

Prospects of Pak-Iran Security Cooperation in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the country is grappling with myriad challenges, predominantly, economic crisis and internal instability. Afghanistan's struggle towards sustainability is seriously hampered due to the current wave of terrorism. The rise of terrorism since the Taliban's takeover over Kabul has not only threatened the legitimacy of the current government but has also influenced its quest for international recognition. The main speculation following the hasty US withdrawal was the apprehension that Afghanistan might turn into a sanctuary of international terrorist organisations once again. History is reflective of the fact that Afghanistan has for long been a training and operational base for militant groups who are the aspirants of global jihadist ideology and the establishment of the Islamic caliphate. Owing to the precarious law and order and security situation in Afghanistan there is a looming threat that the current regime could potentially reignite the terrorist outfits. While under the Doha agreement, the Taliban pledged to refrain from attacking the US, there are projections that the Afghan land could be used against neighbouring states and in the south and central Asia region. This especially includes spill-over of terrorist activities in Iran and Pakistan given staunch sectarian niches in both the countries.¹

Resurgence of IS-K: A Challenge to Taliban Government

The resurgence of Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) among other terrorist groups is extremely pertinent and acts as a morale boost for other jihadist groups based in Central and South Asia. The attack on Kabul Airport on August 26, 2021 was a devastating demonstration of the resurgence of IS-K. As per a UN report 400 civilians have been killed in terrorist attacks so far, of which 80 per cent are launched by IS-K; majorly targeting schools, mosques, and minorities which depicts its violent capacity.² The spate of attacks across the country has stoked fears that Afghanistan is heading towards a violent quagmire.³

Both Taliban and ISIS have had an antagonised relationship since the emergence of the latter and have been engaged in intense clashes. However, the nature of confrontation is expected to change as the Taliban are now a political entity instead of a militant organisation—a factor that adds to the asymmetric dimension to their rivalry. The way that the IS-K is undermining the Taliban government not only endangers the internal political stability of the country but also has serious repercussions for its relations with immediate neighbours. As both Iran and Pakistan share porous borders with Afghanistan they are the most vulnerable to the potential spill-over of terrorism.

Afghanistan is seemingly turning into a mixing pot for different terrorist organisations

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including Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliates groups. This could exacerbate the already worsening situation.⁴ Taliban see IS-K as an irreconcilable enemy because of their ideological clashes and sectarian differences. IS-K follows *Jihadi-Salafist* ideology that believes in the expansion and establishment of the Islamic Caliphate. Furthermore, their sectarian feature comprising of anti-Shiite rhetoric is well-documented. Contrarily, the Taliban subscribe to the *Hanafi madhhab*, an alternative Sunni Islamic school of thought which is more concerned with religious jurisprudence.

In addition to sectarian differences, IS-K considers the Taliban a nationalist group struggling to rule over a limited territory of Afghanistan and has not drawn its legitimacy from the universal Islamic creed. In that context, IS-K perceives the Taliban as a political party aiming to rule Afghanistan by Islamic law with no aspirations to build a global Islamic Caliphate.⁵ However, the former Afghan government alleged the Taliban of collaborating with the IS-K for launching violent attacks. The US government did not support the argument. US President Joe Biden also considers them “sworn enemies” and believes that there is no possibility of any strategic alignment between both the rivals.⁶

Impact on Iran and Pakistan

Taliban have a history of belligerent relationship with Iran. During the previous regime of the Taliban government (i.e., 1996-2001), the Taliban forces captured and killed the Shiites in the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif. The situation escalated when in response Iran deployed its troops along the eastern border, demanding justice for the deceased Iranian diplomats and journalists. With the Taliban in charge of power yet again in Afghanistan, Iran seems seriously concerned for Shiite minorities and has consistently insisted for an inclusive

incumbent. Additionally, Iran has also actively urged the Taliban to ensure the human rights of all people from all ethnicities, religions and races.⁷ Iran is witnessing that the Sunni extremist group IS-K is gaining footholds in the province of Khorasan which is near to Afghan border and by doing so, it is threatening the security of the Iranian border region. Since the outset of the Taliban, the IS-K has launched a number of attacks brutally targeting Shiite minorities. Iran is serious about the situation and looking toward the Taliban to thwart the rising militancy.

The prevailing situation if not handled diligently by the Taliban, can further deter their political relations with Iran. Currently, both Iran and Afghanistan are internationally isolated. Iran is under sanctions, re-imposed by the US in 2018. Similarly, the Taliban government is looking for legitimacy and international recognition but the present situation could hamper the process as all the actors have serious concerns regarding human security. Furthermore, Afghanistan’s strangulated economic situation demands for it to have a cordial relationship with its immediate neighbours. Additionally, Iran was Afghanistan’s biggest trading partner with around \$2 billion in bilateral trade each year, nearly a third of Afghanistan’s total trade volume. Taliban also announced that after establishing their government they would resume their trade with Iran because they saw it as a potential trading partner for economic recovery.⁸ However, the IS-K continues to target the minorities within Afghanistan and the threat that it could use Afghanistan’s land to destabilise the eastern border region is eroding the process.

IS-K is not only posing a threat to Iran but it has also galvanised militant groups in Pakistan. Since the Taliban’s return to power, different militant outfits have launched more

than 124 terrorist attacks in Pakistan using the Afghanistan base.⁹ There is an assumption that these jihadi outfits have an affiliation with the Taliban, so the surge in attacks within Pakistan has posed serious questions over the security control of the Taliban as well as their legitimacy to not let the militants use Afghanistan as their operational base. Pakistan is considered a supporter of the Taliban government in the region. However, if the Taliban could not control the rising terrorism, it would complicate Pak-Afghan relations as well. There are some reports which indicate that the terror outfits which operate in Pakistan have joined the IS-K in Afghanistan. Therefore, the Afghan government needs to deal with IS-K as it has the potential to grow to an extent that could destabilise the security of the region and make the situation harder for the Taliban.

Prospects of Pak-Iran Collaboration in Countering IS-K Threat

The holistic analysis of the current Afghan situation presents a grim scenario as the Taliban government is dealing with mounting challenges, predominantly terrorism as it could further exacerbate the existing issues. More importantly, this time around neither the US government nor any other international organisation has the leverage to initiate counterterrorism efforts alone in Afghanistan as the scenario is different compared to post 9/11. Currently, all eyes are on the Taliban to improve the security situation and to keep Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorist organisations.

Regional platforms the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have also not produced any fruitful results after their meetings to improve the Afghanistan crisis. So, the responsibility now rests on its immediate neighbours as they would be the most affected

if the situation becomes uncontrollable. However, as Iran has become a member of SCO it can utilise this platform, on the one hand, to overcome its international isolation and on the other hand combat the influx of terrorism by using the Regional Anti-Terrorism Framework of the SCO. This will allow Iran to share its intelligence with other member states in order to fight against the menace of terrorism.¹⁰ Additionally, Iran also has economic stakes in a stabilised Afghanistan as it could revamp its economy by providing an alternative route to landlocked Afghanistan to the Indian ocean which would be a win-win situation for both the countries.

It is high time that Pakistan and Iran both play their role in stabilising Afghanistan as it is in their best interests to suppress the resurgence of IS-K to ensure border security and internal peace. Pakistan and Iran can work together in multiple areas to enhance the cooperation against these terrorist organisations. Pakistan is dealing with the separatist groups in Balochistan which find their sanctuaries in Iran and use the Pak-Iran border to operate within Pakistan. On the other hand, Iran is struggling against sectarian violence and has experienced the killing of border guards multiple times. These radicalised outfits also have cells inside Pakistan.

In the context of trilateral cooperation, Pakistan already has good relations with the Taliban and Iran is also improving its ties with the Taliban government so they can cooperate on the issue of countering terrorism. Currently, IS-K is a common concern for all of them as it is a Sunni militant group which is on one side targeting Shiite minorities and on the other hand is seemingly shaking hands with militant outfits that operate within Pakistan.

Conclusion

There is no misconception that terrorist outfits are re-emerging in Afghanistan since the Taliban's resurgence. Taliban owing to their national interests are trying to convince the world that they are battling against terrorism and do not support militant outfits anymore. The resurgence of ISIS is one of the grave challenges as it is an old rival of the Taliban and is still apparently trying to delegitimise the

Afghan government through a series of attacks. Although, IS-K does not pose an immediate threat to global security until it replenishes its ranks and expands its territorial base in Afghanistan. However, it is threatening the internal security and security of border countries especially Iran and Pakistan which could destabilise regional security. All three countries need to devise a security framework to combat terrorism as they have now a common threat.

Notes and References

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