

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The Afghan Taliban's Many Challenges

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S*ummary*

The Taliban is navigating strained relations with Pakistan externally while confronting the threat posed by ISKP and deepening socio-political fault lines internally.

Introduction

Since consolidating control over Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has avoided systemic collapse despite internal fault lines defined by governance and security challenges, and mounting border tensions with erstwhile allies. However, the January 2026 Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) attack on a Chinese establishment in Kabul’s Shahr-e-Naw district—widely regarded as one of the capital’s most secure areas—reaffirmed the endurance of ISKP, which has waged a protracted insurgency against the Taliban since 2015.

Mounting tensions with Pakistan, meanwhile, intensified following the February 2026 attack in Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A vehicle laden with explosives killed 12 individuals in a suicide attack. Subsequently, Pakistan’s Foreign Office accused the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) of carrying out this targeted strike, arguing it “operates with impunity from Afghan soil”.¹ At the same time, recent governance reforms have injected a new strain in Afghan society through the implementation of a new penal code titled *De Mahakumu Jazaai Osulnama*, or the Criminal Procedure for Courts. This has laid the groundwork for the hardening of socio-economic fault lines, potentially further fragmenting the domestic landscape.

ISKP and the Internal Security Challenge

As the Taliban has transitioned from an insurgent movement employing guerrilla tactics against allied forces to a governing authority spearheading a counter-terrorism campaign against ISKP, it confronts a persistent challenge. Despite an overall reduction in mass-casualty incidents and targeted attacks, ISKP has remained a persistent threat, through strikes on diplomatic missions, commercial sites, places of worship, and targeted assassinations of senior Taliban officials since 2021.

ISKP’s operational adaptability and ideological resilience, therefore, continue to pose concerns, despite improvements in Afghanistan’s security landscape. ACLED’s January 2026 Asia-Pacific Overview, for instance, notes a reduction in ISKP-claimed attacks from 19 in 2024 to 5 in 2025.² The United Nations Security Council’s Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report (February 2026), while acknowledging that the ISIL-K was ‘under significant pressure, mostly from security operations of the regional states and military actions by the Taliban’, notes that it

¹ [“Pakistan Issues Demarche to Taliban Regime Over Use of Afghan Soil for Terror Attack”](#), *The Hindu*, 19 February 2026.

² Laleh Rahimi et al., [“Asia-Pacific Overview: January 2026”](#), ACLED, 12 January 2026.

still ‘retained significant operational and combat capability and the ability to rapidly replace fighters, including through online recruitment ... The pressure campaign pushed ISIL-K to search for alliances with other armed factions in different areas in Afghanistan ... [ISIL-K] continued to develop its network of cells to project a threat regionally and beyond’.³

The Shahr-e-Naw terror attack resulted in approximately 27 casualties.⁴ The incident reaffirmed ISKP’s symbolic, operational and ideological endurance. It also reflected its ability to target one of the capital’s most secure districts, at a time when the Taliban are looking to attract foreign, including Chinese, investment. In February 2026, attacks targeting Chinese citizens operating in the mining sector escalated. This has resulted in at least five fatalities in northern Afghanistan.⁵ This area is considered one of ISKP’s key operational bases. Notably, China remains a major stakeholder in Afghanistan’s mining sector.

These attacks raise questions about the Taliban’s monopoly over violence and its credibility as a counter-terror partner. At the same time, they also underscore that counter-terrorism successes do not always translate into ideological attrition. Here, it is important to reflect on documented evidence concerning Afghanistan’s evolving security landscape.

As per the Global Terrorism Index (2025) report, “ISK’s ability to operate and expand in Afghanistan and beyond remains an international concern”.⁶ The report also pointed out that Afghanistan’s exclusion from the list of the five most affected countries by terrorism can be “attributed to the exclusion of Taliban activities from the Index, following the group’s ascendance to government in 2021”.⁷

These trends highlight the limits of coercive counter-terrorism and the inherent structural vulnerabilities within Afghanistan’s counter-violent extremism (CVE) framework. While domestic security concerns and threats posed by ISKP continue to thwart the Taliban’s consolidation of authority and undermine its monopoly over violence, external pressures along Afghanistan’s eastern and southern frontiers, bordering Pakistan, remain an ongoing challenge.

³ James Kariuki, [“Thirty-seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Pursuant to Resolutions 1526 \(2004\) and 2253 \(2015\)”](#), Report, United Nations Security Council, 3 February 2026.

⁴ David O’Brien and Besmillah Taban, [“Targeted Attacks on Chinese Nationals in Afghanistan: A Wake-Up Call for Beijing?”](#), *The Diplomat*, 22 January 2026.

⁵ Sarah Godek, [“China’s Afghan Gold Rush Is Turning Deadly”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 20 February 2026.

⁶ [“Global Terrorism Index 2025”](#), Report, Institute for Economics & Peace, March 2025.

⁷ Ibid.

Recalibrating Ties with Pakistan

As indicated earlier, one of the most pivotal shifts in regional geopolitics has occurred in Taliban–Pakistan relations, reflected in border clashes, diplomatic demarches, cross-border airstrikes and mutual countercharges over security concerns. At the root cause of this deterioration are escalating attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), broadly regarded as an offshoot of the Afghan Taliban.

The TTP seeks to replicate the Afghan Taliban’s model of Islamic jurisprudence within Pakistan. Its resurgence has transformed a previously long-standing strategic partnership into a bilateral relationship fuelled by mistrust, demarches and armed clashes. Pakistani officials have repeatedly accused the Afghan Taliban of harbouring the TTP militants and granting the use of Afghan territory as a launchpad to target Pakistan—an allegation vehemently denied by the Afghan leaders.

Furthermore, the disputed status of the Durand Line has exacerbated tensions. No Afghan government, including the Taliban administration, has formally recognised it as an international border, contributing to contained border skirmishes on both sides. Tensions have also frequently culminated in cross-border airstrikes in bordering provinces such as Nangarhar and Paktika, most recently on 21 February 2026, reportedly resulting in dozens of civilian casualties.⁸

The recent strikes followed three major terror attacks within Pakistan: the November 2025 suicide bombing outside the Islamabad district court complex that caused about 39 casualties; the February 2026 suicide attack in Bajaur district (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), which killed at least 11 soldiers; and the February 2026 suicide bombing at a Shia Mosque in Islamabad during Friday prayers, which killed over 30 individuals.

While Islamabad framed the airstrikes as part of a broader counter-terror operation targeting militant hideouts in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban decried the strikes and vowed an “appropriate response”.⁹ Whether such diplomatic condemnation will translate into decisive counter-measures remains doubtful, given the lack of notable precedents beyond contained border skirmishes over the past five years.

The Taliban’s reluctance to decisively curb TTP’s escalating militancy since returning to power, partly due to ideological affinity, has consequently transformed its relationship with Pakistan for the foreseeable future. As the Taliban recalibrates its

⁸ [“Pakistan Strikes Militant Hideouts on Afghan Border After Surge in Attacks”](#), *The Guardian*, 21 February 2026.

⁹ [“Afghanistan Promises ‘Appropriate Response’ After Deadly Pakistani Strikes”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 22 February 2026.

relationship with Pakistan, the fallout of domestic governance reforms may prove equally pivotal in shaping Afghanistan’s security environment.

Governance Reconfiguration

In January 2026, guidelines for implementing a new penal code, De Mahakumu Jazaai Osulnama, were issued by the Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada. Perceived injustice arising due to the uneven application of the penal code risks fomenting societal grievances that may bolster radicalisation and recruitment by non-state actors, including ISKP. Exclusionary politics risk deepening internal fault lines, undermining societal cohesion, and contributing to instability and emigration.

Analysts argue that its provisions may reduce protections for survivors of domestic violence, reigniting fierce debates over women’s rights and their role in the public sphere since August 2021.¹⁰ They have also raised concerns regarding the selective application of penalties for violations of established laws.

For example, information suggests that elites and religious scholars may merely be fined for proven misconduct. In contrast, other social groups, such as middle-class families, could face harsher punishments, including imprisonment.¹¹ It is important to note that governance-related grievances, arising from the penal code, may further undermine or challenge the Taliban’s CVE strategy and broader consolidation of authority.

Dissent and dissatisfaction among women and other socio-economic groups excluded from clerical or elite positions could harden identity and socio-economic fault lines and exacerbate security challenges. They could take up arms and join groups such as ISKP, regardless of ideological and objective dissonance, subvert the Taliban’s authority in other manners, or contribute to the brain drain, further shrinking the institutional capacity to rebuild Afghanistan as a prosperous country. Resultantly, taken together, this could undermine the regime’s efforts to stabilise Afghanistan from the bottom up if this approach is pursued over the foreseeable future.

¹⁰ Alex Kwok, [“New Taliban Penal Code Legalizes Domestic Violence Against Women”](#), *Jurist News*, 21 February 2026.

¹¹ Syed Muskan Shafiq, [“Taliban’s 100-Article Criminal Code Formalises Class-Based Justice, Deepens Curbs on Afghan Women; Reports”](#), *The Logical Indian*, 18 February 2026.

Conclusion

Afghanistan, five years after the Taliban’s return to power, finds itself at a delicate crossroads. Despite preventing complete collapse and systemic fragmentation of authority, the regime faces the prospect of governing a country under sustained duress, as its governance reforms risk weakening the state from within. Its pursuit of domestic stability and authority consolidation appears to rest on two central pillars—coercive counter-terrorism and societal reconfiguration shaped by ideological rigidity.

The Taliban confronts a dual security challenge: navigating strained regional relations with a hostile neighbour while addressing the persistent threat posed by ISKP. The evolving regional developments, ongoing security concerns, domestic reforms and subsequent erosion of internal cohesion underscore the multifaceted challenges confronting the interim Afghan administration as it attempts to balance institutional reforms, credibility as a counter-terror partner, and the management of relations with former allies such as Pakistan.

The Taliban’s primary challenge, therefore, lies in preserving its counter-terror gains amid widening domestic and regional pressures, while examining how governance reforms will affect the durability of its security strategy. Institutional reforms, if implemented without a broad consensus, might foment grievances that violent non-state actors could exploit.

About the Author



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