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# AFGHANISTAN WATCH

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<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/3-killed-in-attack-on-china-hotel-in-afghanistans-kabul-3600349>

At least three people were killed when gunmen attacked a hotel popular with Chinese business people in the Afghan capital Monday, with witnesses reporting multiple blasts and several bursts of gunfire. Smoke could be seen pouring from the multi-storey Kabul Langan Hotel as Taliban security forces rushed to the site and sealed off the neighbourhood.

The Taliban claim to have improved security since storming back to power in August last year but there have been scores of bomb blasts and attacks, many claimed by the local chapter of the Islamic State group. Italian non-governmental organisation Emergency NGO, which operates a hospital just one kilometre from the blast site, said it had received 21 casualties, including three people dead on arrival. It did not say if those dead were civilians or involved in the attack. A Kabul police spokesman said three attackers were killed and one suspect arrested, blaming the assault on "mischievous elements".

"All the guests of the hotel have been rescued and no foreigner was killed. Only two foreign guests were injured when they threw themselves from an upper storey," chief Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid added on Twitter.

## Comments

### *Mapping ISKP*

- Tagging its roots to 2015, the Islamic State affiliate: IS in the Khorasan Province, or ISKP, has reappeared on recruitment posters, and a credit with over dozens of attacks against civilian targets. Their attacks were earlier smaller in scale, by targeting a hotel popular within the Chinese nationals, the group has demonstrated its ruthlessness and marked its presence not only as a regional actor but a solid contender to Taliban, some even referring it to as a religious alternate. Although the group initiated by recruiting disgruntled members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan popularly known as the TTP, its followers now include former members of the Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and erstwhile factions from ETIM.

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- The forced repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan has resulted in a large number of Afghans returning to their country of origin possessing vital skills, which also strengthens the ISKP strategically. They have access to a larger pool of prospective recruits as a result of the extensive migration, in the form of influx by disgruntled Afghans into Nangarhar province.
- It would be incorrect to compare the Taliban and ISKP based on how much of each group's territory they control. ISKP is in many ways deadlier than the Taliban, despite still having weaker organisational foundations, due to its willingness to wage indiscriminate attacks against those who do not share its core ideologies, its willingness to target other Muslims, and its emphasis on global jihad, which allows it to potentially conduct attacks across borders. It should not be assumed that ISKP will fail to develop as a major force in South Asia despite being a relatively young organisation relying on foreign recruits, and embracing an ideological and rhetorical rigidity. Neighbouring nations should not make this mistake.
- Regional economies must remain vigilant on ISKP's ability to build long-lasting terrorist safe havens with the potency to carry attacks globally. Policy must keep a special emphasis on ISKP's ability to broadcast a violent extremist message into cyberspace which has the potency to radicalise local groups and sympathisers, inciting them to commit acts of violence especially in neighbouring states.

## INTRODUCTION

The attack came a day after the Chinese ambassador requested Taliban to pay special attention to the security of the Chinese embassy and diplomats in Kabul, a hotel visited by Chinese citizens in Afghanistan's capital was attacked. According to local sources, the attack resulted in three people killed and 18 were injured. After three hours of gunfighting, the Taliban announced that the attack had been contained with three attackers being killed, cloaking the loss of civilian casualties for the first few hours. The attack came third in the number after embassies of Pakistan and Russia in Kabul were also attacked. To this author, the trajectory of attack suggests that the terrorist groups based in Central Asia are losing trust in Taliban, especially after their liberal stands opening schools to women, unislamic and blasphemous in their eyes. This attack further highlights that besides Taliban, militant factions & islamist jihadist organizations have attained their strategic depth in Afghanistan.

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This attack also implies that, regional islamists factions may have lost trust in Taliban which deviated from its traditional Islamic responsibilities and in the name of governance or political motivations, withdrew from its original cause. This explains local islamists factions' interest to jointly pursue their goals with the cooperation of ISKP or under the name of ISKP in Afghanistan.

## *Attack on Pakistan's Ambassador in Kabul*

Once a main ally, Pakistan is known for providing extensive financial, logistical, intelligence and military support to the Taliban over the past twenty years, and the majority of Taliban leaders and fighters had sought refuge in Karachi, Quetta, Mansehra during the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan under the protection of the ISI and Pakistani Army's Quetta Corps. Before the hotel attack in Kabul, Obaid ul-Rahman Nizamani, Pakistan's ambassador in Kabul, was attacked by members of the ISKP while walking in the embassy compound. He escaped unharmed with the only casualty being his body guard who received minor wounds.

## *Attack on the Russian Embassy in Kabul*

Despite hopes for positive engagements, Moscow's renewed engagements did not deliver the desired results it expected with the Taliban. The ISKP assailants breached the embassy gates killing two Russian diplomats were. In addition to this, more than 20 local Afghans—the majority of them were running local businesses and students—also sustained injuries. Since then, in the last two months, over 100 individuals have died and more than 100 people have been killed and more than 150 people have been injured in terror attacks.

## *What are the effects of ISKP's rise to the region?*

The ISKP's rise and its renewed activities has resulted in more chaos in a situation that is already unstable and vulnerable. If it attains to power, it will not only target members of the Shiite community – but also the minorities like the Hazara community – and hunt for Afghans who worked with the Western forces, while focussing on its principal: raise the Islamic State flag in the historic Khorasan region and renew attacks against the West. With copy-cat terrorist groups or lone wolves seeking inspiration from ISKP, it continues to consolidate its position through successes not just in Afghanistan but through the globe. This may result in smaller disgruntled factions joining ISKP or at least for their interest raising its flag.

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Vulnerable without an Umma, ideological adversary Al Qaeda may feel threatened and exercise political pressure on the Taliban for aggressive actions. This may result in an increased violence, forcing ISKP to maximise its potential by recruiting from all corners of the region, not only threatening regional peace and security but to neighbouring countries and especially to India.

## *Re-emergence?*

Islamic State in Khorasan is still a relatively small group although they achieved good numbers after the Taliban's decision to release ISKP prisoners from Pul-e-Charkhi prison in Kabul. Today, according to a former NDS official, the Taliban is said to be operating with 85,000 – 120,000-strong followers, which means ISKP needs strong recruitment modules to achieve a sustainable numerical strengthen in order to defeat the Taliban. Although even in its current strength, ISKP can cause some serious damage. This means isolating Taliban's focus to its vulnerable regions and prohibiting them to govern in areas around the border.

ISKP functions on the mix pool of local experts in the context of hardened fighters and religious leaders with members having unique ability to maximise propaganda through internet and social media very effectively. Devoid of any established base of operations (no physical territory it can hold to launch attacks) it has stronger presence on digital space with active members interacting with affiliate and sympathetic groups. Its propaganda is based on exploiting the young minds from the disgruntled marginalised communities, who have experienced discrimination and are hungry for revenge with little to offer. With young Afghans discontented from Taliban's constant appeals to the West for aid, there is still lot more the ISKP can offer, making it an alternate to Taliban. But with Taliban still exercising strong influence and control, is the soil ready enough for ISKP to sow? After decades of war and constant conflict, local Afghans are desperately looking for an end in violence, which may go against the ISKP favour. That said, there are many disgruntled Taliban fighters changing their turbans for ISKP, the sentiment is only shared by a few. This further means, ISKP does not have the required support to grow without external support from sympathetic militias. This attack does highlight ISKP's emergence in the region, but lack of territorial control points towards its inability to recruit in significant numbers.

The ISKP's growth shares an intrinsic relationship with Taliban's policy decisions and security prerogatives in the region. Primarily its ability to sustain a steady flow of fighters, retain battle hardened members, and prohibiting them to induce violence



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local Afghans and participate in corrupt practices. This further means that an inclusive government will bring an end to ISKP.

## *ISKP's stance on China*

In its monthly propaganda magazine, Voice of Khorasan, the ISKP published an article titled China's Daydream of Imperialism which targeted Beijing's globally increasing economic influence. In a long discussion with a Kabul based Islamic scholar (who interpreted the text from Pashto to Dari), for ISKP the rivalry between US & China in the context of Taiwan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine will pave a new way towards the establishment of a Sunni Caliphate. At the outset, the ISKP argues that though US tried to influence global powers through military force and political coercion, China is using economic power to influence global nations. It makes a comparison of China's BRI with that of British imperialism, which flourished under the East India Company for over a century.

On its future, the ISKP negates the China's rise as a global power and declares it to be a short lived as it negates military power/strategic strength and knack for new innovation/technology unlike the West. The ISKP makes a comparison of Chinese economic influence with that of the 13th Century Mongols' Silk Road driven empire, which was short lived (less than 100 years). Their resentment to Chinese investment is witnessed in their glorification of attacks carried by IS-affiliated jihadists against Chinese workers in Mozambique, resulting in a sudden halt of all major Chinese projects. This further proves that the threats to Chinese community in Afghanistan is not empty. This is also reflected from the group's abduction of a Chinese couple from the Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province, which is a hub of multi-billion-dollar mega infrastructure project, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

## *China: Threatened by ISKP and helpless Taliban*

Since the Taliban's return to power, ISKP continues to be the flag bearer of anti-China jihadist islamists faction in the region. Its anti-China propaganda is based on the systematic subjugation and oppression Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which from the article, seems to target its global economic influence. This seems to be influenced by two key factors:

- The ISKP, which is an extension of the Islamic State, needs to create multiple causes to retain relevance in the light of global changing political stances and to exploit possible scenarios that may give them a clear entry.

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- To fill ranks, the disgruntled Uyghur militants from the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Afghanistan offers best alternatives, especially when Taliban and Al-Qaeda continues to maintain silence on China's human rights violations in Xinjiang province. This provides them a unique opportunity to drive a wedge between Taliban and the TIP, with an intent to alienate them from other disgruntled groups.

After coming to power, in its first few movements, the Taliban relocated TIP militants from northern Badakhshan province (near the China-Afghanistan border) to central Afghanistan in an effort to address China's in-security in the region. These moves angered numerous TIP militants who openly criticised Taliban's ignorance towards Chinese oppression in local /provincial shuras, resulting in many battle-hardened fighters returning to Badakhshan province. To exploit this strained relationship, an ISKP delegation met the TIP operatives and managed to win over sympathetic affiliates along with certain TIP members, resulting in over 80 Uyghur militants joining the ISKP ranks. This prognosis proved correct when Muhammad al-Uyghuri, targeted a Shia Mosque last October in the Kunduz province, who was identified as a former TIP militant operating within the ranks of the ISKP. This was a perfect demonstration by the ISKP, highlighting the Uyghur suicide bomber as an example of successful recruitment strategy to fill Uyghur militants within their ranks. While taking credit for the attack, ISKP also made it evident that their target was exclusively Shia community and came as a punishing act for Taliban regime for forcefully handing over Uyghurs militants on Beijing's request. This implies, Taliban tightening its noose around the TIP militants under Beijing's demand will provide greater opportunity to ISKP in employing Uyghurs militants, which will then result in a deepening grievances of TIP militants resulting in a motivated, determined, battle hardened recruitment pool for the ISKP to join their ranks.

## *Beijing's Predicament*

From the aforementioned statement, it is clear that China is unlikely retain a level of comfortability in its diplomatic engagement with Taliban, which it desperately needs to secure its western frontiers, and neutralise any threats emanating from anti-China islamists groups looking for safe harbour within its borders or in the neighbourhood, threatening its economic interests and potentially challenging its national security. That said, it still remains unclear as to what Beijing's next step should be – or what it intends to do – either on its own or with regional neighbours and economic partners to prevent what looks like an emerging IS Khorasan steps away from becoming South Asian Syria.

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## *Conclusion*

In the light of an intensified rivalry between US & China, Beijing will appear more in global militant/islamists terror propaganda. This drives religious islamists factions such as the ISKP to incite violence and conduct recruitment pool through propaganda, without alienating local sympathisers and regional populous. In the previous decades islamists propaganda were primarily focused on providing alternate narratives to an unjust US invasion of Iraq & Afghanistan. In the age of great power competition and possible confrontation, an Imperialist China will remain primary focus and point of attention for ISKP and liked minded affiliates.

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