Ever since coming into power after the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban (banned in Russia) has been facing an unprecedented security challenge from the Islamic State in Khorasan (terrorist organization, banned in Russia). Ever since August, a series of highly sophisticated attacks in Kabul and other cities have eroded the Taliban’s claims to have replaced the “illegitimate” government in Kabul and delivering the much needed security and peace to the common Afghans. The Taliban’s takeover was followed by an outright denial by the group that the IS-K poses any credible threat to Afghanistan. Following initial attacks by the group - which killed hundreds and injured several hundreds more - the Taliban regime reiterated its capacity to tackle the IS-K without any external help, including that offered by the Biden administration. While the Taliban-US alliance could have been a serious political dilemma for the nascent Taliban regime, as it could have drove many a hard-liner Taliban field commander and fighter away from the leadership, it remains that the presence and growing activity of the IS-K remains a lacuna that the Islamic Emirates is finding extremely difficult to control.

As it stands, the Islamic Emirates is increasingly turning into a melting pot of competing jihadi ideologies, a landscape of transnational jihad that directly threatens Afghanistan’s neighbours - Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, Russia and China - much more than it threatens the US and Europe, even though the latter played a key role in not only willingly or unwillingly allowing the IS-K to establish its roots in Afghanistan, but also in leaving Afghanistan...
without addressing the core issue of Islamist jihad, as well as preventing the migration of jihadis from the Middle East to Afghanistan.

According to the June 2021 report of the United Nations Security Council, when the US/NATO were still very present in Afghanistan, the IS-K is not only present in Afghanistan and sitting on a strength of around 2,000 fighters, but that its connection with the ISIS in Iraq and Syria is very much intact as well. The group’s strength explains its increasing militant activity. To quote the report,

“During the first four months of 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 77 ISIL-K claimed and/or attributed attacks. This was an increase over the same period in 2020, where the number of claimed/attributed attacks was far lower, at 21.”

The recent, post-withdrawal resurgence in the IS-K attacks is, thus, a continuation of the pattern that existed during the US/NATO military presence, a continuity that exposes the lies that the US military commanders blatantly told in the past their defense of their ‘success’ in Afghanistan.

Not only is the IS-K present in the country, but past few months have also seen a resurgence in the migration of jihadis from the Middle East. According to the said report, there are at least 8,000 to 10,000 foreign jihadis operating in Afghanistan, with a vast majority of them “from Central Asia, the north Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, Pakistan and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China, among others. Although the majority are affiliated foremost with the Taliban, many also support Al-Qaida (terrorist organization, banned in Russia). Others are allied with ISIL or have ISIL sympathies.”

Most of these jihadis have views that support exporting jihad from Afghanistan to its neighbouring countries and regions. For example, the presence of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan shows how China’s highly sensitive Xinjiang region could be a target of jihadi infiltration. Xinjiang is important for China not only because of the presence of a huge Muslim population, but also because at least four different Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) routes pass through or emerge from it. Specifically, Silk Road networks other than the CPEC that run through Xinjiang include the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor and the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor. A spread of jihad in Xinjiang, thus, could destabilise China’s massive project, which has practically become the most important reference point of Beijing’s foreign relations since its inauguration in 2013.

The threat that the IS-K poses to Afghanistan and the wider region is, therefore, serious enough for China to establish a new military base in Tajikistan’s eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province in the Pamir mountains, which border both China's Xinjiang province and Afghanistan's northern province of Badakhshan. The strategic location of the base indicates how China aims to position itself in the region to protect its wider political, economic and security interests.

As far as other countries are concerned, Russia, very much like other countries, has consistently refused to recognise the Taliban government as legitimate unless it first practically tackles the threat of terrorism emanating from within Afghanistan.

The reason why Russia and other countries have linked the recognition with tackling the security threat is how some Taliban groups – in particular, the Haqqani network – remain in potential alliance with the IS-K itself.

The IS-K’s current leader in Afghanistan, Shahab al-Muhajir, happens to be a former Haqqani network leader. As the above-mentioned the UNSC report mentions, the IS-K is known to have carried out numerous attacks in recent past in close coordination with the Haqqani network. Therefore, with the Haqqanis now being the most dominant group in Kabul controlling the all-important interior ministry, speculations about their continuing ties with the IS-K remain strong.

At the same time, it remains that many Taliban field commanders and fighters continue to believe that the end of the war against the US need not be the end of jihad itself and that jihad must continue at least until the establishment of true Islamic Emirates that extends into parts of Pakistan, Central Asia and China. The Afghan Taliban’s internal shift towards ‘permanent jihad’ is, to a significant extent, a direct result of their exposure to the above-mentioned arrival of transnational jihadis in Afghanistan, as well as the time many of the Taliban fighters spent in US prisons in Afghanistan and elsewhere alongside the IS-K and al-Qaeda jihadis.

It is this transnational jihadi posturing that has become a serious security dilemma not only for the common people
of Afghanistan, but also for the neighbouring states. Until the Taliban central leadership can overcome this dilemma and take concrete action against these groups, it is unlikely to be able to win recognition. At the same time, regional states will continue to take steps to fortify their borders to tackle the terrorist threat the Taliban’s so-called Islamic Emirates is posing.

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