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## Post-2021 Terrorism in Afghanistan and Its Geopolitical Impact on Regional Security: Case Studies of Pakistan and China

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### ABSTRACT

The study evaluates the nature of emerging terrorism threats in post-2021 Afghanistan and their geopolitical implications for regional security while focusing on Pakistan and China as a major case study. Using a structured scoping review approach, the research systematically identified and analyzed academic, policy, and institutional literature to synthesize current patterns in militant activity, regional security responses, and the evolution of multilateral counterterrorism dynamics. Following a thematic synthesis to extract insights from diverse sources, the findings further identified the core security challenges and response frameworks. The findings reveal that, in the wake of the foreign military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the nation has witnessed a renewed presence of militant actors, most notably Islamic State Khorasan Province, al-Qaeda, and a resurgent Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan with extended cross-border reach. While the Taliban has established firm territorial control, it has yet to dismantle external jihadist networks which is a situation that continues to cause unease among the neighboring states. Pakistan specifically has faced an intensified insurgency along its western frontier further disrupting internal security and slowing its economic recovery. For China, developments in Afghanistan are viewed primarily through the risks of extremist spillover into Xinjiang and potential threats to Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure which is linking the two countries. Regional countermeasures, however, have been hindered by limited institutional coordination, enduring political frictions and differing perceptions of the threat's urgency. As a result, security policies have tended to remain nationally focused and reactive, with minimal collective engagement. More so, the study concludes that durable stability will require a fundamental shift in regional security thinking-moving beyond militarized containment toward integrated strategies that combine intelligence cooperation, inclusive governance and economic resilience. Hence, without such a recalibration, Afghanistan's security volatility is likely to persist, destabilizing its neighbors and undermining long-term prospects for peace and cooperation.

### INTRODUCTION

The withdrawal of United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a pivotal shift not only in the domestic political landscape of Afghanistan but also in the wider security dynamics of South and Central Asia. The return of the Taliban to power reconfigured a delicate regional balance, reigniting concerns about the resurgence of jihadist activity, the proliferation of ungoverned spaces, and the strategic recalibration of global and regional actors. As Afghanistan transitions into a new phase of governance under the Taliban regime, the country remains a volatile epicenter where old and emerging terror networks, such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP), are regrouping and expanding their operations (Mehran & Jobard, 2025; Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh, 2020). Unlike the post-9/11 period, the contemporary terrorism threats in Afghanistan do not unfold in isolation. They intersect with transnational security issues including arms trafficking, ideological exportation, and digital radicalization. Moreover, Afghanistan's transformation into a safe haven for extremist factions carries serious implications for neighboring countries such as Pakistan and China. In Pakistan's tribal belts, a reinvigorated

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has intensified cross-border assaults, threatening Islamabad's internal stability and its counterinsurgency efforts (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). Simultaneously, Beijing faces heightened anxieties over the potential spillover of extremism into its western Xinjiang province, which has long been vulnerable to ethno-religious dissent (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025; Kiik, 2016).

From a broader geopolitical standpoint, the post-2021 Afghan theatre is being transformed into a strategic arena for competitive influence, particularly among regional stakeholders with overlapping security and economic ambitions. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, must now contend with a highly unstable Afghanistan where logistical integration and long-term investment plans are at risk (Omarkhail & Zahid, 2025; Hu *et al.*, 2022). Concurrently, Pakistan's dual role, as both a key interlocutor with the Taliban and a victim of retaliatory terrorism, exposes the fragility of regional counterterrorism frameworks (Emerson, 2018). Given these developments, this paper examines how the evolving nature of terrorism in Afghanistan since 2021 has altered regional security calculations, with particular focus on Pakistan and China. The manuscript draws on

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a cross-disciplinary body of literature, including political geography, security studies, and international economics, to map the emerging patterns of threat and assess their strategic implications for regional peace and cooperation.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study employed a scoping review methodology to map and synthesize the evolving nature of terrorism threats in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s return to power in 2021 and their geopolitical implications for regional security, particularly in relation to Pakistan and China. The methodological foundation was informed by Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) five-stage framework, which was subsequently enhanced by Levac *et al.* (2010) to emphasize analytical rigor and stakeholder relevance. The process included identifying the research question, selecting relevant literature, charting the data, and synthesizing findings thematically. In line with these guidelines, literature was identified through a structured search of academic databases including JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Google Scholar, supplemented by grey literature from policy institutions, government reports, and news sources. Boolean operators were used to refine the search strategy, employing combinations such as “Afghanistan AND terrorism AND post-2021,” “China AND Taliban AND security,” and “Pakistan AND TTP AND regional threat.”

Inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed publications, policy analyses, and empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025, with a focus on security studies, international relations, political geography, and conflict economics. The synthesis followed Popay *et al.*’s (2006) narrative synthesis approach, allowing the integration of qualitative findings across diverse contexts. This was particularly relevant given the complexity of the topic and the multiplicity of regional actors involved. Thematic coding was used to extract data from each included source, and findings were clustered around key domains: the post-withdrawal terror landscape in Afghanistan, bilateral security challenges in Pakistan and China, and broader geopolitical implications. Reporting was guided

by best practices articulated in Tricco *et al.* (2016), ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and conceptual clarity throughout the review process.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

**The Post-2021 Terror Landscape in Afghanistan**

The U.S. withdrawal left behind a fragmented counterterrorism apparatus, creating a vacuum rapidly exploited by insurgent groups. While the Taliban has attempted to consolidate power through a centralized Islamic Emirate, its internal factions and external adversaries continue to disrupt governance efforts. Notably, IS-KP has orchestrated high-profile attacks targeting both civilians and the Taliban administration, signaling a persistent threat to security and stability (Schroden, 2025; Mehran & Jobard, 2025). This intra-jihadist rivalry has intensified since 2022, undermining the Taliban’s monopoly on violence and sowing further discord within Afghan territory (Ibrahimi & Akbarzadeh, 2020). What distinguishes the current threat environment is not only the number of active militant factions but also their transnational connections. The re-emergence of al-Qaeda in various provinces under tacit Taliban protection contradicts prior commitments made in the Doha Agreement, raising alarm bells among global security actors (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). Additionally, the fluid movement of fighters across Afghanistan’s porous borders with Pakistan and Central Asia allows for the rapid diffusion of militant ideology and logistical support (Ubaydullaeva, 2023). China, in particular, views this resurgence of extremist activity with grave concern. The potential for Uyghur separatist groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) to gain training and operational support from Afghan-based cells has prompted Beijing to increase intelligence collaboration with regional partners and the Taliban itself (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025). However, the Taliban’s ambiguous stance on international jihadists complicates China’s risk calculus, forcing it to rely on economic diplomacy and bilateral agreements that lack enforceable security guarantees (Hu *et al.*, 2022).

**Table 1:** Summary of Regional Strategic Responses to Post-2021 Terrorism in Afghanistan

Country	Security Threat Identified	Policy Response	References
Pakistan	TTP insurgency from Afghan territory	Military operations, diplomatic engagement with Taliban	Akhtar and Ahmed (2023); Emerson (2018)
China	Potential spillover of extremism into Xinjiang	Economic caution, intelligence cooperation, selective diplomacy	Kumar and Ramachandran (2025); Hu <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Tajikistan	Cross-border militant threats	Strengthened border control, military coordination with Russia	Ubaydullaeva (2023)
Iran	Risk of IS-KP and other Sunni militant resurgence	Strategic engagement with Taliban, defense posturing	Downey (2021); Norlén (2022)
Russia	Taliban instability affecting Central Asian interests	Expanded military exercises with Central Asian republics	Thomas <i>et al.</i> (2020); Amiri and Jackson (2021)

## Case Studies of Regional Responses to Post-2021 Terrorism in Afghanistan Pakistan's Evolving Security Dilemma and Strategic Blowback

Pakistan's historical engagement with the Taliban has been characterized by a complex mix of ideological affinity, strategic interest, and geopolitical pragmatism. Islamabad had long viewed the Taliban as a means of securing strategic depth in Afghanistan, especially as a counterbalance to Indian influence. However, the post-2021 environment has altered this dynamic significantly. The resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), drawing ideological and logistical strength from Taliban-controlled territory, has reignited insurgent activity across Pakistan's northwestern regions (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). TTP militants have launched a series of coordinated attacks on security forces and infrastructure in areas such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. These developments echo the violent instability of the mid-2000s, when Pakistan faced a widespread internal security crisis.

The renewed violence has exposed structural weaknesses in Pakistan's counterterrorism framework. Islamabad's reliance on military offensives, without a parallel track of political reconciliation or socio-economic reintegration, has proved insufficient in curbing the TTP's momentum (Emerson, 2018). The Taliban's reluctance or incapacity to restrain TTP fighters based within Afghan borders has strained diplomatic relations between the two governments. Despite Pakistan's material support for the Taliban during their resurgence, its post-2021 overtures for cooperation have not yielded concrete commitments on security. As noted by Kotokey and Borthakur (2021), the absence of trust and enforceable agreements has hindered the development of an effective cross-border counterterrorism mechanism. Beyond the immediate security implications, the TTP insurgency has also inflicted economic harm. The increased allocation of fiscal resources to military operations has diverted attention from developmental priorities. Investor confidence has declined, and inflationary pressures have intensified, particularly in conflict-prone provinces. Banna *et al.* (2023) argue that the convergence of inflation and insecurity has disrupted economic stability across South Asia, with Pakistan serving as a key example. The violence has deterred foreign direct investment and undermined long-term economic planning. In line with the findings of Khan (2024) and Ward (2018), terrorism is not merely a threat to national security but a profound obstacle to sustainable economic growth and governance.

## China's Geostrategic Concerns and Policy Realignments

China's perception of Afghanistan changed dramatically following the Taliban's return to power. What had once been seen as a peripheral issue quickly became a strategic priority due to the potential implications for internal security, particularly in the Xinjiang region. Beijing has

expressed growing concern over the reactivation of militant safe havens along its western frontier. The possibility that groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party may find ideological or logistical sanctuary in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan poses a direct threat to China's national cohesion (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025). Despite repeated assurances from Taliban officials that Afghan territory would not be used for hostile activities against China, skepticism persists. The fragmented nature of Taliban governance and the presence of multiple autonomous factions reduce the credibility of such commitments (Hu *et al.*, 2022; Omarkhail & Zahid, 2025). China's economic engagement with Afghanistan has consequently adopted a risk-averse posture. While Beijing has extended diplomatic and humanitarian gestures to the Taliban administration, it has withheld substantial investment, particularly in high-risk sectors. Strategic ventures like the Mes Aynak copper mine remain underdeveloped due to security volatility. Ibrahim and Akbarzadeh (2020) note that intra-Taliban rivalries and the persistent threat of jihadist violence deter long-term economic planning. Moreover, the growing insecurity in Afghanistan jeopardizes the broader Belt and Road Initiative, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Key transit routes connecting Gwadar to Kashgar pass through volatile areas in both Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, where militant activity continues to pose significant logistical and human security challenges (Algaoud & Kumar, 2021).

At the strategic level, China has adopted a dual-track policy combining economic diplomacy with cautious security engagement. This includes intelligence-sharing with regional allies, limited diplomatic recognition of the Taliban, and selective participation in counterterrorism dialogues with Central Asian republics (Ubaydullaeva, 2023). However, these measures have yet to produce a comprehensive or durable framework for regional security. The fragmented and unpredictable political landscape of Afghanistan, coupled with the transnational nature of emerging terror threats, limits the effectiveness of bilateral or regional initiatives.

## Geopolitical Implications for Regional Security

The re-establishment of Taliban rule in 2021 has not only reshaped Afghanistan's internal political order but also triggered a recalibration of regional geopolitics, particularly among neighboring powers such as China, Pakistan, and Central Asian states. With the U.S. withdrawal creating a vacuum in the regional security architecture, countries like China and Russia have moved swiftly to secure their strategic interests. China's engagement with the Taliban regime has been marked by cautious diplomacy, driven by dual priorities: countering the spread of extremism to Xinjiang and safeguarding its economic interests along the Belt and Road Initiative (Hu *et al.*, 2022). Yet Beijing's fears are far from unfounded, as the Taliban's historical ties with militant Uyghur groups like the Turkistan Islamic Party persist despite

official reassurances. This concern has grown in parallel with Pakistan's security dilemma, where Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has intensified operations from Afghan sanctuaries. Islamabad, once seen as the Taliban's most influential backer, now finds itself under growing internal pressure from TTP insurgency while simultaneously relying on Chinese economic support to maintain regional influence (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023; Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025).

The destabilizing impact of Afghanistan's terror resurgence extends to the broader Central Asian region, where states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan fear ideological contagion and cross-border militant incursions. This has led to closer security coordination with Russia and China through mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, although internal rivalries and divergent threat perceptions have prevented unified action (Ubaydullaeva, 2023). As regional actors increasingly default to defensive policies that fortify borders, reinforce surveillance, and conduct bilateral intelligence exchanges, multilateral cooperation has weakened. This environment has allowed the Taliban to play a dangerous game of selective appeasement, cooperating with some states on counterterrorism while allowing other militant actors like al-Qaeda or IS-KP to operate with relative impunity (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). Such ambiguity undermines UN Security Council resolutions and erodes the normative foundations of international counterterrorism, placing the burden of containment disproportionately on individual states (Tsoukala, 2006). Moreover, securitization in response to terrorism has come at the cost of civil liberties and democratic accountability across the region, as states deploy emergency laws, restrict political dissent, and justify authoritarian practices under the banner of national security (Barak, 2008; Grødeland, 2015).

The geopolitical landscape that has emerged from these developments is fragmented, competitive, and deeply unstable. Rather than fostering coordinated peacebuilding, the threat of terrorism has intensified great-power maneuvering and hardened spheres of influence. Countries like Iran, China, and Russia engage with the Taliban on strategic terms, while hedging through military build-ups, regional pacts, or alignment with rival blocs (Downey, 2021). In South Asia, the instability has threatened major infrastructure investments such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, whose routes remain exposed to both insurgency and sabotage (Omarkhail & Zahid, 2025). Simultaneously, Afghanistan's status as an ungoverned space has reduced incentives for collective governance and shifted the burden of stabilization to transactional, short-term security arrangements. This environment rewards state actors that can act unilaterally or in selective coalitions, but it does little to build the long-term institutional trust needed for regional peace (Norlén, 2022; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Ultimately, terrorism in Afghanistan has not only reignited armed violence; it has reconfigured strategic behavior, elevated threat

perceptions, and redrawn the rules of engagement in a region already marked by fragile borders and historical rivalries (Fernandez, 2007; Savun & Phillips, 2009).

4. Multilateral Security Dynamics and Policy Implications  
The post-2021 terrorism landscape in Afghanistan has also exposed the limitations of existing multilateral security arrangements in the region. Institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have made limited headway in formulating a cohesive strategy for addressing terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. While the SCO includes both China and Pakistan, alongside Russia, India, and Central Asian states, its consensus-based decision-making model and internal rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan, have hampered effective counterterrorism coordination (Norlén, 2022). The failure to forge a collective approach has left a vacuum increasingly filled by unilateral or bilateral security arrangements, often characterized by overlapping agendas and limited transparency. For instance, while Russia has strengthened military ties with Tajikistan to counter Taliban expansionism, China has sought to enhance surveillance and intelligence capacity along its Wakhan Corridor. These fragmented efforts lack the institutional robustness and strategic coherence needed to contain the cross-border threats posed by resurgent terror groups such as IS-KP or the TTP (Jablonski, 2023). Moreover, the post-Doha security vacuum has accelerated the privatization and politicization of regional counterterrorism policies. The Taliban's selective enforcement of anti-terror commitments was offering haven to some groups while targeting others which further complicates the policy landscape. The result is a region in which national security strategies are increasingly decoupled from multilateral frameworks, raising the risk of duplicative efforts, intelligence silos, and diplomatic deadlock (Tsoukala, 2006; Downey, 2021). There are also significant normative concerns regarding human rights and civil liberties in the context of counterterrorism. Governments across the region have used the specter of terrorism to justify expanded surveillance, increased censorship, and militarized border policies often without accountability mechanisms (Barak, 2008; Grødeland, 2015). This securitized governance model, while appealing in the short term, risks undermining long-term stability by alienating local populations and fostering grievances that militant groups can exploit (Ide, 2020; Sharp, 2011). From a developmental perspective, the economic costs of prolonged insecurity are considerable. According to Banna *et al.* (2023), regional growth has suffered due to war-related inflation, disrupted trade corridors, and declining investor confidence. These effects are especially pronounced in fragile states like Afghanistan and Pakistan, where governance deficits intersect with fiscal vulnerability, creating feedback loops of instability. Empirical evidence from conflict-affected regions also shows that terrorism exacerbates inequality, disrupts public service delivery, and stymies the long-term gains

of regional integration efforts (World Bank, 2016; Mohammad *et al.*, 2023).

### Future Trajectories and Strategic Recommendations

As the regional security landscape continues to evolve in the shadow of Afghanistan's post-2021 transformation, several trajectories merit critical attention. First, the fragmentation of militant networks into decentralized, cell-based organizations particularly within IS-KP which suggests a long-term evolution of terrorism that is increasingly adaptive and transnational. These groups are leveraging new technologies, including encrypted communication channels and digital recruitment tools, which complicates conventional counterterrorism measures and necessitates more robust cyber intelligence capacities across the region (Akcinaroglu & Tokdemir, 2018; Bunzel, 2020). Second, the Taliban's ambiguous stance toward external jihadist groups remains a persistent source of instability. While the regime has made tactical decisions to contain IS-KP, it continues to tolerate or even cooperate with factions that share its ideological foundations or serve political utility. This dual-track engagement undermines international confidence and weakens prospects for long-term stabilization (Amiri & Jackson, 2021; Ibrahim, 2022). Without a credible commitment to dismantling terrorist infrastructure within its borders, the Taliban's governance model is unlikely to foster meaningful security partnerships or attract the scale of foreign investment needed for reconstruction.

Third, future policy responses must recognize that regional security is deeply interlinked with political legitimacy and social inclusion. In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, cycles of repression, marginalization, and violence have historically produced fertile ground for radicalization. Strategies that prioritize military solutions over political reform risk entrenching the very grievances that violent actors exploit (Savun & Phillips, 2009; Bandyopadhyay & Sandler, 2023). Conversely, policies aimed at expanding civic participation, reforming educational content, and supporting community resilience could disrupt the ideological appeal of extremist narratives (Banerjee *et al.*, 2014; Emerson, 2018). To that end, a comprehensive regional security approach must move beyond state-centric models and adopt a multi-layered strategy that integrates diplomatic, developmental, and intelligence frameworks. Key recommendations include:

1. Enhancing regional intelligence cooperation among China, Pakistan, Central Asia, and international partners to preempt the cross-border spread of militant networks. Shared early warning systems and interoperable data infrastructures are urgently needed to detect and disrupt evolving threats.

2. Institutionalizing joint development-security platforms, especially under mechanisms like the SCO or BRI forums, to link economic development with counterterrorism objectives. Development aid and investment must be contingent on clear security benchmarks and local participation to ensure sustainability.

3. Revisiting normative frameworks on human rights within counterterrorism regimes to avoid the alienation of at-risk communities. Drawing from legal perspectives such as those advanced by Barak (2008), national strategies should balance securitization with democratic accountability and rule of law.

4. Promoting educational and media reforms that counteract jihadist ideologies and foster pluralist civic identity. As Ide (2020) notes, the way terrorism is framed in public discourse and school curricula can significantly shape national resilience against radicalization.

Lastly, the role of global powers must be considered. While the United States and its allies have reduced their physical footprint in the region, their influence over diplomatic, financial, and intelligence architectures remains significant. A strategic recalibration that supports regional autonomy while offering technical and diplomatic backing could help stabilize Afghanistan and shield neighboring countries from further security shocks (Fernandez, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Taken together, these recommendations underscore that the terrorism threats emerging from post-2021 Afghanistan cannot be addressed in isolation. They require a layered, collaborative, and adaptive response that aligns short-term security imperatives with long-term structural transformation across South and Central Asia.

### CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated that the reconfiguration of Afghanistan into a fragmented and contested security space since 2021 has profoundly affected regional security calculations and geopolitical alignments. The return of the Taliban has not neutralized militant threats but instead has intensified the activities of jihadist groups with transnational linkages. The resurgence of IS-KP, the continued presence of al-Qaeda, and the revitalization of TTP all underscore the volatility of Afghanistan's security environment and its potential to destabilize neighboring states. Pakistan's experience reveals the unintended consequences of strategic patronage, as its historical ties with the Taliban have failed to yield cooperative security outcomes. Instead, Islamabad faces renewed insurgency pressures that threaten national cohesion and economic performance. China, on the other hand, has chosen a strategy of cautious engagement, balancing economic diplomacy with selective security cooperation while remaining wary of ideological spillovers and investment risks. Across South and Central Asia, the failure to construct cohesive multilateral security mechanisms has created a vacuum filled by fragmented, state-centric responses. As terrorism becomes more adaptive and transnational, solutions rooted solely in military intervention or diplomatic hedging will prove inadequate. Sustainable regional security will depend on the development of inclusive political structures, economic integration that addresses inequality, and norm-based counterterrorism policies that respect human rights. Addressing the complex, cross-border nature of

emerging threats in Afghanistan requires not just reactive containment but a proactive, holistic transformation in how the region understands and manages security.

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