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AFGHANISTAN BECOMES A HUB OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORIST ORGANISATIONS, ONCE AGAIN

Overview

After the exit of foreign forces from Kabul in August 2021 and the fall of control to the Afghan Taliban, Afghanistan again became a terrorist safe haven despite the Doha Accords 2020 that mentioned commitments by the Afghan Taliban not to allow their soil to be used against foreign states. The contraction in diplomatic and intelligence presence has reduced early-warning mechanisms, creating space for terrorist organisations to reorganise and adjust their operations with fewer constraints. For Pakistan, this presents direct security risks through cross-border terrorism and revived sanctuaries. The UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report, the SIGAR report, and regional forums, including the Moscow Format, have expressed concerns and urged the Afghan Taliban to ensure that their territory is not used for terrorism. However, the Afghan Taliban's lack of continued cooperation and head-in-the-sand attitude has prevented meaningful progress.

Issue

To assess how Afghanistan's re-emergence as a hub for international terrorist organisations poses serious risks to Pakistan's internal security, regional stability, and wider international security, and to outline policy options to mitigate cross-border terrorism and transnational terrorist threats.

Analysis

For centuries, Afghanistan has been a bridge and a battleground between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Afghan soil emerged as a major base of cross-border terrorism in the last few decades owing to the absence of sustained state writ and uneven regional cooperation, which affected the next-door neighbours. Due to these circumstances, Afghanistan's internal developments are rarely contained within its borders, making it a constant variable in the security environment of the region. As a result, peace and stability in Afghanistan have long had an impact on regional security outlooks that go well beyond domestic politics.

One crucial development that substantially changed this security setting was the Taliban's takeover in August 2021.¹ The collapse of the former political system, withdrawal of foreign forces, and counter-terrorism monitoring mechanism led to changes in the operational space of terrorist groups. The Taliban's pledge not to allow their soil to be used against foreign countries, under the Doha Accords 2020 provisions, is no source of comfort because the group has its own incapacity for statehood, lingering internal contradictions, and an unrepresentative interim polity.² Pakistan's security has been jeopardized by these developments owing to the lack of willingness by the Afghan Taliban to rein in terrorist groups, mainly TTP, thus putting heightened pressure on Islamabad for border management and counter-terrorism initiatives. Beyond Pakistan, the ramifications affect regional stability by eroding trust in connectivity projects that foster South and Central Asian economic integration. When taken as a whole, these factors highlight why Afghanistan is still crucial to assessments of regional security and why its post-2021 trajectory continues to influence geopolitical and strategic outcomes far beyond its boundaries.

What has emerged instead is a system that rests more on local accommodations than the formal institutions of the state. Central directives do not have the personnel, resources, or monitoring in place to ensure their consistent enforcement outside of provincial capitals. In many areas, governance is shaped by practical constraints rather than policy intent. The sharp reduction in international diplomatic and security engagement has further narrowed external visibility into these dynamics, limiting timely assessments of local security developments and allowing militant actors to operate with fewer constraints. Prior to the withdrawal, international forces worked closely with Afghan security and intelligence agencies to monitor militant movements, gather actionable intelligence, and conduct joint operations. Now, the contraction in diplomatic and intelligence presence has reduced early-warning mechanisms, creating space for militant networks to reorganize

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Reconstitution of Terrorist Safe Havens

Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team's Report

With more than two dozen terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, the security threat emanating from the country serves as a constant driver of instability in the region and beyond, according to the 35th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted to the UN Security Council in February 2025.³ The presence of terrorist organisations in Afghanistan poses a serious challenge to the stability of the country as well as the security of Central Asian and other neighbouring states.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant–Khorasan Province (ISIL-K), al-Qaeda, TTP, East Turkestan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM/TIP), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and others are currently exploiting gaps in governance, open borders, and weak counterterrorism oversight to expand recruitment, training, and logistics networks. There was increased cooperation between the TTP, the Afghan Taliban, and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which was carrying out attacks under the banner of Tehreek-e Jihad Pakistan (TJP).⁴

The report revealed that the family of TTP leader Noor Wali Masoud receives around \$43,000 per month from the Afghan Taliban, reflecting a significant level of financial backing for the terrorist group. The TTP has also established new training centres in Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost, and Paktika (Barmal) provinces while enhancing recruitment, including from within the Afghan Taliban's ranks. This expansion has contributed to the TTP continuing its position as the largest Afghanistan-based terrorist organisation, with an estimated 6,000 to 6,500 fighters. The group's growing influence is linked to the Afghan Taliban's continued ideological and historical ties with the TTP.⁵

The report further noted that these linkages have enabled the group to access logistical support, training facilities, and cross-border safe havens, increasing its operational reach and resilience. The presence of BLA-linked elements in Afghanistan, alongside other militant organisations, continues to complicate counterterrorism efforts and underscores the persistent challenge posed by ungoverned or weakly governed spaces in the region. Pakistan's security assessments suggest that the BLA and TTP receive financial and logistical support through Indian-linked networks, with assistance to the TTP further facilitated via Afghan proxies, enabling cross-border attacks against Pakistan.⁶

SIGAR's Report

The final 137-page report of the US watchdog Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in December 2025 highlighted that a lack of monitoring

during the withdrawal of foreign forces resulted in a significant amount of equipment falling into Taliban hands, weakening the project authority and their ability to maintain internal security without immediate external support.⁷ This transfer of material has, in fact, provided the group with capabilities that would have taken years to develop independently. The United States Department of Defence (DOD), now Department of War, confirmed that approximately \$7.1 billion worth of American-provided equipment was left behind, including thousands of vehicles, hundreds of thousands of small arms, night-vision devices, and more than 160 aircraft.⁸ Weapons from the Afghan withdrawal are reaching the TTP. Assault rifles, machine guns, and night-vision goggles are being used in attacks in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Security forces in Pakistan report that the militants can move quickly and strike in several places at once. This shows that events in Afghanistan are directly affecting Pakistan's security. Borders need closer monitoring, and intelligence gathering must improve.⁹

Domestic Reports

The Taliban's takeover on 15 August 2021 and the eventual prevalence of non-state actors exploiting the border regions have exacerbated the security crises in Pakistan. The number of violent terrorist attacks has increased exponentially since then, especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. The year 2023 recorded an alarming surge in violence by about 56%, an unprecedented escalation, with the overall number of fatalities increasing from 980 in 2022 to 1524 in 2023. This includes a staggering 57% uptick recorded in Balochistan and 55% in KP.¹⁰ According to the Pakistan Security Report 2024, prepared and released by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Pakistan witnessed a significant 70 per cent increase in terrorist activities across Pakistan in 2024.¹¹ According to statistics released by the Islamabad-based Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), combat-related deaths in 2025 rose by 73 per cent to 3,387, compared with 1,950 in 2024.¹² The fatalities included 2,115 militants, 664 security forces personnel, 580 civilians, and 28 members of pro-government peace committees (combatants).¹³

For the past four years, Pakistan has repeatedly engaged the Afghan Taliban authorities through multiple channels to address cross-border terrorism. It held border meetings, sent protest notes with evidence, shared intelligence, and issued demarches. Afghan authorities have seen the evidence; however, the attacks continue. Civilians, police, and border posts keep being targeted. Pakistan is tightening its own border security and asking Kabul authorities to cooperate, which they have not done so far.

Other Global and Regional Concerns

Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu said in

August 2025 in a published article that Moscow estimates more than 23,000 fighters from about 20 international militant groups are currently operating in Afghanistan, posing a serious threat to regional and global security.¹⁴ Similarly, on October 7, 2025, the 7th meeting of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan was held in Moscow at the level of special representatives and senior officials of Afghanistan, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In a joint statement released after the meeting, the parties emphasized that Afghanistan should be supported to undertake comprehensive measures aimed at the elimination of terrorism and its eradication within a short timeframe so that Afghan soil is not used as a threat to the security of the neighbouring countries and beyond.¹⁵

In November 2025, Anna Evstigneeva, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, warned of a clear risk that terrorism could spill over from Afghanistan into Central Asia and beyond, raising concerns about the growing threat posed by the Islamic State's Khorasan branch.¹⁶ Likewise, Denmark's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Sandra Jensen Landi, told the UNSC meeting that the TTP, "with its approximately 6,000 fighters, is another serious threat emanating from the region, receiving both logistical and substantial support from the de facto (Afghan Taliban) authorities."¹⁷ The warning was issued during a briefing at the UN Security Council in New York, with Denmark, in its role as chair of the ISIL (Daesh) and Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee. ISIL, Al Qaeda, and their affiliates continue to step up their propaganda, exploiting social media platforms to glorify violence, recruit youth, and raise funds. Their continued use of cryptocurrencies poses a growing challenge to sanctions implementation. The use of cryptocurrencies by these terrorist organisations complicates sanctions enforcement as these digital assets allow transactions to occur outside traditional banking systems, reducing traceability and oversight by the regulators.

In the last week of November 2025, five Chinese nationals were killed, and five more were injured in Tajikistan in attacks launched from Afghanistan. Afghanistan's foreign ministry blamed an unnamed group, which it said was seeking to create instability.¹⁸ Again, by the end of December, Tajikistan claimed that three intruders from Afghanistan were killed when they intended to carry out an armed attack on one of the border posts in the Shamsiddin Shohin district.¹⁹ This was the third "armed attack, terrorist act, and border crossing" from Afghanistan in the past month. Tajikistan already has tense relations with the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the high-level gathering in the Iranian capital in December 2025 brought together special representatives from Pakistan, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to discuss shared security concerns and strategies for engaging with Afghanistan's de facto authorities, which the Afghan Taliban declined to attend. This showed the Afghan Taliban's head-in-the-sand attitude.²⁰

Pakistan–Afghanistan Border Clashes and Indo-Afghan Alignment

Tensions flared up in October between Pakistan and Afghanistan, when Pakistan carried out airstrikes in Afghanistan targeting terrorists' hideouts as Islamabad's patience ran out due to Kabul's non-cooperation.²¹ Later, the two sides engaged in a weeklong conflict until mediation by Qatar and Türkiye led to a ceasefire signed by the defence ministers of the two countries in Doha.²² The ceasefire agreed has largely held, though efforts to secure a longer-term arrangement through follow-up talks in Istanbul and Riyadh failed to produce a peace agreement.²³ The negotiations ended without a long-term deal after Kabul did not provide a written commitment to take action against militants sought by Islamabad. India intends to engage Pakistan in a low-intensity conflict, and for this purpose, it is using Kabul. While the presence of Taliban leadership to hold talks with Pakistan, arranged by mediators for a workable solution, was welcomed, the defence minister of Pakistan claimed that the people in Kabul pulling the strings and staging the puppet show were being controlled by Delhi.²⁴ The conflict has led to the closure of major crossings such as Torkham and Chaman, disrupting trade and regional connectivity. The closure has paralysed a vital trade corridor worth billions of dollars annually, with local exporters claiming losses of over \$4 million daily on both sides.²⁵

In October 2025, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited India amid deteriorating Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, reflecting the growing engagement between India and the Afghan Taliban, which signals a prioritisation of strategic interests. While Pakistan has refrained from intervening in Afghanistan's diplomatic outreach, the India–Afghanistan rapprochement is widely perceived as deliberately directed toward Islamabad.²⁶ This perception is shaped by India's long-standing posture at international forums, particularly its active role at the UN in portraying the Afghan Taliban as an illegitimate and destabilizing force. Against this backdrop, India's pragmatic engagement with the Taliban in 2025, including high-level diplomatic contacts, is viewed in Pakistan not as neutral regional outreach.

Conclusion

Since 2021, the Taliban has taken control of Afghanistan. They hold power in most areas, but running the country effectively is a different matter. The interim government is unable to monitor its borders or manage services across provinces. Neighbouring countries have to deal with the fallout. Many terrorist groups still operate from Afghan territory; they use Afghan territory to launch terror attacks inside Pakistani territory. The Afghan Taliban exercise political control in Afghanistan, but effective governance remains largely absent, and their writ is uneven and compromised across large parts of the country. For Pakistan, the consequences are neither abstract nor

far-reaching. Cross-border terrorism, continued availability of sanctuaries and safe havens for hostile elements in Afghanistan, non-cooperation from the Afghan Taliban, and continued pressure on border security have created major security challenges for Pakistan. At the regional level, these dynamics erode trust, undermine prospects for economic connectivity, and undermine confidence in international infrastructure and energy projects that depend on peace and a predictable Afghan scenario.

Pakistan cannot handle these problems alone. Border checks, intelligence sharing, and diplomacy help, but they do not stop attacks coming from inside Afghanistan, where authorities are unable to cooperate owing to their inability and unwillingness. The Afghan Taliban are expected to act against terrorist groups operating from their territory; however, decisive action appears unlikely, particularly against the TTP, given the ideological alignment between the two. Isolating Afghanistan will make things worse. Regional and international groups, like the UN, can watch what is happening and make sure promises are kept. Long-term security also needs better conditions in border areas so people do not join militant groups. Ultimately, Afghanistan's role in regional security will continue to shape the strategic environment of South and Central Asia. Whether it functions as a bridge for cooperation or a source of persistent disorder will depend on the extent to which commitments translate into enforceable practices and whether regional actors can move beyond crisis management toward coordinated, forward-looking security and development strategies.

Recommendations

Pakistan should work with its neighbours and all immediate neighbours of Afghanistan to watch border crossings and track terrorists. Sharing intelligence and coordinating through groups like the SCO and the China–Pakistan–Afghanistan trilateral format can make it harder for terrorists to move freely and ease the burden on Pakistan's forces.

Pakistan's relations with the Afghan Taliban regime should be based on reciprocity and pragmatism. Trade or aid should depend on real actions, such as closing safe havens and stopping cross-border attacks. Pakistan must make its security priorities clear.

Pakistan should choke the internal ecosystem of organised crime and its symbiotic linkage with terrorism through bold and consistent policies, regardless of the resistance by influential lobbies profiting from such a system.

Pakistan should keep improving the western border security. Fence completion, surveillance, and integrated command posts help, but border forces also need to act quickly on intelligence. Operations to stop cross-border infiltration should continue. Strong border security is essential to reduce attacks inside Pakistan.

Pakistan should continue to raise the issue at international fora, including the UN, to keep the threat in high visibility, reinforce accountability, and collectively pressure the Afghan Taliban to accept international cooperation aimed at neutralising terrorist organisations.

Pakistan should support counterterrorism capacity-building in Afghanistan through the UN and regional mechanisms such as the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), while simultaneously advocating for an inclusive political framework that incorporates all major Afghan ethnic groups to ensure long-term peace and stability.

Pakistan must invest in the development of border areas. Education, economic projects, and de-radicalization programs could reduce recruitment into terrorist organisations. Linking development with security helps contain extremist threats over the long term.

Pakistan should adopt a layered counterterrorism approach in which the police serve as the first line of defence against the TTP, supported by paramilitary forces and the armed forces as secondary and tertiary responders, while simultaneously empowering the police with the necessary resources, training, equipment, and legal authority and engaging local communities to counter militant influence and narratives at the grassroots level.

Notes

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