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Iran and Russia Reenter the Afghan Conflict

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The first combat zone use of the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) device by US forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) on 13 April 2017 brought the Islamic State–Khurasan Province (ISKP) to the headlines. ISKP emerged in Afghanistan and Pakistan in early 2015 with individuals or disparate groups of militants pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and became operationally active after few months. ISKP represents a danger to the stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well the wider region including India and Central Asia. I argue that, beyond that, the outfit has become a vehicle to legitimize the growing internationalization of the wider Afghan conflict, in particular the changing calculus of Iran and Russia vis-à-vis the Taliban, and has the potential to become a tool for proxy warfare in Afghanistan evocative of the mid-1990s.

The Taliban and ISKP

Since their emergence in the mid-1990s, unlike the self-identified Islamic State (IS), the Taliban has sought international legitimacy. The initial proclamations coming from the Taliban's Islamic Emirate were mostly Afghan-centric. However, with the cementing of their ties with al-Qaeda, their views took on a more pan-Islamist outlook. Retrospectively, the strategies of the Taliban and those of al-Qaeda differed fundamentally, as the former wanted to become a national movement and be recognized by the international community as such, while the latter wanted to keep Afghanistan in a perpetual state of anarchy, using it as a base for waging global jihad. Currently, the majority of the Taliban have returned to the founding Afghanistan-centric principles of the movement with an arguably less religiously zealous message, calling on Muslims to avoid extremism in religion with the goal of becoming a legitimate force in the political arena of the country as well as in the international calculations on Afghanistan. Perhaps learning from their initial mistakes, the reemerging Taliban have tried to speak for the totality of Afghanistan, including providing assurances that they will respect the rights of the Shi'ites and other minorities within the country. Nevertheless, the Taliban remain a violent insurgency and are very keen not only on retaining their monopoly over this violence but also on controlling and managing it to help calibrate the reactions of both domestic and foreign actors.¹

The emergence of ISKP occurred in a highly sensitive period for the Taliban who had lost its elusive, but unifying founding leader sometime in Spring 2013. The movement managed to keep a lid on Mullah Muhammad Omar's demise until it was officially revealed two years later by the Afghan government. During this time, however, the Taliban was dealing with internal fractures due to power struggles for leadership in a time when major decisions needed to be taken on whether and how to make peace with the Afghan government, to open

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dialogue with foreign countries, and to shape relations with their host Pakistan in addition to decisions on military matters and expanding their areas of operation. Following the confirmation of Mullah Omar's passing, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur became the new amir al-muminin (commander of the faithful), but disagreements remained among top members of the movement over leadership positions. The Taliban leadership experienced another setback in May 2016 when the United States conducted an airstrike, killing Mansur. Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, then, became the leader.

ISKP took advantage of the discontent within Taliban ranks and the rifts they were experiencing with their erstwhile allies the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). ISKP used the absence of and later the confirmation of the demise of Mullah Omar in their propaganda courting disgruntled members of the Taliban, arguing that he no longer was the legitimate leader of the Islamic community or the Taliban Emirate. The TTP and IMU were increasingly at odds with the Taliban due to the latter's refusal to conduct and support operations inside Pakistan and began to align with ISKP. ISKP's ranks increased, albeit slowly at first. As they became stronger and more active, tensions between the two group grew, as they vied for power and territory.

Tensions turned to confrontations in 2015. The main arena of Taliban-ISKP military confrontations was in southern districts of Nangarhar Province. The Taliban also started campaigns against ISKP affiliates and supporters elsewhere in Afghanistan with notable success. In November, the Taliban gained a decisive victory in the southern Afghan province of Zabul against IMU—ISKP's main Uzbek affiliate. The Taliban also defeated the mainly Uzbek Jundullah, an IMU splinter group operating in northeastern Afghanistan in proximity to Tajikistan.² These victories were a two-pronged blessing for the Taliban. First, the Taliban stopped a major local rival from gaining a foothold in the country and reversed the brief territorial gains made by Jundullah in northeastern Afghanistan. Second, these events were propaganda boons for the Taliban in Central Asian, Chinese, and Russian circles where the Uzbek-dominated groups are regarded as a serious threat to the security and stability of Central Asian states and, by extension, Russia as well as China's Xingjian Province.

Iran

Iran's longstanding policy for Afghanistan has been to prevent the full stabilization of a unitary Afghanistan while Kabul is supported by the United States and simultaneously to help prevent the total collapse of order in its eastern neighbor. In Tehran's Jekyll and Hyde gameplay in Afghanistan, Iran has regarded the Taliban as a staunch enemy yet a useful ally to oppose USFOR-A and, prior to that, the broader NATO-led coalition. With the advent of ISKP, the stakes for Tehran are higher and so is the utility of the Taliban as a tool to counter the radical Sunni movement. This brings Iran closer in partnership with Russia as both countries follow steadfast policies of denying a victory to Western plans for the Afghan state's rehabilitation.

In its initial campaign to gain control of Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Taliban, at times, targeted Shi'ites due to their religious affiliation not just because of their refusal to submit to Taliban rule. As the movement gained more authority, its anti-sectarian tendencies diminished but never ceased. Currently, the Taliban, in spite of its alliances with militant jihadist outfits with anti-sectarian doctrines, has by-and-large stayed away from sectarianism and has called on the Shi'ites to join the Taliban movement as an Islamic—rather than just Sunni—national liberation front. There are no credible statistics on the number of Shi'ites among Taliban ranks; however, these numbers ought to be small given the low level of support for the Taliban in the predominantly Shi'ite regions of Afghanistan. The first manifestation of the Taliban's strategy of inclusivity was in July 2016. ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack on a predominately Shi'ite demonstration, resulting in the death of 80 individuals and demonstrating their reach into Kabul. In response to Taliban condemnation, ISKP issued a fatwa claiming that the Shi'ites were undisputedly infidels, adding that any Sunni religious scholar who rejects this understanding and the permissibility of their killing is himself an apostate. In October two attackers targeted a popular shrine during Ashura—the commemoration of death of Husayn, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who is considered by the Shi'ites as their third imam—killing 19 people.³ The Taliban's response shows how the group has evolved since its emergence in the 1990s. The Taliban condemned ISKP's attacks, referring to the Shi'ites as their "brothers."⁴

While the Taliban's change of policy on sectarianism is undertaken primarily for their domestic reasons, the inclusiveness of the movement's message has made the Taliban more publicly palatable in Iran. In preparation for the latest conference of the Iran-based World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought that was held in

Tehran in December 2016, according to its Secretary-General Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, invitations were extended to some “figures in the Taliban movement who believe in the unity of Muslims.”⁵

The Taliban’s strengthening bonds with Shi’ite Iran challenge ISKP and the broader Sunni Arab-dominated IS community. Within ISKP’s foreign and domestic members, discontent with current Taliban leadership’s Shi’ite-tolerant or Shi’ite-friendly policies is growing. There are dangers that the hallmark sectarianism used by IS in Iraq and Syria could be mobilized to further push Afghanistan’s war towards a more sectarian conflict. Such a move could potentially reignite the regional proxy war in Afghanistan with realigned alliances and newcomers. It could also increase the threat to global security emanating from the regions of Afghanistan that remain outside the control of the central government. Moreover, if the Afghan government’s control over its territory deteriorates further, Iran could come to see the Taliban as their least threatening option, which would strengthen the complicating Iranian voice—regardless of whether Tehran directly participates—into the on-again, off-again peace negotiations with the Taliban. The United States is publicly acknowledging Tehran’s backing of the Taliban as well as Iran’s multidimensional relationship with the Afghan government.

Russia

Another player in this complex security environment not to be ignored is Russia. In their operations against IMU and their overall opposition to IS-inspired or backed groups, the Taliban has found a sympathetic ear in Moscow, potentially inducing the re-internationalizing of the Afghan conflict. Taliban successes prompted Zamir Kabulov, Russia’s special envoy to Afghanistan, to state that “Taliban interests objectively coincide with ours.”⁶ The potential is reminiscent of the 1990s proxy wars supported by India, Iran, and Russia on one side and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, to a certain point, the United States on the other—albeit two decades ago, the Taliban was the main challenge for the India, Iran and Russia triangle. To the discomfort of Kabul and New Delhi, the Russians with Iranian and Chinese support have opened a dialogue with the Taliban. Russia, along with Iran, China, and Pakistan, but without the participation of Afghanistan and India, held a meeting in Moscow in November 2016 to discuss countermeasures to the threats posed by ISKP. After complaints by Afghanistan and India, another meeting in Moscow was organized two months later that included representatives from Afghanistan and India. While specific information of what the Moscow talks entailed is unavailable, the maneuverings are eerily reminiscent of the political jockeying prior to and after the formation of the Taliban.⁷ The latest Russian-led talks on Afghanistan were held on the same day the United States dropped the MOAB on the ISKP target in Achin District of Nangarhar. The United States reportedly refused a Russian invitation to participate in the talks. According to commander of USFOR-A, General John W. Nicholson, “Russia has overtly lent legitimacy to the Taliban,” and he added that Moscow, basing their position “not on facts,” believes the Taliban is only engaged against ISKP and not the Afghan government.⁸

More recently, after the Taliban attacked the headquarters of the Afghan National Army’s (ANA) 209th Corps based in Mazar-e Sharif on 22 April killing more than 140 ANA soldiers, the United States increased its criticism of Russia’s support of the Taliban, including hints that Moscow was supplying small arms to the Taliban, which Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis sees as a “violation of international law” and something that the United States would “have to confront.”⁹

Russia’s involvement in Afghanistan as a political supporter of dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban, if coordinated with other stakeholders, including the United States, would add to the legitimacy and chances of a successful political outcome to the insurgency in Afghanistan. But Moscow’s military support of the Taliban and promotion of parallel political processes will only complicate the already fragile state of affairs inside Afghanistan and has the potential of opening greater opportunities for groups such as ISKP or terrorist or insurgent outfits to grow in strength at the expense of the Afghan government. While Russia has genuine concerns with the growth of pan-Islamist jihadist organizations such as ISKP, its romancing of the Taliban may be seen as part of Russia’s ongoing and expanding competition with the United States. As in the case in Syria, the Kremlin’s long-term goal is to push the United States out of Afghanistan, and in the short-term, it seeks to make the US deployment and stabilization policies in the country more difficult. This aligns conveniently with the Taliban’s goal, as the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan is the Taliban’s paramount demand for accepting a peaceful resolution of their insurgency.

Conclusions

The multiplicity of groupings and policies engaged in Afghanistan once again serves to potentially undermine peace and stability in Afghanistan. There is a risk to the continued legitimacy of the Afghan government. There is an incentive for the Taliban ranks to split to accommodate or take advantage of one or another of the various groups vying for the upper hand. Such a scenario would open more opportunities for ISKP or its future renditions, not only inside Afghanistan and Pakistan but also in Central Asia and India—Kashmir in particular.

Whereas Iran has been a constant player in Afghanistan since the 1978 Soviet-back communist coup d'état, since the demise of the Taliban in 2001, for the most part Tehran's policies and actions have been unilateral and uncoordinated with regional actors. The current support provided to the Taliban is, as in the case in Syria, coordinated with Russia despite overall strategic differences between the two countries' long-term priorities. The new alignments in Afghanistan have Russia and Iran together with China and Pakistan, less vocally involved, pushing for a reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban and at the same time, with the exception of China, lending support, including military support, to the Taliban. The wildcard in this game is Pakistan, the longtime backer and host of the Taliban. As echoed in early 2017 by General Nicholson, "the insurgents cannot be defeated while they enjoy external sanctuary and support ... in Pakistan."¹⁰ As the Taliban gain closer ties with Russia and Iran, ostensibly due to their opposition to ISKP, their submissiveness to Islamabad's directives should be expected to decrease. The question to consider is whether a Taliban with more freedom of political decision-making will emerge to seriously engage in peace negotiations with the Afghan government or whether ISKP will morph into a savvy spoiler role and create new alternatives to the Taliban, prolonging the instability in Afghanistan and the region.

In 2008, while serving as his country's ambassador to Afghanistan, Kabulov is reported to have said that the United States and its allies have repeated all of the Soviet mistakes, adding, "Now they are making mistakes of their own, ones for which we do not own the copyright."¹¹ It would be interesting to ask Ambassador Kabulov whether Russia owns the copyright on its reemergence in the Afghan scene.

Notes:

¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Blood and Faith in Afghanistan: A June 2016 Update," Brookings Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2016-Felbab-Brown-Paper-BLOOD-AND-FAITH-VFB.pdf>), 17.

² Obaid Ali, "The 2016 Insurgency in the North: Raising the Daesh flag (although not for long)," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 July 2016 (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-2016-insurgency-in-the-north-raising-the-daesh-flag-although-not-for-long/>).

³ Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, 13; Borhan Osman, "With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 19 October 2016 (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/with-an-active-cell-in-kabul-iskp-tries-to-bring-sectarianism-to-the-afghan-war/>).

⁴ Osman, "Active Cell."

⁵ "Iran hosts Taliban leaders at a conference in Tehran," *Al-Arabiya* English, 14 December 2016 (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/12/14/Iran-hosts-Taliban-leaders-at-a-conference-in-Tehran.html>); "Ayatollah Araki warns: KSA turning to Muslim dispersion base," 5 January 2016 (<http://www.iuc.taghrib.com/en/news/nf-en-07>).

⁶ Javid Ahmad, "Russia and the Taliban Make Amends," *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2016 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-01-31/russia-and-taliban-make-amends>).

⁷ Suhasini Haidar, "India to join Moscow meet on Afghanistan," *The Hindu*, 15 February 2017 (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/India-to-join-Moscow-meet-on-Afghanistan/article17303436.ece>).

⁸ "DoD press briefing by Gen. Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room," 2 December 2016 (<https://www.defense.gov/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=1&ModuleId=1144&Article=1019029>).

⁹ Gordon Lubold and Habib Khan Totakhil, "U.S. Says Russia Arming Taliban," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 2017.

¹⁰ Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, U.S. Forces—Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan, Washington, 9 February 2017, 11.

¹¹ Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 201.