

Regional Insecurity from Afghan Soil



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ABOUT COMMANDELEVEN

CommandEleven is an intelligence and analysis firm, based in Pakistan, with assets, analysts, and researchers offering apolitical analysis on topics such as security, geopolitics, defense, and espionage. CommandEleven’s intelligence includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kashmir.

CommandEleven, founded in 2015 as a think tank and policy advisory, with the objective of democratizing intelligence, simplify its understanding and real-life application, while offering guidance to governments, agencies, media, and private organizations.

CommandEleven continues to inform and guide public policy and decision-makers in the government, business, and military through a rigorous program of publications, conferences, digital media, policy briefings, and recommendations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS	4
Introduction	5
Afghanistan	7
Active Terror Groups in Afghanistan	11
The Rise of the Islamic State - Khorasan Province in Afghanistan	12
Pakistan, CPEC, Terrorism and Insurgencies	20
Erroneously Pointing the Finger at Pakistan	24
China, Uighur Muslims, and East Turkestan Islamic Movement	28
Iran, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISKP	32
Uzbekistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	35
Tajikistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Tajikistan, and Jamaat Ansarullah	39
What was the result in Afghanistan for US and NATO forces?	43
The Failure of the Taliban to Secure Afghanistan	45

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ANDSF – Afghanistan National Defense and Security Force

ANF – Afghanistan National Force

AQ – al-Qaeda

AQIS – al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent

ARF – Afghanistan Resistance Force

BLA – Baluchistan Liberation Army

BRA – Baluchistan Republican Army

BRAS – Baluchistan Raaji Ajoin-r-Sanger

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CPEC – China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

ETIM – East Turkestan Islamic Movement

FATA – Federally Administered Tribal Areas

IJM – Islamic Jihad Movement

IMU – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

ISAF – International Security Assistance Force

ISHP – Islamic State Hind Province

ISI – Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence

ISKP – Islamic State – Khorasan Province

ISPP – Islamic State – Pakistan Province

JA – Jamaat Ansarullah

JeM – Jaish-e-Mohammad

JuA – Jamaat ul Ahrar

JuD – Jamaat ul Dawah

Khorasan – an ancient area of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan

KP/KPK – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

LeI – Lashkar-e-Islam

LeJ – Lashkar-e-Jhangvi

LeT – Lashkar-e-Taiba

MI6 – British Intelligence

PTM – Pashtun Tahafuz Movement

Quetta Shura – the original 6 who founded the Taliban

RAW – India’s Research & Analysis Wing

TeU – Tehreek-e-Uzbekistan

TLP – Tehreek-e-Labbaik

TTP – Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

TTT – Tehreek-e-Tajikistan

US – United States

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION

The United States' haphazard withdrawal from Afghanistan and the immediate capture of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban was the final nail in one of the most costly and unneeded wars. In return for billions spent, thousands of lives sacrificed and billions in damages, the United States left Afghanistan without delivering justice to the American people or democracy to the Afghan people.

It is clear that the Pentagon, and White House have not learned any lessons from Vietnam.

Some have chosen to blame Pakistan for their support of the Afghan Taliban against the US and its coalition forces, but that would be another mistake. Pakistan is not interested in US interests in the region, because the US is not interested in Pakistan's interests in the region.

It really is as simple as that – no country in the world will sacrifice their own interests for the interests of another. Pakistan, in this case, had seen what happened after the Soviet collapse in Afghanistan in 1989, they were sanctioned. They were punished for supporting the United States against their Cold War enemy. The Soviet Union was not Pakistan's enemy until it was standing on their border in Afghanistan attempting to decide whether invading Pakistan was a viable option for them.

Some will like to quote the late Lieutenant General Hamid Gul's, former Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service, when he said *"First, we beat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with the Americans help. Now, people will say that we beat the Americans in Afghanistan with the Americans help."*

Afghanistan was left defenseless against the terror groups that had found safe haven during the United States invasion. The United States withdrawal from Afghanistan seemed more like a get-away than a formally planned military withdrawal. Military hardware was made non-functional, but a great deal was left behind for the Afghan Taliban, foreign fighters, insurgency groups to pick and choose from, a great deal with sold to US enemies.

The lesson that hasn't been learned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), MI6, Mossad, Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and many other intelligence agencies is now being experienced by the Afghan Taliban.

*You can create a monster to fight your opponent,
but what do you do when the monster escapes your control?*

Before you blame Pakistan for Afghanistan's condition, please read the Running to Disaster series, available on the CommandEleven website, which will give a better understanding of the Afghan-Soviet conflict.

The Taliban is today learning that the foreign fighters and mujahideen change allegiances when they see opportunity, and they are losing control of their soil.

What is interesting is a statement made by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, better known as the Butcher of Kabul, in 2002:

*"When you shelter armed opponents of another country,
it can only mean you have declared war against them"*

There is not a single country in the region that doesn't have fighters enjoying safe haven in Afghanistan. To take Hekmatyar's words in context – Afghanistan has declared war against every nation in the region – Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, China and indirectly Russia, just by sheltering their armed opponents.

Ultimately, not only Afghans and Americans will determine the course post-withdrawal, but more importantly, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia, all have interests in Afghanistan and do not wish to see a Taliban emirate again. China with its massive investments into mining and expanding CPEC into Afghanistan are not willing to deal with a nation embroiled in war. Iran and Pakistan have already seen Afghanistan's terror groups showing their teeth against them. Russia can be accessed if the Central Asian Republics fall.

India, Iran and Russia have long-standing relations with the Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks, who oppose the Taliban, if the need arises, they can cause internal strife with the Afghanistan Resistance Force (ARF), led by Ahmad Massoud, the late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud's son. While both Iran and Russia have been playing both sides for years, secretly arming and funding the Taliban to push the Americans out of the region, while publicly rejecting the idea of a Taliban, if it becomes a matter of Afghanistan and regional security, both will leverage their long-standing relations.

AFGHANISTAN

At the center of this discussion is Afghanistan and the situation created over the past 20 years to facilitate such a comprehensive failure by US/ISAF forces to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda, while being unable to stop other terrorist/extremist organizations from gaining a foothold, and assisting the Taliban.

It all ended in August 2021, when the 20-year experiment into democracy, nation-building, and counter terrorism came to a stunning faceplant. The US military and diplomats could not board C-130s fast enough to escape Afghanistan.

Gone were the millions of dollars that were given to warlords for their support. Gone were the billions of dollars spent on building a democracy, military and infrastructure in Afghanistan. Lost were the hundreds of thousands of lives sacrificed by both sides of the experiment.

The result – after 20-years of warfare in Afghanistan and fallout in Pakistan – the Taliban returned to Kabul has the leaders of Afghanistan, just as before the US invasion to eliminate al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban.

The Americans, whether the Pentagon, The White House or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) clarified one singular point – they have learned no lessons from Vietnam or the other attempts they have made at nation-building.

The late Mullah Omar, founder of the Taliban, proved his adage to be true: “Americans have the watches, but we have the time.”

After the Doha Accords in February 2020, facilitating a power handover to the Taliban and the withdrawal of US/ISAF troops, the Taliban were bound to prevent any group or individuals, including al-Qaeda, from threatening the US or its allies.

Read that again – prevented from threaten the US or its allies. The US made it clear their singular intent was protecting US interests, not stopping terrorism globally, or regionally, from Afghanistan.

Assets on-ground in Afghanistan told CommandEleven at the time, that the Taliban have no intention to break their long-term ties with militant groups with a transnational agenda, or completely curb their activities on Afghan soil. Rather, their plan was to attempt to control them.

Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban’s official spokesman, in July 2020 told the Swiss Institute for Global Affairs (SIGA) that they had successfully implemented the counter-terrorism guarantees made to the US:

*“All our mujahideen were ordered to not allow anyone to use Afghan soil to threaten other countries and no one will come to harm from here inshallah.
According to our information, there are also no foreign fighters in areas under our control.”*

This statement stands in direct contrast to the official reports, which confirm the presence of al-Qaeda and Islamic State – Khorasan Province fighters, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and a plethora of other groups, some with transnational, some with regional and others that are country specific. A UN report also cited that during 2019 and 2020, there were several meetings between high-ranking Taliban and al-Qaeda members to discuss cooperation related to operational planning, training and the provision of safe havens by the Taliban for al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan.

Any way its viewed, there is little doubt that official Taliban statements misrepresent the real, on-ground situation concerning foreign fighters, which raises questions over the Taliban’s seriousness to prevent transnational terrorism and adhere to the conditions agreed in the Doha Accords with the United States.

Appendix A contains images from a Taliban document titled – *“Instructions for Control & Supervision of Refugees”* – released in September 2020. Many analysts believe the term “refugee” has a dual meaning, it could mean actual refugees, but it could also refer to foreign fighters, again raising doubts to the Taliban’s sincerity to peace.

The document is divided into three sections:

1. A special department within the Taliban’s Intelligence Commission (General Directorate of Intelligence) will be responsible for “the affairs of registering and controlling tribal refugees, foreign mujahideen, their supplies, training and the prevention of unwanted/unpleasant events.
2. Stipulates that all “tribal refugees” and “foreign mujahideen” have to register with and pledge allegiance to the Taliban and that they shall receive identity cards.
3. The largest part is titled – *Requirements/Conditions for Stay of Refugees and Foreign Mujahideen in Afghanistan* – and contains regulations of what refugees and foreign mujahideen are allowed to do.
 - a. Clause 8 – “shall not interfere in the affairs of any country and can only continue jihad in Afghanistan”
 - b. Clause 10 – “under no circumstances can refugees and mujahideen threaten the government or citizens from another country”
 - c. Clause 23 – “refugees and foreign mujahideen will neither allow nor recruit local people or people from foreign countries into their groups”

Additional provisions of clause 23 qualify under what circumstances fighters who newly arrive in Afghanistan are granted to stay.

This is not the first attempt by the Taliban to control militants in Afghanistan. In an early June 2020 version, the Taliban informed foreign mujahideen that they must inform the Taliban of their presence and are barred from conducting operations without the consent of the Taliban. Prior to 9/11, the Taliban also circulated a document of 13 points, including required registration and banning of any operations without the approval of the Taliban.

What raises questions is the Doha Accords does not expressly obligate the Taliban to break ties with transnational terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda and sworn enemy ISKP, whereas The New York Times asserts that the obligation to renounce al-Qaeda and ISKP are part of a secret annex to the Doha Accords.¹

For example, clause 21 states: "Apart from the flag of the Islamic Emirate, refugees and foreign mujahideen have to refrain from raising other flags in order to prevent suspicions/doubt (problems)." For lack of better terminology, this seems to be the Taliban's attempt to establish plausible deniability. Another condition is the prohibition of the use of Afghan SIM cards, another attempt to conceal Afghanistan, and the Taliban's, own complicity.

The above clearly suggests the Taliban are aware of the transgressions of foreign fighters against other countries, but rather than preventing or distancing themselves from such groups, they are attempting to assure there will be no evidence that directly connects back to Afghanistan and the Taliban.

Considering that in spite of the 13 conditions issued in early 2000, al-Qaeda still carried out the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, are we to believe the Taliban consented to both attacks or should we assume that in spite of the agreement, al-Qaeda continued its global operations without any concern for the Taliban?

This is a question that must be answered for both regional and international nations.

Another concern arises about whether the Taliban have the willingness or ability to disarm or otherwise control foreign fighters. Understanding the Taliban's only real enemy is ISKP, who they will disarm by force if required, how will the Taliban disarm those who have been loyal or allied with them?

The greatest concern comes from the Taliban's ability to prevent foreign fighters from threatening or carrying out operations against other countries, when a considerable number of groups based in

¹ "Trump Wants Troops in Afghanistan Home by Election Day. The Pentagon is Drawing up Plans," Gibbons-Neff, Thomas and Barnes, Julian E, *The New York Times*, 26 May, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/world/asia/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-election-day.html?Page%20of%201%20of%205>

Afghanistan have aspirations to overthrow the un-Islamic governments in their own homelands, which they openly express in their propaganda messages. To prevent them from threatening other nations would effectively end their reason for existence, which will case the Taliban to have increased internal conflicts.

It is due to these concerns and inaction, thus far, against terror groups that operate from Afghan soil that has shaken international and regional resolve that the Taliban will not allow Afghanistan to become a terrorist safe haven again. Some diplomats and analysts believe that economic and diplomatic pressure will force the Taliban to take action against foreign fighters, but we see that as unlikely, as Western capitals were quick to sanction Afghanistan immediately after the US withdrawal, eliminating their ability to withdraw from the US\$ 9 billion of Afghanistan government funds in foreign banks, while the IMF blocked access to the US\$ 450 million fund, both leading to the massive humanitarian crisis that has developed in Afghanistan, creating opportunities for terror groups for recruitment and bashing the Taliban's inability to govern Afghanistan.

The situation will get significantly worse before it could possibly get better.

ACTIVE TERROR GROUPS IN AFGHANISTAN

Islamic State – Khorasan Province

Tehreek-e-Taliban and 25 splinter groups

East Turkestan Islamic Movement

Turkestan Freedom Movement

Haqqani Network

Independent IS groups (unaffiliated)

Freelance fighters (mercenaries)

al-Qaeda (Core)

Baluchistan Liberation Army

Baluchistan Republican Army

al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

Lashkar-e-Taiba

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi

Jaish-e-Mohammad

Jamaat ul Ahrar

Mujahid United Council (Shura-i-Etehad Mujahid)

Maulvi Nazir Group (TTP)

Amre Ba Maroof

Momin Group

Jamaat ud Dawah

Lashkar-e-Islam

Ansarul Islam

Jamaat Ansarullah

Islamic Jihad Movement

Tajik Taliban

Tehreek-e-Tajikistan

Chechens

Uighur Muslims

Tajiks

Tehreek-e-Uzbekistan

Arabs

THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE – KHORASAN PROVINCE IN AFGHANISTAN

“There is no doubt that Allah the Almighty blessed us with jihad in the land of Khorasan since a long time ago, and it is from the grace of Allah that we fought any disbeliever who entered the land of Khorasan. All of this for the sake of establishing Sharia. Know that the Islamic Caliphate is not limited to a particular country. These young men will fight against any disbeliever, whether in the west, east, south or north.”

The Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) has risen and fallen many times since July 2015, when they announced their formation to the global jihad. They have seen 4 different Emirs – Hazif Saeed Khan (2016), Abdul Hasib (2017), Abu Sayed (2017) and Abu Saad Orakzai (2018) – neutralized by US drone strikes. They have lost territories to the Taliban, but the US withdrawal gave ISKP the foundation to formally challenge the Afghan Taliban and, more importantly, al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

ISKP's strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan is simple – delegitimize the governments and degrade public trust in the democratic process, sowing instability in nation-states, which ISKP views as illegitimate.

ISKP was able to win districts from the Taliban within their own territories, which expanded a greater threat for the Taliban. From being in Nuristan and Kunar, ISKP spread across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, gaining supporters disgruntled with the Taliban, and with the territories came revenues from illegal tax collection, illegal check posts, kidnapping, and drug revenue, facilitating additional growth and recruitment.

First, engaging their extensive social media channels to decry the Taliban as traitors to Islam for making a deal with the US, insinuating the Taliban was unable to govern or secure Afghanistan for the Afghan people, while carrying out attacks against the Taliban and their affiliates to bolster their argument. Weaknesses within the Taliban ranks were quickly exposed and converted to either ISKP recruits to be better trained or dead bodies.

Second, they leveraged the Taliban's predominantly Pashtun majority against them to recruit Afghanistan's minority groups – Hazaras, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and other foreign fighters – to a more inclusive jihadi organization. ISKP also positioned itself as the only option for those who believed in a Caliphate, whereas the Taliban was only concerned with Afghanistan.

Third, ISKP reached out to groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Uighur Muslims, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the TTP, BLA, BRA, BRAS and other insurgents inside Afghanistan, who wished to implement Sharia law in their home countries and expand the Caliphate.

ISKP, unlike the Taliban, offers a transnational ideology to the terrorists who have targets in their home countries. For groups like the TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the opportunity to overthrow the “un-Islamic” governments and establish a Sharia-compliant government in their home countries. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan have already shown their hand by disclosing they believe the Taliban to be the model and they aspire to continue that model.

ISKP also gained a major advantage when ISIL disintegrated in Iraq and Syria. Many fighters travelled from those countries to Afghanistan, bringing with them battle-ready fighters, suicide bombers, and vehicle-born improvised explosive device (VBIED) expertise, which significantly changed the stakes in Afghanistan and surrounding countries.

Lastly, ISKP's most significant growth came when the Taliban, under pressure from Pakistan's security establishment, re-settled TTP fighters from the Pak-Afghan border to provinces whose borders adjoined the Central Asian Republics. First, the Taliban removed a significant support base that was already pro-Taliban inviting ISKP to secure the territory, while simultaneously creating enemies within the Taliban rank-and-file for bowing to Pakistan's demands against a war-tested ally.

What raised a number of questions was the July 30 attack on the JUI-F rally in Bajaur. While it was not the first incident when ISKP has targeted JUI-F. Most recently in June, ISKP assassinated a JUI-F official. JUI-F is a regional political party that was part of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government. They advocate the implementation of Sharia law under the Deobandi school of jurisprudence, while also being sympathetic to the Afghan Taliban, and the TTP. ISKP violently oppose the TTP, Afghan Taliban, and the TTP, which makes JUI-F an appealing target.

While ISKP advocated different schools of Islamic jurisprudence and has condemned Deobandi organization, like the TTP and Afghan Taliban.

After the Bajaur attack, ISKP issued a 198-page fatwa against the JUI-F, declaring them valid targets of jihad.

In Badakhshan, the Tajik-led government was replaced by a Pashtun government, which causes tensions to increase with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Tajikistan, the Tajik wing of the Taliban, and the Tajik people on both sides of the border. It also saw Jamaat Ansarullah enter the Afghanistan-Tajik space. While Jamaat Ansarullah is an al-Qaeda ally, if it senses a shift from the Taliban, it could easily align with ISKP. It also led to the revival of the Greater Tajikistan movement, which has sought to absorb the Tajik-majority areas in Afghanistan into Tajikistan, and created an opportunity for ISKP to recruit more Tajiks on both sides of the border.

ISKP has significantly benefited from defectors from various terrorist groups. Having their initial Amir being a former TTP commander, ISKP has always willingly accepted the disgruntled fighters from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI), as well as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Arabs, Chechnya and many other ethnicities. This advantage of not being predominantly one ethnicity has given ISKP a significant strategic advantage against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The ISKP threat for Afghanistan and Pakistan grows significantly each day due to the factors listed above. ISKP has already demonstrated their ability to carry out attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with this being assumed as a prelude to the brutality to come.

ISKP Attack Operations in the Post-US Withdrawal Landscape

Operation Type	Logic of Violence	Examples
Economic Warfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bleed enemy resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Destruction of electricity pylons - Attacks on oil tankers
Attacks on International Presence/Foreign Nationals & NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purify the country - Cement in-group identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pakistani and Russian embassies, hotel frequented by Chinese nationals - Anti-humanitarian campaign
High Profile Assassinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whittle enemy ranks and morale - Encourage defections from enemy rank-and-file - Refocus enemy security resources on senior leadership and open alternative targets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - March 2023 assassination wave against multiple Taliban officials - Killing of Rahimullah Haqqani, prominent Afghan cleric - June 2023 assassination of Taliban deputy governor of Badakhshan
Rural Guerrilla Warfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whittle enemy ranks and morale - Establish safe havens - Compete for historical stronghold communities - Intimidate and extort civilians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Threatening Taliban security personnel and convoys in former Nangarhar strongholds
Urban Sectarian Warfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Destroy social cohesion - Refocus enemy security resources on urban areas and away from rural communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2021 bombings on Shi'a mosques, notably the Sayed Abad Mosque in Kunduz and Bibi Fatima Mosque in Kandahar in October - June 2022 attack on Kabul Sikh temple
Cross-Border Attacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobilize supporters and expand regional recruitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attacks claimed in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran and Pakistan

As CommandEleven has written extensively on the viability of the threat posed by ISKP post-US withdrawal, we will not repeat the previous analyses here. Rather, we have included links to the past analyses and comments in Appendix B.

There is no doubt that terrorist attacks originating from ISKP will increase in Afghanistan. Those attacks will target Afghanistan and its international interests in the region, with the objective of embarrassing the Taliban government and rendering the country ungovernable. ISKP's aggressive stance and threats to foreigners, economic and infrastructure development projects, and humanitarian organizations in the country, as well as its actions against potentially allied countries will put the Taliban in a very difficult position.

ISKP's objective is to make Afghanistan a "failed state" and benefit from the authority vacuum created. Their attempts to show the Taliban administration as fragile and weak, and harm Taliban's relations with countries of the region through cross-border violence.

They specifically target the Taliban's relations with China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian Republics.

ISKP is also banking on the fact that no Western country is willing to put troops on the ground in Afghanistan to fight the multitude of terrorist organizations operating from there. This means planning an effective and successful military intervention will not be easy given the geopolitical and logistical circumstances. The US has withdrawn all military assets from Afghanistan, relying on drone strikes to deal with counter terrorism problems. And the leadership of ISKP knows this very well, which is why they will not be leaving the Afghan battlefield in the near future. While the international community has a duty to assist the Taliban in combatting a potentially more dangerous enemy both regionally and globally, the possibility of this happening is minor, at the moment.

The vacuum created by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has allowed ISKP to spread its training camps and strongholds to the eastern border with Pakistan, along the northern borders with China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and along the western border with Iran. With time, these camps will be used to attack these regional nations. The stronger training camp infrastructure will also facilitate ISKP to recruit more foreign fighters into their fold, which contains fighters from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, the Maldives, the Philippines, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan. If we include those who attempted to join but were captured, we would also include the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and many other countries.

ISKP's growth into northern Afghanistan, a strengthened foothold in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan, a consistent ability to execute suicide missions, and broad domestic and international outreach efforts underscore its resilience and strategic adaptability, and until real and significant counter-terrorism pressure is not exerted on them, ISKP will not be suppressed or defeated.

ISKP has the potential to be significantly more deadly and spread across more nations than al-Qaeda was ever able to consider.

Under Sanaulah Ghafari's (alias Shahab-ul-Muhajir) leadership, ISKP was able to achieve the following objectives:

- **Targeting the South and Central Asian Fronts** – the increase in ISKP's regional approach has been remarkable. Propaganda that was initially in Arabic, now including Pashto, Dari, Hindi, Malayalam, Bengali, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Farsi and English. In September 2022, Tawhid News, the pro-ISKP Uzbek channel officially announced the expansion of ISKP's jihad into Central Asia, focusing on Chinese targets and investments. In 2022, ISKP also launched the Voice of Khorasan magazine in English to target younger, more educated youth who may be disillusioned or harbor grievances against their local governments.
- **Disparaging the Taliban and targeted civilians** – ISKP has been successful in painting the Taliban's negotiations with foreign governments as an "abandonment of the true jihad. They have also adjusted the release of their propaganda to coincide with Taliban actions. In June 2022, when the Taliban was opening bilateral discussions with India, ISKP quickly criticized the Taliban by exploiting the statements made by Indian politicians about the Prophet Muhammad. They also targeted a Sikh temple.

In 2022, ISKP claimed the attacks in Tamil Nadu and Mangalore, India were conducted by ISKP militants. While Islamic State – Hind Province (ISHP) has failed to rise, the recruitment of Indian Muslims and carrying out attacks in India remains steadfast. Similarly, the ISKP attacks on the United States have become more targeted, with specific mention of recent events and references to the Biden administration.

ISKP has referred to Pakistan as a cancerous tumor, blaming its leaders and armed forces for the current socioeconomic and political volatility in the country, while issuing direct threats to its multi-billion-dollar investments with China.

In regards to China, ISKP has showcased the government atrocities toward the majority-Muslim Uighur ethnic group in China's Xinjiang province. A recent UN report cited operational and logistical cooperation between East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and ISKP, including the exchange of personnel and planning of joint operations.

- **Increased audience segmentation** – in an attempt to recruit individuals who are dissatisfied with the governments of China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and various Central Asian governments,

ISKP embeds nationalistic or ethnic messaging into its propaganda. While the Taliban maintains the Uighur Muslims are an internal Chinese matter, and the mass murders of Ahlul Sunnah of Iraq and Syria are another matter outside the Taliban's control. ISKP offers its own platform to battle the "enemies of Islam slaughtering the Muslims." Additionally, some of the propaganda materials directed toward Tajikistan directly threatens the Tajik government of Emomali Rahmon.

Ghafari was neutralized in a targeted operation in June 2023.

Additionally, the Taliban, who understand the threat that ISKP presents, has recently invited US "civilian contractors" to be stationed at Bagram Air Base to provide surveillance, operational planning and assistance to the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), which they verbally deny², but on-ground assets have confirmed the presence of US personnel.

For the purpose of this briefing, CommandEleven will focus on the specific threat posed by ISKP to regional countries. In the process of discussing these threats, we will also provide expanded insights into the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the affiliated terror groups, which will assist the reader in better understanding the current situation and the potential future of regional and global security.

² "Islamic Emirate Denies Russian Claims of US, UK Intelligence Bases," Ziaei, Hadia, 13 October, 2023, *Tolo News*, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-185514>



THE STAKEHOLDERS

PAKISTAN, CPEC, TERRORISM AND INSURGENCIES

Once close allies, Pakistan and the Taliban are on the verge, if not already embroiled, in a major crisis that will have repercussions across the region. Since returning to power, the Taliban have shown an utter defiance to their main state benefactor during the war against the US and the now deposed Afghan government.

The Taliban, who many believed would do Pakistan's bidding, have again challenged the status of the Pak-Afghan border and continue to provide safe haven to anti-Pakistan terrorist and insurgent groups, especially the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, who have been energized with the Taliban in power. Almost immediately after taking power, the Taliban released senior TTP leaders and a large number of fighters imprisoned by the former Afghan government. The TTP came into existence in 2007, after the operation against Lal Masjid, the Red Mosque located in the heart of Islamabad. They have been responsible for the martyrdom of over 90,000 civilians and seek to establish a Taliban-style, Sharia-complaint state in Pakistan.

The Taliban has also moved to a more nationalistic policy, asserting Afghan sovereignty and focusing on their needs first. Pakistan, in response, still supports the Taliban politically and provides significant technical assistance, but has withheld significant aid, tightened border controls and continues to withhold diplomatic recognition. As a result, the Taliban had made surprising overtures to establish friendly relations with India to gain leverage against Pakistan, including sending Taliban fighters to India for training. However, that relationship soured quickly, as last week the Taliban closed their embassy in New Delhi.

Tensions significantly increased due to the TTP's increased attacks on Pakistan's security forces in the eight months since the Taliban's return to power. On April 21, 2022, Pakistan, in a major escalation, launched coordinated air strikes inside Afghanistan on known TTP safe houses and training camps. The Taliban summoned Islamabad's envoy in Kabul and the Defense Minister, Mullah Yaqob, threatened retaliation in case of more attacks. Pakistan accused the Taliban of allowing terrorist groups to use Afghan soil to attack Pakistan and that it may engage in cross-border action again if the Taliban does not take action itself. It should be clear that Pakistan's air strikes were emblematic of the frustration with the Taliban's failure to restrain and neutralize the TTP.

Instead, the TTP, emboldened by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, strengthened its bases in Afghanistan, received de facto political cover to step up cross-border attacks and regularly sends fighters, some who are Afghan nationals, into Pakistan, while the Taliban attempted to convince Pakistan to address the TTP 'grievances.' The TTP launched the al-Badr offensive, the most significant campaign against Pakistan since Operation Zarb-e-Azb.

Pakistan's choice to resort to air strikes seem to be bound to a number of objectives:

- send a message to the TTP that its cross-border havens are not as secure as they believed
- give the Taliban a strong warning to force them to reconsider their asylum to the TTP
- drive a wedge in the TTP-Taliban ties and compel the Taliban to consider the potential cost of their support to the TTP

However, the Taliban was unmoved. The TTP's status in and activities from Afghanistan have not decreased. Simultaneously, anti-Pakistan sentiments from within the Taliban have surged, increasing and solidifying support for the TTP within the Taliban. In short, the Taliban has made no effort to conceal their support for the TTP in Afghanistan.

Many analysts believed the TTP-Taliban nexus is an ideological alignment to implement a Sharia-compliant government through force. Others believe that the Taliban refuses to abandon the TTP due to their unwavering supporting, including the provision of suicide bombers, during the US occupation. There are also strong interpersonal, war-time bonds with the Haqqani family and the TTP, as well as between some southern Taliban leaders and the TTP's political leadership.

Keeping this in mind, it is possible the Taliban want to use the TTP as 'strategic depth' to leverage Pakistan when required, an ideal first attempted by President Hamid Karzai and Afghanistan NDS Chief, Amrullah Saleh. It is also possible that the Taliban want the TTP to ultimately rise to power in Islamabad. Most importantly, it is possible that the support the TTP enjoys among rank-and-file Taliban, coupled with its own size, makes it difficult for the Taliban to take any real action against them, especially with Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) recruiting deserters from other groups.

Pakistan needs to abandon hope that the Taliban will take action against the TTP. The Taliban's sponsored/mediated negotiations between the TTP and Pakistan failed to bring a long-term ceasefire in December 2022, when the TTP demanded large regions of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province be ceded to the TTP.

The negotiations were not positively viewed by most domestic and international analysts. It is believed that the ceasefire was an attempt to gain the release of imprisoned senior leaders and improve its own battlefield positions by sneaking fighters into Pakistan from Afghanistan, which we believe 2023's brutality is proof.

Since the collapse of negotiations, Pakistan has seen some of the most brutal attacks on its soil, including the attacks on Peshawar's Police headquarters mosque, Bannu's counter-terrorism police station, and the Kabal, Swat police station attack. This is not including the on-going guerilla warfare against Pakistan's

military installations in FATA that increase brutality with each attack. Taken together, it signifies the steadily increasing trajectory of the TTP, due to its political cohesion with the Taliban, and ever-expanding cadres of trained fighters, suicide bombers, weapons and equipment. The TTP is able to fundraise through kidnapping and extortion inside both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan needs to use more coercive leverage against the Taliban to force action against the TTP and other anti-Pakistan insurgent groups, who enjoy safe haven in Afghanistan. Pakistan, however, struggles with a major economic crisis, an ever-troubled political environment, and the rapid rise of the TTP threat, all backing Pakistan into a corner with very few options. Pakistan needs to make Kabul aware of the military component – if the ANY group with safe haven in Afghanistan carries out an attack on Pakistan soil, Pakistan will respond with air strikes on known TTP training camps along the Pak-Afghan border and in northeastern Afghanistan, near the Tajikistan and China borders,

There is no doubt the Taliban are pro-TTP and its campaign against Pakistan, with Taliban Amir Hibatullah Akhundzada stating that Pakistan's system is "un-Islamic."

Tensions between both countries have reached a point of counter-accusations, with a manufactured Taliban memo being leaked to the local media "identifying" and describing training camps inside Pakistan, where Islamic State fighters were being trained by Pakistan's military to attack Afghanistan. The spurious claims that Pakistan is training ISKP fighters to attack Afghanistan, while being a direct target of the same ISKP is untenable to say the least. Why would Pakistan consider replacing the Afghan-centric Taliban with the transnational, and significantly more violent, ISKP? These tensions are further inflamed with reports from UN officials of TTP individuals moving freely and conducting business in Afghanistan's cities.

Pakistan's response, thus far, has not been very cohesive. While preferring the Taliban to the previous Afghan governments, Pakistan seems to be unable to force them into taking punitive action against the TTP. A major factor limiting Pakistan's response is its own decimated economic situation. While being able to carry out raids and take defensive actions, Pakistan does not have the resources for a sustained high-intensity campaign, like Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which crippled the TTP.

The TTP has also changed their focus to a local agenda against Pakistan to keep from drawing the wrath of the Taliban and US drone strikes. TTP Amir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, believes that 2011-2017 was the biggest setback for the TTP because they were a target of US drone strikes, eroding TTP's combat potential. Mehsud has steered clear of any provocation or plotting against the US in hopes of staving off US drone strikes.

If the TTP is able to gain territory in Pakistan, the al-Qaeda fighters hiding in their ranks will again look for operational space in those territories.

The most important way to threaten US interests, and draw the Americans back into the region, is to seriously destabilize Pakistan, eroding nuclear security, broadening regional insecurity and migration to and from other countries.

In 2017, Noor Wali published “Inqilaab-e-Mehsud,” making an appeal for Pashtun nationalism, while his deputy in South Waziristan, Azmat Mehsud, publicly supported the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in 2018. He has also voiced support for Tehreek-e-Laibaik Pakistan (TLP) against France and the Aurat March. The move was designed to draw support from other groups, regardless of sectarian schisms, in effect, changing the jihadi landscape of Pakistan.

Additionally, Noor Wali has been successful in reconciliations with splinter groups, the largest being the Hakeem Ullah Mehsud Group, and smaller groups into the TTP fold again. After the Hakeem Ullah Mehsud Group rejoined the TTP, an estimated 22 additional anti-state terrorist groups re-aligned with the TTP core group under Noor Wali.

Noor Wali has also reached out to the Baluchistan liberation forces, including the Baloch Liberation Army, to increase their ability to strike Baluchistan, and specifically Chinese interests, such as Gwadar and CPEC projects, attempting to drive a wedge between China and Pakistan.

And, the TTP also has a deep pool of recruits to draw from due to structural/political issues in FATA. Poverty, lack of educational and health opportunities, and communication may push many to turn to the TTP as their only way to survive.

What should be clear about the Taliban’s backing of the TTP in Afghanistan for the United States and regional countries – if the Taliban are not restraining a terrorist group attacking its most important state benefactor of the last two decades, the Taliban’s guarantees to other states – which have more limited leverage on the Taliban – are not reliable.

When we consider Islamic State Pakistan Province (ISPP), which is made up of two different factions – the first consists of former TTP and other disgruntled fighters from terrorist groups, who are predominantly Salafi from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the second is made up of anti-Shia sectarian elements active in southern Baluchistan. ISPP was significantly reduced in strength when ISKP decided to keep Khyber Pakhtunkhwa within its own wilayat to revamp its own war against the Pakistani state. Additional reasons include the majority of ISKP’s Afghan leadership originate from Salafi seminaries in the province, and recruits from KP played a crucial role in ISKP’s original expansion. The province also shares a difficult-to-govern border with Afghanistan, allowing it to serve as a launchpad against the Pakistani state.

ERRONEOUSLY POINTING THE FINGER AT PAKISTAN

Many have erroneously pointed the finger at Pakistan's role in the US-led War on Terror, but they fail to understand a few important factors.

Pakistan had already been a frontline partner once with the United States during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1978 to 1989. Pakistan allowed its soil to be used for recruitment, training and facilitation of fighters from Pakistan, and around the Muslim world, into Afghanistan as mujahideen. Pakistan allowed its conservative madrassa, Islamic seminaries, system to be used to impart jihadi principles and education from USAID textbooks to future mujahideen fighters.³

Selig Harrison, a leading US expert on South Asia, at *Terrorism and Regional Security: Managing the Challenges in Asia* in March, 2001, said the following:

*"I warned them that we were creating a monster. The CIA made a historic mistake in encouraging Islamic groups from all over the world to come to Afghanistan, provided US\$ 3 billion, and agreed to allow Pakistan decide how the money should be spent."*⁴

John Pilger, a former CIA operative, wrote in *The Guardian* on September 20, 2003:

*"For 17 years, Washington poured US\$ 4 billion into the pockets of some of the most brutal men on earth - with the overall aim of exhausting and ultimately destroying the Soviet Union in a futile war. CIA Director William Casey backed a plan by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, to recruit people from around the world to join the Afghan jihad. More than 100,000 Islamic militants were trained in Pakistan between 1986 and 1992, in camps overseen by the CIA and Britain's MI6, with the British SAS trained future al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in bomb-making and other black arts. Their leaders were trained at a CIA camp in Virginia."*⁵

The result for Pakistan – sanctions and blacklisting as a rogue state that supported and exported terrorism by the same Americans, who had created the system and infrastructure to support their proxy war against their Cold War enemy. Thus, pushing Pakistan backwards, not only unable to deal with the mess created in Afghanistan, but also unable to control the now radicalized madrassas that were now churning out radicalized youth looking for a fight. This is without discussing the corrupt politicians, who offered their personal services to anyone willing to pay.

³ "Infidels are our enemies,' Afghan fighters cherish old American schoolbooks, Crilly, Rob, *Al Jazeera*, 07 December 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/12/7/afghan-fighters-american-textbooks.html>

⁴ "Taliban is a child of CIA & ISI, says Zardari," Kanchan Gupta, May 11, 2009

⁵ Ibid

Pakistan, due to the support of the United States invasion of Afghanistan, itself became a target for the terrorists and extremists, as many felt this was an unforgivable betrayal of the Afghan Taliban, who had long enjoyed the support of the Pakistani state machinery. The blowback on Pakistan cost 90,000+ lives, hundreds of thousands physically handicapped, not to mention the countless cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the Pakistani public. This coupled with close to US\$ 200 billion in economic and infrastructure losses broke Pakistan's back again. This is also not taking into consideration the occupation of the settled districts of Swat, Buner, Dir, in Pakistan's scenic Northern Areas, or the formerly Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) being used for cross-border attacks and safe haven from terrorists fleeing US assaults in Afghanistan.

Some members of the US government, media and intelligence community have even accused Pakistan of playing a duplicitous game with the US-led coalition. This raises a question that US officials have not asked themselves – Was Pakistan fighting the Taliban for its own interests or in support of US interests?

It is also important to note that in May 2001, the United State Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chaired by John Kerry, held a series of hearings on “al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other extremist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”⁶ Prior to this hearing, in 2009, another hearing was held by the same committee into “Afghanistan's Impact on Pakistan.”⁷

There is no nation on the planet that will declare war against another unless there is a benefit to be attained from the war itself. While the US was able to cobble together a coalition of nations that would support American hegemony globally, Pakistan was not a willing participant. Without Richard Armitage's threat to “Be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the stone age,”⁸ which was cited in President Pervez Musharraf's book, *In the Line of Fire*, Pakistan would not have been involved. Armitage denies having made the statement⁹, but does not deny that Pakistan was put on notice to help America's war effort.

Pre-2001, Pakistan had no issue with the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan, nor was it struggling with cross-border attacks or suicide bombers targeting Pakistan's civilian population, military personnel and

⁶ “al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other extremist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, May 2011, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/al-qaeda-the-taliban-and-other-extremist-groups-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

⁷ “Afghanistan's impact on Pakistan,” *US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, October 2009, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg55243/html/CHRG-111shrg55243.htm>

⁸ “Bush threatened to bomb Pakistan,” Suzanne Goldenberg, *The Guardian*, 22 Sept, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/22/pakistan.usa>

⁹ “Armitage denies threatening Pakistan after 9/11,” *NBC News*, 22 Sept. 2006, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna14943975>

infrastructure. Pakistan and Afghanistan were at peace with each other, until the US threatened then President Pervez Musharraf to join the war.

Musharraf told CBS News that he refused some of the US demands, including turning over border posts and bases to US forces, and banning anti-US protests in Pakistan. Pakistan abandoned its support for the Taliban government in Afghanistan, allowed US overflights and the use of land routes to transport supplies from Karachi's Port Qasim to Afghanistan, and granted access to some air bases to launch drones, within the guidelines and approval of Pakistan's military and government.

It should also be known that Pakistan, initially, took the role of negotiator attempting to convince the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden and key al-Qaeda leadership living in Afghanistan under their protection.

In November 2001, Lt. General Ehsan ul Haq, then Director General – Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had maneuvered Saudi royals to front a deal to protect the Taliban, which was partially supported by Tony Blair's government. They warned that the movement could not be defeated and should be incorporated into what the US intended to do in Afghanistan. The proposal was taken by a Saudi royal and Tony Blair to US Vice President Dick Cheney, who rejected it outright, much like he had rejected a deal from Iran in 2002, where Iran offered the bin Laden family and top al-Qaeda commanders in their custody, in return for normalization of relations with the US. In Cheney's well-known arrogance, he said Iran would fall after Iraq and the Taliban, and the US was not prepared for any deals or normalcy as it invaded Baghdad.

Consider how much the war would have changed had US Vice President Cheney accepted either deal.

The deal was never forgotten by Lt. General Ehsan, whose tenure ended in 2007, when the ISI and CIA parted ways, because Ehsan would not relinquish the idea and the US was unable to find a strategy to persuade Pakistan to relinquish its own strategic interests.¹⁰

What we see is not Pakistan's long-haul planning, but the abject failure of US policy to launch an impossible low-intensity war in Afghanistan, and then further dilute it with the illegal invasion of Iraq – and finally abandoning both Iraq and Afghanistan, while neighbors in Pakistan continued to hold on to their ambitions, suffer the consequences and, again, left to clean up a mess they didn't create or require in the region.

¹⁰ "ISI didn't plan the Taliban victory. The US facilitated it, says Adrian Levy," Ullekh NP, 27 Aug 2021, *Open Magazine* <https://openthemagazine.com/columns/isi-didnt-plan-the-taliban-victory-the-us-facilitated-it-says-adrian-levy/>

Also, President Musharraf, and the Pakistan armed forces, attempted to convince Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura that they didn't want US forces in the region because it would open the door to more adventures that could cause Pakistan significant problems and leave a long-lasting negative impression, as a whole. Pakistan's offer was the Taliban surrender Osama bin Laden to Pakistan, who would then be handed over to the US under negotiated conditions. Mullah Omar refused to hand over bin Laden, instead demanding that all the evidence be provided to the Taliban, who would oversee a bin Laden's trial in Afghanistan.

Pakistan wearily became a frontline state, fighting the Taliban for US interests, not their own.

It should also be clear that Pakistan, on numerous occasions, called on the US/ISAF forces to support on-going Pakistani counter-terrorism operations, only to be swiftly denied. Specifically, during Operation Zarb-e-Azb, Pakistan's largest and most-far reaching counter-terrorism operation, US forces refused to seal the Afghanistan border to stop terrorists from fleeing to their safe havens in Afghanistan.

This was a major mistake for the US military. Had they sealed the border, the terrorists would have been sandwiched between the US military in Afghanistan and the Pakistan military in Pakistan. This would have eliminated a significant number of problems that Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region are facing today due to the short-sighted approach of the US military commanders in Afghanistan. Fighters affiliated with Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JUA), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI), and numerous additional insurgent groups joined the fight against the Americans.

Pakistan has seen both in the past and the present, the US has never been interested in Pakistan's interests, even though it would have assisted them significantly. Rather, the US continued to support the failed Afghan governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, the warlords, who once only ruled regions along the Pak-Afghan border, who now populated Afghanistan's parliament, and an utterly incapable Afghanistan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF).

For the US, Pakistan was lines of communication and an easy target for their own failures in Afghanistan.

CHINA, UIGHUR MUSLIMS, AND EAST TURKESTAN ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

China, who had significantly benefited from the American security presence in Afghanistan, has become increasingly concerned about the security vacuum and is looking for ways to protect its own security and economic interests with the quickly changing realities on ground. Experts agree that ISKP is the largest terrorist organization with China in its crosshairs, and that poses significant security risks to Beijing's diplomatic and economic presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

China will be looking to establish its regional hegemony and assert itself as a preeminent actor, looking to wield its soft power by engaging with Afghanistan and fostering diplomatic alliances. This strategic move aims to position China as a paramount influencer in regional affairs, fortifying its ties with neighboring nations and bolstering its overall sway.

China's grand strategy in Afghanistan encompasses several goals, including safeguarding its economic interests, expanding global influence, and ensuring stability within its borders. Against an enduring conflict and evolving regional dynamics, the prospects of a stable Afghanistan presents an opportunity to align a neighbor with China's overarching strategic objectives.

However, the persistent instability in Afghanistan poses considerable challenges to China's security policy, particularly in relation to non-traditional transnational security threats. China astutely discerned its own role in Afghan security from the following perspectives:

- as a secondary stakeholder in the conflict
- as an indispensable great power and contiguous nation that defies dismissal
- as a pivotal protagonist owing to its substantial investments in post-conflict reconstruction and economic development

China's military role has also expanded, with reports that it is establishing a military base in Badakhshan province and financing an Afghan mountain brigade. While China is downplaying its military role to focus on capacity building and counter-terrorism efforts, its primary goal is to eliminate the training bases of East Turkestan Islamic Movement in the Wakhan Corridor and prevent terrorist infiltration into Xinjiang.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has established bases in the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan, but has been retrained from attacking Chinese interests inside Afghanistan, or using Afghan soil to launch operations against Chinese targets abroad, but that may change with ETIM changing allegiances from the Taliban to ISKP.

The type of stability that China had envisioned may not materialize ever. Over the past months, China has held weekly consultation with the Taliban via its ambassador in Kabul. Many economic and investment opportunities have been discussed, and the Taliban has promised to hold major mining projects reserved for Beijing. Today, they offer China Afghanistan's natural wealth in exchange for investments, realizing that their own Islamic Emirate will not flourish without funding, and that the ruling elites, such as the Haqqani Network and the Kandahari faction, will need a strong and independent finance base to secure their respective interests and future both as part of a state, and potentially, against each other as well.

Beijing's most serious concerns are the potential spillover effects from the Taliban takeover of Kabul to other militant groups, and the absorption of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) fighters into ISKP with the potential of carrying out orchestrated attacks in the Xinjiang province. China also has significant economic investments in Afghanistan including the 25-year oil extraction deal for the Amu Darya Oil project in northwestern Afghanistan, Mes Aynak copper mine and ambitions to expand CPEC to Kabul. However, these projects are all contingent on the security situation and diplomatic relations with the Taliban.

China is also concerned about further extremism in Xinjiang, after an attack in Kunduz in October 2021 was executed by a Uighur Muslim as retaliation for the Taliban's inclination to forge closer relations with Beijing.

In December 2022, ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack at a Kabul hotel popular with Chinese citizens. In January 2023, another attack on Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry was believed to have targeted Chinese diplomats, but there has not been independent confirmation of this claim.

Although China is unlikely to be fully comfortable with diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, it is the only pragmatic option to secure its western frontiers, to reduce the potential threat of anti-China militant groups finding safe haven and to protect its economic investment in the region. Simultaneously, it is unclear what China is prepared to do – or capable of doing – on its own, or in conjunction with other regional or external powers to prevent ISKP's Khorasan from becoming the next Syria.

ISKP in their September 2, 2022 *Voice of Khorasan* magazine said – “with its ambition of conquering the world and establishing their own power sphere, China is now on a collision course with ISKP.” The tyrants are destined to lose unable to protect themselves from the sharp knives of the caliphate's soldiers.”¹¹

¹¹ “China's Daydream of Imperialism,” *Voice of Khorasan*, 2 September, 2022

China has been an ISKP target since the group was formed, when then Emir Hafiz Saeed Khan declared “ISKP will fight until we liberate all Muslim lands from Andalus (Spain) to East Turkestan (Xinjiang, China) from the hegemony of disbelievers.”

In June 2022, ISKP boasted in *Voice of Khorasan* about creating difficulties for the “murtad apostate Taliban regime who want to fulfill their void promise of ensuring no harm for their American, Chinese and other international masters from the soil of Afghanistan.” They claimed “it will be the turn of China and Iran next, and soon the Islamic State’s warriors will attack the modern cities of China.”¹²

The same article criticized the Taliban for efforts to “protect Chinese occupiers” and refusing to “avenge or free the Uighur Muslims from the hands of the communist regime in China.”

ISKP has successfully carried out a deadly string of violence across Afghanistan, rocket attacks on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the September 2022 attack that targeted the Russian embassy in Kabul killing two Russians and four Afghans. All undermining the Taliban’s authority and increasing the cost of doing business in Afghanistan.

As long as ISKP can deliver on their threats, Beijing will proceed with caution in Afghanistan, rather than have its personnel targeted in Afghanistan, as they were in Pakistan.

Uzbek Tawhid News, another arm of the Islamic State propaganda machine, contained an article threatening attacks on BRI infrastructure and Central Asia gas pipelines running toward China. China is also among the ISKP targets because they are “red atheists whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent Uighur Muslims, and call on all Muslims to take up arms against China. China, who has been quite troubled with the Uighur Muslims within ISKP and ISKP’s approach to the Uighur issue, claims the Taliban supported Uighur separatists in the past and those who carried out some bombings were associated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), who received training in Afghanistan. Beijing has argued that the Taliban must fight these forces in order to prevent the spread of “cross-border terrorism and extremism” in Xinjiang.

In order for China to increase their investments in Afghanistan, the Taliban must prove that it has terminated its ties with organizations that Beijing considers as terrorist organizations. China’s discomfort regarding ISKP is not only caused by the Uighur issue. China believes the Belt and Road Initiative projects in the country are under threat due the possible actions and activities of the organization. Both Chinese

¹² “Islamic State in Afghanistan Promises Attacks on Chinese and Iranian Cities, Threatens Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Webber, Lucas, *The Militant Wire*, 20 Jun 2022, <https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-in-afghanistan-promises>

investors and employees in the country do not feel safe. All these factors cause China-Taliban relations to never reach the expected level.

While there is no doubt that China with its economic heft can be a gamechanger in Afghanistan, it is also important to remember that regional and neighboring states have a stronger grasp on Kabul and its Islamic politics. While international discourse troubles Beijing's role in Afghanistan, others have made much more progress in influencing the Taliban politically and economically.

States such as the UAE, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Qatar, along with the West, may have a more realistic chance of helping Afghanistan avoid a complete, long-term economic collapse than Beijing, which has narrow strategic and security aims concerning natural resources, infrastructure development and investing in foreign lands to feed its own domestic economy in China. With a looming great power competition between the US and China, struggles with mammoth, capital-intensive projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC, and a shaky global post-pandemic economic environment further aggravated by Russia's war against Ukraine, it will be surprising if China takes up the sole responsibility of keeping Afghanistan afloat.

IRAN, AL-QAEDA, THE TALIBAN, AND ISKP

Iran will benefit from a stable and secure Afghanistan in terms of trade and cultural ties, but they stand at a crossroads wherein the outcome or progress of the peace process will definitely shift the strategies that best suit its interests. Tehran established contacts with the Taliban once the Doha Accords were signed. Given Iran's troubled history with the Taliban is one of convenience and opportunity while maintaining leverage.

In 2020, Iran has also played a key role in convincing sparring Afghan political factions to agree to a joint committee for intra-Afghan talks, which fits into a broader strategy for engaging with all sections of the Afghan political landscape.¹³ Iran's special envoy for Afghanistan, Mohammad Taherian, met with Afghan political leaders, including moderates like Salahuddin Rabbani, the head of Afghanistan's Jamiat-e-Islami, and fringe leaders, like Abdul Sayyaf, leader of the Islamic Dawah Organization of Afghanistan. It was believed that this would provide Iran with options and also send a clear message to the Afghan government, at the time, that Tehran is not solely dependent on Kabul's goodwill.

Afghanistan does not want to become a ground for proxy warfare between the United States and Iran, as there are many allegations of Iran arming different factions of the Taliban against US forces. It also does not want to become a proxy between Iran and Saudi Arabia – particularly if Afghanistan were to return to a civil war post-US withdrawal. Iran can also potentially command/redeploy a large number of its own Afghan Shia fighters, part of Liwa Fatemiyoun¹⁴ militia, that have returned from Syria. While Iran does not seem to be willing to undertake such options, but if Afghanistan becomes a ground for proxy conflicts Iran's involvement could lead to sectarian tensions between the predominantly Shia Hazaras and the majority Sunni Pashtuns.

Beyond the main convergence of interests in US forces leaving the region, Iran and the Taliban have also cooperated in fighting the Islamic State - Khorasan Province and denied it a foothold in western Afghanistan along the Iranian border. ISKP being a Salafi extremist terrorist group is a logical enemy of Iran, a Shia Islamic power. ISKP also opposes the Taliban for ideological and political reasons. There is a precedence of ISKP being funded by private Sunni patrons from the Gulf region to counter-balance the Taliban, which had somewhat moved out of the shadow of its erstwhile Sunni sponsors in the Arabian Peninsula.

¹³ "Iran and the US 'meet' again over Afghanistan," Slavin, Barbara, *The Atlantic Council*, 21 May, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-and-the-us-meet-again-over-afghanistan/>

¹⁴ "Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life through the Eyes of a Militia Member, Hauch, Lars, *Middle East Institute*, 22 May, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-fatemiyoun-division-life-through-eyes-militia-member>

Iran, who has maintained contacts¹⁵ with the Taliban at both upper and lower levels, and reportedly given military support to both the mainstream Taliban and rival splinter groups¹⁶, given Iran's troubled history with the group and ideological differences at face value, its relationship with the Taliban is one of convenience and opportunity while attempting to maintain leverage. Iran and the Taliban has also cooperated in fighting the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) and had denied it a foothold in western Afghanistan, which has disappeared since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

While ISKP, being a Salafi extremist group, is a logical enemy of Iran, a Shia Islamic power. ISKP also opposes the Taliban on ideological and political reasons. Additionally, there is ample proof that private Sunni patrons from the Gulf region are funding ISKP to counter-balance the Taliban, who have fallen out of favor with their former supporters in the Arabian Peninsula. Lastly, Iran does not want a return to an exclusively pro-Saudi and pro-Pakistan Taliban in Afghanistan, as this will led to Saudi interests taking center stage in the region.¹⁷

ISKP also has a hostile position towards Shiites and Iran, claiming the Taliban cooperates with the Shiites, citing the appointment of a Shiite Hazara as governor of Sar-i-Pul. They also hold the Taliban responsible for the assassinations of predecessor scholars such as Obaidullah Mutawakkil, Mustafa Dervishade, and Sardar Wali. ISKP is causing disruptions in Iran-Taliban relations with attacks against Shiite Hazaras.

Iran's main interests in Afghanistan is maintaining its access to the Afghan market and security on the porous Iran-Afghanistan border – a concern for drug trafficking into Iran. Iran is also an important trade partner for Afghanistan and Kabul stand to gain significantly for increased trade and connectivity with Iran.

Afghanistan faces the problem of US sanctions against Iran, which may limit Afghanistan's access to ports, rail, and road projects that will greatly benefit the Afghan economy and reduce its reliance on Central Asia and Pakistan, where the relationship is strained, due to being landlocked. Iran also presents Afghanistan with diversified options in terms of energy requirements, if there is a stable government in Afghanistan.

There are reports that China and Iran are close to signing a trade and military pacts that would increase Chinese investments in connectivity and other projects in Iran, which could enable a Chinese military presence in the region. This would increase Iran's capabilities in Afghanistan via connectivity projects,

¹⁵ "Taliban Links to Iran threaten peace talks with US," Siddique, Abubakar, *Gandhara*, 10 January, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-links-to-iran-threaten-peace-talks-with-u-s-/30370796.html>

¹⁶ "Iranian Links: New Taliban splinter group emerges that opposes the US peace deal," Bezhan, Frud, *Gandhara*, 09 Jun 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-splinter-group-peace-deal-iranian-links/30661777.html>

¹⁷ "Mapping Iran's policy towards a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan," Shekhawat, Shivam, *Observer Research Foundation*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/mapping-irans-policy-towards-a-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/>

trade, and better border management. It could also open up an Iran-China-Pakistan axis in Afghanistan, while using ports in Pakistan and Iran to get access to Afghanistan.

The problem with this scenario is that the US, Saudi Arabia, and India, who view a greater China-Iran footprint with concern. Iran have maintained a stable relationship and beneficial, but if a hostile environment emerges, which it has through the Taliban and ISKP, then Tehran could embark on a destabilizing campaign of violence, where General Qassem Soleimani¹⁸, assassinated commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF), replacement Esmail Qaani, has extensive experience and expertise in carrying out IRGC-QF operations in Afghanistan since the 1990s.

Iran's dealings with multiple actors in Afghanistan are ultimately determined by necessity and threat perceptions. Iran, therefore, has no unitary Afghan policy, but a multi-pronged pragmatic strategy wherein it retains leverages and linkages with parties, and preparations for multiple scenarios.

¹⁸ "The potential impact of Qassem Soleimani's Death on South Asia," Prasad, Hari, *South Asian Voices*, 29 Jan 2020, <https://southasianvoices.org/potential-impact-of-soleimani-death-on-south-asia/>

UZBEKISTAN AND THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

Though aware of the weaknesses of the former Afghan government, none of the Central Asian governments seemed prepared for the rapid and decisive Taliban victory, which has led to concerns that regional terrorism and extremism, either through direct Taliban sponsorship or inspiration, will explode. Keeping in mind that all five Central Asian states backed the anti-Taliban opposition in the 1990s, and supported the US military campaign after 2001, which has created great concern for the governments of these states to reprisals.

If the Taliban, as they claim, have turned over a new leaf and renounced terrorism, some Central Asian republics may be open to economic cooperation. If they have not, the Central Asian states will likely rely on Russia for enhanced security support.

During the previous Taliban-ruled government, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan used Afghan territory for training and transnational terrorist operations. Over time, IMU militants aligned and merged with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State – Khorasan Province. Unlike the original IMU, al-Qaeda and ISKP have a pan-Islamist Salafi ideology whose goal is to replace all Central Asia's secular regimes with an Islamic Caliphate that would encompass Central Asia, Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan and China. Arabs, Chechens, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Pashtuns, Syrians, Tajiks, Turks, Uighurs, and other Eurasian ethnic groups have joined these various terror movements, including the combat units in Syria and Iraq.

While Taliban leaders now pledge not to support their transnational terrorist's agenda, it remains uncertain if all Taliban commanders will reject providing assistance or ignoring jihadi activities directed toward the Central Asian Republics.

No matter what, the Taliban's sweeping victory has boosted enthusiasm for extremist ideologies in Central Asia.

Ismatulla Irgashev, special representative to Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, said during an interview with Voice of America, "Uzbekistan sees the Taliban as a reality that must be accepted. We see no other option. We share a border, deep history and culture. Imagine what happens if we don't engage, more conflict, another civil war, more blood, poverty, suffering, threats to the neighbors and the international community."¹⁹

Irgashev went on to say – "we see a common future with immense common interests, no matter who is in power there."

¹⁹ "Uzbekistan seeks to engage Taliban without alienating west," Imamova, Navbahor, *Voice of America*, 04 May, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-seeks-to-engage-taliban-without-alienating-west/6557338.html>

“The concern about terrorism is one that Uzbekistan and the United States share deeply,” US Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel Rosenblum said, “Terrorist groups operate there. There’s some evidence that they’ve been growing in number and ability to operate since the change in government.”²⁰

Realistically, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)²¹ should protect Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which are full members of the institution, along with Armenia, Belarus, and Russia. Afghanistan is currently a CSTO observer, with its status in question. The problem – of the three Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan, only Tajikistan is a member of the CSTO.

The problem is that CSTO never engaged in an actual combat operation. It has also focused on containing Afghan-related threats – such as transnational terrorism and narcotics trafficking. The CSTO was absent in the recent Belarus crisis, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All of these matters were left to Russia to solve bilaterally. These conflicts have given rise to the question about the cohesiveness of the institution, in an August 23, 2021 emergency online summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his deep concern over the developments in Afghanistan and potential threats coming from there.”²²

Admittedly, Uzbekistan has been moving closer to Russia, as well as its Central Asian neighbors since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President in 2016. One factor accelerating this process has been the security situation in Afghanistan. Though Uzbekistan has not rejoined the CSTO, Russia and Uzbekistan have resumed large-scale bilateral military and defense industrial cooperation. In an Aug 15, 2021 telephone call between Mirziyoyev and Putin agreed to ensure close ties and cooperation in ensuring regional security and stability.

Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has also expanded economic ties with Afghanistan and its other neighbors, including its 137-km border with Afghanistan’s Balkh province. Afghan-Uzbek economic cooperation has expanded to include Uzbekistani firms building Afghanistan’s roads, railroads, bridges, telecommunications, and other national infrastructure. Uzbekistan has also extended the Hairatan-Mazar-i-Sharif railway to additional Afghan cities, as well as construct a new electricity line to the Afghan province of Baghlan.

Despite these ties with the Ghani’s Afghan government, Uzbekistan has been hedging their position and engaging extensively with Taliban representatives in recent years. They have reopened the Friendship

²⁰ “Uzbekistan seeks to engage Taliban without alienating the West,” Imamova, Navbahor, 04 May, 2022, *Voice of America*, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-seeks-to-engage-taliban-without-alienating-west/6557338.html>

²¹ Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), <https://en.odkb-csto.org/>

²² “Session of CSTO Collective Security Council,” Russian President Vladimir Putin, 23 August, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66433>

Bridge, declined to champion the rights of ethnic Uzbeks and taken additional measures to restore economic ties.

The game changer is ISKP, who has twice fired rockets from Afghanistan towards Uzbekistan. Both occurrences were near Termez, seemingly to prove Dustlik Bridge is not secure. None of the rockets fired in mid-April 2022 made it into Uzbek territory, but a couple rockets fired in July hit a residential area near Termez, damaging homes but causing no casualties.

ISKP has also increased their online propaganda against Uzbekistan for their relationship with the Taliban. Most recently, ethnic Uzbek Afghan commander Abdul Rashid Dostum, called on Tashkent to give seized Afghan government warplanes and helicopters to the National Resistance Front (NRF) that is still fighting the Taliban in areas of northeastern Afghanistan. Taliban Defense Minister, Mullah Yaqoob, son of former Taliban leader Mullah Omar, has twice demanded Uzbekistan hand over the aircraft.

Uzbekistan's close relationship with the Dostum's forces likely have Taliban officials suspicious that some aircraft may be given to their enemies in Afghanistan.

It should also be noted that in September 2002, an aide to Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, then Foreign Minister of the Taliban, claimed he had been sent, prior to 9/11, to warn the US government of an impending attack and to persuade them to take military action against al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan. The aide claimed advance knowledge of the attack came from IMU chief, Tahir Yuldashev, which, if true, would indicate a high degree of cooperation between al-Qaeda and the IMU.

In Phillip Bobbitt's book, *Terror and Consent*, he noted that Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a scientist at the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, had met Osama bin Laden in Kabul in August 2001, where he was informed by bin Laden that "he already had sufficient fissile material to build a nuclear bomb, having obtained it from former Soviet stockpiles through the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

In 2003, A. Elizabeth Jones, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, testified on the threat of terrorism in Central Asia before the US House of Representatives' subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, arguing the greatest threats to the region and US interests were IMU and Hizb-ul-Tahrir

Mahmadsaid Juraqulov, head of the anti-organized crime department in the Interior Ministry of Tajikistan, told reporters in Dushanbe that the "Islamic Movement of Turkestan is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," and that the Uzbek secret services manufactured the change in name. Juraqulov also claimed that IMT is not a major security threats to Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, however, IMU wants to create problems in Uzbekistan.

The IMU has been involved in attacks in Tashkent, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In April 2012, 150 IMU and TTP fighters launched an attack on Bannu prison in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, freeing 400 prisoners, including Adnan Rashid, who had been convicted for attempting to assassinate then-President Pervez Musharraf. They also took part in the December 2012 attack on Peshawar Airport, and in June 2014's attack on Karachi's Jinnah International Airport.

TAJIKISTAN, THE TEHREEK-E-TALIBAN TAJIKISTAN, AND JAMAAT ANSARULLAH

The relationship between Tajikistan and the Taliban has been tenuous at best, and confrontational at worst, but with the addition of ISKP into the mix, the relationship is expected to sour significantly. Tajikistan, by far, has the worst relationship with the Taliban due to the hosting leaders of anti-Taliban forces that have launched an armed insurgency in pockets of northern Afghanistan.

In Mazar-e-Sharif, ISKP killed Mohammed Duad Muzammil, who was the Taliban governor of the province, then days later, killed 30 Shiites in the Tebyan Cultural Center. This after the car bomb attack in Badakhshan, where the Taliban police chief and other security personnel were killed.

“Tajikistan is rightly concerned about terrorist travel and terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan and is taking important steps to address the threat,” said the US State Department. “We have worked with our Central Asian partners, including Tajikistan, for many years to support improved border security and to build law enforcement capacity to interdict terrorist travel. This security cooperation includes training, assistance, mentorship, and equipment to counter terrorist activity and curtail international crime.”

Let’s begin on July 6, 2022, when the Taliban’s supreme leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada said Afghan soil would not be used to launch attacks against other countries. “We assure our neighbors, the region and the world that we will not allow anyone to use our territory to threaten the security of other countries,” was his exact statement speaking to clerics in Kabul.

Prior to this, on April 18, ISKP fired ten Katyusha rockets at a military base in Termez, while claiming credit for the attack, ISKP announced the rockets had been launched from Hairatan in Afghanistan’s Balkh province. On May 7, ISKP claimed its fighters fired seven rockets from Khawaja Ghar in Afghanistan’s Takhar province against military targets in Tajikistan.

Although the attacks did little physical damage, they are significant for many reasons. First, and foremost, they demonstrate that ISKP has expanded its presence in Afghanistan. The attacks were carried out from Balkh and Takhar provinces, which border the Central Asian countries. Additionally, ISKP’s presence is significant enough to carry out military operations and operate rocket launchers. Since the Taliban took power in August 2021, they have carried out multiple

campaigns against ISKP, but it seems while the Taliban was focused in the east, ISKP moved to the north.

The second reason these attacks are important is because they are the first occasion when the ISKP has explicitly targeted Central Asian countries. In the past, ISKP used hostile rhetoric to target the Central Asian governments. The Tajik government said that “bullets, not rockets” were accidentally fired into Tajik territory due to a firefight between the Taliban and ISKP. While the incident was covered up, Tajikistan cannot afford to take the attacks lightly because ISKP poses a clear and present danger to their national security.

Third, these attacks can inspire and motivate potential Central Asian recruits, especially since ISKP has now included the Tajik language into their propaganda.²³ Given the deep disaffection among Afghans of Tajik ethnic origin with the Pashtun-dominated Taliban, the ISKP could easily strike a chord with these alienated ethnic groups and their compatriots in Central Asian Republics.

The attacks have also exposed the Taliban’s flanks, indicating that the regime does not have total control over Afghan territory, and northern Afghanistan is contested. The attacks have undermined regional confidence in the Taliban’s ability to play the role of a regional security provider. The Taliban have been unable to secure its borders and ensure that violence and instability does not spill over into neighboring countries. The ISKP attacks will unsettle relations between the Taliban and Central Asian governments, like Tajikistan.

Another concern that may come to light in the near future is that some Afghan army and intelligence forces were joining ISKP ranks to defy Taliban persecution. This is similar to what happened in Iraq, when Saddam Hussein’s Baathist led government was dismissed and many army officers joined ISIL as strategic planners, trainers and fighters.

Since 2018, ISKP has taken responsibility for the attack in Tajikistan’s Danghara district, killing four Western cyclists and wounding others. In November 2019, 15 ISKP terrorists were killed by Tajik security forces at a checkpoint, near the Tajik-Uzbek border. In August 2021, two Pakistani ISKP operatives were arrested while attempting to set off an improvised explosive device (IED)

²³ “Islamic State in Khorasan Province exploits Tajik martyrs for online recruitment in Central Asia,” Webber, Lucas, Terrorism Monitor Volume 20, Issue 14. <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2075977.html>

outside the embassy of Turkmenistan in Kabul. This indicates that ISKP is able to strike the interests of other Central Asian states besides Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where ISKP has been primarily focused.

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, ISKP has also centralized and expanded its propaganda apparatus. It has formed both Tajik and Uzbek wings of its al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production. ISKP's media strategy, if we were to call it a strategy, is to denounce the Taliban's relations with apostate regimes, portray the Taliban as a Pashtun-centric movement that is hostile to Central Asian Republics, while simultaneously serving as a puppet to foreign powers. Additionally, ISKP emphasized how the Taliban waged war on the ISKP affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), slaughtering fighters and family members.

The Taliban is under immense pressure from neighboring countries and the international community to prevent terrorist attacks from being launched from Afghanistan, as well as halt any spillover that may affect Central Asia. In response, ISKP intensified its hostile rhetoric and threats against Central Asian governments, targeting Uzbekistan and Tajikistan specifically, while attempting to increase their appeal among extremists in these countries. ISKP also wants to undermine Taliban relations with regional countries and create a "chilling effect" in Afghanistan to keep the Taliban weak, cutting support from foreign diplomatic missions, investors and humanitarian organizations. The threat of further attacks against Central Asian Republics and their interests in Afghanistan will persist.

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, there has been an increased importance on establishing a security dialogue with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan has already demonstrated its desire to support opposition movements to the Taliban, offering refuge to members of the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud. In addition, land has been ceded to the Chinese to build a military base overlooking the Tajik-Afghan border. This military base, located in Gorno-Badakhshan province, near both the borders with Afghanistan and China, is critical to China for the protection of the Wakhan Corridor, which is vital for BRI.

This base demonstrates China's anxieties regarding the security situation inside Afghanistan and how it may affect their own economic interests, while also revealing a clear consensus between the Tajik government and China on the necessity for security cooperation vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The more Chinese bases that are built in Tajikistan, the more territory and de facto sovereignty is

yielded to the Chinese. If the West does not step forward to assist in security matters relating to Afghanistan, the Tajik government may view China as the only option.

With terrorism expanding from Afghanistan, Tajikistan is already facing direct consequences from the instability of the Taliban's return. ISKP has recruited ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks with the intention of having them carry out attacks within Afghanistan and against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

There is no doubt in the threat that ISKP poses to the government and people of Tajikistan, already having launched attacks from Afghanistan. In 2022, ISKP fired rockets into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and stepped up its online propaganda aimed at ethnic Tajiks using local dialects. ISKP's dissemination of material in Central Asian languages has been increasing, with the group creating digital books, audio statements, translations, and social media content in both Uzbek and Tajik languages, with its own media wing, al-Azaim and through its Uzbek Telegram channel Tawhid News.

ISKP has also declared a great jihad on Central Asia, similar to the language used to declare war on Europe during the mid-2010s. ISKP Tajik content has been distributed on TikTok and Telegram, including videos with Tajik subtitles that use the Cyrillic alphabet, which suggests targeting Tajiks outside of Afghanistan. The Ferghana Valley region, which includes Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, may be especially vulnerable to ISKP recruitment due to the conflict and unrest the area experienced after the dissolution of the USSR.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's borders with Afghanistan are vulnerable, and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is not able to devote resources and energy to assist in securing them, which gives China the opportunity to step in and fill the vacuum.

WHAT WAS THE RESULT IN AFGHANISTAN FOR US AND NATO FORCES?

The United States, against Pakistan's objections, enlisted the support of the Northern Alliance, based in the Panjshir Valley, led by the late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, a Tajik himself. The Northern Alliance, without US support, could not fight the Taliban, but was being called forward to be members of the military, intelligence and government. Additionally, the Northern Alliance was heavily supported India and Tajikistan, two non-starters against a predominantly (80%) Pashtun majority.

The US purchased the support of local warlords and criminal gangs, who they believed would provide support and assistance to US/ISAF forces against the Taliban and their long-term guest, al-Qaeda. The US military poured millions of dollars into the coffers of these anti-Taliban forces only to find the warlords and criminals increased and expanded their hold on Pak-Afghan border regions, increased the flow of drugs into the global market and provide safe haven to the terrorists that were flowing across the border from Pakistan. Neither the Taliban nor al-Qaeda saw any resistance from these forces, rather they provided additional support by facilitating the flow of additional fighters from Pakistan and other Muslim nations against the US/ISAF coalition.

Due to an already flawed decision-making tree, heavily influenced by Kabul and New Delhi, the US alienated Pakistan, their biggest asset against the Taliban. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and many senior military officers had long-standing relationships with key Taliban leadership, according to Western media reports, which could have been used to force the Taliban to negotiate and become part of the government. In return for Pakistan's assistance, the US would neutralize terror camps and safe havens established in Afghanistan by groups targeting Pakistan, even if the Afghanistan National Directorate of Intelligence (NDI) objected, as they had cultivated the TTP for strategic depth against Pakistan.

It is a well-known fact, even reported by The New York Times,²⁴ that the Afghanistan government maintained more than cordial ties with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), considering them "strategic depth" against Pakistan when required. It is also a well-known fact that India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) was also providing logistic and military support to the TTP, Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Baluchistan Republican Army (BRA) and Baluchistan Raaji Ajoi-R-Sangar (BRAS).

Allowing Pakistan to be destabilized by the fallout from the American invasion weakened the US mission in Afghanistan. With Pakistan's military and equipment facing inward due to the terror attacks inside Pakistan, the US facilitated the terror groups in re-settling in the Pak-Afghan border region, re-arming of weaponry and munitions, and the recruitment and training of new fighters that would be used against them.

²⁴ "U.S. Disrupts Afghans' Tack on Militants," Matthew Rosenberg, *The New York Times*, 28 Oct 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/29/world/asia/us-disrupts-afghans-tack-on-militants.html>

The most significant error in the US strategy, which will affect the entire region for decades to come, happened on July 2015, when the Islamic State announced the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan.

In July 2015, the US could have focused its military on neutralizing the roughly 200-300 fighters organized under ISKP's first Emir Hafiz Saeed Khan, himself a defector from the TTP, eliminating what is now a regional threat. Instead, the US didn't take ISKP seriously due to their lack of size and access to munitions.

ISKP is discussed in depth in this briefing, including its growth, threat increase, and most dangerous, becoming a viable alternative to the Afghan Taliban for national leadership and al-Qaeda for leadership of the global jihad.

This background discussed is required understanding to comprehend the threat that has been allowed to embed itself in Afghanistan. We stress the point – *allowed to embed itself*– because from 2015 to 2021, there was little to no intent in fighting ISKP by US/ISAF forces. More importantly, the US saw ISKP has a counter force against the Taliban. With Taliban attention drawn to fighting ISKP in skirmishes, the US military was given an advantage to attack the Taliban. The US believed the skirmishes between the Afghan Taliban and ISKP were beneficial to the US mission in Afghanistan.

THE FAILURE OF THE TALIBAN TO SECURE AFGHANISTAN

It is not surprising that the Taliban was not able to secure Afghan soil after the US withdrawal. The Taliban was not ready for the mess that had been created in Afghanistan. This same mess, post-Soviet withdrawal, led to civil war, which seems to be the same path post-US withdrawal.

As US C-130s, filled with military and diplomatic personnel, flew out of Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, the Taliban, along with the rest of the world, got a taste of the challenges left for them by the fleeing invaders. While hundreds of Afghans thronged to the airport in hope of finding some way out of the country before the bloodshed began, ISKP launched a brazen suicide attack on August 26, 2021 that took the lives of 170 Afghans and 13 US service personnel. The attack was followed by a massive firefight between US and Taliban fighters against ISKP.

Whether this attack was preventable or not is a matter for deeper research, but the indication given by ISKP threw all of Afghanistan's stakeholders off-balance.

For years, both the Afghan government and military who had claimed that ISKP was not a formal threat and was quashed on the Pak-Afghan border fighting against the Taliban were quickly stumbling for answers as Kabul fell to the Taliban without resistance, and ISKP rose to challenge for governance and leadership of the global jihad. The US, on assurances from the NDS and ANDF, had not engaged ISKP because they were considered a "minor group with limited capabilities," whose only target was the Afghan Taliban.

In fact, the US, as stated previously, saw ISKP beneficial because they were able to weaken the Taliban with their own skirmishes and defections, keeping the Taliban from mounting any major attacks against US forces. US interests again outweighed Afghan interests, and put Afghanistan on a collision course to become a terrorist haven again, while leaving huge power vacuums that would unleash another civil war in Afghanistan.

It must be remembered that the 20-year US mission in Afghanistan was to assure Afghanistan would no longer be used by terrorists against the US or neighboring countries. Pakistan had directly suffered from 2007 onward from the US invasion, fermenting the belief in Pakistan's power corridors that the US had a more covert mission in the invasion of Afghanistan.

In simple terms, after the 20-year war in Afghanistan, everything returned to the pre-2001 state when the Taliban were facilitated to take control of the country through the Doha Accords. When the Taliban returned to power, it was a clear signal that democracy had failed. Nation building had failed. The War on Terror, with all its bluster, had failed to accomplish any of its stated objectives.

While the US government and military began hearings in Washington, DC, into the failure of their grand mission, their focus turned away from Afghanistan and the problems they had left behind. The US again considered sanctioning Pakistan for its support of the Taliban, which had long soured when the Taliban refused to take action against the TTP, BLA, and other insurgent groups enjoying safe haven on Afghan soil.

CommandEleven has discussed, in briefing papers, interviews and research (all available on our website), in great detail, the threats and concerns from a destabilized Afghanistan, which has been met with rhetoric from both Kabul and Western capitals.

Today, Pakistan is again left to clean up a mess that it never wanted, while continuously facing attacks from the same terror groups that existed during the US occupation, threats of sanctions and blacklisting from the same countries, much like the post-Soviet era.

It was these and other significant missteps that allowed ISKP to grow and establish itself as a major regional threat, under a joint Taliban-al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan.

This time, the threat extends well beyond Pakistan. China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran are all concerned, because all share the borders with Afghanistan and are targets for ISKP.

APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A: PHOTOS OF TWO PAGES FROM TALIBAN DOCUMENT TITLED
"INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTROL AND SUPERVISION OF REFUGEES"**

د مهاجرينو د کنترول او څارنې د څانګې طرز العمل

لومړی فصل

سولیزه

۱. د اسلامي امارت د مشرتابه له لوري د مهاجرينو او بهرنيو مجاهدينو د ثبت، کنترول، څارنې، اعاشوي اکمالاتو، ښوونې او روزنې، روغتيا او همدا راز له ناوړه پېښو څخه يې د خونديتوب او نورې ټولې اړونده چارې د استخباراتو کمېسيون ته سپارل شوي.
۲. د يادو چارو د تنظيم او سمون په خاطر د استخباراتو کمېسيون په خپل تشکيل کې مستقله څانګه لري.

دويم فصل:

د قبائلي مهاجرينو او بهرنيو مجاهدينو د ثبت او تنظيم په اړه:

۳. نوموړې اداره به د خپلو سيمه ايزو مؤظفينو په توسط د هغوی هويت او مشخصات او د هېواد په کچه د ټولو مهاجرينو دقيق لسټ ترتيب او ثبت کړي.
- نوم - د هېواد نوم - دلته د راتلو نېټه - د راتلو لامل - مربوطه تنظيم - مربوطه تنظيم سره د اړيکو شرنگوالی - متاهل / مجرد - د تمويل منابع ...
- ټولو مهاجرينو ته دې د هويت کارټونه ورکړل شي، چې پورته کوائف ټول په کې احتواء شوي وي او يو قطعه عکس هم ورباندې لګېدلی وي.
- اسلامي امارت سره يې بيعت حتمي ده.
- د قبائلي مهاجرينو او مجاهدينو د هويت او مشخصاتو اړونده معلوماتو نه دې د اړوند تنظيم او يا هم د هغوی له دلګي مشر څخه تر لاسه کولای شي.

درېم فصل:

د بهرنيو قبائلي مهاجرينو او مجاهدينو د اوسېدو شرايط:

۷. د اسلامي امارت د دښمنانو سيمې ته تلو راتلو څخه به په کلکه ډډه کوي، او که احياناً شه اړتيا پيدا کېږي د استخباراتو مسئولينو سره دې رابطه کوي.
۸. د اسلامي امارت د پاليسی مطابق به د هېڅ هېواد په چارو کې مداخله نه کوي، يوازې افغانستان کې د جهادي مصروفيتونو اجازه لري.
۹. په هېڅ صورت نه شي کولای چې د ګاونډي هېواد او يا کوم بل ځای څخه د پيسو په خاطر څوک اختطاف کړي.
۱۰. په هېڅ صورت نه شي کولای چې د بل هېواد حکومت يا اتباع وګواښي.

۱۱. داسې څېرونې او څرګندونې به نه کوي چې د اسلامي امارت پاليسی سره په ټکر کې وي.
۱۲. په لارو کې د موټرو او خلکو د تلاشی او يا هم د چا د کورونو د تلاشی حق نه لري، البته که اړتيا پيدا شوه د استخباراتو مسئولين به جريان کې اچوي چې هغوی به بيا د خپلو لوائحو مطابق اقدام کوي.
۱۳. د اسلامي امارت اړونده ادارو او کمېسيونونو په چارو کې به هېڅ ډول مداخله نه کوي.
۱۴. د اسلامي امارت مجاهدينو او مسئولينو په څېر به د اسلامي امارت له فرامينو او لوائحو څخه په کلکه او په هر ډول شرايطو کې اطاعت کوي.
۱۵. کوم ځای چې د دوی استوګنې لپاره مناسب وګڼل شو هماغه به ورته په ګوته کېږي، حق نه لري چې بل ځای ته پرته له اجازې انتقال شي.
۱۶. له اجازې پرته به له ملګي خلکو سره له روابطو او راشه درشه څخه ډډه کوي.
۱۷. له ملګي خلکو سره د ستونزو په صورت کې به د استخباراتو له مسئولينو سره رابطه کوي.
۱۸. که چېرې يې د استخباراتو د ادارې کارمندان خبره نه اوري يا نامناسب چلند ورسره کوي د خپل نماينده په توسط به د استخباراتو مافوق مسئول په جريان کې واچوي.
۱۹. د اسلامي امارت د نورو متعهدينو په څېر به د اسلامي امارت له فرامينو او لوائحو څخه په کلکه او په هر ډول شرايطو کې اطاعت کوي.
۲۰. د دوی مسئولين مکلفيت لري چې د سياسي، حقوقي يا جزائي جراثيمو د ارتکاب په صورت کې د جرم مرتکب اشخاص او يا هم متهمين د حل او فصل اړونده مراجعو ته احضار کړي.
۲۱. د اسلامي امارت له بيرغ پرته بل بيرغ کارولو څخه به ډډه کوي تر څو يې په اړه شکوک پيدا نه شي.
۲۲. له هغوی څخه به دا ډاډ تر لاسه کولای شي چې بل هېڅ مذهب يا بل کوم سياسي يا جهادي ډلې ته دعوت نه شي کولای.
۲۳. د سيمې مجاهدين به خپلو دلګيو کې نه جذبوي او نه به هم نوي اشخاص له بهر څخه را واردوي، البته د زياتې اړتيا په صورت کې به اړونده استخباراتي مسئولينو ته مراجعه کوي.
۲۴. د اسلامي ډلو او احزابو په اړه به يې ځايه الزام لګولو او د هغوی له تکفير څخه ځان ساتي.
۲۵. هغه مجاهدين چې له کوم تنظيم سره وابسته نه دي او په انفرادي توګه له نژدې قبائلي سيمو څخه د خپل ذاتي شناخت له مخې جهاد ته راځي، دلګي مشر به خامخا د استخباراتو اداره جريان کې اچوي او د اړونده شرايطو له مخې به هغه تن په خپل دلګي کې اجازه ورکوي.
۲۶. د انصارو د تنظيمونو مجاهدينو چې را تلل غواړي له مشرتابه څخه به اجازه تر لاسه کوي، د مشرتابه له اجازې پرته به خپلو سيمو کې اجازه نه ورکول کېږي.
۲۷. کوم تنظيمي او انفرادي مجاهدين چې په اجازه راشي د دوی استوګنه به د لاندې شرايطو مطابق وي:
 - په قطعه کې ځای په ځای کېږي.
 - له درې مياشتو څخه به په کمه موده نه تيروي.
 - تک او راتل به يې د قطعې په اجازه وي.

APPENDIX B: REFERENCES FROM THE COMMANDELEVEN WEBSITE

TELEVISION APPEARANCES

PTV – FAULT LINES – THE CHANGING DYNAMIC IN AFGHANISTAN

<https://www.commandeleven.com/videos/fault-lines-ptv-world-the-changing-dynamic-in-afghanistan/>

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RT – BAJAUR ATTACK CLAIMED BY ISKP

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PTV – FAULT LINES – TERROR ATTACKS IN KP

<https://www.commandeleven.com/videos/ptv-fault-lines-terror-attacks-in-kp/>

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PTV – FAULT LINES – PAKISTAN'S WAR ON TERROR

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PTV – FAULT LINES – ISKP ESCALATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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RT – TTP'S RE-EMERGENCE IN SWAT

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RT – PEACE TALKS WITH TTP

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<https://www.commandeleven.com/videos/rt-pak-china-relations-post-karachi-consulate-bombing/>

VOE – RUSSIA-INDIA MILITARY & ECONOMIC COOPERATION

<https://www.commandeleven.com/videos/voe-russia-india-military-economic-cooperation/>

PTV – FAULT LINES – RUSSIA’S ROLE IN SOUTH ASIA POLITICS

<https://www.commandeleven.com/videos/fault-lines-russias-role-in-south-asia-politics/>

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TT – ISIS IN PAKISTAN

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SECURING YOUR SIX

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ABOUT COMMANDELEVEN

CommandEleven is an intelligence and analysis firm, based in Pakistan, with assets, analysts, and researchers offering apolitical analysis on topics such as security, geopolitics, defense, and espionage. CommandEleven’s intelligence includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kashmir.

CommandEleven, founded in 2015 as a think tank and policy advisory, with the objective of democratizing intelligence, simplify its understanding and real-life application, while offering guidance to governments, agencies, media, and private organizations.

CommandEleven continues to inform and guide public policy and decision-makers in the government, business, and military through a rigorous program of publications, conferences, digital media, policy briefings, and recommendations.