

The Afghan Taliban's Intransigence on Counterterrorism and the Escalation of Regional Terrorism: Strategic Directions for Pakistan

Sajid Kiani

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defense University (NDU) Islamabad

Abstract

In recent years, the threat of terrorism has considerably increased in the South Asian region. Pakistan, in particular, has been experiencing a hike in terror activity since the onset of 2021. This rise in the security challenges posed by terrorism to the region comes in tandem with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban's return to power in Kabul. This research paper attempts to contextualize and understand the rise of terrorism across the region particularly under the Taliban administration. The paper concludes that owing to the Taliban's ideological and operational ties with several militant groups in the area, the Afghan Taliban have remained relatively unable to restrain their activities. Consequently, militancy in the region is on the path of strengthening, thereby becoming a dire security challenge for regional peace and security in general, and Pakistan's security in particular.

Keywords: Afghan Taliban, Counterterrorism, Regional Terrorism, Pakistan

I. Introduction

The withdrawal of the US Forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the subsequent return of the Afghan Taliban to power have brought about significant geopolitical and geostrategic ramifications for Afghanistan, as well as the region. An uptick in terrorism across the region, and the Taliban's



posturing vis-à-vis the terror groups present in Afghanistan have become one of the immediate security concerns for the regional countries. However, the Taliban-led government has exhibited limited capacity to effectively restrain the activity of terror groups and militant outfits in the country so far. This research paper attempts to provide an exhaustive analysis of the contemporary terrorist landscape of Afghanistan and its attendant security threats for regional states. It also seeks to discover the causes behind the Taliban's obduracy to act against these militant outfits by evaluating ideological and strategic motivations of the Taliban-led government. Lastly, this research paper tends to explore a nuanced way forward that can be pursued by Pakistan while navigating the precarious terror threats emanating from Afghanistan. The militant landscape of Afghanistan is highly complex and volatile where a wide range of militant Jihadi terror groups have been cooperating and competing among themselves for over decades. The withdrawal of U.S troops from Afghanistan was feared to offer a new sense of revival to these groups, and henceforth lead to a resurgence of the threat of terrorism in the region.¹ As the Afghan Taliban's invincibility to the Afghan political chessboard became eminent to the U.S, all bets were placed on the Afghan Taliban to ensure that the Afghan soil may not be used to by any terror group to orchestrate a terror activity against any state. Consequently, during the Afghan Taliban's suspension of ties with militant groups present in Afghanistan was one of the cardinal components of the Doha peace talks. While the Afghan Taliban positively vowed in this direction, yet current developments indicate that more than two years after the Taliban's return, the group has largely failed to honor this pledge. The Afghan Taliban, which were already in a mutually beneficial and inter-dependent relationship with several militant groups operating in Afghanistan, and were co-constitutively 'allies-in-arms' have remained fairly unable to cap the consolidation and revival of these groups. In fact, several reports have indicated that the Afghan Taliban have rather been rearming some of these groups in order to achieve their politico-strategic objectives. Consequently, as of now, the regional terror landscape appears to be undergoing a revival.

2. Mapping the rise of terrorism threat post-2021

The issue of terrorism is widely pervasive in the South Asian region, particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However, since Afghan Taliban's return to power, terror incidents have particularly increased in Pakistan, particularly perpetrated by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, and the IS-KP. As per the Global Terrorism Index Report released in March 2024, the region of South Asia has had the "highest regional average impact from terrorism".² According to this data, Pakistan ranked as the worst hit country by terrorism in 2023 with a total of 490 terror attacks.³ At the same time the GTI data also indicated that terrorism in Pakistan has been consistently increasing each year since 2021, with particularly high incidence of terror activity in the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa followed by Balochistan. The report also suggested that most terror attacks in Pakistan's bordering areas have involved the participation of militant groups present in neighboring Afghanistan. Terrorism-related conflicts in Pakistan's border regions have contributed to the majority of attacks, accounting for 96% of Pakistan's terrorism-related deaths in 2023. Another report released by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, an Islamabad-based think tank suggests that there has been an estimated increase of more than 50 per cent in terror-related fatalities in Pakistan since 2021.⁴ It is also estimated that there has been an almost 79 percent rise in terrorist attacks in Pakistan during the first semester of 2023.⁵ A total of 645 terror attacks were reported to have taken place in 2023, while around 380 terror attacks were recorded in 2022. Overall, a 70 percent increase in terror attacks and an 81 percent increase in terrorism-related fatalities has been recorded in 2023.⁶ In addition to this, number of other countries have also expressed their concerns regarding the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. In May 2023, during trilateral foreign ministerial talks between Afghanistan, China and Pakistan, Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang urged the Taliban authorities to bolster Kabul's counterterrorism efforts and offered to cooperate in order to fight the threat of terrorism emanating from ETIM militants in Afghanistan.⁷ In January

2024, an Iranian delegation during its visit to Pakistan expressed its threat perception vis-à-vis the IS-KP presence in Afghanistan as a security concern for Tehran.⁸ Since the Taliban takeover, TTP and IS-KP have also carried out some extremely lethal terror attacks as well, which have been highlighted in the subsequent sections.

3. Dissecting the Militant Landscape of Afghanistan

Owing to its long-standing history of socio-political instability, ethnic and tribal enmities, weak state institutions and the absence of a strong state writ, Afghanistan has been the melting pot of transnational militant outfits. Espousal of radical religious ideologies in an ever-lasting state of war has also been a key determinant shaping a conducive environment for the presence and operation of terror groups in Afghanistan. Some of the prominent terror groups currently active in Afghanistan include: Al-Qaeda, Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Islamic State - Khorasan Province (IS-KP), Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Jamaat Ansarullah.⁹ These terror outfits chiefly serve as a dire threat to regional and international security, and can be broadly divided into two categories: groups that are allied with the Afghan Taliban like al-Qaeda, TTP, ETIM, IMU and JA, and groups that are against the Afghan Taliban which mainly include the IS-KP.¹⁰

4.a) Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent:

Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda have been sharing a symbiotic relationship since the 1990s, and was responsible for orchestrating the 9/11 attacks, two factors that mainly led to the U.S invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Consequently, the United States' threat perception vis-à-vis Al Qaeda is particularly high. Al Qaeda also remained an Afghan Taliban ally during the Taliban's insurgency against foreign forces. The two groups are tied together by ideological affinity and interpersonal relationships. After the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Al Qaeda congratulated the Taliban. Hence, in contravention to their promise to the U.S, the Afghan Taliban have been in close collaboration with Al Qaeda. This particularly came to fore in July 2022 when the U.S located and killed Al Qaeda's emir Ayman al Zawahiri in

a drone strike in Kabul.¹¹ Taliban government refrained from issuing any statement, however, Zawahiri's presence in Kabul that too in close vicinity of the U.S embassy was indicative of Taliban's continued ties with Al Qaeda. In February 2024, a report for the UN security council revealed that since its return to power, the Afghan Taliban had increased protections for Al Qaeda. The report suggested that while Al Qaeda had several safehouses in Afghanistan, and had also established eight new training camps.¹² The claims of the report were however rejected by the Taliban government.¹³ While Al Qaeda, and its south Asian chapter AQIS have strategically disguised in order to protect the Afghan Taliban, yet , the Afghan Taliban's ties with Al Qaeda will not only continue to bring unwanted attention to the Taliban government, but shall also strengthen the militant nexus in Afghanistan, since Al Qaeda, whether weak or strong, enjoys the reputation of being a prominent and influential militant group in the region.

4.b) Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan

Another key group that finds safe havens in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime is the TTP. Since its inception in 2007, TTP has remained one of the gravest security threats to Pakistan's internal security, with some of the most lethal terror attacks to its name. TTP and Afghan Taliban share an ideological synchronicity to the extent that both envision to establish a strictly fundamentalist Islamic rule, however, the two are fixated on different geographical regions. Owing to the porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban and TTP have a history of facilitating each other by providing resources, sanctuaries, material and logistical supports and hideouts. In this lieu, the TTP was one of the first terror groups to pledge allegiance with the Afghan Taliban and to congratulate them.¹⁴ Therefore, quite naturally, since the Taliban's return to power, the TTP has gained a renewed vigour and strength. This is evident through a considerably sharp uptick in TTP-related terror activity in Pakistan since the Taliban takeover in 2021 as between 2020 and 2022, the number of TTP-claimed attacks in Pakistan more than tripled.¹⁵ Since the Taliban takeover, the TTP is also reported of revamping itself through mergers, changes in operational activity,

target selection, and media and communication strategies.¹⁶ While initially, Islamabad expected cooperation with the Taliban-led government in Kabul with regards to the TTP threat, however, in the face of rising TTP-led terror activity, Islamabad finds itself in a rather precarious situation. As Islamabad initiated negotiations with the TTP, the TTP leadership displayed an unrelentingly stubborn posture with respect to its demands regarding the erstwhile-FATA re-merger and the establishment of Islamic Shariah.¹⁷ In November 2023, Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister lashed out at the Taliban government for supporting anti-Pakistan terror activity by TTP which had led to major rise in violence, leading to 2,867 deaths of Pakistanis since 2021.¹⁸ While the Afghan Taliban's tacit support and protection to the TTP continues to pose grave security challenges to Pakistan, at the same time, it also serves as an irritant in bilateral ties between Islamabad and Kabul. Most recently, in March 2024, Islamabad also launched overnight air attacks in Afghanistan claiming that it had targeted anti-Pakistan militant groups hiding in border regions. Kabul claimed that the attacks had rather killed women and children.¹⁹

4.c) East Turkestan Independence Movement

The presence of ETIM in Afghanistan is of particular concern for Beijing which asserts that the ETIM is responsible for inspiring Uighur separatism in China's Xinjiang province. Established in late 1990s, the ETIM comprises the Turkic-speaking Uighur Muslims of China's Xinjiang province. While the exact magnitude of the group's terror activity, its operational activity's stretch, and overall contribution to global terrorism may not be as detrimental as that of the TTP or al Qaeda, the group nevertheless continues to exist in Afghanistan with impunity and shares ties with other militant groups of the region.²⁰ Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, it is reported that the ETIM has been further strengthening ties with TTP and Jamaat Ansarullah. In so doing, it is suggested that the ETIM has been improvising its planning and training. A 2022 report to the UN Security Council indicated that the ETIM was manufacturing and using IEDs, and focusing on trainings to conduct attacks against Chinese interests in the

region.²¹ The same report also suggested that the ETIM had purchased new weapons and rebuilt its areas of operations in Afghanistan's northeastern province of Badakhshan in 2021. These developments continue to take place despite the Taliban governments reassurances to Beijing that an action against such militant groups shall be taken.²² However, experts opine that the Taliban government has not done much to honor its vow to the Chinese and has only relocated the ETIM as yet. Of now, the Afghan Taliban exercises a considerable political leverage vis-a-vis the ETIM, hence, there could be limited chances of the ETIM carrying out a detrimental attack against Beijing's interests without the Taliban's sanction.²³ However, this may not be a reason sound enough to downplay the threat of ETIM for China and the broader regional security.

4.d) Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

Another key militant group present in Afghanistan is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was established in 1994, and was strongly allied with the Afghan Taliban since the initial years of its inception. The IMU is one of the most influential central Asian militant jihadist groups in the region, and the Afghan Taliban has exercised considerable influence over it for the larger part of history. However, the dynamic of central Asian jihadism in the region appears to be altering in the favor of IS-KP in recent years. The IMU mainly comprises ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks of the region in general, and Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks in particular. IMU has remained at odds with Al Qaeda since the 1990s owing to Al Qaeda's predominantly Arab composition and its fundamentalist Takfiri ideology. While Afghan Taliban and IMU have been allies, frictions between IMU and Afghan Taliban were reported to arise in 2014. In 2015, the IMU temporarily broke away from the Afghan Taliban after the Taliban delayed the announcement of the killing of their emir Mullah Omar.²⁴ At the time, the IMU temporarily joined forces with the IS-KP. A factor that facilitated the IMU-ISKP alliance was the fact that both militant groups were already co-operating in Syria and the larger

middle-eastern theatre at the time. Nevertheless, this temporary alliance between IS-KP and the IMU became a force multiplier for the IS-KP, which was able to substantially increase its influence among central Asian jihadi demographic. However, in 2016 the IMU once again pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban owing to the Afghan Taliban's lethal onslaught against the IMU after its defection. However, this move was rather strategic, and large numbers of IMU members chose to remain allied with IS-KP. Currently, while the IMU is allied with the Afghan Taliban, yet the IS-KP continues to attract large numbers of central Asian recruits instead of the IMU. The IS-KP has been able to do so by building on ethnic disparities and the Pashtun-led discrimination of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks.

4.e) Jamaat Ansarullah

The Afghan Taliban is also closely tied with the Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), which is predominantly a Tajik militant group. Also referred to as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Tajikistan or the Tajik Taliban, the group overtly cooperated with the Afghan Taliban during the fall of Kabul and was also responsible for the security of security checkpoints located in the vicinity of the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border.²⁵ While the JA shares ideological affinity with the Afghan Taliban, the group primarily seeks to overthrow the Tajik government led by Emomali Rahmon, whom the group perceives as secular, nepotistic and authoritarian. Since the Taliban's return to power, Dushanbe's threat perception vis-a-vis the Tajik militants as well as the Afghan Taliban has increased many folds. In the lieu, the Tajik government has increasingly voiced its terrorism-related concerns against the Afghan regime. In response to Tajikistan's criticism of the Taliban regime, the Afghan Taliban in return have been reported of rearming Tajik militants with weaponry, military vehicles, and other equipment.²⁶ Experts suggest that the Afghan Taliban have been empowering the JA as a pressure tactic against Dushanbe which has been highly dismissive of the Taliban regime.²⁷

4.f) Islamic State – Khorasan Province

Amid these terror groups, perhaps the most urgent and immediate security threat emanates from the IS-KP which is also not allied with the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban hold no political leverage over the IS-KP, and has rather remained at the receiving end of the IS-KP-led terror activity. The IS-KP is the south Asian chapter of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and is responsible for carrying some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan. Owing to the strong ideological and operational enmity between IS-KP and the Afghan Taliban, the Taliban has been strongly cracking down against the IS-KP's leadership and cadre in Afghanistan. The Taliban has also been in coordination with the U.S with regards to dealing with the IS-KP.²⁸ However, this is not to suggest that the threat of IS-KP is dwindling away. While the IS-KP had reportedly capped down its terror activity to some extent after the Taliban's rise to power in 2021, yet in recent months the group has launched some highly impactful attacks not only in Afghanistan but across the region as well in countries including Pakistan, Iran, Turkiye, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Of now, the IS-KP is also displaying its expansion in terms of operational capacity and target selection. Most recently, in March 2024, the IS-KP attacked Russia's capital city Moscow when four to five terrorists opened fire in a concert taking place in Crocus City Hall, after which a part of the area was also set ablaze by one of the terrorists. The attack claimed 140 lives. While the responsibility of the attack was claimed by the IS's Middle Eastern chapter, however, later US intelligence reports signaled that it was rather the IS-KP behind the planning and execution of the attack.²⁹ Prior to this, in January 2024, the IS-KP had conducted a high-profiled twin bombing attack outside Major General Qassem Soleimani's tomb in Kerman Iran. The attack claimed 91 lives.³⁰ In addition to this, the Islamic State is also reported of expanding its recruits, particularly those hailing from central Asian regions and militant groups present in Afghanistan, by strengthening its propaganda apparatus and outreach campaign. The IS-KP has been publishing print, as well as audio and video content across online spaces. In doing so, the IS-KP is seeking to garner a larger support base from Uzbek

and Tajik populace. The group also launched rocket attacks against Uzbekistan in April 2022 and Tajikistan in May 2022.³¹

4. Contextualising Afghan Taliban's Obduracy to Act Against Terror Groups

The question of Afghan Taliban severing ties with other militant groups present in Afghanistan is rather precarious. In 2011, during a meeting in Doha, the representative of the Afghan Taliban negotiating with the US authorities, asked them to define what the demand of cutting ties with militant groups like Al Qaeda and others, meant or entailed. In response, the Afghan Taliban were presented with a detailed inter-agency approved paper explaining elaborated what the demand of cutting ties entailed. However, when the Taliban shared the paper with the *ulema* (clerics), the clerics denied stating that the Afghan Taliban could not cut off ties with any Muslim militant group.³² While the group agreed to cut off its ties with other militant groups in the country during the Doha Peace Talks that concluded in August 2020. However, the Afghan Taliban have not honored their pledge. As a consequence, most of the terror groups mentioned in this paper, and their smaller affiliates are rather at good terms with the Afghan Taliban. Hence, the Taliban could be in a position to coerce these groups into practicing restraint in terms of their terror activity. However, a stable regional and international security cannot solely hinge upon a wild goose chase. As yet, the Taliban regime has not shown much inclination and capability towards restricting the activities of militant groups in Afghanistan. This inability of the Afghan Taliban mainly stems from the fact that the Afghan Taliban have a history of share ideological and operational bonds with these militant groups for over decades. Currently as well, the Afghan Taliban are engaged in an interdependent relationship with most of these groups for mutual give-and-takes.³³ In the scenario, it is not feasible for the Afghan Taliban to decisively act against any of these militant groups. In case this happens, the Taliban may be at the risk of losing the support of the king-makers i.e militant groups, that are currently supporting the Afghan Taliban government. While the Afghan Taliban face IS-KP-led insurgency at the eastern and northern front, and former government's forces from the northern front, the Taliban may not

risk further instability by turning against their allied militant groups, leaving the country once again falling into a war-like situation with internecine militant groups daggers drawn against one another.³⁴

However, as long as these militant groups continue to exist, the Afghan Taliban itself may also use these militant groups as wildcards friends and foes to achieve their political and strategic goal within the country and without.

5. Way Forward for Pakistan

The contemporary militant landscape of Afghanistan remains of dire concern for countries in the region. Islamabad faces the twin problem of TTP and the IS-KP, in addition to a number of smaller splinter factions and lone wolves that may easily find refuge across the border. In this scenario, Islamabad needs to chart out a comprehensive Afghanistan policy, arrived at with consultations of varied stakeholders in an inclusive manner. Islamabad's support to the Taliban regime must be strictly conditional, hinging upon the Afghan Taliban's ability to influence the TTP into surrendering to Islamabad. This shall entail a clear and articulate communication of Islamabad's expectations and consequences for non-compliance. In order to encourage the Taliban's adherence to their pledges, Islamabad may take an initiative to offer cooperation to the Taliban government on security and intelligence related matters. With international cooperation, Pakistan may also push forward for the establishment of an international body responsible for gauging the Taliban government's compliance with its pledges that were made during the Doha Peace process. Pakistan may also encourage other regional states to engage with the Afghan Taliban over the issue of terrorism.

6. Conclusion

Since August 2021, Afghanistan has further become a conducive environment for the existence and perseverance of different militant groups in the region. This paper concludes that the Taliban's obduracy in acting against these groups, despite having assured the US negotiators, has therefore become a key security challenge for countries in the region. However, it is also important that the Afghan Taliban now fully assume the primary responsibility for the country's internal security matters and the presence of militant groups, rather

than mere relocations of terror groups and verbal statements denying the presence of such groups. The Afghan Taliban need to make arrangements to expedite the formalization of Afghanistan's security apparatus in order to break its reliance and interdependence on militant groups.

References

- ¹ Asfandiyar Mir, "Two years under the Taliban: Is Afghanistan a terrorist safe haven once again?", *United States Institute of Peace*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-under-taliban-afghanistan-terrorist-safe-haven-once-again>
- ² *Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. New York: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>.
- ³ Shraddha Tiwari, "South Asia's tussle with terrorism: Overcoming obstacles against rising extremism", *CNBC News*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.cnbctv18.com/world/global-terrorism-report-south-asia-tussle-with-rising-extremism-india-pakistan-afghanistan-bangladesh-19393609.htm>
- ⁴ Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan battles rising terror threat in Afghan border regions", *Financial Times*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f739d848-5061-412e-b55a-027502925a64>
- ⁵ *Pakistan's Comprehensive National Security Profile 2023*. Islamabad: Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, 2024. <https://www.picss.net/picss-annual-security-assessment-report-2023/>.
- ⁶ *Pakistan's Comprehensive National Security Profile 2023*.
- ⁷ Ayaz Gul, "China Asks Afghanistan's Taliban to Address Terrorism Worries", *Voice of America*, May 6, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-asks-afghanistan-s-taliban-to-address-neighbors-terrorism-worries/7081901.html>
- ⁸ Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan terror safe havens worry Pakistan, Iran", *Express Tribune*, January 15, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2453355/afghan-terror-safe-havens-worry-pakistan-iran>
- ⁹ "Terrorist groups in Afghanistan", *Congressional Research Service*, April 2, 2024, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10604.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Asfandiyar Mir, "Two Years Under the Taliban"
- ¹¹ Richard Atwood and Laurel Miller, "The U.S. and the Taliban after the Killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri", *International Crisis Group*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-united-states/us-and-taliban-after-killing-al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al>
- ¹² Parwiz Karokhail, "Taliban reject UN team's report on Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan", *Arab News*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2452186/world>
- ¹³ Parwiz Karokhail, "Taliban reject UN team's report on Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan", *Arab News*, February 01, 2024, <https://arab.news/zj9rb>
- ¹⁴ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover", *Combating Terrorism Center* 16, no. 5, (May 2023),

<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052023.pdf>

¹⁵ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover", *Combatting Terrorism Center* 16, no. 5 (May 2023),

<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover/>

¹⁶ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover"

¹⁷ Abdul Sayed and Amira Jadoon, "Understanding Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan's unrelenting posture", *George Washington Program on Extremism*, August 16, 2022,

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-posture>

¹⁸ Asfandiyar Mir, "In a major rift, Pakistan ramps up pressure on the Taliban", *United States Institute of Peace*, November 16, 2023,

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/major-rift-pakistan-ramps-pressure-taliban>

¹⁹ Abid Hussain, "Tensions high after Pakistan launches cross-border attacks into Afghanistan", March 18, 2024, *Al Jazeera News*,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/18/pakistan-launch-retaliatory-strikes-inside-afghanistan-raising-tensions>

²⁰ Beina Xu, Holly Fletcher and Jayshree Bajoria, "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)", *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 4, 2014,

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim>

²¹ Amy Chew, "Uyghur separatist group rebuilds bases in Afghanistan even as China-Taliban ties grow", *South China Morning Post*, July 28, 2022,

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3186820/uyghur-separatist-group-rebuilds-bases-afghanistan-even-china>

²² "China hopes Afghanistan continues to fight terrorism, eliminates ETIM forces" *CGTN*, October 15, 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-05/China-hopes-Afghanistan-continues-to-fight-terrorism-InEJ6FLj7Qk/index.html>

²³ Amy Chew, "Uyghur separatist group rebuilds bases"

²⁴ Lucas Webber & Riccardo Valle, "The Islamic State's central Asian contingents and their international threat", *Hudson Institute*, October 16, 2023,

<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>

²⁵ Mumin Ahmadi, Mullorajab Yusufi and Nigorai Fazliddin, "Exclusive: Taliban puts Tajik militants partially in charge of Afghanistan's northern border", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380071.html>

²⁶ Farangis Najibullah and Mumin Ahmadi, "Taliban said to have rearmed Tajik militants and moved Uyghur fighters from Chinese border", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-china-uyghur/31492147.html>

²⁷ "Tajik Islamist militants take control of five districts in Afghanistan's Badakhshan", *Asia Plus*, September 21, 2023,

<https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20230921/tajik-islamist-militants-take-control-of-five-districts-in-afghanistans-badakhshan>

²⁸ Abdul Basit Khan, "From isolation to engagement: The evolution of America's Afghan policy", *Arab News*, November 19, 2023, <https://arab.news/22ccm>

²⁹ Ejaz Haider, "Is 'ISIS' still a global threat?", *Dawn News*, April 7, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1826214>

³⁰ Lucas Webber and Peter Smith, "Iran attack signals growing Central Asian role in ISKP's external ops", *Eurasia Net*, January 10, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/iran-attack-signals-growing-central-asian-role-in-iskps-external-ops>

³¹ Lucas Webber and Bruce Pannier, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's"

³² Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Findings on the Current Situation*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-findings-on-the-current-situation/>

³³ Asfandiyar Mir, *Afghanistan's terrorism challenge: the political trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State*. Washington D.C: Middle East Institute, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf>.

³⁴ *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>