

The Influence Of The Afghan Factor On Anti-Terrorist Strategies In Central Asia

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Abstract: The article analyzes the impact of Afghanistan's security system transformation and ISKP's activities on the anti-terrorism strategies of the Central Asian states. The dynamics of terrorist activity, the Taliban's approaches to countering terrorism, the role of multilateral cooperation mechanisms, and the digital dimension of modern terrorist threats are considered.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Central Asia, ISKP, terrorism, regional security, SCO, online radicalization, migration, financial intelligence.

Introduction: In recent decades, the Afghan factor has become a key element of regional security in Central Asia (CA). However, the level of direct terrorist activity in the region remains relatively low. In the context of increasing global geopolitical turbulence, when external actors seek to influence internal processes in Central Asia, the role of Afghanistan as a potential platform for terrorist groups is becoming one of the key tasks of analysis and practice of countering terrorism.

In the period 2018-2021, the country was consistently in first place in terms of the number of terrorist acts and victims. However, after the withdrawal of foreign troops and the Taliban coming to power in August 2021, the situation has undergone significant changes. In 2022-2023, the number of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan decreased by 75-81%, and the number of deaths decreased by 58-71%. As a result, 2023 was the lowest year for terrorist activity in the last two decades [1]. This decline is explained not only by a decrease in the intensity of the armed confrontation but also by the new authorities' ability to ensure the basic functioning of central institutions and to establish effective law enforcement agencies, thereby making countering terrorism a priority of state policy.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the transformation of terrorist activity in Afghanistan and its impact on the anti-terrorism strategies of the Central Asian states, with an emphasis on the roles of the Taliban movement and the ISKP, regional

cooperation mechanisms, and the digital dimension of modern threats.

METHODS

The following methods were used in the study: comparative politics, regional studies, statistics, institutional analysis, content analysis, and case studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Transformation of terrorist activity in Afghanistan

At this stage, the main source of terrorist threats in Afghanistan is the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), which accounted for up to 61% of all victims of terrorist attacks in the country in 2023 [1]. ISKP is a transnational jihadist terrorist organization, which is a branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Afghanistan. The strategic goal of the group is to overthrow the existing governments of the countries of the historical region of Khorasan and create a caliphate based on radically interpreted Sharia norms.

The organization was founded in 2015 by recruiting Afghans, Pakistanis, and defectors from the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan [2]. According to a 2024 report by the UN Security Council, the number of ISKP militants in Afghanistan is estimated to be between 2 and 3,500, with the main support bases in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. The group went through a period of intense Salafization, relying mainly on local Salafi communities in eastern

Afghanistan, and intensified religious and ideological radicalization [3].

Under pressure from the Taliban, ISKP was largely pushed underground and partially shifted the center of gravity of its activities from Afghanistan to Pakistan, primarily to the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, where the largest terrorist attacks were recorded in 2023, including a suicide attack on the congress of the Jamiat Ulema-Islam Fazl party [4]. ISKP's funding for its activities has weakened, donor interest from Gulf countries has decreased, and control over informal remittance channels (hawala) has been tightened, including under the influence of agreements between Iran and Saudi Arabia. According to Riccardo Valle, co-founder of the online platform The Khorasan Diary, ISKP has been forced to adapt its strategy, abandoning its desire for territorial control in favor of asymmetric warfare tactics. Constant changes in tactics and continued terrorist activity have turned ISKP into one of the main threats to stability in the region and the world [5].

Despite ISKP's structural stability and ability to adapt, going underground and increasing ideological narrowness have limited the group's growth and presence in northern Afghanistan, near the borders of Central Asian countries. According to SCO RATS sources at the end of 2024, the lack of a broad social base, the local nature of the Salafi enclaves, and the active special operations of the Taliban did not allow ISKP to gain a firm foothold in northern Afghanistan: most of the cells were isolated from the local population and from each other, which complicated management and coordination [6].

These factors have forced ISKP to seek additional external funding, increase its reliance on donations, and pressure the local population. A critical vulnerability of the current stage of ISKP's development is the growing dependence on online resources. The group transferred a significant part of its training and propaganda to the digital environment: a network of media structures (al-Azaim, alMillat Media, Khalid Media, etc.) was deployed, telegram channels for military training were organized, and the language range of content was expanded – from Arabic, Pashto, and Dari to Uzbek (al-Azaim Uzbek and radio Xuroson ovozi), Tajik, Urdu, English, and other languages. This enabled targeting audiences in Central Asian countries, among migrants in Russia and Turkey.

2. The Taliban government's counter-terrorism policy

In response to the threat of ISKP, the Taliban leadership has built a more systematic counter-terrorism course than expected by many experts. First, the army and police were significantly strengthened, with military

personnel reaching approximately 150,000 and police officers reaching up to 60,000 by 2023. This enabled the creation of "security belts" around departments and key facilities, thereby reducing the effectiveness of attacks in large cities.

Secondly, the Taliban began to rely on an extensive intelligence apparatus and conduct harsh targeted special operations against ISKP urban cells, concentrating not so much on the mass destruction of ordinary militants as on the elimination of the most trained nuclei and commanders (for example, Qari Saheb Fateh, "Engineer Umar", Abu Saad Muhammad Khorasani).

Thirdly, the fight against Salafist ideology has become a priority. The Taliban leadership has religiously delegitimized the participation of Afghans in attacks outside the country as "non-jihad." At the provincial level, the Taliban have been instructed to end their indiscriminate repression of ordinary Salafis and seek to integrate their communities, while harshly suppressing ISKP leaders.

Finally, measures were taken to cut off the group's funding channels by regulating the hawala system and conducting targeted operations in coordination with foreign partners, including Turkey. In November 2022, Turkey carried out an operation on its territory to eliminate the ISKP financial hub, which operated according to the hawala system. During the operation, about two dozen people were detained [6].

3. The Impact of the Afghan Factor on the Security of the Central Asian Countries

In the context of regional security, the Afghan factor has a dual impact on the Central Asian countries. On the one hand, statistics show that the region remains among the least affected by terrorism worldwide: in 2023, Tajikistan ranked 60th in the Global Terrorism Index, Uzbekistan ranked 76th, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan were among the countries with a zero index of terrorist activity [1]. The main threats in the region were internal and included ethnic conflicts, border clashes, socioeconomic crises, and internal political confrontations among elites.

On the other hand, there is still a risk of a "spillover" of violence and radical ideas across the relatively porous borders and border areas of northern Afghanistan, where individual ISKP cells and other extremist structures continue to operate, as well as online propaganda channels in Uzbek, Tajik, and Russian.

Under these conditions, the Central Asian states rely on a multi-level system of regional cooperation. At the institutional level, the SCO is a key platform for regular meetings of the security council secretaries and heads

of special services, as well as for joint exercises and operations, including those of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). These formats facilitate the exchange of operational information, the harmonization of lists of terrorist organizations, the coordination of border controls, and the development of common approaches to combating transnational threats. Along with formalized mechanisms, more flexible formats are being developed – contact groups on Afghanistan (including those initiated by Uzbekistan) and specialized information-analytical centers, such as the SCO Comprehensive Center for Countering Security Challenges in Tashkent [7].

The external dimension of the fight against terrorism in Central Asia relies heavily on international partners. Russia, being outside the immediate Afghan perimeter, perceives the threats associated with it largely indirectly, through its influence on its allies in Central Asia, but considers the functionality of the Afghan central government and its ability to contain terrorism and drug trafficking as a key condition for its own security. In December 2024, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted a law allowing the Taliban to be excluded from the list of terrorist organizations. In July 2025, Moscow officially recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [8].

China and India complement this contour, embedding the Afghan factor in the broader Eurasian and Indo-Pacific context: Beijing focuses on protecting its infrastructure projects and cybersecurity, while New Delhi focuses on developing multilateral dialogue formats and security working groups. At the global level, the contribution of UN agencies – the Security Council, the Sanctions Committee, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, which develops regulatory standards, monitoring mechanisms, and a methodological framework for the implementation of the global anti-terrorist strategy - is significant.

One of the most dynamic dimensions of the Afghan factor for Central Asia remains the digitalization of terrorist activities. ISKP's transition to the underground, while simultaneously developing its online infrastructure, has led to a transformation in recruitment methods: from mass open calls to work through closed channels, niche messengers, and targeted campaigning focused on diasporas and migrant communities. This reduces the effectiveness of traditional monitoring methods that track public radical resources. At the same time, the use of cryptocurrencies and informal payment schemes to finance terrorism is expanding, complicating financial flow tracking and necessitating that Central Asian countries and their partners develop specialized

competencies in financial intelligence and cybersecurity.

The experience of recent years shows that the largest terrorist attacks with an alleged "Afghan trace" (both in Iran and in Russia) go beyond the typical ISKP models in some characteristics: in the degree of religious motivation of the perpetrators, in the connection of motivation with the Afghan-Pakistani conflict field, and in the depth and multifunctionality of political consequences [9]. This underscores the importance of a comprehensive analysis that enables the separation of genuine cross-border risks emanating from Afghan territory from media-political constructs and speculation. For the Central Asian states, this means the need to simultaneously avoid both exaggerating the scale of the threat, which can lead to excessive militarization and unjustified politicization of the religious factor, and underestimating it, especially in the context of the online radicalization of migrants and the functioning of "sleeper cells."

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the analysis of the Afghan factor in the fight against terrorism in Central Asian countries allows us to draw the following conclusions.

First, despite the overall decrease in the level of violence in Afghanistan, the source of threats has not been eliminated. Still, it has only transformed from open warfare to more covert, networked, and digitalized forms of terrorist presence, primarily in the form of ISKP.

Second, the region's relative stability is ensured primarily by a well-developed system of multilateral cooperation mechanisms, which transforms Central Asia into a zone of manageable risks rather than a "borderline" zone of chronic instability.

Third, the growing role of the online space, cryptofinance, and diaspora ties in the strategies of terrorist groups makes the digital agenda and migration policy an integral component of the anti-terrorist strategy. In the long term, the sustainability of regional security will be increasingly determined by how effectively the Central Asian states and their key partners will be able to combine measures to deter transnational networks by force with targeted prevention of radicalization, strengthening the institutional base, and forming pragmatic mechanisms for interaction with the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan.

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