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Networks, Social Capital, and Strategic Liability: Revisiting Pakistan, the Taliban, and the Evolution of Strategic Networks

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Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of the relationship between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban through the perspectives of social capital, organizational development, and network sociology. Building upon earlier work on social capital and social liability, it introduces the concept of strategic liability and proposes a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks to explain how long-term strategic relationships may evolve over time. The framework identifies five analytically distinct but interconnected stages—formation, consolidation, organizational autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability—and argues that the same processes through which social capital generates trust, cooperation, legitimacy, and organizational capacity may, under particular historical and political conditions, also contribute to increasing organizational autonomy and the gradual divergence of strategic interests. Using the historical relationship between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban as a qualitative case study, the article traces the evolution of the network from the anti-Soviet conflict through the Taliban's assumption of de facto authority following the events of August 2021. Rather than treating the relationship solely through the lenses of proxy warfare, principal-agent theory, or state sponsorship, the analysis emphasizes the sociological processes through which sustained interaction, institutional learning, organizational development, and changing patterns of dependence reshape long-term strategic relationships. References to the Taliban as the de facto authorities in Afghanistan or to the Taliban-led de facto administration are purely descriptive and do not imply recognition, endorsement, or any diplomatic or political position. The Pakistani-Taliban case provides an initial plausibility assessment of the proposed framework while illustrating how organizational evolution may alter the distribution of authority within enduring strategic networks. Although conclusions drawn from a single case necessarily remain tentative, the analysis suggests that long-term organizational evolution represents an important and underexplored dimension of strategic relationships that complements existing explanations based on principal-agent theory, proxy warfare, and realist approaches. More broadly, the article contributes to scholarship on social capital, political sociology, organizational development, and security studies by proposing a sociological framework for understanding how enduring strategic relationships evolve and under what conditions successful cooperation may ultimately contribute to strategic liability.

Keywords

Social Capital, Strategic Liability, Network Evolution, Organizational Development, Pakistan, Taliban, Proxy Warfare, Political Sociology, Security Studies, Informal Networks

1. Introduction

Why do successful strategic relationships sometimes produce outcomes that undermine the interests they were originally intended to advance? Why do actors initially viewed as strategic assets later become strategic liabilities? Existing scholarship on proxy warfare, insurgencies, intelligence cooperation, and state sponsorship of non-state actors has devoted considerable attention to explaining how strategic relationships emerge, how they function, and why they sometimes fail. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how successful strategic relationships evolve over time and how the very processes that generate strategic advantage may ultimately contribute to strategic vulnerabilities.

This question lies at the center of Pakistan's long and controversial relationship with the Afghan Taliban. For more than four decades, scholars, policymakers, and security analysts have debated the nature, extent, and historical evolution of links alleged or documented between Pakistani institutions and armed networks operating in and around Afghanistan. Existing explanations emphasize strategic depth, regional competition, intelligence cooperation, ideological affinity, security concerns, and proxy warfare. These perspectives provide important explanations for the origins and development of the relationship. Yet they leave unresolved a broader sociological question: how do long-term strategic relationships transform the organizations embedded within them, and under what conditions do the benefits generated by such relationships become sources of strategic vulnerability?

In an earlier study, *Networks, Social Capital and Social Liability: The Case of Pakistani ISI, the Taliban and the War Against Terrorism* [1], I argued that relationships among intelligence services, militant organizations, tribal actors, and religious institutions simultaneously generate social capital and social liability. While such relationships create trust, legitimacy, information flows, influence, and strategic access, they also generate obligations, dependencies, constraints, and unintended consequences. At the time, however, the argument was necessarily prospective. The Taliban had not yet assumed de facto authority in Afghanistan, and the longer-term implications of these relationships could not yet be evaluated.

More than a decade later, the Taliban's assumption of de facto authority in August 2021 created an opportunity to examine whether, and to what extent, subsequent developments are consistent with the expectations of that earlier framework. The collapse of the internationally recognized Afghan Republic provided an opportunity to revisit the earlier framework, reassess its analytical value, and refine it in light of changing regional dynamics. These developments include the resurgence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), increasing tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban-led de facto administration, recurring border disputes, reported Pakistani military operations inside Afghanistan, and the Taliban administration's expanding engagement with regional powers [2]-[7].

Existing scholarship frequently interprets such developments through the lenses of principal-agent theory, proxy warfare, blowback, or changing state interests [8]-[11]. These perspectives provide important insights into failures of control, monitoring problems, information asymmetries, and unintended consequences. This article argues that some strategic liabilities may emerge not because strategic relationships fail, but because they succeed. The same processes that generate trust, cooperation, legitimacy, organizational capacity, and political influence may also contribute to increasing organizational autonomy among network participants. Over time, the accumulation of social capital may alter patterns of dependence within strategic relationships, creating conditions under which strategic assets gradually evolve into strategic liabilities.

Building upon scholarship on social capital and network structure [12]-[25], organizational and institutional development [26]-[30], and strategic relationships involving states and non-state actors [9]-[11] [31], this article proposes a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. The framework does not assume that all strategic networks evolve through identical stages, nor that strategic liability is an inevitable consequence of successful network development. Rather, it offers one analytically plausible pathway through which strategic relationships may evolve from formation and consolidation to organizational autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability under particular political and historical conditions. The central proposition is that strategic liability becomes increasingly likely when network actors acquire independent sources of legitimacy, authority, resources, and support that progressively reduce their dependence upon their original sponsors or strategic partners.

The proposition that organizations, institutions, movements, and networks evolve over time is well established across sociology, political science, organizational studies, and institutional analysis. Research on organizational life cycles, institutional development, social movement trajectories, path dependence, and network evolution has long emphasized processes of growth, adaptation, consolidation, and transformation. The contribution of this article therefore lies not in demonstrating that strategic networks evolve, but in identifying one sociological mechanism through which the long-term accumulation of social capital may contribute to increasing organizational autonomy, divergence of interests, and ultimately strategic liability.

Although the empirical focus of this study is Pakistan and Afghanistan, the article is fundamentally a sociological inquiry into the evolution of social relationships, legitimacy, power, and organizational autonomy. The Pakistani-Taliban relationship provides a particularly informative case because it spans more than four decades and allows the long-term development of a strategic network to be examined across multiple political contexts. While the findings cannot establish the broader applicability of the proposed framework, they provide an initial plausibility assessment of the theory while offering a basis for considering how similar processes might operate in other strategic relationships and contribute to broader discussions of social capital, network evolution, political violence, insurgencies, proxy warfare, and informal governance.

This study makes four principal contributions. First, it revisits and extends earlier work on social capital and social liability. Second, it conceptualizes strategic liability as a distinct analytical concept within scholarship on social capital and strategic networks. Third, it introduces a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks linking formation, consolidation, organizational autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability within a unified analytical framework. Fourth, it identifies one sociological mechanism through which successful strategic relationships may generate increasing organizational autonomy, diverging interests, and strategic liability over time.

Throughout this article, factual claims concerning security developments, border incidents, and political events are distinguished, where appropriate, among the author's analytical interpretation, official statements issued by Pakistani authorities, statements by the Taliban-led de facto administration, and findings reported by international organizations or other independently documented sources. This distinction is intended to clarify the evidentiary basis for the analysis and to distinguish sociological interpretation from contested political claims.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on social capital, network evolution, proxy warfare, and social liability. Section 3 revisits the 2014 framework and identifies the theoretical questions highlighted by developments after 2021. Section 4 develops the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. Section 5 traces the historical evolution of Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban from 1979 to 2021. Section 6 examines developments between 2021 and 2026 and considers whether the available evidence appears broadly consistent with the theory's propositions. Section 7 discusses the broader theoretical implications of the analysis. The conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and identifies directions for future comparative research.

At its core, this study argues that one important implication of strategic network evolution is that some of the most significant risks generated by long-standing strategic relationships may emerge during periods of organizational success rather than organizational weakness. Strategic liability may arise not because networks fail, but because the successful accumulation of social capital contributes to increasing organizational autonomy and changing distributions of authority **and** dependence within enduring strategic relationships.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Social Capital, Strategic Networks, and Organizational Evolution

Understanding the long-term evolution of strategic relationships requires integrating insights from several bodies of scholarship that have often developed independently. Research on social capital explains how networks generate cooperation, trust, legitimacy, information exchange, and collective action. Scholarship on social liability recognizes that the same relationships may also produce obligations, constraints, exclusion, and unintended consequences. Studies of proxy warfare, insurgencies, and state-non-state relations provide important explanations for why strategic partnerships emerge and how they function within particular political and security environments. Finally, organizational sociology and institutional theory emphasize that organizations and networks evolve over time through processes of adaptation, institutional learning, and organizational development.

Individually, each of these perspectives provides valuable insights into different dimensions of strategic relationships. Considered together, however, they also suggest a broader question that has received comparatively less attention: how do long-term strategic relationships themselves evolve as the organizations embedded within them develop? Addressing this question requires bringing these complementary literatures into conversation rather than treating them as separate analytical traditions.

Accordingly, this section reviews the principal strands of scholarship that inform the framework proposed in this article. It first examines the concept of social capital and its role in organizational development, before considering the concept of social liability and its implications for network analysis. It then reviews scholarship on strategic networks and proxy relationships before identifying the theoretical gap that motivates the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks developed in the following sections.

2.1. Social Capital and Network Development

The concept of social capital has become one of the most influential analytical frameworks in sociology, political science, organizational studies, and development research. Although scholars differ regarding its precise definition and underlying mechanisms, there is broad agreement that durable social relationships generate resources that facilitate cooperation, collective action, information exchange, institutional effectiveness, and organizational resilience [12]-[21] [24].

Bourdieu [13] conceptualized social capital as the resources individuals and groups derive from durable networks of institutionalized relationships. Coleman

[14] emphasized the role of social capital in facilitating coordinated action through norms, trust, and reciprocal obligations, while Putnam [15] highlighted its contribution to civic engagement and institutional performance. Granovetter [16] demonstrated the importance of network structure through the strength of weak ties, and Burt [17] [18] showed how brokerage across structural holes creates strategic advantages. Woolcock [12] [19], Lin [24], and Adler and Kwon [21] further expanded the concept by emphasizing its organizational, developmental, and institutional dimensions.

Although these perspectives differ in emphasis, they share the assumption that repeated interaction, reciprocal obligations, and embedded social relationships generate resources unavailable through formal institutions alone. Organizations embedded within durable networks often gain access to information, legitimacy, influence, and opportunities for cooperation that strengthen their resilience and effectiveness. Consequently, social capital has become a central concept for understanding how organizations acquire and mobilize resources through social relationships.

For the purposes of this study, social capital is understood not merely as a collection of interpersonal relationships but as an evolving organizational resource that develops through sustained interaction over time. This temporal dimension is particularly important because the organizational consequences of accumulated social capital are themselves dynamic. As organizations mature, expand their institutional capacity, and acquire increasing political authority, the same relationships that initially generate trust, legitimacy, and cooperation may also reshape patterns of dependence and authority within strategic networks. Although the social capital literature has extensively documented the benefits generated by durable relationships, it has devoted comparatively less attention to how the long-term accumulation of those benefits may transform the strategic relationships themselves. This unresolved question provides the foundation for the theoretical framework developed in this article.

2.2. From Social Capital to Social Liability

While much of the literature emphasizes the benefits generated by social capital, scholars have increasingly recognized that dense social relationships may also produce obligations, exclusion, constraints, and unintended consequences. Portes [20] demonstrated that the same networks generating cooperation may also impose significant costs upon participants. Similarly, Talmud [23] argues that network structures capable of producing organizational advantages may simultaneously generate liabilities that constrain organizational flexibility and decision-making.

These perspectives suggest that social capital should not be understood as inherently beneficial. Rather, its consequences depend upon the organizational, institutional, and political contexts within which relationships develop. Dense networks may facilitate cooperation while simultaneously reinforcing dependency, increasing obligations, limiting flexibility, and constraining strategic choices.

The concept of social liability represented an important extension of the social capital literature because it challenged the predominantly positive interpretation of network relationships. At the same time, existing discussions have focused primarily on liabilities experienced by participants within networks themselves. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to how long-term network development may gradually reshape relationships among participating organizations or alter the strategic balance between sponsors and network actors.

This distinction provides the point of departure for the present study. Rather than replacing existing understandings of social liability, the analysis extends them by examining how the long-term accumulation of social capital may gradually reshape relationships among participating organizations. The central argument is not simply that networks generate liabilities for their participants, but that sustained organizational development may progressively alter the strategic relationship itself.

2.3. Strategic Networks, Proxy Relationships, and Organizational Evolution

Research on proxy warfare, insurgencies, and state sponsorship of non-state actors has generated important insights into the formation, management, and evolution of strategic relationships. Principal-agent theory emphasizes monitoring problems, incentive divergence, and information asymmetries between sponsors and proxies [8]. Scholarship on proxy warfare examines delegation, influence, and varying degrees of control exercised by states over armed organizations [9]-[11]. Likewise, studies of insurgent cohesion and organizational development demonstrate that internal network structures strongly influence organizational resilience, military effectiveness, and political survival [31].

These approaches provide valuable explanations for why strategic relationships emerge and how they function. At the same time, they generally focus on questions of delegation, organizational cohesion, changing state interests, or failures of control. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the long-term sociological evolution of strategic relationships themselves.

Organizations participating in strategic networks do not remain static. Through institutional learning, leadership succession, organizational adaptation, and the accumulation of legitimacy, authority, and political experience, they gradually develop independent organizational capabilities. As these processes unfold, relationships initially characterized by asymmetrical dependence may become increasingly reciprocal as participating organizations acquire greater autonomy. Strategic relationships should therefore be understood not simply as policy instruments but as evolving organizational systems whose internal distributions of authority, legitimacy, and dependence change over time.

Viewed from this perspective, strategic relationships are not simply policy instruments but evolving social systems whose internal distribution of authority, legitimacy, and dependence changes over time. This organizational perspective complements existing theories by directing attention toward long-term network development rather than replacing established explanations of proxy warfare or principal-agent relationships.

2.4. Theoretical Gap: Toward a Life-Cycle Perspective

Despite the extensive scholarship on social capital, network analysis, proxy warfare, and state-non-state relations, an important theoretical question remains unresolved. Existing theories explain why strategic relationships emerge, how they function, and why they sometimes fail. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how successful strategic relationships evolve as participating organizations mature over extended historical periods and how relationships initially regarded as strategic assets may, under particular historical and political conditions, become strategic liabilities. Existing explanations generally interpret such developments in terms of principal-agent problems, changing strategic incentives, failures of control, or unintended consequences rather than as potential outcomes of long-term organizational and network evolution.

To address this question, the present study builds upon existing theories of social capital, social liability, and network evolution by proposing a third analytical concept: strategic liability. Strategic liability is understood as a condition that may emerge when network actors acquire sufficient organizational autonomy, legitimacy, and independent sources of support to pursue objectives that increasingly diverge from those of their original sponsors or partners. Under such circumstances, relationships that once generated strategic advantages may also contribute to strategic vulnerabilities. The argument is therefore not simply that networks generate costs or constraints, but that, under particular historical and political conditions, long-term organizational development may gradually reshape the strategic relationship itself.

Building upon scholarship on social capital, organizational development, network evolution, and state-non-state relations, this article proposes a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. The framework identifies one analytically plausible pathway through which strategic relationships may evolve from the accumulation of social capital to increasing organizational autonomy, divergence, and, potentially, strategic liability. It does not suggest that all strategic networks necessarily follow identical developmental trajectories, nor that strategic liability is an inevitable consequence of successful network formation. Rather, it offers a probabilistic analytical framework through which long-term network evolution may be examined systematically.

The proposed framework consists of five interconnected stages: formation, consolidation, autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability. During the formation and consolidation stages, networks generate social capital through trust, cooperation, information exchange, legitimacy, influence, and strategic access. As relationships deepen, network participants may accumulate resources, organizational capacity, authority, and independent sources of support. During the autonomy stage, dependence upon original sponsors may gradually decline. Divergence may emerge as the interests of network actors increasingly differ from those of their sponsors or partners. Strategic liability represents the stage at which sufficiently autonomous network actors may begin pursuing objectives that are no longer fully aligned with—and may, under certain conditions, ultimately undermine—the strategic interests that originally motivated the relationship.

The Taliban's assumption of de facto authority in Afghanistan following the events of August 2021 provides an opportunity to examine whether subsequent developments are broadly consistent with the expectations of the proposed framework. More than a decade after the publication of *Networks, Social Capital and Social Liability: The Case of Pakistani ISI, the Taliban and the War Against Terrorism* (2014), developments in the post-2021 regional security environment permit an initial plausibility assessment of how strategic networks may evolve under changing political conditions. Rather than constituting a definitive empirical test, the analysis that follows considers whether the available evidence is broadly consistent with the theoretical expectations developed in this article.

3. Revisiting the 2014 Framework: From Social Capital to Strategic Liability

The publication of ***Networks, Social Capital and Social Liability: The Case of Pakistani ISI, the Taliban and the War Against Terrorism*** [1] proposed that enduring strategic relationships simultaneously generate both social capital and social liability. The framework emphasized that relationships linking states and non-state actors create trust, legitimacy, information flows, influence, obligations, and constraints that shape subsequent organizational behavior. While the argument identified the coexistence of benefits and liabilities within strategic networks, it was necessarily prospective because many of its longer-term implications could not yet be evaluated empirically.

The Taliban's assumption of de facto authority following the events of August 2021 fundamentally altered the context within which the earlier framework can now be assessed. Relationships that had developed under conditions of insurgency continued after one participant assumed governmental responsibilities, creating an opportunity to examine whether long-term organizational development had altered the distribution of authority, dependence, and strategic priorities within the network. This transition provides the basis for extending the earlier framework beyond social capital and social liability to the concept of strategic liability.

Developments following August 2021 created an opportunity to revisit that earlier framework. The collapse of the internationally recognized Afghan Republic and the Taliban's assumption of de facto authority substantially altered the political environment within which these longstanding networks operated. Organizations that had previously functioned primarily as insurgent movements assumed governmental responsibilities within Afghanistan. Relationships originally developed under conditions of insurgency consequently evolved within a markedly different institutional and political context.

From a network perspective, this transition may also have altered the distribution of resources, legitimacy, authority, and organizational capacity among actors embedded within these relationships. Network participants that had previously relied heavily upon external sponsorship acquired additional institutional resources and new sources of political authority. As organizational autonomy increased, dependence upon original sponsors may have declined, creating conditions under which the internal balance of influence within longstanding relationships also evolved.

Viewed through the perspective of network sociology, these developments extend beyond a simple transfer of governmental authority. They raise the possibility that the internal structure of strategic relationships may also change over time. As network actors accumulate increasing autonomy, the strategic value of relationships may evolve as well. Networks that once generated influence may gradually generate constraints. Relationships that once enhanced strategic flexibility may increasingly limit it. The same processes through which social capital accumulates may also create conditions under which new forms of organizational and strategic vulnerability emerge.

Subsequent developments appear broadly consistent with these theoretical expectations. The post-2021 period has been characterized by renewed security concerns involving Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), increasing tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban-led de facto administration, continuing disputes concerning cross-border militancy, and indications reported by Pakistani authorities, international organizations, and independent analysts that actors embedded within longstanding networks have at times pursued objectives not fully aligned with the interests of earlier sponsors [4]. While these developments do not by themselves establish causal relationships, they suggest that processes of long-term network evolution may warrant greater attention alongside questions of network formation and strategic management.

The post-2021 environment also highlights a conceptual limitation of the original framework. Although the concepts of social capital and social liability explain many of the benefits and costs generated by enduring relationships, they do not fully capture what may occur when network actors acquire sufficient organizational autonomy to pursue objectives that increasingly diverge from those of their original sponsors or partners. At that stage, the analytical question extends beyond balancing benefits and costs to understanding how changing distributions of authority reshape the strategic relationship itself.

The present article therefore proposes an additional analytical concept: strategic liability. Strategic liability is understood as a condition that may emerge when network actors become sufficiently autonomous that relationships originally cultivated to advance strategic objectives begin to generate outcomes that increasingly diverge from, or potentially undermine, those objectives. Unlike social liability, which concerns the costs and constraints associated with participation within networks, strategic liability refers to the possibility that the strategic relationship itself may become a source of political, organizational, or security vulnerability.

The argument developed here should therefore be understood as an extension rather than a replacement of the 2014 framework. The earlier study identified the coexistence of social capital and social liability within strategic networks. The present analysis suggests that these concepts may represent successive components within a broader process of long-term network evolution. Strategic networks are not static organizational arrangements; they may evolve as participating actors accumulate resources, legitimacy, authority, and organizational independence. The central proposition advanced here is not that strategic liability inevitably emerges, but that it may become increasingly plausible under particular historical and political conditions as successful network development contributes to increasing organizational autonomy among participating actors. The same processes that generate trust, cooperation, influence, and organizational capacity may also reshape the internal distribution of authority within networks, thereby creating conditions under which relationships that once generated strategic advantages may also contribute to strategic vulnerability.

The remainder of the article develops this argument through a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks consisting of five analytical stages: formation, consolidation, autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability. Developments following August 2021 provide an opportunity to examine whether the subsequent evolution of Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban appears broadly consistent with the expectations of this proposed framework. Rather than constituting a definitive empirical test, the analysis that follows offers an initial plausibility assessment of how strategic networks may evolve over extended historical periods.

4. The Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks

Having identified the limitations of existing approaches and revisited the earlier framework of social capital and social liability, this section develops the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. The theory proposes that strategic relationships may evolve through five analytically distinct stages linking the accumulation of social capital to increasing organizational autonomy and, under particular historical and political conditions, strategic liability. Rather than offering a deterministic model, the framework is intended as a probabilistic, middle-range theory for analyzing the long-term organizational evolution of strategic networks.

The central proposition is that the accumulation of social capital simultaneously functions as both a source of organizational strength and a mechanism through which strategic relationships evolve. As networks generate trust, legitimacy, organizational capacity, influence, and access to resources, participating actors may become progressively more autonomous. Increasing autonomy may reduce dependence upon original sponsors, creating conditions under which strategic interests gradually diverge. Strategic liability may therefore emerge not despite the successful accumulation of social capital, but as one possible consequence of that accumulation under particular historical and political conditions.

Table 1 illustrates the proposed Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. The framework should not be interpreted as a rigid or universally applicable sequence in which each stage completely replaces the preceding one. Social capital, social liability, and strategic liability may coexist within the same relationship, and networks may stagnate, regress, fragment, or evolve unevenly. Movement between stages should therefore be understood as representing analytically expected tendencies rather than deterministic transitions. Nevertheless, the model identifies recurring developmental patterns that may assist comparative analysis across state-non-state strategic relationships, insurgent organizations, and informal governance networks. Future comparative research will determine the broader applicability and limitations of the framework.

Table 1. The life-cycle theory of strategic networks.

Stage	Primary Organizational Process	Dominant Network Characteristic	Expected Organizational Outcome
1) Formation	Initial cooperation among strategic actors	Emergence of trust, communication, and reciprocal expectations	Creation of social capital
2) Consolidation	Institutionalization of relationships through repeated interaction	Increasing trust, legitimacy, cooperation, and network closure	Strong organizational cohesion and expanding social capital
3) Organizational Autonomy	Accumulation of institutional capacity, leadership, legitimacy, and independent resources	Declining dependence on original sponsors	Increasing organizational independence
4) Divergence	Emergence of independent interests and strategic priorities	Growing differences in objectives while cooperation may continue	Partial separation of strategic interests
5) Strategic Liability	Autonomous actors increasingly pursue objectives different from those of original sponsors	Redistribution of authority within the network	Former strategic asset becomes a potential strategic liability

Stage One: Formation

Strategic networks emerge when actors identify mutual interests and establish relationships capable of generating benefits unavailable through independent action. These benefits may include security cooperation, intelligence sharing, political influence, legitimacy, territorial access, material resources, protection, or operational flexibility. The formation of strategic networks reflects the recognition that cooperation may generate advantages beyond those attainable by individual actors acting independently.

During this initial stage, relationships remain relatively fragile. Trust is limited, expectations are uncertain, and cooperation is primarily instrumental rather than institutionalized. Participants engage because they perceive potential strategic advantages rather than because durable social bonds have already developed. The principal objective at this stage is therefore the establishment of mutually beneficial channels of interaction and strategic access.

Formation represents the earliest stage in the accumulation of social capital. Communication channels begin to emerge, information starts to circulate, and expectations regarding future cooperation gradually develop through repeated interaction. Participants evaluate one another's reliability, commitment, and long-term strategic value while simultaneously establishing the foundations for more durable organizational relationships.

Although formation is generally understood as the beginning of strategic cooperation, it also establishes the foundations for future dependence. Every enduring relationship simultaneously creates opportunities and obligations. As networks mature, these obligations may acquire increasing significance, shaping subsequent patterns of cooperation, expectations, and organizational development. The same processes that generate early strategic advantages therefore also establish conditions that may influence the network's long-term evolution.

Stage Two: Consolidation

As strategic relationships deepen, networks enter a stage of consolidation. Repeated interaction strengthens trust, reciprocity, legitimacy, and increasingly predictable patterns of behavior. Shared experiences reinforce collective identities, establish common expectations, and create norms that facilitate continued cooperation. What initially began as an instrumental relationship gradually develops into a more stable and institutionalized network characterized by durable social connections rather than episodic strategic exchanges.

Consolidation represents the period during which social capital reaches its greatest apparent value. Information flows become more efficient, coordination becomes increasingly routine, and participants invest additional resources in maintaining relationships because continued network participation generates substantial strategic, political, and organizational benefits. Cooperation increasingly reflects established expectations rather than isolated calculations of immediate advantage.

From the perspective of network theory, consolidation frequently combines the complementary mechanisms of brokerage and closure. Brokerage provides access to information, opportunities, and relationships beyond the immediate network, while closure reinforces trust, coordination, reciprocity, and social control within it. As Burt has demonstrated, organizations capable of combining these structural characteristics frequently enjoy significant advantages because they simultaneously maintain internal cohesion and external access.

Yet the very processes that strengthen strategic relationships also begin to generate the foundations for future liabilities. As cooperation deepens, relationships become increasingly difficult to modify or abandon. Expectations expand, reciprocal obligations multiply, and dependence upon continued access to network resources becomes progressively more pronounced. Participants increasingly organize their strategic decision-making around relationships that have become central to their political and organizational activities.

Accordingly, consolidation should not be understood solely as a period of increasing organizational strength. From the perspective developed here, it also represents the stage during which the structural conditions that may eventually contribute to social liability begin to emerge. Although networks continue to appear overwhelmingly advantageous during this period, the processes that create trust, reciprocity, and cooperation simultaneously deepen the relationships that may later constrain strategic flexibility. The accumulation of social capital and the emergence of future liabilities therefore develop together rather than sequentially.

Stage Three: Autonomy

Autonomy represents the critical turning point in the evolution of strategic networks and constitutes the central analytical stage of the proposed Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. Whereas the earlier stages emphasize the formation and consolidation of social capital, the autonomy stage focuses on how sustained cooperation gradually transforms the organizational capabilities and independence of network participants.

As strategic relationships mature, participating actors accumulate resources, legitimacy, organizational capacity, institutional experience, and independent sources of authority. Organizations that initially depended heavily upon external sponsorship may gradually become increasingly self-sustaining. Network actors develop their own constituencies, leadership structures, administrative institutions, financial resources, and strategic priorities. Over time, they may become progressively less dependent upon the actors who originally facilitated their development.

Importantly, increasing autonomy should not be interpreted as evidence that strategic relationships have failed. Rather, it reflects the organizational development that frequently accompanies sustained cooperation. Successful relationships often strengthen the capabilities of all participating actors, including those that initially relied upon external sponsorship. Trust facilitates cooperation, cooperation supports organizational growth, and organizational growth expands access to legitimacy, resources, and political authority. The same processes that generate social capital therefore also contribute to increasing organizational independence.

Nor should autonomy be equated with hostility. Organizations may become substantially more independent while continuing to cooperate closely with their original sponsors across many political and security objectives. The theory therefore treats autonomy as a structural transformation in the distribution of organizational capabilities rather than as evidence of deteriorating political relations.

Consistent with Burt's work on brokerage and closure, successful networks frequently derive strength from their ability to combine internal cohesion with external connections. Yet these same structural advantages may also contribute to increasing autonomy among participating actors, thereby creating conditions under which future divergence becomes increasingly plausible. The characteristics that initially enhance network effectiveness may simultaneously reshape the internal distribution of authority within the relationship.

At this stage, dependence upon original sponsors begins gradually to decline. Network participants possess greater capacity to survive, adapt, and pursue strategic objectives without direct external assistance. The balance of influence within the relationship therefore evolves as organizational independence increases.

Much of the existing literature on proxy warfare emphasizes monitoring problems, discipline, and organizational control. The Life-Cycle Theory offers a complementary sociological interpretation. Control may become progressively more difficult not simply because relationships deteriorate or because participants become disloyal, but because sustained network development gradually reduces structural dependence upon original sponsors. From this perspective, increasing autonomy is not an anomaly requiring separate explanation; rather, it represents one analytically plausible consequence of long-term network maturation.

Stage Four: Divergence

As organizational autonomy increases, the interests of network participants may gradually begin to diverge. Divergence does not necessarily imply conflict, hostility, or the immediate breakdown of strategic relationships. Longstanding ties, ideological affinities, shared historical experiences, and continuing strategic interests may sustain substantial cooperation for extended periods. Nevertheless, increasingly autonomous organizations are also more likely to evaluate political and strategic decisions according to their own institutional priorities rather than those of their original sponsors or the broader strategic network.

This stage reflects a broader principle of organizational sociology: as institutions mature, they acquire identities, constituencies, and interests that become increasingly independent of the circumstances surrounding their original formation. Organizational survival, political authority, institutional legitimacy, and accumulated experience generate new incentives, responsibilities, and strategic calculations. Consequently, objectives that once appeared closely aligned may gradually evolve in different directions without requiring a complete rupture in the underlying relationship.

Importantly, divergence should not be interpreted as evidence that cooperation has ended. Strategic relationships frequently continue to function despite growing differences in priorities and objectives. Cooperation may persist across many policy areas even while underlying strategic interests increasingly diverge. External observers may therefore underestimate the extent to which the internal distribution of influence within the network has changed. Relationships often appear stable precisely when their underlying organizational foundations are undergoing significant transformation.

Viewed through the Life-Cycle Theory, divergence represents the transitional stage linking organizational autonomy to strategic liability. It is during this period that previously aligned interests become progressively differentiated, creating conditions under which network participants may increasingly pursue objectives that are only partially consistent—or, under some circumstances, inconsistent—with those of their original sponsors. Divergence should therefore be understood as a gradual process of organizational evolution rather than as a discrete political event.

Stage Five: Strategic Liability

Strategic liability is proposed to emerge when sufficiently autonomous network actors increasingly pursue objectives that diverge from, or potentially undermine, the strategic interests that the relationship was originally intended to advance. Unlike earlier stages of network evolution, the principal analytical issue is no longer the accumulation of social capital or the organizational costs associated with participation. Instead, the strategic relationship itself becomes a potential source of political, organizational, or security vulnerability.

This distinction is central to the proposed framework. Social liability concerns the obligations, constraints, and vulnerabilities associated with participation in enduring networks. Strategic liability, by contrast, concerns the consequences of long-term network evolution and the changing distribution of organizational capabilities, authority, legitimacy, and influence among network participants. The analytical focus therefore shifts from the costs of maintaining relationships to the strategic implications of organizational transformation.

The concept also differs from related explanations based upon principal-agent problems, proxy failure, or blowback. Those approaches generally emphasize failures of monitoring, control, incentive alignment, or strategic oversight. The Life-Cycle Theory offers a complementary sociological perspective by directing attention toward the longer-term organizational processes through which sustained network development may gradually redistribute authority, legitimacy, organizational capacity, and strategic influence among participating actors. Accordingly, the framework complements rather than replaces existing explanations by focusing on processes of network evolution that may unfold over extended historical periods.

From this perspective, vulnerabilities do not necessarily emerge because strategic relationships collapse. Rather, they may emerge because successful cooperation contributes to the development of increasingly capable and autonomous organizations that possess the legitimacy, institutional capacity, resources, and political authority necessary to pursue objectives that are increasingly independent of their original sponsors. Strategic liability therefore represents one possible culmination of long-term network development rather than simply the breakdown of an otherwise successful strategic relationship.

From Social Capital to Strategic Liability

The Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks proposes that social capital, social liability, and strategic liability should be understood not as competing concepts but as interconnected dimensions of a broader process of organizational and network evolution. Rather than representing discrete or mutually exclusive categories, these concepts illuminate different analytical dimensions through which strategic relationships may develop under changing political, organizational, and historical conditions.

During the early stages of network development, social capital predominates. Trust, cooperation, legitimacy, information exchange, and strategic influence generate substantial political and organizational advantages for participating actors. As relationships deepen, however, social liability becomes increasingly visible through the emergence of obligations, dependencies, constraints, and structural vulnerabilities associated with sustained cooperation. Under particular historical and political conditions, strategic liability may subsequently emerge when network actors acquire sufficient organizational autonomy to pursue objectives that increasingly diverge from those of their original sponsors or partners.

From this perspective, the three concepts represent successive analytical dimensions of the same long-term developmental process rather than alternative explanations. Social capital explains how strategic relationships generate value. Social liability identifies the obligations and constraints associated with enduring relationships. Strategic liability focuses on how long-term organizational development may gradually alter the internal distribution of authority and influence within strategic networks. Together, these concepts provide a broader analytical framework for understanding how successful strategic relationships may evolve over extended historical periods.

Comparable developmental processes may also be observable in state-non-state strategic relationships, insurgent organizations, and informal governance networks. These examples are intended to illustrate the potential comparative applicability of the framework rather than to suggest identical developmental trajectories across cases.

Theoretical Propositions

The Life-Cycle Theory generates a series of propositions that may guide future empirical research and comparative analysis.

Proposition 1. The sustained accumulation of social capital is expected to increase cooperation, organizational effectiveness, and network cohesion during the formation and consolidation stages.

Proposition 2. Sustained cooperation is expected to increase the organizational autonomy of network participants through the accumulation of legitimacy, institutional capacity, resources, leadership experience, and independent sources of authority.

Proposition 3. Increasing organizational autonomy is expected to reduce structural dependence upon original sponsors and increase the likelihood of divergence in strategic interests.

Proposition 4. Strategic liability is expected to become more likely when sufficiently autonomous network actors increasingly pursue objectives that diverge from, or potentially undermine, the strategic interests their relationships were originally intended to advance.

Proposition 5. The probability of strategic liability is expected to increase as network actors acquire independent sources of legitimacy, organizational capacity, political authority, financial resources, territorial control, or external support.

Proposition 6. Processes of long-term organizational evolution are expected to complement explanations based on principal-agent dynamics, proxy warfare, and strategic blowback by identifying mechanisms through which successful network development may gradually redistribute authority within strategic relationships.

Scope Conditions

The **Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks** does not suggest that all strategic relationships inevitably progress toward strategic liability. Some networks fragment, collapse, or remain dependent upon their original sponsors before reaching more advanced stages of organizational development. Others may experience prolonged stagnation, institutional adaptation, cyclical development, or partial reversal. Strategic liability should therefore be understood as a probabilistic rather than deterministic outcome whose emergence depends upon particular historical, organizational, and political conditions.

The framework is expected to be most analytically useful in relationships characterized by sustained cooperation, institutional consolidation, resource accumulation, growing legitimacy, and increasing organizational autonomy among participating actors. Conversely, strategic liability is less likely to emerge where relationships remain weakly institutionalized, highly dependent upon external sponsorship, or subject to continuous external control. These scope conditions identify the circumstances under which the framework is expected to have the greatest explanatory value while recognizing that alternative developmental trajectories remain possible.

Conclusion to the Theoretical Framework

The Life-Cycle Theory integrates social capital, social liability, and strategic liability within a single developmental framework. Social capital explains how strategic relationships generate trust, cooperation, legitimacy, information exchange, and organizational resources. Social liability captures the obligations, constraints, and vulnerabilities associated with enduring network participation. Strategic liability extends these concepts by examining how long-term organizational development may gradually reshape the strategic relationship itself as increasingly autonomous actors pursue objectives that diverge from those of their original sponsors.

Rather than representing competing explanations, the three concepts illuminate successive analytical dimensions of long-term network evolution. Together they provide a sociological framework for understanding how strategic relationships generate value, how they create constraints, and how sustained organizational development may ultimately transform the distribution of authority within enduring networks. Comparable developmental processes may also be observable in state-non-state strategic relationships, insurgent organizations, and informal governance networks. The broader applicability of the framework, however, remains a question for future comparative research.

5. Applying the Life-Cycle Theory: Pakistan and the Taliban, 1979-2021

This section applies the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks to the historical evolution of Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban between 1979 and 2021. Rather than seeking to establish definitive causal relationships between individual historical events and the proposed framework, the analysis examines whether developments over four decades are broadly consistent with the theoretical expectations developed in the preceding section. The Pakistani-Taliban relationship provides an informative case because it spans multiple political contexts—from the anti-Soviet conflict through insurgency to the Taliban's assumption of de facto authority—thereby providing an initial plausibility assessment of the proposed theory.

Formation: Building Strategic Networks During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989)

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 created conditions that encouraged extensive cooperation among Pakistan, Afghan resistance organizations, tribal actors, religious institutions, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and local communities throughout the region. The convergence of these actors generated an environment in which strategic relationships could develop through repeated interaction, shared objectives, and coordinated support for the Afghan resistance.

These relationships were heterogeneous, changed across time, and should not be treated as evidence of a single, unified policy or command structure. The actors involved included distinct Pakistani state bodies, military and intelligence institutions, religious organizations, refugee communities, tribal networks, resistance organizations, and, later, multiple Taliban factions whose interests and relationships varied across periods.

Pakistan occupied an important brokerage position linking external sponsors with Afghan resistance groups. Through Pakistani institutions, resources, intelligence, training, and logistical assistance flowed to resistance organizations operating inside Afghanistan. This intermediary role facilitated the development of relationships among military officials, intelligence personnel, tribal leaders, religious scholars, refugee communities, and resistance commanders. Repeated interaction contributed to the accumulation of trust, reciprocity, and expectations of continued cooperation, all of which constitute central components of social capital.

From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, this period appears broadly consistent with Proposition 1, which suggests that the accumulation of social capital is expected to increase network effectiveness during the early stages of network development. Coordination among otherwise fragmented actors became increasingly feasible, information circulated more efficiently, and resources could be distributed through established channels of cooperation. While numerous political, military, and geopolitical factors also shaped developments during this period, the emergence of social capital provides one sociological mechanism that helps explain the growing effectiveness of these strategic relationships.

Importantly, many of the relationships established during this period extended beyond formal state institutions. They became embedded within tribal networks, religious organizations, refugee communities, and personal relationships that frequently persisted despite changing political circumstances. From the perspective developed here, this embeddedness contributed to the durability of the network by creating social connections capable of surviving well beyond the conflict that initially generated them.

Consolidation: Taliban Emergence and Network Institutionalization (1989-2001)

The Soviet withdrawal did not bring an end to the networks that had developed during the previous decade. Rather, many of those relationships adapted to changing political circumstances. The collapse of the Soviet-backed Afghan government, the ensuing civil war, and the emergence of the Taliban during the mid-1990s altered the structure of these networks while preserving many of their underlying social foundations.

The Taliban's rapid expansion during the 1990s reflected multiple interacting military, political, religious, and social factors. From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, one important sociological dimension was the continued mobilization of social capital accumulated during earlier periods of cooperation. Relationships established through years of interaction facilitated communication, recruitment, and coordination among participants. Religious institutions contributed sources of legitimacy, refugee communities maintained cross-border social connections, and tribal and familial relationships reinforced organizational cohesion. This interpretation is intended to complement, rather than replace, existing political and military explanations for the Taliban's rise.

This period appears broadly consistent with the consolidation stage of the Life-Cycle Theory. During this phase, social capital deepened through repeated interaction, institutional learning, and increasingly stable organizational relationships. The transition from episodic cooperation to more institutionalized forms of collaboration represents one of the defining characteristics of this stage. As cooperation became more routinized, expectations grew increasingly predictable, and many relationships became embedded within organizational and social structures rather than relying primarily upon individual actors. Consequently, trust and reciprocity increasingly functioned as institutional resources that supported continued cooperation and enhanced organizational resilience.

The consolidation of these relationships also generated substantial strategic value for many participants. Information, influence, legitimacy, and access to resources flowed through increasingly stable channels of cooperation, enhancing coordination and facilitating the exchange of resources across the network. To contemporary participants and observers, these relationships often appeared mutually beneficial because they expanded organizational capabilities and reinforced strategic cooperation among multiple actors.

At the same time, the Life-Cycle Theory suggests that consolidation may also begin to generate the conditions associated with future liabilities. As cooperation deepens, reciprocal expectations expand, investments in the relationship increase, and organizational dependence upon established networks may become progressively more pronounced. These developments do not themselves constitute strategic liability. Rather, they represent the gradual accumulation of structural conditions that may become significant during later stages of network evolution if participating organizations continue to develop increasing autonomy.

Accordingly, the consolidation stage should be understood as a period in which the benefits associated with social capital remain substantial while the longer-term implications of sustained cooperation begin to emerge. From the perspective developed here, the same processes that strengthened coordination and organizational effectiveness also contributed to the deeper institutionalization of relationships whose strategic consequences would become more apparent only over subsequent decades.

Deepening Social Capital and Organizational Growth (2001-2021)

The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent United States-led intervention fundamentally altered Afghanistan's political environment. The Taliban lost formal control of the Afghan state and returned to insurgency. Despite these changes, many of the underlying social networks that had developed over previous decades demonstrated considerable resilience. From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, this period illustrates the capacity of deeply embedded networks to adapt to changing political and military circumstances while maintaining important social relationships.

Military setbacks did not necessarily eliminate the social capital accumulated during earlier stages of network development. Relationships built upon trust, repeated interaction, shared experiences, tribal affiliations, religious institutions, and personal networks continued to facilitate communication and organizational coordination. Rather than disappearing, many of these networks adapted to a substantially different political environment while preserving important elements of their underlying social structure.

This period is particularly significant because it illustrates the cumulative nature of social capital. More than two decades of continued interaction contributed to the further development of organizational experience, leadership capacity, financial systems, and institutional structures. During this period, the Taliban also developed increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for governance, taxation, dispute resolution, and territorial administration in areas under varying degrees of its influence. These developments have been documented in a broad body of scholarship examining the movement's institutional evolution during the insurgency.

From the perspective of the theory, these developments appear broadly consistent with Proposition 2, which proposes that the sustained accumulation of social capital is expected to contribute to increasing organizational autonomy. As organizational capacity expanded, the Taliban increasingly developed internal sources of legitimacy, administrative capability, and political authority. This interpretation does not suggest that social capital alone produced these outcomes. Rather, it identifies network development as one important sociological mechanism operating alongside military, political, ideological, economic, and international factors.

What began as a movement supported through extensive regional networks gradually developed increasingly independent organizational structures, administrative capabilities, and political constituencies. Over time, the organization became progressively more capable of pursuing its own strategic objectives through institutions and sources of legitimacy that had developed during two decades of continued organizational evolution. From the perspective advanced here, these developments represent an important transition toward increasing organizational autonomy rather than a discontinuity in the underlying network itself.

Autonomy: The Critical Turning Point

The emergence of organizational autonomy represents the pivotal transition within the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. Whereas the preceding stages emphasize the accumulation of social capital and the institutionalization of strategic relationships, the autonomy stage focuses on how sustained cooperation may gradually transform the capabilities and independence of participating actors.

A central proposition of the Life-Cycle Theory is that long-term network development may contribute to increasing organizational autonomy among participants. The evolution of the Taliban between 2001 and 2021 appears broadly consistent with this proposition. As the movement expanded its territorial influence, strengthened internal governance structures, diversified revenue generation, and developed increasingly sophisticated political and administrative institutions, it also became progressively less dependent upon the external relationships that had contributed to its earlier development.

Over time, the movement increasingly derived legitimacy from its own organizational activities, territorial administration, dispute resolution mechanisms, and political authority within areas under its influence. These developments reflected a broader process of institutional maturation in which organizational capacity became increasingly rooted in internally generated structures rather than external sponsorship alone. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship emphasizing the Taliban's growing institutional sophistication during the insurgency while recognizing that multiple political, military, ideological, and social factors contributed to this process.

Increasing organizational autonomy should not be interpreted as evidence that the strategic relationship itself had failed. On the contrary, from the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, organizational autonomy may represent one consequence of sustained and successful network development. Trust facilitates cooperation; cooperation supports organizational learning; organizational learning contributes to expanding institutional capacity; and growing institutional capacity may ultimately increase organizational independence. At the same time, increasing autonomy does not imply the disappearance of external relationships but rather a gradual change in their relative importance. The same social capital that initially strengthened strategic relationships may therefore also contribute to reducing long-term dependence upon original sponsors. By the late 2010s, the Taliban increasingly possessed the organizational capacity to pursue strategic objectives based upon its own political priorities and institutional capabilities. From the perspective developed here, this transition represents the principal sociological mechanism linking the accumulation of social capital to the later emergence of strategic liability. Rather than constituting definitive proof of the Life-Cycle Theory, developments during this period appear broadly consistent with its expectation that sustained network development may generate increasing organizational autonomy over time.

Divergence: The Emergence of Independent Interests

As organizational autonomy increases, the Life-Cycle Theory proposes that divergence in strategic interests becomes progressively more likely. Divergence does not imply the immediate breakdown of cooperation, nor does it require hostility between network participants. Rather, it reflects the possibility that increasingly autonomous organizations begin to evaluate political and strategic decisions according to their own institutional priorities rather than those of the broader network or their original sponsors.

The Pakistani-Taliban relationship appears broadly consistent with this process. Historical relationships remained important, and significant areas of cooperation continued. Ideological affinities, long-standing personal ties, and shared strategic interests continued to facilitate collaboration. At the same time, however, the Taliban's priorities increasingly reflected its own political objectives within Afghanistan, while Pakistan's strategic considerations necessarily encompassed a broader range of regional, diplomatic, border security, and domestic security concerns. Although these interests frequently overlapped, they were not identical.

Within this analytical perspective of organizational sociology, this divergence is consistent with the institutional development of mature organizations. As organizations acquire greater legitimacy, resources, and administrative capacity, they frequently develop strategic priorities shaped increasingly by their own organizational environments. The Life-Cycle Theory therefore interprets divergence not as evidence of failed cooperation but as one possible consequence of increasing organizational autonomy.

Prior to 2021, these differences generally remained manageable because the Taliban continued to function as an insurgent movement rather than as the governing authority of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, from the perspective advanced here, these developments suggest that the relationship had already begun to exhibit many of the structural conditions associated with potential strategic liability, as organizational authority and strategic independence gradually shifted within the network.

By the eve of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the historical relationship had undergone substantial organizational transformation. The Taliban had developed extensive administrative structures, growing political legitimacy within areas under its control, increasingly diversified sources of revenue, and substantial institutional experience acquired during two decades of insurgency.

From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, these developments suggest that the relationship had progressed through the stages of formation, consolidation, autonomy, and increasing divergence. The events of August 2021 therefore provide an opportunity to examine whether the subsequent behavior of increasingly autonomous actors appears broadly consistent with the final stage of the proposed framework: strategic liability.

6. Taliban Rule, TTP Resurgence, and the Emergence of Strategic Liability (2021-2026)

Introduction

The Taliban's assumption of de facto authority in Afghanistan in August 2021 provides an important opportunity to examine the central propositions of the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks. Whereas the previous section examined the accumulation of social capital, the development of organizational autonomy, and the emergence of increasingly differentiated strategic interests, the post-2021 period makes it possible to examine whether, and to what extent, subsequent developments are consistent with the theory's expectations regarding strategic liability.

The significance of 2021 extends beyond a change in political authority. From the perspective of network evolution, this transition followed more than four decades of organizational development. A movement that had accumulated legitimacy, organizational capacity, territorial influence, and social support through successive periods of formation, consolidation, and increasing autonomy assumed responsibility for governing Afghanistan. This transition substantially altered the institutional position of the Taliban and the distribution of authority within the historical relationships examined in this article.

The Life-Cycle Theory proposes that strategic liability becomes more plausible when network actors acquire independent sources of legitimacy, authority, organizational capacity, resources, territorial control, and external support. Developments following 2021 therefore provide an opportunity to examine whether observable political and security developments are broadly consistent with Propositions 4, 5, and 6. The theory does not propose that the acquisition of governing authority inevitably produces strategic liability. Rather, it suggests that increasing organizational autonomy may alter incentives, priorities, and patterns of dependence in ways that increase the possibility of strategic divergence over time. Accordingly, the analysis that follows constitutes an initial plausibility assessment rather than a definitive empirical test or causal demonstration.

From Insurgency to De Facto Authority

For much of its history, the Taliban operated as an insurgent movement seeking political power rather than exercising the responsibilities associated with governing Afghanistan. Following the collapse of the internationally recognized Afghan Republic in August 2021, the Taliban became the de facto authorities in Afghanistan. This institutional transformation fundamentally altered the movement's political responsibilities, strategic incentives, and operating environment.

As an insurgent movement, the Taliban's principal objectives centered on organizational survival, armed resistance, recruitment, territorial influence, and the restoration of political authority. Following its assumption of de facto authority, it became responsible for administration, economic management, border security, diplomatic engagement, internal governance, and regime preservation. These expanded responsibilities introduced institutional incentives and policy priorities substantially different from those characterizing earlier stages of organizational development.

Most importantly for the Life-Cycle Theory, the Taliban acquired sources of political authority that were less dependent upon its historical external relationships. Religious legitimacy, narratives of resistance, personal relationships, and longstanding regional networks remained important, but territorial control and governing institutions provided additional foundations for organizational authority. The movement also gained greater capacity to formulate and pursue policy priorities based upon its own institutional requirements.

This transformation should not be interpreted as demonstrating that earlier relationships disappeared or that Pakistan ceased to possess influence. Nor does the framework assume that the Taliban's acquisition of governing authority necessarily produced conflict with Pakistan. Rather, the transition altered the relative distribution of resources, authority, and dependence within a historically complex set of relationships. Whether this increased autonomy subsequently contributed to strategic divergence and potential strategic liability is the empirical question examined below.

TTP Resurgence and the Security Burden for Pakistan

One of the most consequential developments following August 2021 has been the intensification of militant violence associated with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP is organizationally distinct from the Afghan Taliban, and the relationship between the two should not be treated as evidence of a unified organization, command structure, or policy. Nevertheless, longstanding ideological, historical, organizational, and personal connections make developments involving the TTP relevant to an examination of changing Pakistan-Taliban relations.

Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies data indicate a substantial deterioration in Pakistan's security environment in recent years. The number of militant attacks increased from 908 in 2024 to 1063 in 2025, while reported fatalities associated with militant violence and counterterrorism operations increased from approximately 1950 to 3387 over the same period [3]. These figures should not be interpreted as establishing that Taliban rule in Afghanistan caused the increase. Militant violence in Pakistan reflects multiple interacting factors, including domestic political conditions, TTP organizational development, Pakistani counterterrorism policies, regional instability, and changing patterns of militant activity.

The relevance of these developments to the Life-Cycle Theory lies instead in the changing strategic environment confronting Pakistan. Pakistani authorities have repeatedly alleged that TTP members and leaders have benefited from sanctuary or operational space inside Afghanistan, while the Taliban-led de facto administration has rejected, disputed, or qualified aspects of these allegations [4] [5]. Whatever the precise extent of TTP activity from Afghan territory, the persistence of the dispute indicates that Pakistan has encountered significant difficulty obtaining outcomes it considers essential to its domestic security from an Afghan administration with which Pakistani institutions historically maintained extensive relationships.

From the perspective of strategic liability, the important question is therefore not whether the Afghan Taliban controls the TTP, nor whether the Taliban's return to power directly caused Pakistan's deteriorating security environment. The relevant question is whether an increasingly autonomous Taliban administration has become less responsive to Pakistani preferences on an issue Islamabad regards as a fundamental security priority. The available evidence appears broadly consistent with that possibility, although it does not establish organizational autonomy as the sole or primary cause.

Cross-Border Militancy and Divergent Priorities

The continuing dispute concerning cross-border militancy provides a particularly important illustration of potentially diverging institutional priorities. Pakistan has increasingly characterized TTP violence as a major domestic security threat and has repeatedly pressed the Taliban-led administration to prevent Afghan territory from being used by militants targeting Pakistan. The Taliban-led administration, by contrast, operates within a different set of political, ideological, organizational, and domestic constraints.

This divergence does not require hostility between Pakistan and the Taliban-led administration. Historical relationships, ideological affinities, economic connections, personal ties, and shared interests continue to link actors on both sides of the border. Nevertheless, governing Afghanistan requires the Taliban to respond to its own constituencies, internal factions, security concerns, ideological commitments, and institutional priorities. Policies that might satisfy Pakistani security objectives may therefore carry political or organizational costs for the Taliban administration.

The persistence of disagreement is analytically significant because it demonstrates the distinction between cooperation and dependence. Two actors may maintain substantial relationships while becoming increasingly capable of pursuing different objectives. From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, such circumstances are consistent with the divergence stage: historical social capital continues to structure interaction, but accumulated organizational autonomy reduces the ability of earlier relationships to guarantee alignment on matters of strategic importance.

At the same time, caution is necessary. The continuing TTP dispute may also be interpreted through principal-agent dynamics, ideological affinity, domestic

Afghan politics, Pakistani policy choices, changing regional incentives, or the independent organizational evolution of the TTP. The Life-Cycle Theory does not displace these explanations. Rather, it identifies declining structural dependence as an additional sociological mechanism that may help explain why historical relationships no longer produce the degree of strategic alignment that might previously have been expected.

Border Disputes and the Limits of Historical Alignment

Recurring tensions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier provide another indication of increasingly differentiated institutional priorities. Disputes surrounding the Durand Line, border fencing, crossings, population movements, trade, and territorial authority predate 2021. Nevertheless, tensions after the Taliban's return to power demonstrate that historical relationships have not eliminated conflicting institutional interests.

The Chaman-Spin Boldak crossing has repeatedly become a focal point for disputes involving border management, closures, movement restrictions, and armed confrontations [6]. Disagreements over Pakistani efforts to fence portions of the border have likewise demonstrated that the Taliban's position on territorial and border questions cannot simply be inferred from the historical relationships linking Afghan and Pakistani actors [5].

These disputes are particularly relevant to organizational autonomy because governing authority changes the institutional incentives confronting the Taliban. As an insurgent movement, the Taliban's relationship with territorial administration and international borders differed substantially from that of an organization exercising de facto governmental authority. Border control, territorial claims, customs revenue, trade flows, domestic legitimacy, relations with border communities, and assertions of sovereignty now constitute institutional interests in their own right.

The resulting tensions do not establish that historical cooperation has ended. Instead, they illustrate how organizational development may produce interests that coexist with longstanding relationships but are not determined by them. From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, border disputes therefore provide additional evidence consistent with the proposition that greater organizational autonomy may be accompanied by increasingly differentiated strategic priorities.

Escalation and Pakistani Military Action

The deterioration in bilateral security relations has also been reflected in reported Pakistani military operations inside Afghanistan and increasingly public exchanges of accusations between Pakistani authorities and the Taliban-led administration. Pakistani authorities have justified cross-border operations as responses to militant threats, while Taliban officials have condemned incursions and asserted Afghanistan's territorial authority [7].

Such episodes represent a significant development in a relationship historically characterized by extensive interaction among Pakistani institutions, Afghan political and armed actors, religious networks, refugee communities, tribal structures, and other cross-border relationships. They do not demonstrate that these diverse historical relationships have disappeared. Rather, they indicate that areas of cooperation now coexist with substantial security disputes and increasingly coercive forms of interaction.

These developments should not be treated as proof that a former strategic asset has mechanically transformed into a strategic liability. Such a conclusion would exceed the evidence and reproduce precisely the deterministic reasoning that the Life-Cycle Theory seeks to avoid. Alternative explanations include changes in Pakistan's domestic political and security environment, the independent evolution of the TTP, shifting regional incentives, principal-agent dynamics, and broader geopolitical developments.

Nevertheless, the willingness of Pakistan to employ coercive measures against targets it associates with threats emanating from Afghan territory, together with the Taliban administration's resistance to such actions, demonstrates a significant transformation in the strategic environment. The relationship increasingly contains both cooperation and conflict, suggesting that historical social capital no longer ensures strategic alignment. This pattern is consistent with, although not sufficient to prove, the emergence of strategic liability as conceptualized in this article.

Diplomatic Diversification and Organizational Autonomy

A further indicator of organizational autonomy is the Taliban-led administration's expanding diplomatic and economic engagement with regional and international actors. Since 2021, the Taliban-led administration has pursued increasingly diversified diplomatic, economic, and security engagement with regional actors [2].

This diversification should not be interpreted as evidence of hostility toward Pakistan. Nor does the development of additional relationships necessarily diminish Pakistan's continuing importance to Afghanistan. Geographic proximity, trade, migration, historical ties, security concerns, and extensive cross-border social relationships ensure that Pakistan remains a significant actor in Afghanistan's external environment.

The theoretical significance lies instead in diversification itself. Organizations possessing multiple sources of diplomatic access, economic interaction, political engagement, and external support have greater capacity to maneuver among competing relationships. As the Taliban-led administration develops relations with a broader range of external actors, its dependence upon any single historical partner may decline in relative terms.

This pattern is broadly consistent with Proposition 5, which predicts that organizational autonomy is likely to increase as network actors acquire independent sources of legitimacy, political authority, resources, territorial control, and external support. The Taliban's post-2021 diplomatic diversification therefore provides an additional mechanism through which governing authority may have altered the distribution of dependence within its historical relationship with Pakistan.

Again, the causal interpretation should remain limited. Diplomatic diversification is a normal feature of governing behavior and cannot by itself demonstrate strategic divergence. The significance of the development lies in its interaction with other changes, including territorial control, administrative capacity, border disputes, security disagreements, and the TTP issue. Taken together, these developments indicate an institutional environment in which the Taliban possesses substantially greater capacity to formulate and pursue objectives independently of Pakistan than during earlier periods of its organizational development.

Assessment of Propositions 4, 5, and 6

Taken together, post-2021 developments provide qualified support for an initial plausibility assessment of Propositions 4, 5, and 6 of the Life-Cycle Theory.

Proposition 4 predicts that strategic liability becomes more likely when sufficiently autonomous network actors pursue objectives that increasingly diverge from, or potentially undermine, the strategic interests that their relationships were originally intended to advance. Persistent disagreements concerning TTP activity, border management, and security policy appear broadly consistent with this expectation. Pakistan faces security challenges that it associates, at least partly, with conditions in Afghanistan, while the Taliban-led administration has demonstrated limited willingness or ability to respond to Pakistani demands in the manner Islamabad seeks.

Proposition 5 predicts that the probability of strategic liability increases as network actors acquire independent sources of legitimacy, organizational capacity, political authority, financial resources, territorial control, and external support. The Taliban's transition from insurgency to de facto authority represents a substantial increase across several of these dimensions. Territorial control, administrative institutions, governing authority, independent revenue-generating capacity, and diversified external relationships have reduced the movement's structural dependence upon historical partners and expanded its capacity for autonomous political action.

Proposition 6 suggests that long-term organizational evolution complements explanations based upon principal-agent dynamics, proxy warfare, and strategic blowback by identifying mechanisms through which successful network development may redistribute authority within strategic relationships. The Pakistani-Taliban case appears consistent with this proposition because the changing relationship cannot be reduced to a single failure of control or a discrete policy decision. It reflects a longer process in which the Taliban developed from an armed movement embedded within regional networks into an organization exercising territorial control and de facto governmental authority.

The evidence nevertheless does not establish a simple causal sequence from social capital to organizational autonomy to strategic liability. Nor does it demonstrate that Pakistan created or controlled a unified network whose subsequent development produced contemporary security problems. The historical relationships examined here were heterogeneous and involved different Pakistani institutions, Afghan actors, religious organizations, tribal networks, refugee communities, political interests, and armed organizations whose relationships changed substantially over time.

Alternative explanations remain important. Changing geopolitical incentives, Pakistani domestic politics, ideological commitments, principal-agent problems, the independent organizational evolution of the TTP, border politics, and transformations in the wider regional security environment may all contribute to the developments observed after 2021. The Life-Cycle Theory should therefore be understood as identifying an additional sociological mechanism operating alongside these explanations rather than as establishing an exclusive causal account.

The principal empirical finding of this section is consequently more limited but theoretically significant. The post-2021 evidence appears broadly consistent with the expectation that long-term organizational development can alter patterns of dependence within strategic relationships. The Taliban's transition to de facto authority expanded its organizational autonomy at the same time that Pakistan encountered increasingly visible limits on its ability to secure preferred outcomes concerning cross-border militancy, border governance, and bilateral security. These developments do not prove the Life-Cycle Theory, but they provide sufficient evidence to justify treating organizational autonomy and changing patterns of dependence as important components of the explanation.

The Pakistani-Taliban case therefore provides an initial plausibility assessment rather than a definitive test of the Life-Cycle Theory. Its significance lies not in demonstrating that strategic liability inevitably follows successful network development, but in showing that the organizational consequences of sustained relationships may themselves transform the strategic environment. Social capital that once facilitated cooperation can coexist with increasingly autonomous organizations, divergent institutional priorities, and new strategic constraints. This possibility provides the basis for the broader theoretical implications considered in the following section.

7. Discussion and Comparative Implications

The Pakistani-Taliban case provides an initial plausibility assessment of the Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks while suggesting broader implications for social capital theory, network analysis, political sociology, and security studies. Although the empirical focus of this article is Pakistan's historical relationship with the Taliban, the theoretical framework developed here is intended to have broader analytical applicability. The principal contribution of the study is therefore not simply the interpretation of a particular strategic relationship, but the development of a sociological framework for understanding how strategic networks evolve over time and how, under particular historical and organizational conditions, the sustained accumulation of social capital may contribute to the emergence of strategic liability.

The analysis suggests that enduring strategic relationships cannot be understood solely through the lenses of state interests, military capabilities, intelligence operations, or formal institutional arrangements. They may also be understood as evolving social systems shaped by trust, legitimacy, reciprocity, repeated interaction, organizational learning, and institutional development. These processes generate social capital while simultaneously transforming the organizations embedded within strategic networks. Over time, sustained network development may contribute to increasing organizational autonomy, changing patterns of dependence, and forms of strategic behavior that become progressively differentiated from the objectives that originally brought participants together.

More broadly, the findings suggest that strategic relationships should be analyzed as dynamic social structures rather than static political arrangements. Relationships that appear highly effective during one historical period may generate different consequences as organizations mature, accumulate resources, expand institutional capacity, and acquire increasing political authority. The temporal dimension of network development therefore becomes essential for understanding why strategic relationships often change in ways that cannot be explained solely through short-term calculations of interests or power.

Alternative interpretations emphasize changing geopolitical incentives, domestic political considerations, principal-agent dynamics, proxy warfare, or shifting regional security interests as explanations for the evolution of Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban. The Life-Cycle Theory proposed here does not reject these perspectives. Rather, it argues that long-term organizational evolution provides an additional sociological mechanism that complements existing explanations by examining how sustained network development may gradually reshape relationships among strategic actors over time.

From Social Capital to Strategic Liability

The central theoretical insight emerging from this study is that social capital, social liability, and strategic liability should be understood as interconnected analytical dimensions within a broader process of network evolution rather than as competing concepts. Each concept captures a different stage in the long-term development of strategic relationships and highlights distinct mechanisms through which networks generate both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

The social capital literature has traditionally emphasized the benefits generated through trust, cooperation, reciprocity, and durable social relationships. Subsequent scholarship has also recognized that networks may generate obligations, constraints, exclusion, and other forms of social liability. Building upon this literature, the present study introduces strategic liability as a complementary analytical concept concerned not primarily with the costs of network participation but with the consequences of long-term organizational development within strategic relationships.

Whereas social liability primarily concerns obligations and constraints experienced by actors participating within networks, strategic liability concerns the evolving relationship between increasingly autonomous network actors and those who originally created, supported, or benefited from the network. Strategic liability may emerge when sustained organizational development enables participants to pursue political and strategic objectives that increasingly diverge from those of their original sponsors or partners.

The significance of this distinction lies in its temporal dimension. Social capital creates opportunities for cooperation and organizational development. Social liability identifies the constraints that accompany durable social relationships. Strategic liability focuses on how the long-term accumulation of social capital may gradually alter the internal distribution of power within strategic networks themselves. The framework therefore introduces an explicitly developmental perspective into the analysis of social capital by emphasizing that the consequences of network participation may change substantially over time.

The Pakistani-Taliban relationship illustrates this process particularly clearly. Relationships originally developed to generate strategic advantages gradually contributed to the emergence of an increasingly autonomous political actor capable of pursuing independently defined objectives. From the perspective of the Life-Cycle Theory, this evolution represents not the disappearance of social capital but one possible long-term consequence of its sustained accumulation under partic.

Strategic Networks as Evolving Social Systems

Building upon scholarship on organizational development, institutional change, and network evolution, a central contribution of this study is the proposition that strategic networks should be understood as evolving social systems rather than static instruments of state policy. Although governments may initially establish or support strategic relationships to achieve particular political or security objectives, the organizations embedded within those relationships continue to evolve through processes of social interaction, institutional learning, leadership development, and organizational adaptation.

Much of the literature on proxy warfare, insurgencies, and political violence has examined networks primarily as instruments through which states pursue strategic objectives. Within these perspectives, the principal analytical challenge often concerns how sponsors maintain influence over proxy organizations or manage relationships characterized by information asymmetries and competing interests. These approaches have generated important insights into state behavior, but they frequently devote comparatively less attention to the long-term sociological development of the networks themselves.

The Life-Cycle Theory offers a complementary perspective by shifting analytical attention from network management to network evolution. Rather than viewing networks as relatively fixed institutional arrangements, it conceptualizes them as dynamic social structures whose internal distribution of authority, legitimacy, organizational capacity, and dependence changes over time. Strategic relationships therefore evolve not only because external political environments change, but also because the organizations participating within them undergo their own processes of institutional development.

From this perspective, trust facilitates cooperation; repeated cooperation contributes to organizational learning; organizational learning strengthens institutional capacity; and increasing institutional capacity may gradually expand organizational autonomy. As organizations accumulate resources, legitimacy, administrative capabilities, leadership experience, and political authority, they may become progressively less dependent upon the relationships that originally facilitated their development. The analytical focus therefore shifts from whether social capital generates benefits to how those benefits may transform the organizations embedded within strategic networks over extended historical periods.

The Pakistani-Taliban relationship illustrates this broader sociological process. The strategic relationship evolved across multiple political eras, institutional contexts, and organizational stages. The resulting outcomes cannot be understood solely through individual policy decisions or isolated historical events. Rather, they reflect the cumulative effects of long-term organizational development within an evolving network. From this perspective, strategic outcomes emerge not only from immediate political choices but also from gradual transformations in organizational capacity, legitimacy, and patterns of dependence that unfold over decades.

Similar evolutionary processes may be observable in state-non-state strategic relationships, insurgent organizations, and informal governance networks. The Life-Cycle Theory does not suggest that all such relationships follow identical developmental trajectories. Rather, it proposes a general analytical framework through which scholars may examine how strategic relationships evolve, how organizational autonomy develops, and under what conditions sustained cooperation may contribute to strategic liability.

Strategic Liability and Existing Theories

The concept of strategic liability intersects with several established theoretical traditions while remaining analytically distinct from each of them. Principal-agent theory explains divergence primarily through problems of monitoring, information asymmetries, and incentive misalignment. Scholarship on proxy warfare emphasizes the challenges states encounter in influencing armed groups whose objectives may evolve over time. Blowback literature focuses on the unintended consequences of supporting non-state actors, while realist approaches generally interpret changing relationships through shifting distributions of power, strategic interests, and state behavior.

Each of these perspectives provides valuable insights into different dimensions of strategic relationships. The Life-Cycle Theory is not intended to replace these approaches. Rather, it proposes a complementary sociological mechanism that directs attention toward the long-term evolution of strategic networks themselves. Instead of focusing primarily on failures of monitoring, policy implementation, or institutional control, it asks how successful network development may gradually transform the organizations participating within those relationships.

From this perspective, strategic liability does not necessarily emerge because sponsors lose control, make strategic errors, or miscalculate incentives. Instead, it may emerge because sustained cooperation contributes to organizational learning, institutional development, increasing legitimacy, and expanding political authority among network participants. These processes may gradually redistribute power within the relationship itself, allowing increasingly autonomous organizations to pursue objectives that become progressively differentiated from those of their original sponsors.

Accordingly, the Life-Cycle Theory emphasizes long-term organizational development rather than short-term management problems. It shifts analytical attention from questions of whether relationships remain under effective control to questions concerning how those relationships evolve over extended historical periods. The framework therefore complements principal-agent theory, proxy warfare scholarship, blowback literature, and realist approaches by introducing a temporal and developmental dimension that has received comparatively less systematic attention.

Importantly, the Pakistani-Taliban case should not be interpreted as demonstrating the exclusive validity of this framework. Rather, it illustrates that organizational evolution provides one plausible sociological mechanism through which strategic relationships may change over time. Alternative explanations remain valuable and, in many cases, may operate simultaneously. The contribution of the Life-Cycle Theory is to identify an additional analytical pathway that helps explain why strategic relationships may generate outcomes different from those originally anticipated.

Toward a General Theory of Network Evolution

The proposition that organizations, institutions, political movements, and networks evolve over time is well established across sociology, political science, organizational theory, and institutional analysis. Research on organizational life cycles, institutional development, path dependence, social movements, and network evolution has consistently emphasized processes of growth, adaptation, consolidation, differentiation, and transformation.

The contribution of the present study is therefore **not** the observation that networks evolve. Rather, it is the identification of a specific sociological mechanism through which successful strategic relationships may, under particular historical and political conditions, generate strategic liability through the cumulative effects of social capital, organizational autonomy, and gradually diverging interests.

At its core, the Life-Cycle Theory contributes to the broader study of network evolution by proposing one analytically plausible pathway linking the accumulation of social capital to increasing organizational autonomy, differentiated strategic interests, and, ultimately, strategic liability. Rather than treating these developments as isolated phenomena, the framework integrates them within a single developmental process emphasizing long-term organizational change.

This perspective also extends the classical social capital literature. If Bourdieu demonstrated how social capital contributes to the reproduction of power, Coleman emphasized its role in facilitating cooperation, Putnam highlighted its contribution to collective outcomes, Burt examined the structural advantages associated with network position, and Portes identified its potential liabilities, the present study focuses on the temporal evolution of social capital and the conditions under which its continued accumulation may contribute to strategic liability.

The framework therefore introduces an explicitly developmental dimension into social capital scholarship. The consequences of social capital cannot always be fully understood through static analysis because relationships that generate substantial strategic advantages during one historical period may contribute to different outcomes as organizations mature, accumulate institutional capacity, and acquire increasing political autonomy.

This insight extends beyond security studies. Similar developmental processes may be observable in relationships involving insurgencies, militias, tribal alliances, intelligence networks, revolutionary movements, political parties, criminal organizations, social movements, and systems of informal governance. The Life-Cycle Theory does not assume that these cases follow identical trajectories. Rather, it offers a comparative analytical framework for examining how strategic relationships evolve across diverse political and organizational contexts.

The framework therefore shifts attention from the origins of strategic relationships toward the mechanisms through which they change over time. Understanding how networks evolve may ultimately prove as important as understanding why they emerge. Future research should examine not only the conditions under which strategic liability develops, but also whether processes of network evolution can be redirected, moderated, or institutionally managed before divergence becomes fully institutionalized.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Research

The framework proposed in this article is intended to contribute to several ongoing conversations across sociology, political science, security studies, and network analysis. Rather than advancing a comprehensive theory of strategic behavior, it seeks to offer a sociological perspective that places long-term organizational development at the center of the analysis of strategic relationships.

First, the study proposes strategic liability as a potentially useful analytical concept that complements existing work on social capital and social liability. Whereas previous scholarship has largely examined the benefits and constraints associated with social relationships, strategic liability draws attention to the possibility that, under particular historical and organizational conditions, the long-term accumulation of social capital may contribute to changing patterns of dependence and increasingly differentiated strategic interests.

Second, the article proposes a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks that conceptualizes strategic relationships as evolving social systems rather than static policy instruments. The framework suggests that organizational development, institutional learning, and the gradual accumulation of legitimacy and capacity may influence how strategic relationships change over time. It is offered as one possible analytical model whose broader applicability should be evaluated through additional comparative research.

Third, the study seeks to contribute to scholarship on network evolution by emphasizing the importance of temporal processes. Strategic relationships are often examined at particular moments in time, yet many of their most significant transformations occur gradually over years or decades. By directing attention to long-term organizational change, the framework highlights a dimension of strategic relationships that may complement existing explanations centered on immediate political or military considerations.

Finally, the article illustrates how sociological concepts—including social capital, organizational development, institutional evolution, and network analysis—may provide useful insights into questions that are frequently examined primarily through international relations or security studies. The intention is not to replace existing theoretical approaches but to encourage greater dialogue across disciplinary boundaries.

These proposed contributions should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The present study is based on a single historically significant case, and conclusions regarding the broader applicability of the framework necessarily remain tentative. The Pakistani-Taliban relationship possesses characteristics that may not be fully replicated elsewhere, and additional research will be required to determine the extent to which similar developmental patterns are observable in other strategic relationships.

Future research could examine a broader range of historical cases involving state-sponsored armed groups, insurgent organizations, revolutionary movements, intelligence networks, militias, and other forms of strategic partnership. Comparative analyses across regions and time periods would help identify the conditions under which organizational autonomy develops, the factors that may accelerate or constrain network evolution, and the circumstances in which strategic liability is more—or less—likely to emerge. Such research would also help clarify the scope conditions and potential limitations of the Life-Cycle Theory.

8. Conclusions

This article revisited the relationship between social capital, social liability, and strategic networks through an examination of Pakistan's historical relationship with the Afghan Taliban. Building upon earlier work on social capital and social liability, it proposed the concept of strategic liability and introduced a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks as one possible framework for understanding how strategic relationships may evolve over time.

The analysis suggests that strategic networks may evolve through identifiable stages of formation, consolidation, autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability. As organizations accumulate trust, legitimacy, organizational capacity, political influence, and other forms of social capital, they may also become increasingly autonomous. Under particular historical and organizational conditions, increasing autonomy may reduce dependence upon original sponsors or partners and create opportunities for the gradual divergence of strategic interests.

The Pakistani-Taliban relationship provides an opportunity to examine these processes over an extended historical period. Viewed through the perspective of the proposed framework, the case appears broadly consistent with the argument that long-term organizational development may contribute to changing patterns of dependence and strategic behavior. Rather than emerging from the collapse of a strategic relationship, strategic liability may arise when successful network development enables participating organizations to pursue increasingly independent political objectives.

This study seeks to make three principal theoretical contributions. First, it proposes strategic liability as a distinct analytical concept that complements existing scholarship on social capital, social liability, and strategic networks. Second, it introduces a Life-Cycle Theory of Strategic Networks that integrates social capital, organizational autonomy, divergence, and strategic liability within a unified analytical framework. Third, it suggests that, under particular historical and organizational conditions, the sustained accumulation of social capital may contribute to long-term strategic vulnerabilities by facilitating the emergence of increasingly autonomous actors capable of pursuing objectives that differ from those of their original sponsors or partners.

More broadly, the analysis suggests that strategic networks may usefully be understood not only as instruments through which actors pursue political objectives, but also as evolving social systems that reshape the organizations embedded within them. From this perspective, the significance of social capital lies not only in the opportunities it creates for cooperation, but also in the long-term organizational transformations that may result from sustained network development.

Although the Pakistani-Taliban relationship is historically distinctive, similar developmental dynamics may warrant examination in other state-non-state strategic relationships, insurgent organizations, and informal governance networks. Whether the Life-Cycle Theory proves useful beyond the present case remains an empirical question for future comparative research.

Ultimately, this article suggests that some of the most significant consequences of strategic networks may emerge during periods of organizational success rather than failure. As social capital accumulates, organizations may acquire increasing legitimacy, institutional capacity, political authority, and autonomy. Under certain conditions, these same processes may gradually reshape relationships within strategic networks and contribute to strategic liability. The framework proposed here is intended as a sociological perspective that complements existing approaches to strategic relationships by emphasizing long-term organizational development, network evolution, and the changing distribution of authority within enduring strategic partnerships. Future comparative research will be necessary to evaluate the broader applicability, scope conditions, and limitations of the Life-Cycle Theory.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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