was once lost.

## **ASYMMETRIC SITUATION OF AFGHAN WAR BETWEEN TALIBAN, AFGHAN GOVERNMENT AND US**

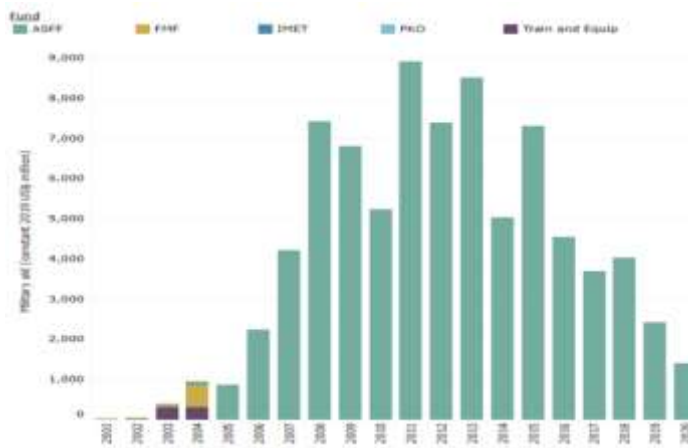
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The war involving the Taliban insurgent group and the Afghan government and its ally the US can be said to be an asymmetrical war. The asymmetrical situation in the Afghan war is indicated by the difference in military status on each side, both in terms of the strength of defense equipment capabilities and unbalanced financing issued by the US and the Afghan government as state actors and the Taliban as insurgent actors.

In terms of military strength, the Taliban's main fighting force in the context of the war in Afghanistan is estimated to be around 125,000 troops, and interestingly only 25,000 of these troops are combat trained. The fighting capabilities of the Taliban forces are limited to light weapons, artillery and a few basic infantry capabilities (Cordesman, 2002). On the other hand, the Afghan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF) reportedly has a final total of around 352,000 personnel, including ground, air, special forces and intelligence (SIGAR, 2020). This figure does not include the aid force sent by the US to Afghanistan, which in 2011 reached 110,000 US joint military forces involved in the battlefield against the Taliban. This number is very large compared to the number of US troops involved in 2002, which was around 7,500 consisting of special forces, infantry including airborne troops supported by 570 air fleets with various combat units (Cordesman, 2002).

Financing also has its own disparities, over the past five years for example, the ANDSF has been funded at around \$5-6 billion per year. In general, these funds are not only sourced from the Afghan government, but are also obtained from various external assistance such as the US. The US and its allies have so far been willing to pay a multi-billion dollar per year price for the ANDSF and have committed to providing some level of security assistance until 2024. It is noted that the US provides about 75% of the funds and every year the US has not been absent in providing financial assistance to the ANDSF. This assistance comes from two sources, the Department of Defense (DOD) and the US Department of State (DOS). Between 2001 and 2020, disbursements and assistance from the US amounted to \$81.6 billion (Tian, 2021).

**Table 1: US Military Aid to Afghanistan 2001-2020**



Source: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-07-30qr.pdf>

US military aid to Afghanistan was initially very low, with DOD and DOS together spending less than \$1 billion per year between 2001 and 2005. By 2008, annual aid spending increased to \$7.4 billion. This increase in aid coincided with the US becoming a significant troop contributor in multilateral peace operations, indicating increased US involvement in Afghanistan. However, the global financial and economic crisis led to a temporary decline in aid, and by 2010 aid to Afghanistan had fallen to \$5.2 billion. US military aid to Afghanistan then peaked at nearly \$9 billion per year in 2011 and again in 2013. This increase in military aid corresponds with a renewed commitment by the US and its NATO allies to support the ANDSF to take full responsibility for security throughout the country by the end of 2014. One notable aspect of US military assistance is the variety of major weapons supplied to Afghanistan. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), between 2005 and 2021, approximately \$18.6 billion in military equipment funds were disbursed to the ANDSF through the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF).

However, after 2015 this aid decreased, it was noted that in 2020, congress allocated \$1.6 billion for the Afghan Army, \$1.2 billion for the Air force, \$728 million for the Afghan special security forces (ASSF), and \$660 million for the Afghan Police (Department of Defense United States of America, 2020). While 90% of the ANDSF receive their funding from international sources, they also receive training and advisory support from international forces. Most of that training takes place in Afghanistan, although the US has also trained Afghan pilots at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia (SIGAR, 2020).

On the other hand, the Taliban is an insurgent group, and it is not yet known how the budget supports this group. This is because there are no clear reports and a lack of reliable data on how much funding the Taliban has. But what is clear is that the Taliban itself has financial resources from various sources, namely from external assistance such as donations from foreign participants, the drug trade (opium), control of several mining and mineral activities, and the spoils of war (Faridi, 2022). The UN itself reported that the Taliban group's annual income from 2011 and subsequent years was estimated to be around \$400-\$500 million (Securitycouncilreport.org, 2012), the amount in 2018 has increased, estimated to be up to \$1.5 billion per year (Azami, 2021). It has been noted that the largest contributor, 60% of the Taliban's annual income, comes from the drug trade, whether through taxes, protection payments, for opium, cannabis, or more recently crystal methamphetamine (UNODC, 2019). Interestingly, however, many analyses suggest that the proceeds from the sale of these drugs have not had a significant financial impact on the Taliban. Even the Taliban themselves deny their involvement in the drug industry.

As such, the Taliban's finances are still vastly different from those of the Afghan government, and this financial disparity has direct implications for the Taliban's level of force capability. To that end, the Taliban are technically less sophisticated than the Afghan government, which alone has an air force of 174 aircraft (a mix of transport and attack helicopters, and fixed transport, surveillance and attack platforms), some of the best in the region. The Special Operation Forces (SOF), and the rest of the army have a wide range of heavy artillery, mortars, thousands of armored vehicles and personnel carriers, tactical drones and technical intelligence capabilities, military-grade communications equipment, and Western weapons and ammunition (including technology to operate at night) (Asey, 2019).

While the Taliban itself does not have an air force, heavy artillery, a fleet of armored vehicles, and various other types of supporting equipment. The Taliban in this case only operates light weapons such as AK-47 assault rifles designed in the Soviet era. Suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices have become one of the deadliest weapons used by the Taliban to attack Afghan forces and their foreign allies. The Taliban also operate a small number of western-made equipment weapons; heavy machinery, heavy mortars, anti-armor weapons, assault rifles, and sniper rifles from the spoils of war (Giustozzi, 2022). Nonetheless, the Taliban's resistance operations against the Afghan government and its US allies continued. The Taliban in this case have never given up hope

in mobilizing their resistance movement, this can be seen from the consistency of the Taliban in continuing to fight since the start of the war in 2001 until they won victory in 2021.

## THE TALIBAN'S COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY AGAINST THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT AND THE US

It is undeniable that the choice of strategy for the success of an insurgency movement is an important consideration. For this reason, the need for an effective strategy is a crucial issue, especially when it comes to the choice of strategy to achieve the success of the goals of an insurgency movement. Conventionally, insurgency groups use a hard power approach in carrying out their insurgency strategy. However, in this contemporary era, many of the insurgency groups choose to abandon the hard power approach strategy, due to the negative impacts that are increasingly creating resistance and/or antipathy from the community, where this community is an important component in providing support for the existence of the insurgency organization (Sasongko, 2013).

Currently, the choice leads to the strengthening of a softer strategy or soft power that emphasizes dialogue and negotiation approaches which are then expected to be able to produce a form of accommodation of interests which is none other than the main goal of the insurgency group. In addition, the use of this strategy is expected to be able to compensate for the superiority of the power resources owned by the government, in this case many of the insurgency groups are pressing a strategic role, especially related to gaining support from the people at home and the support of the international community through a soft power approach in the form of one of them by applying diplomacy and other strategies that are developing at this time such as propaganda which is increasingly widespread, especially through the use of today's increasingly advanced media.

In this context, the Taliban, as one of the insurgency groups that in 2021 managed to regain leadership in Afghanistan, is inseparable from the soft power strategy it plays. Even though on the surface the Taliban appears to use hard power in carrying out its actions, besides that, the Taliban did not rule out the use of soft power strategies in the success of its insurgency movement. The use of this strategy is due to the asymmetrical conditions, namely the imbalance between the power of the Taliban and the Afghan government supported by its US allies as previously explained.

To accommodate these unbalanced conditions, the Taliban in this case tried to improve the relative balance of resources it had to balance the power of the Afghan government. among these strategies are:

**a. Strategies for Exploiting Community Circumstances and Conditions**

The Taliban as an insurgent group that carries out its movement actions cannot be separated from guerrilla warfare which in fact mingles with the community. Therefore, support from the community is the main concern of the Taliban group. To maximize support from the community, the Taliban itself seeks to exploit all the problems that develop in Afghan society. One of the problems the Taliban saw was related to the situation and conditions of the people who at that time felt that the Afghan government and its US allies did not meet the needs of the people, especially related to security and conditions of non-conduciveness in Afghanistan itself.

The use of soft power strategies by the Taliban was confirmed after the Afghan people no longer wished to see others including the US defending the Afghan state for them. The Afghan people consider the US presence in Afghanistan to have worsened the living conditions and situation of the Afghan people. Most Afghans cite civilian casualties as the main source of their frustration. Hence, anti-US sentiments are on the rise in the region, as the prolonged war continues to claim thousands of civilians. This reality is inversely proportional, when the US first invaded Afghanistan, where citizens had high hopes for the US to eradicate terrorism and insurgent movements such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However, after the invasion, the expected reality did not match expectations, instead the US blindly took the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, and brought more suffering and misery to Afghans, thus making them disappointed.

This disappointment was caused by the civilian casualties caused by the attacks of the US forces and its joint NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which indeed claimed many Afghan victims. According to the Watson Institute, in the first year of the invasion, in 2001, civilian lives were lost to at least 2,375 people. The casualties continued in the following years, with 400 lives lost in 2002, 450 in 2003, a decline of 230 civilian lives lost in 2004, a spike in 2005 to 413 people, 929 in 2006, and over a thousand for the first time in 2007 when 1,582 civilian lives were lost. This pattern never reversed and continued to increase with 2,118 killed in 2008, 2,412 in 2009, and 2,794 in 2010 (Saif, 2021).

The first decade has seen a death toll of approximately 13,703 Afghan civilians, with the number of wounded reportedly more than double that of civilians killed. Civilian casualties continue to be felt by the Afghan people, where in 2011 3,133 civilians were killed, 2,769 in 2012, 2,969 in 2013, 3,701 in 2014, 565 civilians were killed in 2015, in 2016 around 3,527 victims, 3,442 in 2017, 3,803 in 2018, 3,409 in 2019, and 3,035 in 2020. So that in total, more than 47,245 thousand people have died from civilians in the last 20 years (Knickmeyer, 2021).

In addition, survey data suggest that political frustration is also to blame for people's lack of trust in the Afghan government, especially with regard to the Karzai administration. Although various demographic groups (Tajiks, urban Afghans, and Kabul residents) prefer Karzai's rule, as he is Pashtun, most Pashtuns hate him for practicing nepotism among his own Popalzai tribe. Other political grievances among the Afghan people are issues related to the government's ineffectiveness, inability to ensure security, and the many corrupt practices in the government that have become more prevalent under the Ashraf Ghani regime (Davis, Larson, Haldeman, Oguz, & Rana, 2012). It was recorded in 2010 that Afghanistan was listed as the second or third most corrupt country in the world, and in 2020 Afghanistan's corruption level ranked 165 out of 180 countries with a score of 19 (<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi>, 2020).

This situation and condition was exploited and utilized by the Taliban to pay attention to the Afghans in order to rebuild their legitimacy and trust. In this case, the Taliban made tactical and strategic adaptations. Their ideology also evolved, where they sought to moderate all forms of policy and make their group the mainstream independence movement (Brahimi, 2010). In exploiting the problem of the large number of civilian casualties caused by US troop operations, for example, the Taliban in this case made various consolidation and propaganda efforts against the Afghan people, namely by raising the premise of anti-colonialism against the presence of the US in Afghanistan. This anti-colonialism premise is reinforced by spreading messages that say "non-Muslims and the West did not come to bring peace and stability" (Asia Report, 2008). Such statements and arguments are commonplace among the Afghan people, especially with the insecurity they cause. Furthermore, the Taliban also created a religious narrative and aligned the anti-US occupation of Afghanistan with the anti-Soviet jihad as happened in the history of the Taliban struggle in 1979-1989.

Supporting the spread of the propaganda narrative, the Taliban created sophisticated media outlets, namely internet media as the mainstream base for dissemination. The Taliban has a variety of media, both social media, websites and various other media platforms, it is noted that 4 years after being overthrown, namely in 2005 the Taliban first launched the official website of the Taliban Islamic Emirate "al-Emarah". The al-Emarah site itself is confirmed to publish content in five languages, English, Arabic, Pashtun, Dar'i and Urdu (Johnson, 2018). Much of its content came in the form of short, rapid-fire press releases either claiming various victories over NATO-led ISAF forces or disputing the number of casualties. The constellation of websites has since expanded to include audio and video propaganda. Therefore, the Taliban also has various official websites such as the "Voice of Jihad" website, the Taliban also actively uses Radio, Youtube and produces thousands of DVD recordings containing motivations for jihad (ICG, 2008). Furthermore, the Taliban also utilizes various social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and other social media platforms (Thorbecke, 2021).

All sites operated by Taliban social media members have special supervision led by Taliban spokesperson Zahibullah Mujahid, and members are given special guidelines, namely they are prohibited from commenting on issues related to foreign policy of neighboring countries on social media, which when done will have implications for limiting the Taliban's relationship with them. The members and citizens who participate in helping them fight on the battlefield online are paid monthly by the Taliban, which is around \$11.51 or around IDR 163,500 per month (Atiq, 2021). In another report, the Taliban's social media team claims they have four modern studios complete with all the multimedia equipment they use to improve their image, which results in the Taliban being able to produce high-quality propaganda videos in spreading anti-colonialism narratives against the Afghan government and its allies which are widely spread on various social media pages.

This propaganda narrative has generated sympathy among Afghans who once fought against Soviet aggression to fight again against the US occupation of Afghanistan as a new face of Taliban jihad. The group claims that "denigrating the current Taliban jihad against the US occupation, is the same as opposing the anti-Soviet jihad as well". The ultimate goal is none other than to undermine the legitimacy of the foreign military presence and demonstrating its ability to attack



them is at the core of the Taliban's appeal. The choice of internet media in this case is the most important part of gaining the legitimized support of the Afghan people, as the Taliban media representative said: "Today's war cannot be won without the media. Media is directed at the heart not the body, while weapons are directed at the body. If the heart is defeated, the battle is won and the body is defeated" (Lamensch, 2021).

Propaganda through social media indirectly has implications for the declining trend of support for the US in Afghanistan. In a survey conducted by ABC News, in collaboration with other news organizations such as BBC, ARD, and USA Today, for example, in 2005 83% of Afghans expressed a favorable opinion of the US, but in 2008 this trend decreased by 36 points to 47% and in 2009 it decreased by 18 points to 29%, which means that slightly more Afghans see the presence of the US as unfavorable as something good in Afghanistan. This downward trend is also experienced by the number of people who say the US is performing well in Afghanistan, falling from 68% in 2005 to 32% in 2009 (Cordesman, 2009).

On the other hand, the Afghan people's lack of trust in the government is also increasing, and this condition is also exacerbated by the problem of corruption, weak government, and the government's lack of ability to run a good government and services to the population. In terms of corruption, for example, every year the level of confidence of Afghans in the widespread level of corruption in the Afghan government is increasing, which was recorded in 2012 reaching 77%, increasing dramatically in the 2015 period reaching 79%, and 89% in 2017, even reaching the highest peak in 2018 where it was recorded that 91% of the Afghan people believed that the level of corruption in the Afghan government was widespread (Bikus, 2019). Surveys show that this corruption issue has motivated people to support the Taliban again (Davis, Larson, Haldeman, Oguz, & Rana, 2012).

Under these conditions, the Taliban also carry out various kinds of propaganda through various internet media that they have, namely spreading a narrative of hatred against the Afghan government. In this case, the Taliban re-voiced a key issue that had been voiced in the 1980s which at that time was strongly opposed to the ruthless power holders who had destroyed most of Afghanistan, and now many of them are back in power by repeating the dark history of the past against Afghans. The Taliban also allege that the Afghan government is a

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representative of the west that interprets US political ideas that are incompatible with Afghan culture and identity.

**b. Isolation within the Afghan military**

The Taliban's success in regaining control of the Afghan government is inseparable from the isolation strategy played at the operational level of attacks on Afghan security forces. This isolation strategy is carried out by the Taliban by weakening the enemy both physically and psychologically. In physically weakening the enemy, the Taliban has taken advantage of the situation and conditions that the Afghan security forces are experiencing, namely by breaking the chain of Afghan army units which as a whole are not united between one unit and another, because Afghan forces only focus on guarding by securing various terrains through checkpoints and small posts without being accompanied by strong coordination (Jensen, 2021).

The Taliban exploited this vulnerability by disrupting the lines of communication between troop units. Since checkpoints are dependent on communications for all the logistics the troops need, the Taliban's efforts often leave Afghan troops short of food, water, and ammunition, leading to dissatisfaction and disillusionment within the troops. The Taliban further shut down the physically isolated Afghan security forces through a sophisticated campaign of psychological warfare. The Taliban and its sympathizers conducted a wide variety of propaganda disseminated through various platforms containing threatening images and narratives.

Some of these threat narratives target military family members who are civilians. They offer choices such as "surrender and live or die and ask if the Taliban will kill your family next" (Jensen, 2021). These messages have affected the psychology of Afghan soldiers, and they have effectively undermined the Afghan soldiers' will to fight. This is evidenced by the behavior of abandoning the posts where they were guarding when the Taliban troops came to them because they did not want to be involved in the battle. This attitude is shown by the Afghan soldiers because in addition to the lack of logistics to support the war, the troops are also afraid of attacks on their families elsewhere by Taliban militias.

**c. Broader Diplomacy Consolidation Strategy**

The Taliban felt that what was a logical start to support its insurgency movement was not enough. To complement this, the Taliban integrated diplomacy with its military campaign in a way that Afghan and US security forces found difficult to replicate. War is an extension of politics, therefore, any battlefield activity where operational logic is not connected to clear political objectives will prove self-defeating. At this point, the Taliban have changed the way they present themselves to the wider world. In 2013, they opened a representative political office (an embassy of sorts) in Doha and made efforts to portray the Taliban as an Afghan national liberation movement (Abdul-Ahad, 2022). In fact, the leadership kept targeting the Pashtun community, but the organization needed to expand the insurgency, drawing other ethnic communities that had been the backbone of the resistance to the Taliban into their fold. Even this strategy was undertaken to gain legitimacy from the outside world.

The establishment of the Taliban's representative political office in Doha in 2013 was the starting point for the Taliban to develop diplomatic tactics to succeed in its movement. Actually, this effort has been made from previous years, which was recorded in 2009 when the Taliban first attempted to establish a Taliban representative office in Saudi Arabia. Tayyeb Agha, then the head of the Taliban's political commission, visited Saudi and requested that Riyadh be willing to host the Taliban's political office. However, the Saudis at the time gave several conditions to the Taliban, namely that the Taliban must sever its ties with al-Qaeda and condemn their actions, as well as accept the constitution drawn up by the Afghan government and take part in Afghan elections. However, the Taliban at that time flatly refused all the conditions proposed by the Saudis which caused the relationship between the two to be strained. These conditions did not make the Taliban despair, and immediately looked for countries that were willing to work with them such as Qatar.

The Taliban through its political commission and later through its office in Qatar, has actively and extensively established contacts with regional and extra-regional countries, such as China, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and some Central Asian countries such as Turkmenistan and even with the US. Whenever the Taliban visit these countries, the Taliban explicitly and repeatedly issue statements that their ideology concerns only Afghanistan and no other region. The Taliban in this case went to great lengths to convince its neighbors and even the

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world at large, emphasizing that it respected geographic boundaries and sovereignty and promising that Afghanistan would not be a platform for attacks on other regional countries (Khalil, 2017). These arguments have been a magnet for attracting support, such as from Russia, Iran and even China. Although these countries have so far limited themselves to contacts with the Taliban, whether supporting the Taliban militarily, financially or diplomatically, the future does not rule out cooperation.

Of concern is when the Taliban made diplomatic efforts with the US, where in 2020 yesterday the Taliban and the US agreed on an agreement called the Agreement to Bring Peace to Afghanistan. One of the contents of the agreement was that the US and its allies promised to withdraw all combat troops from Afghanistan and that the Taliban promised not to allow actors within the territory it controlled to attack the US and its allies (Uncertain, 2020). Actually, if traced back, serious diplomatic efforts between the Taliban and the US have started since 2010, when Obama sent Richard Holbrooke to persuade the Taliban to stop fighting and join the Afghan political government. However, at that time the Taliban rejected the peace settlement invitation. On the other hand, Karzai, the Afghan president, accused the US of being a traitor and objected to giving American legitimacy to extremist insurgents who had been determined to overthrow his government. On this basis, Obama ultimately did not continue the peace efforts and in 2013 serious discussions with the Taliban on power sharing were terminated.

After the change of leadership, under the Trump regime the US resumed diplomatic efforts with the Taliban. This was not initially seen as a way to resolve the conflict, given that early in his presidency, Trump reinforced troops in Afghanistan and promised that US troops would remain in Afghanistan until they defeated the Taliban. But this strategy failed, and Trump quickly looked for another strategy. McMaster as national security adviser at the time was immediately fired and replaced by John Bolton and appointed Mike Pompeo as US secretary of state. On January 22, 2019 the US and the Taliban opened formal negotiations, and the candidates met in Doha, Qatar. This culminated in the 2020 US and Taliban peace efforts (Coll & Entous, 2021), and in 2021 the US officially withdrew all of its troops, allowing the Taliban to easily regain leadership in Afghanistan.

However, it is interesting that when the Taliban pursued a diplomacy strategy and conducted negotiations, the Taliban did not want the Afghan government to participate in any negotiation process. For this reason, the diplomatic strategy carried out by the Taliban does not only aim to bring legitimacy to support its insurgency movement. However, this is done none other than to weaken the Ghani government politically and complicate efforts to maintain unity of effort between partners in the government's counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban. In addition, any peace process efforts are also used by the Taliban to limit US military power, especially in limiting the ability of the US to attack Taliban forces in key districts and provincial centers that are Taliban.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

What the Taliban is doing is causing astonishment and questions from the international community. Its success in regaining control of Afghanistan has been highlighted, but what needs to be noted is that the Taliban's ability to settle the arena of warfare requires an understanding of group strategy in terms of operational art. What needs to be realized is that the Taliban of 2021 is not the same as the Taliban of the 1990s. The face of the Taliban is now very proficient, especially in its ability to integrate various instruments of military and non-military power in pursuit of its political goals, which have not changed in two decades.

The face of the Taliban has changed and evolved into an insurgent group capable of advancing on multiple fronts. Their ability to operate a network of shadowy insurgents, expertise in launching destructive strategies both using a variety of conventional weapons such as planting improvised explosive devices, executing opponents directly, has been replaced by complex organizational capabilities that manage as many as tens of thousands of fighters who can even be said to be more skilled at using social media than AK-47s. In this regard, the Taliban's operational art is to combine information operations, including calls to revive local fighters from the Soviet occupation through media text messages, complex negotiation strategies and a highly centralized command that allows it to seize opportunities to take the initiative.

All of these initiatives have been pursued by the Taliban, as it has been explained that in the success of its insurgency movement, the Taliban in this case exploits all the problems that exist in Afghanistan in order to garner support from the local people, and this

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strategy is extended by the group's efforts to garner outside support, especially towards the international community, to seek legitimacy for the insurgency movement. Its ability to integrate military and non-military forces has been a strategy that cannot be underestimated in its success in taking back power in Afghanistan and should be taken into account by other insurgency groups.

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