

China and Russia's Strategic Dilemmas in Confronting ISIS-Khorasan in Post-2021 Afghanistan

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Introduction

The August 2021 collapse of the United States-led military mission in Afghanistan fundamentally reconfigured the regional security architecture of Central and South Asia. For the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, the abrupt departure of Western forces removed a de facto security buffer, compelling both Eurasian powers to directly confront transnational jihadist threats emanating from the Afghan vacuum. This enduring challenge is embodied primarily by the resurgence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Defying early analytical predictions of its institutional decline, ISKP reconstituted with remarkable velocity following the Taliban's return to power. The organization rapidly pivoted from a localized rural insurgency into a globally networked terrorist apparatus. Transforming into the most operationally active external branch of the Islamic State, its geographic footprint has expanded unprecedentedly across Eurasia, fundamentally altering the traditional analytical framework required to fully assess its capabilities.

Situating its inquiry within this transformed geopolitical landscape, this article examines how Russia and China perceive the transnational threat posed by ISKP and what strategic instruments they have deployed in response. The central thesis argues that Moscow and Beijing are currently trapped in a self-perpetuating security paradox. By deepening their diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban as a designated counterterrorism proxy, both powers inadvertently validate ISKP's core ideological narrative asserting that the Kabul regime has betrayed the Islamic cause for foreign patronage. The severe implications of this entanglement are empirically observable through an escalating campaign of asymmetric violence directed at these intervening powers, highlighted by the devastating March 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow and the lethal January 2026 suicide bombing targeting Chinese nationals in Kabul. Consequently, investigating ISKP's operational

adaptation provides crucial insights into the limits of proxy warfare in post-intervention environments. For both academic discourse and security practitioners, understanding this specific paradox is vital for recalibrating traditional geopolitical containment strategies against the highly resilient and networked nature of contemporary transnational terrorism.

ISKP: Origins, Ideology, and Regional Ambitions

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) did not emerge from a vacuum. Its genesis was deeply embedded in the broader fracturing of the South Asian jihadist landscape, a shift primarily triggered by the rapid territorial expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria during 2014. ISKP officially formed that same year through the defection of fighters from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda, and the Afghan Taliban who were active across the region. Following these defections, the core Islamic State leadership dispatched emissaries from the Middle East to cultivate relationships with local militants and TTP commanders. The subsequent organizational consolidation was remarkably swift. Between 2015 and 2016, the group amassed a force of over 3,000 fighters operating under a highly centralized command structure and successfully expanded its operations beyond the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, this initial surge was eventually curtailed by sustained counterterrorism operations conducted by the United States and Afghan national forces, which severely degraded the organizational hierarchy. Between its inception in 2015 and the structural shifts of 2021, these coordinated military efforts resulted in the death or capture of six top ISKP emirs and successfully eliminated at least 550 mid-level commanders.¹

Despite these significant leadership losses, the organization proved remarkably resilient. The Taliban's seizure of Kabul in August 2021 constituted a critical structural inflection point for the group. Within less than a year, the number of ISKP recruits doubled, surging from approximately 2,200 to nearly 4,000 combatants, with foreign terrorist fighters comprising half of this expanded force. This rapid revitalization was heavily facilitated by the collapse of the previous government and the subsequent opening of Afghan prisons, an event that released large numbers of previously detained ISKP

¹ "ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province)." *Anti-Defamation League*, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/iskp-islamic-state-khorasan-province>.

operatives and seasoned commanders back into the battlefield.² Furthermore, the group's capacity to mobilize such forces is deeply rooted in its ideological framing. The adoption of the name "Khorasan" is by no means incidental; rather, it represents a deliberate ideological construction with profound historical and eschatological resonance. The term designates a historical macro-region that encompasses parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. Consequently, the territorial ambitions inherently encoded within ISKP's nomenclature deliberately transcend the artificial boundaries of contemporary nation-states.³

The conceptual weight of Khorasan extends far beyond mere geographic definition, as the idea has thoroughly permeated modern Islamist mythology and information operations. This concept initially gained traction with the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the region and was further popularized through the strategic circulation of specific eschatological hadiths. Within jihadist propaganda, these religious texts frame Khorasan as the prophesied battleground from which the ultimate restoration of the global Islamic caliphate will commence. Afghanistan holds a particularly central place in the Islamic State's ideology due to a specific hadith asserting that the apocalyptic war will ignite in Khorasan and culminate in Jerusalem. This narrative provides a powerful dual recruitment mechanism, elevating participation in the insurgency from conventional political violence to a sacred religious obligation and the active fulfilment of divine prophecy.⁴ Gaining physical control over these territories, designated as wilayat, is an absolute prerequisite for realizing this vision of a localized "blessed battlefield." In alignment with the broader network, the Khorasan branch strictly adheres to the Islamic State's rigid *takfiri* doctrine. This ideological stance justifies and actively promotes lethal attacks not only against religious minorities such as Shi'a and Sufi com-

² Lucinda Creighton and Hans-Jakob Schindler, "Security Risks Emanating from Afghanistan," *EUISS Brief*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/security-risks-emanating-afghanistan>.

³ Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>.

⁴ Anti-Defamation League, "ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province)."

munities but also against any Sunni sects that fail to conform completely to their extremist interpretations of Islamic law.⁵

Perhaps the most consequential structural dynamic for understanding ISKP's operational behaviour is its bitter and enduring rivalry with the Afghan Taliban. While both organizations share militant jihadist roots, they are divided by irreconcilable ideological incompatibilities. Salafist factions like ISKP vehemently oppose religious innovation, explicitly reject the concept of the nation-state, and actively seek to establish a boundaryless global caliphate governed by a literalist interpretation of sharia. Conversely, the Taliban champion a highly nationalistic vision aimed at consolidating an Islamic Emirate strictly confined within the borders of Afghanistan. From the perspective of ISKP, this localized nationalism equates to apostasy. The group routinely denounces nationalist projects as inherently anti-caliphate, branding the Taliban as "filthy nationalists" and dismissing regional Kashmiri militants as mere "agents of Pakistan." This uncompromising *takfiri* logic serves to theoretically legitimize unrelenting violence against the Taliban administration and any foreign powers attempting to support or stabilize its rule.⁶ Beyond ideological disputes, the relationship is characterized by fierce strategic competition within a saturated militant landscape. ISKP explicitly condemns the Taliban's governing practices as heretical in order to position itself as the sole legitimate jihadist authority in the region. This hostility is deeply entrenched, dating back to January 2015 when the two factions formally declared war on one another shortly after ISKP's inception.⁷ Crucially, this intra-jihadist conflict carries profound strategic implications for regional stakeholders such as Russia and China. While the Taliban possesses a genuine incentive to eliminate ISKP, its counterterrorism capacity is severely constrained by internal politics. An excessively brutal crackdown on local Salafi communities carries the inherent risk of alienating hardline Taliban mem-

⁵ Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, "Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties." CTC: *Sentinel* 11 (4), April 23, 2018, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/challenging-isk-brand-afghanistan-pakistan-rivalries-divided-loyalties/>.

⁶ Saman Ayesha Kidwai, "Rivalry Between the Taliban and ISKP: The Collision of Terror." *India Quarterly* 78 (4), 2022, 544, <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/YDISHRTPQT2YMZUMCISD/full>.

⁷ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, and Abdul Sayed, "The Evolving Taliban-ISK Rivalry," Lowy Institute, *The Interpreter*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/evolving-taliban-isk-rivalry>.

bers, potentially triggering a wave of defections that would directly replenish ISKP's recruitment pool and inadvertently empower the very adversary Kabul seeks to eradicate.

Following the Taliban's return to power, ISKP initiated a profound strategic reorientation, establishing Central Asia as its primary axis of outward expansion. The organization successfully rebranded itself from a localized insurgency into a formidable transnational threat by carefully tailoring its recruitment strategies and propaganda to resonate with Central Asian audiences. Through its Al-Azaim media foundation, the group has significantly amplified its outreach to regional youth, cultivating an ideological framework designed to ensure the movement's survival as a pervasive concept even in the event of organizational collapse.⁸ Furthermore, the launch of the English-language magazine *Voice of Khorasan* in 2022 clearly signals ambitions that extend far beyond immediate geographic confines. This pivot towards the north is physically manifested in ISKP's increased operational footprint in northern Afghanistan. Recent Taliban counterterrorism raids in these provinces have reportedly resulted in the deaths of numerous Tajik and Uzbek foreign fighters, underscoring the success of ISKP's localized fundraising and recruitment drives. The strategic implications of this demographic shift are highly consequential for neighbouring states.⁹ The threat has materialized beyond mere rhetorical posturing; operating from their northern strongholds, ISKP militants executed cross-border attacks into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the first time in 2022. Within this context, Tajik nationals have emerged as a particularly vulnerable demographic for radicalization. This is evidenced by the fact that high-profile, mass-casualty operations, including the devastating Kerman bombing in Iran and the Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow, were both executed by attackers of Tajik origin.¹⁰ Ultimately, this evolving operational pattern carries direct and profound strategic significance for the ensuing analysis of Russian and Chinese security perceptions. ISKP's transnational reach is no longer a speculative projection; it is an em-

⁸ "ISKP's Local Strategy in Central Asia." *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, August 27, 2025, <https://ipripak.org/iskps-local-strategy-in-central-asia/>.

⁹ Riccardo Valle, "ISKP Expands Its Focus Toward Central Asia." Jamestown Foundation: *Terrorism Monitor*, 21(8), April 14, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/iskp-expands-its-focus-toward-central-asia/>.

¹⁰ Nicholas Castillo, "ISKP Remains a Threat to Central Asia," *Caspian Policy Center*, March 18, 2025, <https://caspiantpolicy.org/research/security/iskp-remains-a-threat-to-central-asia>.

pirically validated reality that consistently threatens the domestic security of major powers and their regional partners.

Equally critical to understanding this complex regional dynamic is the propagandistic response orchestrated by ISKP against Russian and Chinese engagements, both within the borders of Afghanistan and on the broader international stage. The principal mechanism utilized for disseminating this ideological framework and maximizing transnational recruitment potential is the *Voice of Khorasan* magazine. *Voice of Khorasan* (VoK) functions as the most visible and analytically accessible artifact within ISKP's highly sophisticated information operations apparatus. Inaugurated in January 2022, this English-language publication constitutes a deliberate and highly sustained effort to comprehensively internationalize the group's localized narratives. Its primary strategic objectives include accelerating recruitment efforts among global Muslim diaspora communities and systematically delegitimizing both the Taliban administration and the external foreign powers that provide it with tacit or overt support.

Furthermore, the exceptional production quality of the magazine holds substantial analytical significance in its own right. The issues are meticulously constructed utilizing professional desktop publishing software, featuring carefully engineered layouts and remarkably consistent organizational branding. Consequently, these publications demonstrate a level of editorial sophistication that far exceeds the standards typical of most jihadist media products circulating prior to the year 2020. Reflecting this expansive global ambition, *Voice of Khorasan* has successfully attracted a wide array of contributors hailing from diverse geopolitical backgrounds, notably including radicalized individuals from Canada, Australia, Italy, and Tajikistan. This diverse editorial coalition vividly illustrates the rapidly expanding international footprint of the ISKP network. Additionally, the militant organization has increasingly exploited modern artificial intelligence technologies to generate high-quality, visually arresting graphics designed to maximize psychological impact across digital platforms. Consequently, a systematic examination of the anti-Russian and anti-Chinese narratives promulgated within the pages of this magazine provides an indispensable foundation for fully comprehending ISKP's strategic, operational, and ideological approach toward these intervening Eurasian powers. These specific ideological constructs and propagandistic themes articulated within the publication will be systematically analysed in detail in the following chapter.

Russian Security Perceptions and Strategic Interests

Following the withdrawal of United States forces in 2021, the Russian Federation's engagement with the Afghan theatre was fundamentally driven by a tripartite set of strategic imperatives. Moscow's subsequent calculus was acutely focused on mitigating the proliferation of terrorism from Afghan territory into the vulnerable former Soviet republics. Concurrently, Russian strategists sought to capitalize on the geopolitical vacuum left by the departing Western coalition, recognizing the absolute necessity of consolidating influence within a region that has historically served as a vital geopolitical buffer against external instability. Viewed through this pragmatic lens, the abrupt return of the Taliban to power was not interpreted within the Kremlin as a catastrophic failure but rather processed as a manageable *fait accompli*. Consequently, the Russian decision to elevate diplomatic ties with the Taliban stemmed from a straightforward geopolitical calculation. Given that the Taliban had established itself as the undisputed *de facto* ruler of Afghanistan, Moscow concluded that there was minimal strategic benefit in denying this empirical reality.¹¹ This pragmatic approach was deeply rooted in the trajectory of Russia's pre-2021 involvement in the region. Even prior to the final American departure, Moscow had consistently prioritized collective action and cooperation with regional powers through established multilateral frameworks. At the same time, the Russian security apparatus was actively hedging against potential destabilization and spillover scenarios by fortifying its bilateral security architecture across Central Asia. From the Russian perspective, non-traditional security threats emanating from the Afghan theatre, including transnational terrorism, large-scale narcotics trafficking, and cross-border militant infiltration, were certainly persistent concerns. However, Russian planners assessed that these challenges would remain manageable under Taliban governance, on the strict condition that Moscow could successfully preserve its status as the unquestioned and dominant security provider throughout the post-Soviet space.¹²

¹¹ Abdul Wasi Popalzay, "Russia's Strategic Engagement with the Afghan Taliban Post-2021: A Realist Appraisal." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 12 (2), (2025), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/18793665251401936>.

¹² Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia, Central Asia and Non-Traditional Security Threats from Afghanistan following the US Withdrawal." *Global Policy* (1), February 2022, 138, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13058>.

It is crucial to emphasize, however, that Moscow's initial perception of the Islamic State Khorasan Province was filtered almost exclusively through a geopolitical paradigm rather than being treated as a direct and immediate domestic security challenge. Russian officials frequently and publicly asserted that ISKP was effectively a manufactured tool of Western intelligence agencies, designed specifically to destabilize the Eurasian landmass adjacent to Russia's vulnerable southern borders. This deliberate rhetorical framing served a multitude of overlapping domestic and foreign policy objectives. It enabled the Kremlin to deflect domestic attention away from the genuine operational threat posed by the terrorist organization, while simultaneously positioning the Russian state as the primary victim of orchestrated Western machinations. Following the initiation of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this narrative proved especially useful for aligning Afghan security developments with the broader global information war. Since that escalation, Moscow has consistently levelled allegations regarding supposed Western and Ukrainian collaboration with various terrorist networks. These accusations were notably intensified in the aftermath of the 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre, serving as a calculated attempt to discredit Kyiv and its Western allies while intentionally widening existing geopolitical rifts. Furthermore, the Russian state systematically instrumentalized these terrorism narratives to reinforce its self-proclaimed role as the indispensable security guarantor of Central Asia, issuing stark warnings to regional governments against pursuing independent foreign policies, distancing themselves from Moscow, or seeking closer alignment with Western capitals.¹³

Nevertheless, this deep strategic instrumentalization of the ISKP threat narrative carried a remarkably severe operational cost, ultimately fostering a culture of systematic intelligence complacency within the Russian security apparatus. The tragic culmination of this oversight occurred in early 2024. On March 19 of that year, only ten days after a Federal Security Service operation reportedly eliminated two alleged ISKP operatives of Kazakh origin in the Kaluga region, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly dismissed numerous counterterrorism warnings provided by Washington. In a highly publicized address, he characterized the American intelligence-sharing as outright blackmail and explicitly condemned it as a deliberate attempt to intimidate

¹³ Uran Botobekov, "Russia's FSB Exploits ISKP Threats to Pressure Central Asia." *Terrorism Monitor* 24 (2), January 29, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/russias-fsb-exploits-iskp-threats-to-pressure-central-asia/>.

and destabilize Russian society. Exactly three days following these dismissive remarks, the devastating attack on the Crocus City Hall unfolded.¹⁴ The events of March 22, 2024, undoubtedly constitute the defining paradigm shift in Russia's post-2021 security recalibration concerning ISKP. The massacre laid bare profound vulnerabilities within the domestic counterterrorism posture and provided a stark demonstration of the expansive operational reach maintained by militant networks linked to Central Asia. Standing as one of the deadliest jihadist assaults on Russian territory in nearly two decades, the operation unequivocally proved ISKP's sophisticated capability to exploit transnational recruitment pipelines. These pipelines effectively mobilized Tajik and Uzbek extremists operating seamlessly across a vast geographic expanse spanning Russia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.

The factual record of the tragedy, along with its extensive judicial aftermath, has since been conclusively established. On March 12, 2026, the Second Western District Military Court in Moscow delivered its final verdict regarding the incident, which ultimately claimed 150 lives and left more than 600 individuals severely injured. The operation was officially claimed by ISKP, and the court subsequently convicted nineteen individuals connected to the planning and execution of the massacre. The four principal gunmen, identified as Shamsidin Fariduni, Dalerdzhon Mirzoyev, Muhammadsobir Fayzov, and Saidakrami Rachabalizoda, were included among eleven defendants who received sentences of life imprisonment in maximum-security penal colonies.¹⁵ Crucially, the long-term strategic significance of the attack resides not solely in its horrific lethality, but fundamentally in the demographic and operational profile of its perpetrators. All four primary attackers were Tajik nationals. They were not hardened, Afghan-based fighters infiltrating across a fortified physical border, but rather newly radicalized individuals who were already deeply embedded within established Central Asian labour migration networks functioning legally or semi-legally inside the Russian Federation itself.

¹⁴ Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Attack: Deciphering Central Asian Jihadism and Russian Counterterrorism." *The Diplomat*, March 27, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/crocus-city-hall-attack-deciphering-central-asian-jihadism-and-russian-counterterrorism/>.

¹⁵ Uran Botobekov, "Crocus City Hall Terrorism Trial Exposes Russian Counterterrorism Gaps." Jamestown Foundation: *Terrorism Monitor* 24 (6), April 3, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/crocus-city-hall-terrorism-trial-exposes-russian-counterterrorism-gaps/>.

To properly comprehend the nature of Russia's kinetic response to the evolving ISKP threat, one must appreciate the highly unique position that Tajikistan occupies within Moscow's overarching Central Asian security architecture. From a purely geographic standpoint, Tajikistan shares a highly porous frontier of over 1,300 kilometres with Afghanistan, representing the longest external border of any post-Soviet state. Consequently, it is viewed by military planners as the primary potential corridor for any militant spillover directed toward the former Soviet sphere. For the Kremlin, ensuring the political and territorial stabilization of Tajikistan is by no means a peripheral or secondary concern, but rather an existential imperative for its own border defence. In this context, Russia's principal instrument of forward defence remains the 201st Military Base, with its main headquarters distributed between the cities of Dushanbe and Bokhtar. Excluding the active combat zones in Ukraine, Tajikistan currently hosts the largest permanent deployment of Russian military forces abroad. The base incorporates multiple sprawling facilities and troop concentrations near Dushanbe, Kulyab, and Bokhtar, sustaining an estimated total force of approximately 7,000 active personnel. The strategic prioritization of this outpost was evident even before the fall of Kabul. In January 2021, Igor Lyakin-Frolov, the Russian Ambassador to Tajikistan, publicly emphasized that the combat readiness of the facility had been significantly upgraded to ensure a robust response to any emerging threats emanating from Afghan territory. In alignment with this defensive posture, the Russian Ministry of Defence dispatched thirty newly modernized tanks to reinforce the 201st base later that same year.¹⁶

The strategic doctrine underpinning this heavy military footprint is deeply traditional. The 201st base is intended to function as an impenetrable cordon sanitaire established along the Panj River, explicitly designed to swiftly interdict and neutralize any hostile militant advance projecting northward from the Afghan hinterland. To achieve this, the installation's primary land manoeuvre capability is organized around three robust mechanized regiments. Notably, the 191st Mechanized Regiment is strategically garrisoned in Bokhtar, south of the capital, positioning it in immediate proximity to the most

¹⁶ Cathrine Putz: Russia Voices Aim to Increase Combat Readiness at Bases in Central Asia. *The Diplomat*, August 30, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/russia-voices-aim-to-increase-combat-readiness-at-bases-in-central-asia/>.

vulnerable sectors of the Afghan border.¹⁷ This aggressive forward positioning was entirely predicated on the outdated assumption that the primary threat vector from ISKP would manifest as a conventional, territorially bounded incursion, characterized by armed columns crossing a physically monitored frontier from a defined sanctuary. The tragedy at Crocus City Hall comprehensively shattered this conventional military assumption. The terrorist organization did not launch an armed cavalry across the Panj River. Instead, it deftly utilized global commercial aviation networks and weaponized a demographic of radicalized labour migrants who were already residing within Russian borders. Consequently, Russia's formidable conventional deterrent stationed in Tajikistan proved to be structurally blind and wholly inadequate against asymmetric, over-the-horizon operations executed directly inside its own domestic territory. This devastating realization forced a profound reassessment within the Russian security establishment regarding what the concept of containment can realistically achieve when confronting fluid, transnational jihadist networks.

In the wake of these operational failures, Moscow's response to the persistent ISKP threat has been increasingly channelled through its rapidly deepening, albeit highly transactional, relationship with the Taliban leadership. The turbulent evolution of the broader geopolitical landscape, coupled with the dramatic political and military realignments within Afghanistan itself, fundamentally animated a total transformation in how Moscow perceived the former insurgents. Following the chaotic withdrawal of Western forces, Russian strategists ceased viewing the Afghan Taliban as an immediate security threat, instead reframing the organization as an indispensable regional bulwark capable of neutralizing far more dangerous elements. This radical perceptual shift culminated in a historic diplomatic manoeuvre when, in July 2025, Russia broke from international consensus to become the sole global power to officially extend formal diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government. This gesture vividly illustrated the immense scale of Moscow's strategic gamble, essentially anointing the Taliban as a localized proxy force tasked with counterterrorism duties (for broader context regarding the dip-

¹⁷ David Batashvili, "Russia's Military Position in Central Asia, Tbilisi," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies and Estonian School of Diplomacy*, March 4, 2025, <https://gfsis.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Russias-Military-Position-in-Central-Asia.pdf>.

lomatic nuances of this recognition, see Belousova and Sharma, “Embracing the Taliban.”¹⁸) However, this formal recognition was driven by a complex geopolitical calculus that reached significantly beyond immediate counterterrorism necessities. According to analytical assessments, including those published by the Carnegie Endowment, the Kremlin’s primary motivation was intimately tied to its own global reputation. After enduring years of intense strategic marginalization resulting from the protracted conflict in Ukraine, the Russian state desperately required high-profile foreign policy victories to restore its image as an influential power capable of holding the geopolitical initiative. The unilateral recognition of the Kabul regime perfectly fulfilled this mandate. Thus, while counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban remained a genuine security objective, it simultaneously functioned as a powerful diplomatic instrument utilized for projecting renewed great power relevance. This intertwined logic of domestic security and international prestige helps explain why Moscow finalized the diplomatic normalization despite the uncomfortable reality that the Taliban continues to provide safe harbour for organizations designated as terrorist entities by the Russian state, and despite the glaring absence of any credible commitments from Kabul regarding the extradition of ISKP operatives.¹⁹

Building upon this diplomatic foundation, the relationship was further solidified by the recent signing of a formal military cooperation pact between the Russian Federation and the Taliban government. This unprecedented accord represents the very first bilateral security arrangement established between a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and the Taliban administration, signalling a qualitative deepening in Moscow’s reliance on Kabul as a primary partner for regional security management. Neither signatory has publicly released the official text of the agreement or provided de-

¹⁸ Tatiana Belousova and Raghav Sharma, “Embracing the Taliban: Deciphering Russia’s Afghan Policy.” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 12 (4), 2025, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23477970251383994>.

¹⁹ Nikita Smagin: Russia Is the First Country to Recognize Afghanistan’s Taliban Government. Why?. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Carnegie Politika* 10. July 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/russia-afghanistan-new-government>.

tailed operational parameters regarding its scope.²⁰ Ultimately, the overarching design behind Russia's enhanced engagement remains explicitly tethered to the objective of isolating ISKP within the confines of Afghanistan. From the perspective of Russian strategists, supporting a functional Taliban state capable of suppressing jihadist factions internally is vastly preferable to any scenario involving state collapse, which would inevitably generate a highly permissive security vacuum. Because severe threats continue to emanate from the region, Moscow has persistently doubled down on its controversial rapprochement with Kabul to curb the unchecked spread of extremist influence.

Nevertheless, this high-stakes strategic gamble carries severe inherent limitations that the Kremlin has yet to resolve effectively. ISKP operatives have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to penetrate Taliban security cordons, successfully executing devastating strikes against prominent international targets, including the lethal bombings directed at both the Russian and Pakistani diplomatic missions in Kabul during 2022. While the Taliban security apparatus has launched numerous kinetic counterterrorism sweeps against suspected cells, the administration has consistently struggled to translate these isolated tactical victories into permanent strategic degradation of the terrorist network. As documented by researchers at the Brookings Institution, historical precedent indicates that while the Taliban is capable of localized suppression, it lacks the capability for total eradication. Between 2018 and 2019, large-scale Taliban ground offensives in Nangarhar province served as a crucial supplement to the overwhelming aerial bombardment campaign conducted by the United States. Together, these forces successfully smashed ISKP's rural infrastructure and dispersed its surviving cadres toward northern provinces and urban centres. Yet, despite this defeat, the organization remarkably reconstituted itself and rapidly expanded its operational footprint in the post-2021 environment. This historical resilience strongly suggests that the Taliban's independent counterterrorism capacity is constrained by profound structural ceilings.²¹ Since reclaiming power, the Taliban has inadvert-

²⁰ Farangis Najibullah, "In Sign of Deepening Ties, Russia and Afghan Taliban Sign Military Deal," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 28, 2026, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-taliban-afghanistan-military-agreement-shoigu-yaqub/33767652.html>.

²¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Russia-Afghanistan Relations in the Aftermath of the Moscow Attack," *Brookings Institution*, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-afghanistan-relations-in-the-aftermath-of-the-moscow-attack/>.

ently provided an environment wherein ISKP has emerged as the most globally ambitious branch within the broader ecosystem of radical Islamist groups. This dominance is evident not only in operations but also in a highly sophisticated propaganda output. The tragic events at Crocus City Hall provided a grim illustration of this dual strategy, as ISKP meticulously weaponized the massacre for maximum psychological impact. The group deployed a deluge of digital materials across encrypted messaging applications and social media platforms, publishing posters and manifestos simultaneously in Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, and various other languages. These materials explicitly articulated violent threats directed toward the Russian populace and President Putin himself. By integrating lethal violence with a synchronized digital strategy, the organization successfully transformed a single operation into a sustained, multilingual campaign of intimidation and radicalization engineered to penetrate audiences throughout the entire post-Soviet space.²²

A highly relevant narrative constructed within this propaganda framework is the explicit labelling of Russia as a “Crusader” aggressor and, consequently, a legitimate target for militant operations. The article titled “The Bear Bewildered” featured in Issue 34 of *Voice of Khorasan*, constitutes the most direct and aggressive engagement with the Russian question across the four issues examined in this analysis. Published in the Ramadan 1445 edition corresponding to March 2024, which was released immediately following the Crocus City Hall attack, the article strategically frames the terrorist operation as a legitimate and justified retaliation for Russia’s military intervention in Syria as well as its historic wars in Chechnya. The text meticulously catalogues alleged Russian atrocities committed in cities such as Idlib, Homs, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor. By doing so, it attempts to position the Crocus City Hall attack as a measured act of proportional justice, confidently proclaiming that “this wave of revenge reached Moscow, Russia, where hundreds of Crusaders were driven to the pit of death.” This rhetorical framing is explicitly eschatological in nature. It locates the Moscow operation firmly within the broader, global confrontation between the Islamic State and an overarching “Crusader coalition.” In the specific taxonomy established by *Voice of Khorasan*

²² Lucas Webber and Louise Meloy, “ISKP Intensifying Online Propaganda Targeting Russia and Central Asia,” *Eurasianet*, November 29, 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-iskp-intensifying-online-propaganda-targeting-russia-and-central-asia>.

san, this hostile coalition simultaneously encompasses Russia, the United States, Iran, and the Afghan Taliban.

Furthermore, this particular issue devotes considerable attention to the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine. The propagandists perceive this Eastern European conflict simultaneously as undeniable evidence of declining Russian power and as a structural manifestation of what they term “Crusader Against Crusader Wars.” Consequently, ISKP has emerged as the leading jihadist voice capitalizing on the geopolitical fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war. The organization has spearheaded a sophisticated propaganda campaign that deliberately positions the conflict as definitive proof of Moscow’s profound vulnerability and as a harbinger of the impending collapse of the broader “Crusader” world order. Particularly noteworthy in this analytical context is the deliberate utilization of graphical elements featuring a photograph of the late mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, which appeared in Issue 29 of *Voice of Khorasan*. Prigozhin and his Wagner Group initially represented a crucial and highly effective element of the Russian armed forces deployed in Ukraine. However, his subsequent rebellion against the Kremlin hierarchy ultimately cost him his life and catalysed the de facto disintegration of the Wagner Group’s autonomy. According to the strategic narrative articulated by *Voice of Khorasan*, the entire Prigozhin episode served as compelling internal evidence of an intra-Crusader power struggle, further illustrating the terminal decline of the modern Russian empire.

Ultimately, the propaganda apparatus presents the Russia-Ukraine war and these internal Russian crises as convergent evidence that the contemporary “jahili world order” is entering a phase of terminal fragmentation. The explicit strategic implication drawn by the authors is that the present historical moment represents an exceptional window of opportunity for ISKP. The underlying logic suggests that as great powers systematically exhaust their military and economic resources in mutual competition, the geopolitical space available for the expansion of the caliphate naturally widens. It is crucial to recognize that this geopolitical opportunism is not merely a rhetorical flourish. The precise timing of these articles, specifically those published in the immediate aftermath of the Wagner mutiny, reflects a genuine and highly attuned analytical awareness of shifting great power dynamics. This level of observation is considerably more sophisticated than the capabilities many Western analysts have historically credited to jihadist media outlets. The im-

plication for the central argument of this article is therefore highly significant. The leadership of ISKP does not merely exploit the ongoing Sino-Russian competition over Afghan influence as a coincidental or secondary benefit. Instead, the organization appears to consciously and methodically frame its entire long-term strategic trajectory around the fundamental assumption that this great power competition will inevitably persist, deepen, and ultimately destabilize the region entirely.

Chinese Security Perceptions and Strategic Interests

China's strategic approach to the Afghan theatre has historically been governed by the principle of strategic restraint, characterized by a deliberate preference for minimal public exposure combined with carefully calibrated economic and diplomatic engagement. Whereas the Russian Federation processed the evolving Afghan dynamics primarily through the prism of geopolitical competition and military deterrence, Beijing's analytical lens has consistently remained focused on domestic imperatives. These imperatives centrally include the internal stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the broader security of its vulnerable western periphery, and the strict protection of its citizens and overseas investments. Consequently, China's post-2021 engagement with Afghanistan is defined almost exclusively by overarching security necessities rather than any prospective economic opportunities. Beijing's diplomatic posture is rooted less in expansionist ambition than in an urgent, pragmatic need to stabilize its borderlands and systematically curtail the ability of armed non-state actors to exploit Afghan territory as a launching pad for activities that could destabilize Xinjiang.²³

This foundational framing is absolutely critical for understanding Beijing's calculated tolerance of the Taliban administration as a viable diplomatic interlocutor. The core of China's security calculus revolves around neutralizing transnational threats directed at Xinjiang, particularly those emanating from Uyghur militant factions, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and

²³ Bahram Kalviri, "Containing the Spillover: Afghanistan as China's Immediate Frontier Risk." Shiv Nadar University, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies: *CEHS Issue, Brief* 26, February 2026, <https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/containing-the-spillover-afghanistan-as-chinas-immediate-frontier-risk/>.

the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (ITP). These acute security concerns have directly conditioned Beijing's willingness to integrate Afghanistan into the expansive Belt and Road Initiative, strictly making such economic incorporation contingent upon the Taliban's verifiable ability to provide a thoroughly secure operational environment. In essence, the Chinese political establishment has pursued a strategy that scholars often characterize as "economic deterrence".²⁴ This approach utilizes the lucrative prospect of infrastructural investment and regional integration as a primary lever to shape Taliban behaviour, thereby attempting to secure Chinese interests without resorting to the direct deployment of conventional military force.

Security considerations continue to serve as the undisputed dominant driver of Chinese strategic calculations. Beijing evaluates the Afghan landscape chiefly through the matrix of potential spillover risks threatening Xinjiang, with its defensive posture being heavily informed by the activities of ISKP and the perceived enduring threat of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Furthermore, Beijing harbours deep-seated scepticism regarding the Taliban's actual institutional capacity to effectively prevent anti-China militancy. This profound institutional doubt strongly reinforces the Chinese preference for highly cautious and easily reversible engagements. Such extreme caution has manifested in clearly observable economic consequences. Despite generating considerable public signalling and diplomatic rhetoric regarding future investment intentions, China's actual economic footprint in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of United States forces has been notably restrained. Bilateral trade remains highly unbalanced, capital investment is severely limited in scope, and previously established infrastructural projects continue to encounter significant operational hurdles.²⁵

Recognizing this dynamic, ISKP has deliberately and systematically sought to drag China out of its preferred posture of strategic invisibility through a sustained, highly visible campaign of targeted violence and aggressive propaganda. The terrorist organization's calculus in this regard is remarkably

²⁴ Nishtha Kaushiki and Victor Sathyadas, "China's Economic Engagement as Strategic Deterrence in Afghanistan." *The International Spectator*, 60(4), 2025, 60-82.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2025.2564099>.

²⁵ Sean Ryan and Adib Farhadi, "China, Afghanistan, and Critical Minerals: Options for U.S. Strategic Competition Below the Threshold of War." *Small Wars Journal*, February 20, 2026,
<https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/02/20/china-afghanistan-critical-minerals/>.

straightforward. By directly attacking Chinese nationals and critical economic assets, the group explicitly aims to fracture the fragile economic alliance coalescing between Beijing and Kabul. The ultimate objective is to demonstrate to the international community that the Taliban is fundamentally incapable of securing foreign investment, thereby fatally undermining the Afghan government's primary avenue for securing external legitimacy and financial lifelines. The pattern of these militant operations against Chinese interests has been both persistent and steadily escalating in its audacity. Prominent ISKP operations targeting Chinese nationals have included the January 2022 suicide bombing executed outside the Foreign Ministry building in Kabul, which occurred mere minutes before the scheduled arrival of a high-level Chinese delegation.²⁶ This was followed by the devastating December 2022 assault on the Kabul Longan Hotel, an establishment frequently utilized by Chinese businessmen and diplomatic personnel, which left at least five Chinese nationals severely injured. The violence continued into early 2025 with the targeted assassination of a Chinese mining worker in Takhar province.

The Longan Hotel siege on December 12, 2022, is particularly illustrative of the group's deliberate targeting logic. In its official communications, ISKP explicitly claimed that its operatives had infiltrated a prominent hotel known to host Chinese diplomats and commercial figures, detonating concealed explosive devices specifically intended to strike a gathering of Chinese guests and the main reception area. Crucially, this operation unfolded just one day after the Chinese ambassador held formal discussions with the Afghan deputy foreign minister to address urgent security matters and demand enhanced protection for the embassy. This timing was almost certainly a calculated operational decision, serving as a direct kinetic signal that no degree of formal diplomatic engagement with the Taliban apparatus would ever confer true immunity from ISKP strikes.²⁷ Concurrently, the Longan Hotel attack was amplified by a dramatic surge in anti-China rhetoric within jihadist media ecosystems, aggressively deriding "communist Chinese imperialists" for allegedly seeking to exploit and plunder Afghanistan's sovereign resources.

²⁶ Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attack in Kabul Punches Holes in Taliban Regime's Claims," *Eurasianet*, March 4, 2026, <https://eurasianet.org/iskp-attack-in-kabul-punches-holes-in-taliban-regimes-claims>.

²⁷ "Deadly Attack on Kabul Hotel Popular with Chinese Nationals," *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/12/deadly-attack-on-kabul-hotel-popular-with-chinese-nationals>.

Through these actions, ISKP has made its spoiler strategy unmistakably explicit. The group intends to prevent the Taliban from acquiring international legitimacy, to sustain the recruitment of disenfranchised Taliban combatants, and to secure Afghanistan as an untouchable base for launching both local and transnational terror campaigns. Consequently, Beijing faces escalating systemic risks from ISKP that extend well beyond the Afghan borders. The group's persistent targeting of regional Chinese interests, combined with the enduring international sanctions imposed on the Taliban administration, severely complicates necessary financial transactions and effectively deters broader institutional investment across the region.²⁸

The lethality of this campaign was further underscored by another highly targeted operation at the beginning of 2026. On January 19, a devastating suicide attack struck a prominent Chinese restaurant situated in Kabul's affluent Shahr-e-Naw district. The explosion claimed the lives of seven individuals, including a Chinese Muslim man who co-owned the establishment alongside his wife and an Afghan business partner, while the remaining fatalities were local Afghan citizens. Additionally, over a dozen patrons, including another Chinese national, sustained severe injuries in the blast. In claiming official responsibility for the massacre, ISKP issued a stark warning that it had formally placed Chinese nationals on its priority target list, explicitly citing the increasing crimes committed by the Chinese government against the persecuted Uyghur Muslim minority as the primary justification. The targeted restaurant was a well-known gathering point for Chinese expatriates residing in the capital. The tactical execution of the bombing further highlighted the attacker's intent to maximize Chinese casualties; according to the official ISKP communique, the suicide bomber deliberately waited for a large contingent of Chinese nationals to enter the premises before detonating his explosive vest.²⁹

Within this complex informational battlespace, the Uyghur question constitutes the most structurally damaging vulnerability for Beijing, precisely because it strategically exploits a genuine and thoroughly documented human

²⁸ Makhdum Karam Shah, "Mining for Influence: China's Mineral Ambitions in Taliban-Led Afghanistan," Wilson Center, August 19, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/mining-influence-chinas-mineral-ambitions-taliban-led-afghanistan>.

²⁹ Ramachandran, "ISKP Attack in Kabul."

rights issue that the Chinese government cannot easily rebut on the global stage. In its sophisticated propaganda output, ISKP fervently calls upon the global Muslim community to take up arms against entities they describe as “red atheists whose hands are soaked with the blood of innocent Uyghur Muslims.” The group’s media apparatus is heavily consumed by the evolving relationship between the Taliban and Beijing, frequently propagating the narrative that China has effectively contracted the Taliban to act as a regional proxy tasked with rounding up Chinese-born Uyghurs currently based in Afghanistan. Within this rhetorical framework, the Taliban is consistently framed as a hired proxy deployed explicitly to tackle the advancement of the Islamic caliphate.³⁰ The Taliban’s calculated political silence regarding the situation in Xinjiang provides ISKP with its most potent and effective recruitment argument against both the Kabul administration and the Chinese state. Beijing remains profoundly concerned about the looming possibility of cross-border attacks orchestrated by militant factions such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a Uyghur separatist organization that Chinese authorities persistently refer to by its former designation, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which actively seeks to liberate the Xinjiang region from central government control. Historically, the Taliban permitted various Uyghur factions to operate freely within Afghanistan during its previous era of rule between 1996 and 2001. Since regaining power in 2021, however, substantial intelligence indicates that the Taliban leadership has made selective, clandestine concessions to Beijing regarding the Uyghur issue. These unpublicized measures reportedly include the systematic detention of identified Uyghur militants and the covert deportation of specific individuals back to Chinese jurisdiction. Yet, the Taliban has consistently and adamantly refused to acknowledge such bilateral security cooperation publicly. The leadership remains acutely aware that formalizing these actions would immediately validate ISKP’s pervasive narrative of Taliban apostasy, potentially triggering mass defections from within its own deeply ideological hardline factions.³¹

³⁰ Lucas Webber, “ISKP’s China Threats Surge, Become More Nuanced,” *Eurasianet*, September 12, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/iskps-china-threats-surge-become-more-nuanced>.

³¹ Zia ur Rehman, “Security Concerns Bring China Closer to Taliban,” *Voice of America*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/security-concerns-bring-china-closer-to-taliban-/6697339.html>.

By prominently showcasing dedicated Uyghur members who possess both the ideological motivation and the tactical training required to execute complex operations, ISKP has significantly exacerbated Beijing's existing anxieties concerning the Uyghur militant threat emanating from the Afghan theatre. Given Beijing's obvious strategic interest in maintaining diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban, ISKP strategists have increasingly framed the Chinese state as an immediate enemy. Consequently, violent attacks directed at targets affiliated with the Taliban are routinely presented to jihadist audiences as justified retaliation for Kabul's perceived willingness to curb Uyghur militants at the explicit request of the Chinese government.³² This dynamic places China in a structurally compromised and deeply uncomfortable geopolitical position. Any visible or formalized security cooperation with the Taliban concerning the Uyghur issue simultaneously validates the most damaging aspects of ISKP's propaganda while risking the internationalization of a highly sensitive domestic policy that Beijing vehemently insists must remain completely immune from external scrutiny.

The geopolitical positioning of China, its expansive regional ambitions, and, most crucially, its highly controversial domestic policies regarding its Muslim minority are predictably exploited by the propaganda apparatus of the Islamic State Khorasan Province. Within this strategic narrative framework, China is systematically depicted as a ruthless imperialist aggressor and a fundamental enemy of the global Islamic ummah. For instance, Issue 13 of *Voice of Khorasan* features a comprehensive six-page article titled "China's Daydream of Imperialism," which constructs a remarkably sophisticated ideological case for designating the Chinese state as a primary adversary. The text deliberately frames Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative investments not as benign development assistance, but rather as a direct continuation of historical Western colonial models operating under a deceptive communist facade. The authors explicitly describe the Chinese leadership as neo-communists who relentlessly exploit cheap international labour while aggressively consolidating their authoritarian state power.

³² Nodirbek Soliev, "Why Is the Islamic State in Afghanistan's Propaganda Targeting China?" *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/is-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-targeting-china/>.

This anti-Chinese framing is powerfully reinforced in Issue 29 through a dedicated article entitled “Patience, O Muslims in East Turkistan! We Have not Forgotten You.” This piece systematically traces the grim history of Uyghur oppression, beginning with the Chinese Communist Party’s initial takeover in 1949 and culminating in the contemporary system of mass internment camps. The text meticulously documents specific human rights abuses, including forced dietary compliance during the holy month of Ramadan, strict official bans on the wearing of the hijab, and the systematic separation of children from their parents. By highlighting these profound grievances, the article explicitly positions ISKP as the sole militant actor genuinely willing to take up arms on behalf of the persecuted Uyghur Muslims. This messaging functions as a highly targeted recruitment pitch, carefully calibrated to resonate deeply with both specific Uyghur audiences and the broader global Muslim diaspora, whose collective sympathy for the Uyghur cause has grown exponentially in the post-2017 period.

Logically, the emerging diplomatic and economic cooperation between the Afghan Taliban and the Chinese government has also become a central target for ISKP’s critical propaganda. Across all four examined issues of the magazine, the Taliban is consistently characterized not merely as a terrestrial political rival, but fundamentally as a theological betrayer. The prevailing narrative insists that the Taliban movement has entirely forsaken its Islamic credentials in direct exchange for lucrative Chinese infrastructural investments. The propagandists aggressively argue that the Taliban’s willing engagement with Chinese communists, whom they explicitly label as the murderers of millions of Uyghur Muslims and the robbers of their honour, transforms any Kabul-Beijing diplomatic cooperation into active collaboration in religious persecution. Ultimately, the Uyghur question functions within *Voice of Khorasan* as an extraordinarily potent, structural propaganda asset that Beijing remains completely unable to neutralize through any available diplomatic or security countermeasure, short of executing a fundamental and highly improbable reversal of its core domestic policy in Xinjiang. Consequently, ISKP’s escalating media campaign against China could precipitate several highly destabilizing future developments, none of which augur well for the internal security of Afghanistan. The magazine’s increasingly targeted anti-China content represents a highly concentrated and strategic effort by ISKP to amplify its hostile messaging regarding Beijing in the volatile period since the Taliban reclaimed power.

Ultimately, despite its facade of internal coherence, China's overarching strategy of risk outsourcing relies heavily upon a series of fundamental structural assumptions that ISKP is systematically and violently working to falsify. The most critical of these assumptions is the belief that the Taliban can be reliably induced, through a carefully calibrated combination of economic incentives and tacit security cooperation, to function as a dependable proxy counterterrorism force. ISKP has not only explicitly threatened the Chinese state, but prominent jihadist figures have also increasingly condemned Beijing's treatment of Xinjiang's Muslim population. Unlike the Russian Federation's geopolitical framing, which remains at least partially contestable in the realm of international diplomacy, China's restrictive policy in Xinjiang represents an inflexible structural feature of its domestic political system. It is a policy that simply cannot be modified or softened to reduce the immense propaganda advantage currently enjoyed by ISKP. Therefore, Beijing finds itself confronting an asymmetric threat that is simultaneously ideological, operational, and severely reputational. While China's preferred instruments of economic leverage and technological outsourcing are certainly not devoid of impact, they ultimately fail to address any of these complex dimensions directly, leaving Chinese regional interests chronically exposed.

The Security Paradox and Future Scenarios

The concept of a security paradox in the context of proxy-based counterterrorism is well-established within scholarly literature. It describes a dynamic in which the very measures adopted by an external actor to reduce its security exposure inadvertently generate the conditions that sustain or amplify the threat it seeks to suppress. In the Afghan case, this paradox takes a specific and analytically productive form. The deeper Russia and China invest in legitimizing and empowering the Taliban as a counterterrorism proxy against ISKP, the more effectively they validate ISKP's foundational propaganda narrative asserting that the Taliban has sold out the Islamic cause to authoritarian foreign powers. The paradox operates through a self-reinforcing feedback loop characterized by three distinct stages. In the first stage, Russia and China deepen security and economic cooperation with the Taliban, motivated by the rational objective of building a reliable local counterterrorism partner. In the second stage, ISKP deploys this cooperation as evidence that the Taliban is a vassal of infidel powers, framing the relationship in the eschatological terms that are most potent for its target recruitment audience.

In the third stage, this narrative drives defections from within Taliban-adjacent communities into ISKP's recruiting pool, expanding the threat that the cooperation was initially designed to suppress. The cycle then repeats at a higher level of intensity.

The mechanism by which external recognition of the Taliban feeds ISKP's propaganda has been documented with increasing precision, particularly as Russia's formal recognition of the Taliban in July 2025 has drawn significant analytical attention. Full diplomatic recognition could effectively hand ISKP and similar organizations a major propaganda victory. ISKP already brands the Taliban as apostates for any sign of pragmatism, citing their willingness to negotiate with the United States and their failure to enforce a strictly literal version of sharia as definitive proof of moral weakness. Recognition could allow ISKP to portray the Taliban as mere puppets of foreign powers, fundamentally tarnished by diplomacy and no longer acting as true holy warriors. This portrayal exploits the identity crisis within Taliban ranks, potentially widening existing internal rifts. Furthermore, the Taliban have ignored ISKP's condemnation of their ties with China, Iran, and Russia, relationships which ISKP has castigated as alliances with the biggest enemies of Islam. The Taliban leadership has shown a willingness to absorb this propaganda cost in exchange for the tangible economic and diplomatic benefits of external engagement. However, the critical question is not whether the Taliban leadership accepts this framing, which it clearly does not, but rather whether rank-and-file fighters and sympathizers in Afghanistan and Central Asia find ISKP's argument persuasive. The evidence derived from ISKP's recruitment trajectory among Central Asian nationals suggests that a significant share of the target audience does indeed find it compelling.

The Taliban correctly perceive ISKP as a severe threat to their regime, and ISKP has long directed the majority of its ire toward the Taliban despite maintaining broader international objectives. Upon taking over Afghanistan, the Taliban initially adopted a highly aggressive and heavy-handed approach to countering the group. Yet, the structural ceiling on Taliban counterterrorism effectiveness is further complicated by a perennial risk that both Moscow and Beijing have acknowledged but neither has successfully resolved. There is a persistent danger that an overly aggressive Taliban crackdown on Salafi communities will drive uncommitted fence-sitters directly into ISKP's ranks. The Taliban's repressive policies harbour the potential to push oppor-

tunists toward the insurgency, raising acute concerns that the numerous unemployed young men in Afghanistan will eventually join ISKP or other extremist networks. Consequently, a Taliban administration that is too aggressive against Salafist populations risks accelerating the very radicalization it is tasked with preventing, whereas a Taliban that remains insufficiently aggressive inadvertently provides ISKP with a secure operational sanctuary. Ultimately, Russia and China possess virtually no leverage over which side of this critical dilemma Kabul chooses to navigate.

The security paradox outlined here does not imply that Russia and China have made inherently irrational strategic choices. When considering the available alternatives, such as direct military intervention with its prohibitive costs and disastrous historical associations, or complete strategic disengagement that abandons all influence over a directly adjacent security environment, the Taliban partnership emerges as a rational second-best option. What the paradox clearly reveals, however, is that the Taliban partnership is structurally insufficient to neutralize the threat. Both powers have invested strategically in a model whose own internal mechanics actively undermine its primary objectives. Through their respective Taliban partnerships, Russia and China have inadvertently contributed to a counterterrorism environment in which ISKP operates with reduced local territorial capacity but vastly enhanced transnational reach. This outcome represents a net security deterioration for both powers when measured against their core strategic interest in preventing catastrophic attacks on their own sovereign territory and citizens.

Projecting the trajectory of ISKP and the future regional security architecture requires navigating a complex space between determinism and informed speculation. The scenarios outlined below are not definitive predictions but rather structured analytical possibilities. Three specific scenarios merit sustained attention: an attritional status quo in which current dynamics persist without fundamental rupture; a Tajik spillover scenario in which ISKP successfully extends its operational reach into Central Asian state territory; and a Chinese kinetic shift in which Beijing abandons its non-interference doctrine in response to a catastrophic attack on Chinese nationals or assets. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and various elements of each may seamlessly co-exist or sequence over time.

The most probable near-term trajectory is a continuation of the current equilibrium, presenting an attritional contest in which ISKP retains sufficient operational capacity to sustain transnational activities while being contained below the threshold of territorial reconsolidation within Afghanistan. Entering 2026, the Islamic State should no longer be analysed primarily through the lens of territorial revival scenarios. The Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor continues to provide a volatile environment in which ISKP can preserve its relevance, actively exploit state friction, and operate within a broader ecosystem of militant competition and cross-border escalation.³³ Within this specific scenario, non-state actors based in Afghanistan, including ISKP, represent the primary and most acute security threat to Central Asia. Despite existing constraints on their direct attack capabilities in the region, propaganda production, recruitment drives, and complex smuggling activities continue unabated, especially in remote border areas. Russia's military presence, projected through the 201st Base in Tajikistan and various CSTO exercises, provides a stabilizing influence. However, excessive strain or curtailed obligations resulting from outside disputes could rapidly generate severe vulnerabilities within regional security. The reference to outside disputes serves as a pointed acknowledgment that Russia's continued entanglement in Ukraine constitutes a structural drain on the security capacity Moscow can realistically deploy in its Central Asian buffer zone. Consequently, Russian domestic counterterrorism measures designed to contain the threat inadvertently generate the very social conditions, including marginalization, economic precarity, and deep-seated grievance, that ISKP's recruitment apparatus is specifically calibrated to exploit. Under this attritional status quo, ISKP's recruitment pool paradoxically expands even as its physical territorial base in Afghanistan contracts.

The second scenario involves a significant ISKP-linked destabilization event within Tajik territory. This represents Moscow's most acute strategic nightmare and the precise contingency that the Russian military posture in Central Asia has been specifically designed to deter. The evidence base for treating this as a highly plausible rather than merely theoretical scenario has deepened considerably in recent years. Of all Central Asians, Tajik nationals appear to

³³ Shantanu Mukharji, "Pakistan's Proxy War: The ISI-ISKP Nexus Unmasked," *Times Headline*, October 6, 2025, <https://timesheadline.in/en/2025/10/06/pakistans-proxy-war-the-isi-iskp-nexus-unmasked/>.

be particularly susceptible to ISKP recruitment efforts. High-profile attacks, such as the devastating Kerman bombing in Iran and the Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow, were both directly attributed to Tajik attackers, as have been several other lethal operations across the globe. The structural vulnerability of Tajikistan is profoundly multidimensional. Tajikistan ranks among the poorest post-Soviet states, featuring a large diaspora highly dependent on labour remittances, a government with a documented record of religious repression that inadvertently feeds radicalization dynamics, and a recent legislative crackdown on religious expression that ISKP has been exceptionally quick to exploit. Should a major ISKP attack occur on Tajik soil, whether targeting vital state infrastructure, security forces, or a high-profile civilian target, it would constitute a direct and undeniable challenge to the deterrent credibility of Russia's 201st Military Base. Moscow's viable response options in such a scenario are considerably more constrained than its robust conventional military posture might suggest. The 201st Base functions effectively as a cordon, but it is not a specialized counterterrorism force capable of pursuing non-state actors through the opaque social networks from which ISKP actively recruits. A Tajik spillover event would therefore starkly expose the widening gap between Russia's forward military deterrent and its actual capacity to address the diffuse, network-based threat that ISKP embodies.

The third scenario envisions a fundamental reorientation of Chinese security doctrine in response to a catastrophic ISKP attack on Chinese interests. By definition, this is a low-probability, high-impact event, acting as a "black swan" whose very improbability makes it analytically instructive. Yet, the current trajectory of Chinese security thinking, coupled with the escalating pattern of ISKP targeting of Chinese nationals and assets, makes this scenario far less remote than Beijing's official doctrine typically suggests. The threshold for such a dramatic shift is undeniably high, but it is not infinite. The Chinese political leadership is deeply averse to the volatile political situation simmering on its doorstep and harbours profound concerns regarding the potential for terror seeping into southwestern China. For President Xi Jinping, maintaining absolute order and security ultimately supersedes economic legacy. A robust security arrangement with Afghanistan that reliably contained the ISKP threat would undoubtedly take precedence over prospective economic interests. The implicit corollary is that a sufficiently severe failure of the existing security arrangement, whether manifested through a mass-casualty attack on Chinese nationals in Afghanistan, a successful ISKP

operation on Chinese soil, or a catastrophic attack on critical Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure, could trigger precisely the doctrinal recalibration that Beijing has thus far successfully managed to avoid. Such extreme circumstances might forcefully overcome the entrenched institutional and ideological barriers preventing Chinese kinetic engagement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, ISKP and TIP cooperation in issuing propaganda in the Uyghur language, exchanging personnel and military advice, and planning joint attacks represents the exact nightmare scenario that China has historically been most wary of encountering. Were this dangerous cooperation to mature into a coordinated, large-scale attack on Xinjiang, the domestic pressure on Beijing to demonstrate a decisive kinetic response, even a covert or plausibly deniable one, would be intense. The Chinese kinetic shift scenario thus functions as a critical structural limit on ISKP's strategic calculus. There exists a clear threshold of provocation beyond which Beijing's non-interference doctrine becomes utterly untenable as a political position. Whether ISKP's leadership accurately understands this threshold, and whether it would deliberately choose to approach it or cautiously remain below it, stands as one of the defining open questions for the medium-term regional security outlook.

All three projected scenarios share a common and deeply concerning structural implication. The current regional security architecture, which is heavily premised on bilateral Taliban partnerships and rudimentary de-confliction functions, is fundamentally inadequate to manage the evolving ISKP threat across any of the plausible trajectories. Furthermore, the ongoing competition between Russian and Chinese influence models in Central Asia severely complicates any genuine move toward a more effective, collective security architecture. China has grown increasingly willing to engage the countries of Central Asia bilaterally and through multilateral formats that deliberately exclude Russia, while Russia has simultaneously sought to aggressively maintain its historical primacy through the CSTO. The inevitable result is a rapidly fragmenting security landscape in which ISKP operates precisely across the institutional seams that Sino-Russian competition creates. The terrorist network expertly exploits the widening spaces between frameworks, between overlapping jurisdictions, and between intelligence communities that do not fully trust each other's assessments.

Conclusion

The August 2021 Taliban takeover was initially interpreted by both Moscow and Beijing as a unique strategic opportunity to expand their regional influence following the departure of Western forces. However, subsequent developments have exposed the profound structural traps inherent in this geopolitical assumption. The security paradox documented throughout this analysis is not the result of strategic incompetence, but rather the inevitable consequence of relying on a fragile non-state proxy. While Russia's forward military deterrence and China's technology-driven risk outsourcing reflect coherent strategic logics in isolation, their simultaneous application generates a highly detrimental feedback loop. Every visible act of diplomatic engagement or economic investment with Kabul provides immediate material for ISKP's propaganda apparatus, which aggressively weaponizes these interactions as definitive proof of Taliban apostasy and foreign subjugation.

The primary source analysis of *Voice of Khorasan* confirms that ISKP does not merely react to Russian and Chinese policies but proactively embeds both powers within a coherent eschatological narrative. The explicit characterizations of Beijing as "communist imperialists" and Moscow as "Crusaders" are foundational ideological constructs. Consequently, any external engagement with the Taliban inherently validates ISKP's claims of regional corruption, meaning no technical refinement of Russia's border security or China's investment conditionality can alter this basic structural vulnerability.

This complex dynamic yields three critical strategic implications. First, domestic political imperatives continuously compromise objective intelligence assessments. As demonstrated by the Russian leadership's public dismissal of the United States' advance warning regarding the Crocus City Hall attack, the political necessity to frame ISKP as a Western instrument – paralleling Beijing's imperative to minimize the Uyghur militant threat – creates profound operational blind spots. Second, multilateral mechanisms such as the SCO-RATS framework function primarily as diplomatic de-confliction platforms rather than cohesive counterterrorism alliances. The latent geopolitical competition between Russia and China deliberately prevents the robust intelligence-sharing required to dismantle a transnational network, actively leaving institutional seams that ISKP successfully exploits. Third, the foundational bet on the Taliban's capability and political will to suppress ISKP is

fundamentally flawed. The Taliban's counterterrorism performance remains inherently selective and constrained by the persistent risk of internal ideological defections.

Ultimately, this research highlights a profound strategic irony that neither Moscow nor Beijing has fully reconciled. In their pragmatic pursuit of peripheral stability through Taliban partnerships, both Eurasian powers have inadvertently established themselves as indispensable supporting actors within ISKP's foundational narrative. Whether Russia and China can develop effective counterterrorism responses that do not simultaneously fuel the exact threat they seek to suppress remains the defining security dilemma of the contemporary Afghan theatre and the broader Eurasian geopolitical landscape.