



Terrorism in Afghanistan: Impact of Regional Security

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Introduction

The study of terrorism in Afghanistan has garnered significant scholarly attention, focusing on its historical origins, ideological drivers, and regional implications. Existing literature emphasizes the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) as a pivotal moment that catalysed the rise of militant groups, with foreign interventions creating a power vacuum exploited by insurgent organizations. Researchers have highlighted how external support from countries such as the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia not only empowered the Afghan mujahedin but also indirectly facilitated the later emergence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Several studies examine the Taliban as a socio-political and religious movement rooted in Pashtun tribal structures and the madrassa education system in Pakistan. Scholars argue that the combination of ethnic loyalty, religious orthodoxy, and strategic external backing allowed the Taliban to consolidate power rapidly in the 1990s. Other works focus on the global ramifications of Afghan terrorism, analysing how regional instability in Afghanistan has influenced security dynamics in South and Central Asia, including cross-border militancy, refugee crises, and the proliferation of extremist ideologies. Despite the depth of existing research, there remain gaps in understanding the long-term interplay between foreign intervention, domestic unrest, and ideological propagation in shaping Afghanistan's terrorism landscape. Many studies have addressed specific conflicts or terrorist groups in isolation; however, a comprehensive analysis that connects historical, social, and geopolitical factors remains limited. This study seeks to bridge that gap by synthesizing historical evidence and contemporary developments, providing a holistic perspective on the Taliban's role in regional terrorism and security challenges.



Historical Context

The Soviet Union sent troops and other military forces into Afghanistan in 1979 to back the overthrown communist government. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was the political party in power at the time. It was led by Mohammad Daoud Khan, who supported anti-communist and nationalist ideas until being killed by the Soviet forces in what is known as the Saur Revolution. Nur Mohammad Taraki, Hafizullah Amin, and Barak Karmal assumed control of the PDP later on. However, the PDPA was ultimately repealed because of political unpredictability and inadequate stabilization of the administration. A second Afghan communist opposition force, the Mujahideen, was established in Afghanistan, however, in order to oppose the US aggression. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this group received significant backing from outside nations like the United States, China, and Pakistan for aiding foreign combatants in the Afghan anti-Soviet jihad, which was later cited as one of the factors contributing to the emergence of al-Qaeda. Other leaders, including Osama bin Laden, turned al-Qaeda into a worldwide jihadist group during this period. Furthermore, youthful Pashtuns and Afghan Mujahideen created the Taliban in the 1990s. Under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban first appeared in the Kandahar region. The majority of the group's members were former Taliban from Pakistani Islamic madrasas, or religious institutions. The group's objectives were to impose strict Islamic law and a particular system of law and order, as well as to put an end to a protracted civil war among the mujahideen organizations that had opposed the Soviet takeover. With the help of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's ISI, the group swiftly took over the majority of Afghanistan. It ousted the government and took control of Kabul on September 27, 1996, but this quick takeover was short-lived since the Taliban let the group plan the events of September 11, 2001. After the Taliban refused to turn over Osama bin Laden to their counterpart, the United States launched airstrikes to topple the Taliban government and install a provisional administration in Afghanistan.

Current Security Landscape in Afghanistan

Meanwhile, the Taliban regained control and resurrected the international terrorism scene following the US soldiers' exit in 2021. Al-Qaeda, which has long been associated with the organisation, has viewed this as a significant win. The world is growing increasingly concerned that Afghanistan may once more serve as a safe haven for international terrorist organisations that may plot strikes in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Taliban's intricate counterterrorism involvement characterises Afghanistan's security environment as of late 2025. While actively fighting their main rival, **ISIS-K**, the Taliban simultaneously provides a haven for allies. Their policy involves enabling groups like **Al-Qaeda**



and the TTP while restricting them from staging major international attacks. The Taliban's campaign against ISIS-K is aggressive, targeting its leaders and perceived supporters. This has created leverage with regional powers, but also fuels high tensions and border skirmishes with Pakistan over the TTP. Despite Taliban pressure, **ISIS-K** remains a potent threat with significant operational capacity and transnational ambitions. The group continues to attack Taliban forces and ethnic minorities, particularly the Hazara community. ISIS-K also actively recruits and uses propaganda to inspire attacks in the U.S. and Europe. Meanwhile, **Al-Qaeda** operates cautiously from its Afghan sanctuary under a quiet arrangement with the Taliban. Its central leadership is weak, and its South Asian affiliate has focused its messaging on India. This situation poses a significant threat to regional stability, with a notable spill-over of violence into Pakistan. Central Asian states and Russia are concerned about the flow of foreign fighters from Afghanistan. The international community remains divided on engaging with the Taliban due to their human rights record. This political instability and ongoing violence severely worsen Afghanistan's dire humanitarian crisis. Millions require aid amid a landscape of competing terrorist groups and a sanctioned de facto government.

The terrorism of Afghanistan: The effect on regional security

The U.S. needs a comprehensive, flexible strategy for South and Central Asia that looks beyond short-term crises to long-term interests. As Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and their neighbours grow in strategic importance, the U.S. must manage shifting dynamics, terrorism, and nuclear risks—especially in Pakistan—while maintaining regional influence amid military drawdowns and budget constraints. The killing of Osama bin Laden has strained U.S.–Pakistan relations, but Washington must keep Pakistan as a difficult yet necessary partner to prevent state collapse. Meanwhile, U.S. engagement with India and Central Asian energy markets is expanding. With declining resources and reduced military presence, America's future role in this region will test its ability to sustain security and influence in a multipolar, fiscally limited world.

India

India has historically perceived South Asia as its natural sphere of influence, shaped by a “Monroe Doctrine” approach since Nehru's era. This vision links India's national security with the stability and cooperation of its neighbouring states. However, persistent instability in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka has constrained India's regional dominance. India faces a strategic dilemma—its regional dominance creates suspicion among smaller neighbours, yet withdrawal would erode its leadership ambitions. Afghanistan has emerged as a crucial platform for India to project regional influence,



especially after 2001. India's engagement intensified following the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of the interim Afghan government.

It re-established full diplomatic relations and actively participated in the Bonn Process, shaping post-Taliban governance. India's Afghan policy emphasized reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, and state-building, reflecting its "soft power" strategy. Key projects included the Zaranj–Delaram Highway, Salma Dam, power transmission lines, and the Afghan Parliament building.

India's advocacy for Afghanistan's inclusion in SAARC reflected its ambition to integrate Kabul into South Asian regional frameworks. While Afghans largely welcomed Indian assistance, Pakistan perceived it as a strategic encirclement. Pakistan, through groups like the Haqqani network, targeted Indian missions in Kabul in 2008 and 2009 to curb India's influence. These attacks exposed the vulnerability of India's non-military, development-led approach and its limited strategic deterrence.

The U.S. decision to withdraw (2013–2014) and reconcile with "moderate Taliban" factions heightened India's concerns. India feared that a Pakistan-backed Taliban resurgence could nullify its investments and threaten its security interests. In response, India recalibrated its strategy—deepening defence training for Afghan forces and enhancing cooperation with Russia and Iran. The 2011 India–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement formalized collaboration in defence, intelligence, and economic domains. This marked a shift from passive reconstruction to assertive strategic engagement.

Simultaneously, strained U.S.-Pakistan ties post–Osama bin Laden's death briefly allowed India to expand its Afghan role. Russia and India aligned on preventing extremism and stabilizing Afghanistan through multilateral forums like the SCO. India's engagement with Iran focused on maintaining access routes via Chabahar to bypass Pakistan, though limited by sanctions. Recognizing dialogue as essential to stability, India cautiously reopened talks with Pakistan, exploring trade normalization (MFN status). However, Pakistan's military dominance and cross-border terrorism continued to undermine progress. The Istanbul Process and U.S.-backed New Silk Road initiatives reaffirmed Afghanistan's central role in regional integration. Yet, conflicting national interests—Pakistan's strategic depth policy, Iran's anti-U.S. position, and China's economic ambitions—blocked cooperation. Analytically, India's Afghanistan policy between 2001 and 2012 evolved from idealistic "soft power" engagement to pragmatic strategic balancing. It reflects India's adaptation to shifting geopolitics—using diplomacy, limited defence cooperation, and regional alliances to secure long-term influence and stability in an increasingly competitive regional environment.



Pakistan

Pakistan has experienced serious and unexpected repercussions from the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan. The Taliban's control has turned into a significant burden after being first seen as a strategic win that would give Pakistan leverage in Kabul and limit India's participation. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), encouraged by the Taliban's victory, has increased its attacks on Pakistani forces, but the Taliban have declined to take action against them. With thousands of fighters operating from Afghan territory, the group—which is philosophically and operationally associated with the Afghan Taliban—has become more powerful. The resurgence of a jihadist stronghold in the former FATA territory could result from Pakistan's attempts to deal with the TTP from a position of weakness, which runs the risk of legitimizing the militants. Pakistan's hopes have been further strained by the Taliban's non-cooperation, border conflicts over the Durand Line, and outreach to India. Furthermore, terrorism in Pakistan has been bolstered by the proliferation of American-made weaponry left in Afghanistan, which have armed Baloch separatists and the TTP. Despite this, the Islamic State–Khorasan (IS-K) continues to pose a serious threat in Afghanistan, using instability to increase its power and spread regional propaganda, especially in languages spoken in South Asia. Concerns about cross-border terrorism are heightened by IS-K's increasing animosity for the Taliban and its external aspirations. Overall, by reviving jihadist networks, undermining counterterrorism measures, and increasing insecurity along the Af-Pak frontier, the Taliban's success has destabilized Pakistan.

China

China views stability in Afghanistan as vital to its own security, especially to prevent extremist spill over into Xinjiang. Due to Afghanistan's strategic location linking South, Central, and West Asia, China sees it as a key factor in regional power politics and aims to prevent great powers—especially the U.S.—from using Afghanistan to expand influence near its borders. Beijing advocates for a **stable, neutral Afghanistan**, believing neutrality in strategic affairs would protect both Afghan and Chinese interests by reducing foreign interference. China favours **political and economic engagement over military involvement**, maintaining its policy of not deploying troops abroad except under UN mandates. It supports Afghanistan through **reconstruction, reconciliation, and socioeconomic development**, such as investments like the Aynak copper project, while avoiding politicised aid. Beijing also seeks **multilateral cooperation**—with actors like Iran, Pakistan, and Russia—to promote Afghanistan's neutralisation through diplomatic channels (UN forums), aiming to limit U.S. dominance and prevent regional instability. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan marks a shift from short-term military action to a



long-term strategic presence, affecting China's geopolitical interests. China favours a **stable and neutral Afghanistan** to prevent chaos, extremism, and prolonged U.S. influence in the region. Beijing should work with like-minded countries to promote **national reconciliation, socio-economic development, and diplomatic efforts** toward Afghan neutrality. While avoiding military involvement, China may support a limited multilateral **peacekeeping force**, but ultimately, a **complete withdrawal of all foreign troops** is seen as essential for lasting peace and neutrality.

Iran

Iran's political evolution reflects a persistent struggle to balance modernisation with ideological control, as the state promotes technological and scientific progress within an Islamic-nationalist framework. While internal tensions stem from ethnic and sectarian disparities—particularly the marginalisation of Sunni minorities—education and development have reduced separatist tendencies.

Externally, Iran's policy toward Afghanistan is pragmatic rather than expansionist, shaped by security, economic, and ideological priorities. Tehran seeks to secure its borders, manage refugees, and counter both Pakistani and U.S. influence by leveraging cultural and religious ties with Afghan Shia communities. This multifaceted approach allows Iran to maintain regional stability and strategic depth without confrontation. Ultimately, Iran's broader dilemma lies in achieving modernisation and global engagement without succumbing to Western political or cultural models, a tension that continues to define both its domestic governance and foreign policy posture.

Efforts and challenges in counterterrorism

Regional cooperation on counter-terrorism in Afghanistan faces major obstacles due to fragmented security and political dynamics. Competing national interests hinder collaboration: Pakistan seeks strategic depth against India, India aims to limit Pakistan's influence, Iran focuses on border security and Shia protection, and China and Russia prioritise preventing extremist spill over. Mistrust of the Taliban's ability and willingness to control groups like ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda further blocks joint efforts, while their preference for unilateral action limits intelligence-sharing and coordinated operations. Regional frameworks, such as the SCO, suffer from inconsistent policies, with countries pursuing bilateral rather than collective strategies. Diplomatic isolation and sanctions on the Taliban constrain engagement and reduce leverage to influence behaviour. Moreover, Afghanistan's weak security infrastructure, economic crisis, and institutional fragility allow extremist networks to thrive, spilling instability across borders.



Overall, mistrust, conflicting interests, and weak governance prevent effective regional counter-terrorism, keeping Afghanistan a hub of instability in South and Central Asia.

Way forward towards Regional Stability

Regional counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan are hindered by competing national interests, mistrust of the Taliban, fragmented regional policies, and weak state capacity. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia pursue different security priorities, while doubts over the Taliban's control of extremist groups like ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda limit cooperation. Diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and Afghanistan's fragile institutions further obstruct coordinated action, allowing extremist networks to operate and spread instability across borders. Without political reconciliation, stronger institutions, and inclusive regional dialogue, Afghanistan is likely to remain a hub of instability in South and Central Asia. The Joint Plan of Action for Central Asia, first discussed in 2011 and updated in 2022, is the UN's first regional framework to guide and coordinate counter-terrorism efforts. It provides policy guidance and supports implementation to address terrorism across the region.

Conclusion

Afghanistan continues to serve as the geopolitical and security pivot of South and Central Asia, where overlapping national interests, historical rivalries, and fragile governance structures perpetuate instability (Giustozzi, 2021; Rubin, 2020). The Taliban's return to power has not resolved internal divisions or regional insecurity; instead, it has intensified mistrust among neighbouring states and created a power vacuum exploited by transnational terrorist networks, including ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda (UN Security Council, 2023; Burke, 2022). Regional and international mechanisms—such as the Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (SCO), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and United Nations counter-terrorism initiatives—have acknowledged the urgent need for collective action, yet their effectiveness remains constrained by political divisions, uneven engagement with the Taliban, and competing strategic objectives, particularly between India and Pakistan (Blank, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022). Afghanistan's weakened institutions, economic collapse, and political isolation further impede coordinated counter-terrorism efforts and state consolidation (Giustozzi, 2021).

Moving forward, sustainable stability will require more than isolated national responses; it demands a cohesive regional security framework grounded in pragmatic cooperation, shared intelligence, and



inclusive diplomacy that transcends zero-sum rivalries (Katzman, 2022; United Nations, 2023). Through sustained dialogue, confidence-building measures, and regional economic integration, Afghanistan has the potential to transition from a source of instability into a stabilizing link connecting South, Central, and West Asia (Rubin, 2020; Katzman, 2022). Without such a unified approach, the region risks remaining trapped in cycles of conflict, extremism, and strategic mistrust, undermining long-term peace and development (Blank, 2021; Burke, 2022)

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