

FINAL REPORT | MAY 2024

Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

President Joe Biden has identified counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an enduring and critical US national security interest. In 2022, the United States Institute of Peace convened the Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan to examine the counterterrorism challenge from the region in light of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and growing strategic competition. The study group is a bipartisan group of experts who bring a range of policy, scholarly, operational, and analytical experience related to terrorism, counterterrorism, and South Asia policy issues. In meetings from 2022 to 2023, the study group assessed the terrorism threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan and its bearing on US interests and also reflected on lessons from efforts to mitigate terrorism risks over the past 20 years. Members developed political, military, intelligence, and legal options for a well-defined and sustainable counterterrorism strategy for the region to effectively mitigate existing threats, especially those directed against the US homeland and its allies and partners.

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Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Study group members express their support for the general findings and conclusions reached by the group, but do not necessarily endorse every statement or judgment in the report. One member, Joshua White, offered a dissenting position on a specific section, which is included in the endnotes of the report. Members participate in the study group in their personal capacities; the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers.

MAY 2024

Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report

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Co-chairs' Note

The months of labor required to create this important work are a credit to the United States Institute of Peace and the many experts who contributed their time and drew from their encyclopedic knowledge of South Asia, terrorism, and the history of America's efforts over two decades in Afghanistan. We were honored and privileged to be the co-chairs for the study group that produced this report. Having seen the years of struggle and sacrifice in South Asia, we earnestly hope that currently serving policymakers and practitioners, as well as future students of the world's efforts to contest terrorism in the region, will benefit from this report and build upon it in years to come.

This study was undertaken for several interrelated reasons. First, with some distance from the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, we felt it was vital to examine the history, trajectory, and outcomes of America's and the international community's efforts against terrorism following the terrible attacks of 9/11 by al-Qaeda.

Second, given the complexity of the topic, we recognized the need to convene a broad group of experts from fields including counterterrorism strategy and operations, diplomacy, intelligence, law, and political and policy analysis. Our intent was to bring multiple perspectives to bear on our conclusions and options.

Third, although many of the disappointments and failures regarding US efforts in South Asia are still fresh in the minds of both policymakers and practitioners, we felt it was vital to compile and publish such a report despite some of the emotions and perspectives of the reading audience. The passage of time may ease those feelings, but it may also erase or soften difficult memories, including recollections of facts, and views that are directly relevant to the accuracy and completeness of any effort to take an honest look at what transpired in and around Afghanistan for two decades. Given the sacrifices and

sorrows that Americans, Afghans, and other affected populations across South Asia experienced, we believed that such a softening would ultimately be a disservice to all of them.

Although the entire report should be useful for policymakers looking to revise America's current approach to counterterrorism in the region and for anyone who seeks to study and learn from it, we believe the following elements are likely to prove the most important:

- Due to the growing pressures of strategic competition with China and Russia, counterterrorism has nearly disappeared from the policy agenda. Following 9/11, the national security policy pendulum swung to an overwhelming focus on counterterrorism, crowding out other concerns, but since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it appears to have swung in an equal and opposite direction.
- A balanced and sustainable approach to counterterrorism in South Asia is needed. Treating counterterrorism as an unwelcome distraction can harm strategic competition. Preventive investment in counterterrorism will enable sustained focus on strategic competition.
- Terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan are persistent, and some are gaining strength in ways that threaten US and allied interests as well as regional security. The Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K) has plotted to strike US interests since the withdrawal from Afghanistan. As this report was being prepared for public release, the terrible March 22, 2024 attack in Moscow that was claimed by ISIS and is believed to be the work of ISIS-K provided a vivid reminder of the resilience, the strategic reach, and the lethal capacity of terrorism that can originate from the region. In addition, the Taliban's provision of sanctuary to terrorist groups, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, signifies that the Taliban are an important driver of the threat landscape.
- The study group does not suggest a return to the expansive counterterrorism posture of the past. Instead, it suggests a cost-effective new strategy that requires realistic aims, the correction of optimistic assumptions about the Taliban's interest in mitigating terrorist threats and its capacity to do so, a moderately upgraded military and intelligence posture, and modest reinforcement of the US relationship with Pakistan to advance US interests.
- A more concerted and public approach to pressuring the Taliban to mitigate terrorist threats is warranted.
- With plausibly available resources, the United States could aim to deter and disrupt terrorist threats from Afghanistan and Pakistan rather than seek the defeat or large-scale degradation of terrorist groups. But achieving these less expansive aims will still require consistent policy attention, alongside other priorities.

Finally, both US policymakers and counterterrorism practitioners must grasp that while the use of significant military force against terrorists and their activities will always be necessary to some degree, that

power is inherently limited in its effects, whether tactical, operational, or strategic. Experience should have by now convinced all US policymakers that the use of force is appropriate and effective when applied for one or both of two related goals: The first is saving lives, where the use of lawful force prevents terrorist activity from harming or killing innocent people. The second is bringing terrorists to justice, where the use of force is necessary to hold terrorists accountable and punishable for unlawful and violent acts they have already perpetrated on the innocent. However, the use of military force cannot be, and never will be, sufficient for bringing a strategic end to terrorism, whether in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan or anywhere else in the world.

To completely dismantle a terrorist movement and thereby permanently eliminate the threat it poses to its targets, the United States must also invest in the capabilities, skills, approaches, and resources that cannot be found in either military or law enforcement entities—but can be found in civil societies, peaceful religious movements, local neighborhood leaders, national policymakers, school-teachers, and engaged families who have come to believe that their governments exist to provide them with opportunities, not to treat them as chattel, servants, or obstacles to the exercise of power. US policymakers could continually examine the types of investments, skills, and abilities they are willing to provide to those nonmilitary and non-law-enforcement entities that are the only strategic actors capable of achieving anything resembling complete resolution of a serious terrorist presence anywhere in the world.

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Executive Summary

When announcing the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021, President Joe Biden identified counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an enduring and critical US national security interest. This priority became even more pronounced after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the discovery of al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul less than a year later, and the increasing threat of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K) from Afghanistan. However, owing to the escalating pressures of strategic competition with China and Russia, counterterrorism has significantly dropped in importance in the policy agenda. Following 9/11, the national security policy pendulum swung to an overwhelming focus on counterterrorism, but since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it appears to have swung in the opposite direction.

In 2022, the United States Institute of Peace convened the Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan to examine the counterterrorism challenge from the region in light of the US withdrawal and growing strategic competition. The study group is a bipartisan group of experts, bringing a range of policy, scholarly, operational, and analytical experience related to terrorism, counterterrorism, and South Asia policy issues.

In meetings from 2022 to 2023, the study group assessed the terrorism threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan and its bearing on US interests, as well as reflected on lessons from efforts to mitigate terrorism risks over the past 20 years. Members then examined what the components of a well-defined and sustainable counterterrorism strategy for the region could be to effectively mitigate existing threats, especially those directed against the US homeland and its allies and partners.

The study group came to the following two major conclusions on the stakes and direction of the terrorist threat and identified options for a new strategy in light of the group's findings.

1. Rather than considering counterterrorism as an unwelcome distraction from strategic competition, policymakers could recalibrate their focus on counterterrorism to mitigate threats and shield the strategic competition agenda.

Some policymakers perceive counterterrorism efforts, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as a distraction from the intensifying strategic competition with China and Russia. However, terrorist groups in Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent in Pakistan, still harbor intentions and possess growing capabilities to target the United States and its interests. If terrorists succeeded in making those intentions a reality, it would not only result in the tragic loss of lives but also have significant adverse effects on America's strategic competition agenda.

For one, a mass-casualty attack would exert significant pressure on policymakers to respond assertively, which would divert resources, leadership attention, and political capital from the current focus on strategic competition. The American public still expects the US government to take necessary measures to prevent terrorist attacks against Americans both at home and abroad.

Terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies and partners, particularly attacks originating from Afghanistan and Pakistan, would also undermine America's alliances. Amid the 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal, Washington assured allies and partners that the United States would retain the capability to mitigate terrorist threats from Afghanistan following the military pullout. Failure to prevent attacks against the US homeland, regional interests, and allies and major partners would tarnish America's credibility and reputation.

Additionally, terrorist attacks from Afghanistan and Pakistan against a critical partner such as India could spark dangerous regional crises. A major attack in an Indian city by a terrorist group, for example, could trigger an India-Pakistan military standoff with the risk of escalating to a nuclear exchange. Such a crisis would also significantly distract India from focusing on the challenge presented by China.

Given these stakes, the United States could consider recalibrating the focus on counterterrorism to safeguard the strategic competition agenda. Preventive investment in counterterrorism will enable a sustained focus on strategic competition.

2. Terrorist threats to US interests from Afghanistan and Pakistan are steadily rising—and Afghanistan presents growing opportunities for terrorist groups compared to the period before the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan are persistent, and some are gaining strength in ways that threaten US and allied interests as well as regional security. The post-US withdrawal environment in Afghanistan offers terrorist groups a range of new opportunities for regrouping, plotting, and collaborating with one another. These groups are positioned to tap into the vast pool of trained

militant personnel in Afghanistan and to some extent in Pakistan. The groups also benefit from the reduced US monitoring and targeting capabilities in the two countries.

ISIS-K presents a rising threat with reach beyond the immediate region, greater than during the pre-withdrawal period. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist group has also returned as a regional security threat. While the worst-case scenario concerning al-Qaeda's reconstitution in Afghanistan has not materialized, that group and its South Asia affiliate continue to maintain ties with and receive support from the Taliban and to call for attacks against US citizens, allies, and partners (including India) and US interests.

The Taliban continue to support terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Despite commitments to the United States and regional countries to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist haven, the Taliban's decision to host al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul and their continued provision of sanctuary and material support to terrorist groups such as the TTP suggest that the Taliban are unlikely to distance themselves in meaningful ways from their allied terrorists. The Taliban target ISIS-K and have substantially reduced the group's violence in the country, yet in the past two years, ISIS-K has plotted attacks against regional actors and US interests, which is particularly concerning. It is not clear if the Taliban's crackdown can alter ISIS-K's external attack ambitions and sufficiently weaken its capabilities. The Taliban's educational policies, such as the expansion of madrassas in the country and a revised curriculum promoting extremist ideologies, also present a counterterrorism challenge.

Terrorist groups are also attempting to destabilize Pakistan. The TTP—a group that has killed Americans and plotted attacks against the US homeland—is imposing significant losses in Pakistan from its sanctuary in Afghanistan; and, going forward, it may become a bigger threat for Pakistan and the region. At the same time, Pakistan historically has maintained relationships with anti-India terrorist groups, although it has restrained them in recent years. As India-Pakistan tensions remain high, violence by such groups against India could trigger Indian military action against Pakistan and, in turn, risk a regional war between two nuclear-armed states.

Revitalizing the US Counterterrorism Strategy: Main Policy Options

The United States can implement a new counterterrorism strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to address the rising terrorism threats from the region. This would not require the expansive counterterrorism posture of the past or a dilution of policymaker focus on strategic competition. The study group believes that it is possible to embed a counterterrorism approach with limited aims in the current strategic competition framework.

The group proposes the aims of *detering* and, when necessary, *disrupting* terrorist threats in Afghanistan and Pakistan that target the United States and its interests overseas as well as its allies and major partners. The study group also proposes that Washington improve its preparedness to respond judiciously to a major terrorist attack; such preparation would help minimize the diversion of resources, leadership attention, and political capital from the focus on strategic competition.

These priorities would create a sustainable end state for managing the terrorist threats from the region, in contrast to broad objectives of the past, such as the defeat and large-scale degradation of terrorist groups.

The study group's main options for policymakers to consider include the following:

Continue to publicly pressure the Taliban to mitigate terrorist threats while maintaining communication channels for counterterrorism exchanges rather than adopting a cooperative approach with open-ended incentives or a pressure campaign that isolates the Taliban entirely.

Key steps to consider:

- Developing a public reporting mechanism to document and disseminate the Taliban's compliance with the counterterrorism terms outlined in the 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban.
- Holding a meeting of regional countries to codify the Taliban's counterterrorism commitments to each country.
- Adding to the federal terrorism watch list, before sanctioning (under US Executive Order 13324), Taliban leaders and personnel assisting terrorists in the country.
- Building up dedicated diplomatic and intelligence counterterrorism channels with the Taliban to convey concerns and explore the possibility of exchanges on shared threats.

Improve military and intelligence postures to deter and disrupt terrorism threats against the United States and its interests, including those that the Taliban are unwilling or unable to contain in Afghanistan.

Key steps to consider:

- Making policies on military action against terrorist threats in Afghanistan—policies tightened by the Biden administration through a 2022 presidential policy memorandum that governs direct action counterterrorism operations outside areas of active hostilities—less restrictive, but not to the level of a conventional war zone or the level that was available to military commanders before the withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- Increasing military and intelligence resources dedicated to counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but still keeping them well below the pre-withdrawal level.
 - Increasing the overseas operations and security cooperation resources of US Central Command (CENTCOM) by providing additional intelligence, surveillance, and

reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft, as well as long-endurance alternate airborne ISR capabilities; and increasing counterterrorism-specific analytical capabilities consisting of analysts, linguists, and screeners and offensive cyber capabilities for over-the-horizon operations.

- Maintaining intelligence collection on Afghanistan and Pakistan at an appropriate priority level as part of the National Intelligence Priorities Framework and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's reporting about critical intentions and warnings on threats and operations.
- Expanding the US Department of State's Rewards for Justice program for Afghanistan and Pakistan by increasing the reward money for those currently listed as well as adding ISIS-K and al-Qaeda operatives currently not covered to generate leads.

Through appropriate legal authorities, leverage an enhanced military and intelligence posture to target terrorist groups while accounting for the risk of retaliatory actions and minimizing civilian harm.

Key steps to consider:

- Targeting with lethal action in Afghanistan those groups that are planning or involved in plots against the US homeland and interests.
- Employing shows of force through drones against Taliban leaders and personnel assisting terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda.
- Carrying out cyber intrusions to disrupt al-Qaeda's and ISIS-K's propaganda and communications.
- After targeting a Taliban-allied terrorist leader, considering declassifying intelligence—insofar as it is practical—on the presence and identity of targeted terrorists to make the case that US actions were justified; this, in turn, could exert pressure on the Taliban to distance from terrorist groups and reduce the risk of retaliation.
- To minimize the risk of civilian harm, controlling the targeting tempo of military operations, keeping it in line with available intelligence resources; to detect civilians in the targeting process and check confirmation bias, the US Department of Defense could create well-resourced "Civilian Harm Red Teams," or groups of analysts that question assumptions and interpretations of information with an eye toward protecting against civilian harm.
- Making what qualifies as legal authorities for counterterrorism operations more transparent by clarifying the executive branch's interpretation of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force in Response to the 9/11 Attacks and Article II of the Constitution as they apply to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Improve the counterterrorism relationship with Pakistan while taking diplomatic steps to prevent a terrorism-triggered crisis in South Asia.

Key steps to consider:

- Offering counterterrorism-specific security assistance and intelligence to Pakistan to (1) reduce the TTP's threat as well as to obtain Pakistani assistance on top US counterterrorism concerns, (2) secure long-term airspace access for operations in Afghanistan, and (3) leverage reliable access in Pakistan in the event of a terrorist attack contingency. Such assistance should be calibrated to reduce the likelihood that Pakistan would find the assistance useful in attacking India.
- Communicating to Pakistani leaders that if terrorists based in or backed by Pakistan carry out attacks in India, there will be serious negative repercussions for bilateral ties.
- Offering assistance to promote peaceful coexistence among at-risk youth; to improve social cohesion by expanding the acceptance of religious, social, and political diversity; and to deradicalize underage children.

Prepare contingency plans for handling terrorist attacks in the homeland and overseas against major allies and partners such as India.

Key steps to consider:

- Improving intelligence collection and analysis capabilities through the National Intelligence Priorities Framework for reliably attributing responsibility for terrorist attacks from Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Providing stepped-up travel warnings to Americans exposed to threats while traveling and living in the region.
- Improving US leverage in Central Asia and Pakistan through assistance programs with the aim of securing emergency basing and access options for military operations.
- Enhancing the Indian government's confidence in the US government's process for attributing responsibility for terrorist attacks through intelligence, investigatory exchanges, and crisis war games; and preparing US policymakers for terrorism-triggered crisis management in South Asia through regular tabletop exercises.

By implementing these measures, policymakers could better safeguard US interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while preserving the overall focus on strategic competition.

Terrorism from Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Continuing Challenge for US National Security

At the time he announced the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021, President Joe Biden identified counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an enduring US national security interest.¹ With the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the risk of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan became greater and more consequential. Yet maintaining counterterrorism as a priority has run into domestic and geopolitical headwinds. American national security policy is contending with a range of new and demanding challenges. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and the ensuing war has escalated considerably and continues to shape the geopolitical landscape in Europe and elsewhere. Bilateral tensions with China continue to rise, and the United States has made clear its strategic focus on competition with China, identifying it as the “pacing” geostrategic challenge confronting the United States.² Global public health and cybersecurity challenges are also increasingly pressing. Significantly, the challenge of climate change has crystallized for many policymakers, as has the rise of artificial intelligence. Finally, the breakout of the Israel-Hamas war in late 2023 has brought Middle Eastern security issues to the center of the policy agenda, at least for the near term.

Amid such a reordering of US priorities, terrorism threats from Afghanistan and Pakistan have dropped down Washington's policy agenda and receive little public attention. This is not a mere oversight. For many engaged in making and analyzing national security policy, counterterrorism in general and addressing Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular is a vestige of the post-9/11 era that the United States needed to move away from a long time ago.³ Among these observers, one prominent view is that the United States overcommitted to the war against terrorism during the past two decades, eroding America's geopolitical standing and distracting it from pursuing key national security interests.⁴ Others believe that America can afford to accept risks when it comes to terrorism. From their perspective, a perceived overemphasis on counterterrorism needs to be corrected, in favor of priorities of the day, such as China and Russia.⁵

Strategic reordering, however, is not the only factor behind the dwindling attention to terrorism and counterterrorism issues. Both decision-makers and many who have labored within the national security agencies show signs of something like collective trauma resulting from a 20-year-long counterterrorism effort. The trauma permeates multiple levels of the national security bureaucracy, which on the whole appears to question both the purpose and the methods of counterterrorism of years past. The collapse of the US-backed government in Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban only increased this sense of trauma, which has also informed subsequent assessments of the threat landscape and how it can affect national security interests. The tragic end of US involvement in Afghanistan has also made it a toxic issue, reinforcing inclinations to keep the region off the policy agenda and the public's radar. All of these factors create incentives for US policymakers to avoid devoting attention to terrorism and counterterrorism challenges from the region. Following 9/11, the national security policy pendulum swung to an overwhelming focus on counterterrorism in the region, but since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it appears to have swung just as far in the opposite direction.

The Post-Withdrawal Counterterrorism Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan

Since withdrawing from Afghanistan, the United States has sought to create a new counterterrorism approach for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the context of the reordering of its national security agenda. Some elements of this approach are deliberate, driven by limited US capabilities and diminished leverage in the region due to the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and redirection of intelligence and diplomatic activity.⁶ Other elements are ad hoc, resulting from the push and pull over strategic priorities and reduced policy bandwidth and bureaucratic resources.

The current approach's overarching goal is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist groups. This is essentially the same broad policy goal of the past two decades; however, today's policy includes much less effort to achieve it. The main political tool of the current approach is to withhold normalization of relations with the Taliban regime while also maintaining sanctions against Taliban leaders until they meet US expectations on counterterrorism concerns, human rights, and formation of an inclusive government. At the same time, the approach depends on the Taliban abiding by the counterterrorism terms of the 2020 US-Taliban agreement.⁷ That agreement,

signed in Doha, Qatar, set out a timetable for the US military withdrawal and included a Taliban pledge not to allow recruitment of, financing of, planning by, or harboring of terrorists, in particular Taliban allies such as al-Qaeda and adversaries such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K).⁸

Beyond withholding normalization and maintaining long-standing sanctions, the approach does not involve a political line of effort to compel Taliban action against ISIS-K and other terrorist groups aside from what the Taliban might do simply to safeguard their own interests inside Afghanistan. It also does not address the questions of whether and how to respond to terrorism spillovers from Afghanistan into Pakistan and Central Asia, nor does it consider the strategic risks of terrorist activity triggering new armed clashes between India and Pakistan.

Military options, referred to as potential over-the-horizon strikes, are an important part of this approach, but the thresholds of terrorism risk and other criteria for using such options are publicly unspecified.⁹ Publicly known US military activity, declassified memos on counterterrorism operations, and statements of US officials indicate that current policy is geared toward primarily monitoring threats. According to the commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), General Michael E. Kurilla, current capabilities for conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations in Afghanistan are limited, and the United States therefore lacks “the granularity to see the full picture.”¹⁰ The administration has also tightened the rules for direct lethal action against terrorists around the world.¹¹ As a result, there has been only one US drone strike in Afghanistan (against al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022) since the US withdrawal from the country.¹² Military and intelligence options also partly depend on Pakistani counterterrorism cooperation, including being given access to Pakistan’s airspace for aircraft flying into landlocked Afghanistan from the Middle East.¹³ The current extent of US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation is not publicly known, but it is apparent that the overall bilateral security and political relationship is far more limited than it was at times during the US war in Afghanistan.

Analytical Judgments and Assumptions Underlying the Current Counterterrorism Approach

The ongoing counterterrorism policy approach outlined above is based on several judgments and assumptions about how counterterrorism is a distraction from other US national security interests, the nature of the terrorist threats, the Taliban’s motives and interests, and Pakistan’s interests. Some of these judgments and assessments are reflected in strategy documents released by the White House and the Department of Defense; others are echoed in the statements of senior State Department officials and a few in declassified intelligence assessments.¹⁴ Six key judgments and assumptions that inform current policy are outlined below.

The first assumption is that counterterrorism needs to be deprioritized in US national security. Policymakers assess that terrorism issues take attention away from the strategic competition agenda and are relatively unimportant to the American public. They also see resources devoted to counterterrorism generally and to Afghanistan and Pakistan specifically to be an imprudent use of scarce military and intelligence assets, diplomatic capital, and policymaker bandwidth—judging that these resources are better spent on other priorities and theaters.



Taliban members mark the second anniversary of the withdrawal of US-led troops from Afghanistan in Kandahar on August 15, 2023. Since the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan has emerged as a permissive sanctuary and base of operations for various terrorist groups. As a result, the threat is growing in an unpredictable way. (Photo by Abdul Khaliq/AP)

The second assumption is that the threat to US interests from the Afghanistan and Pakistan region is low. Policymakers and the intelligence community see terrorist groups in the region as posing a lower threat to US assets and interests than during the 20 years of US military involvement. Further, they have judged that since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the country has not become a safe haven for terrorists. Some assessments state that terrorist groups lack the capacity, perhaps also the intent, to challenge the United States from Afghanistan. They also suggest that terrorist threats against the United States now emerge predominantly from other parts of the world and that the residual threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not directed against the United States.¹⁵ Such assessments generally discount the possibility that terrorist activity could destabilize a nuclear-armed South Asia if left unchecked.

Third, many assume that the Taliban see mitigating terrorism as being in their interest. Policymakers treat the counterterrorism assurances in the 2020 US-Taliban agreement as meaningful even if imperfect and unenforceable.¹⁶ More important, they assess that the Taliban see upholding those assurances as being in the Taliban's own interest, and they count on the Taliban's hostility toward ISIS-K to motivate the Taliban to degrade the group's capabilities to a level sufficient to satisfy US interests.

It is also assumed that the current over-the-horizon posture is sufficiently resourced and permissive to keep threats at bay. The current policy approach relies on tightly controlled and lightly resourced

over-the-horizon capabilities as being sufficient to neutralize persistent threats as well as an imminent, direct terrorist threat to the United States. It also assumes sufficient warning time on imminent terrorist threats to target and neutralize them by means of over-the-horizon capabilities.

The current approach is also based on the assumption that necessary cooperation from Pakistan is sustainable without additional effort. Policymakers judge that the minimal necessary counterterrorism cooperation, such as access to Pakistani airspace, can be sustained without being anchored in a robust bilateral security relationship. They also assume that current US policy toward Pakistan is sufficient to dissuade the country from undermining US interests, including its use of anti-India militants.

Finally, there is an assumption that political leaders and the public are more willing to accept terrorism risks from overseas. To the extent that policymakers see the threat as persisting, they show a higher risk tolerance than they did during most of the post-9/11 period. This is partly due to confidence in hardened US homeland defense against terrorism. Some policymakers anticipate continued terrorism challenges but assume that political leaders and the public are ready to accept more risk and can demonstrate resilience in the face of potential attacks in the cities of the United States or its allies.

Why Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan Matters in the Era of Strategic Competition

The focus on terrorism and counterterrorism in US national security policy could indeed be rightsized as compared with the focus of the prior 20 years. Certainly, shifting resources and attention toward pressing and previously neglected national security challenges is necessary and laudable. Yet the study group concludes that the current counterterrorism approach could update assumptions and review select judgments on the threat trajectory of major terrorist groups, the calculus of the Taliban and Pakistan, and the potential consequences of terrorism from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

For one, terrorist groups in Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent in Pakistan, still seek to target the United States and undermine US interests. The threat has not shifted away from the region, even as threats from within or from other regions, in particular Africa, have grown. Troublingly, since the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan has emerged as a permissive sanctuary and base of operations for various terrorist groups. As a result, the threat is growing in an unpredictable way, as demonstrated by the horrific terrorist attack in Moscow on March 22, 2024, that was claimed by ISIS and is believed to be the work of ISIS-K. Given the existing and significant gaps in US intelligence capability resulting from America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, policymakers lack the in-depth insight to evaluate these challenges accurately or clearly and therefore may not have the necessary understanding and warning time to act preemptively against imminent threats.

Moreover, the Taliban's policies and actions, discussed in detail in the next section, suggest that they may not uphold their counterterrorism assurances in good faith. The Taliban maintain that they are abiding by the terms of the US-Taliban agreement, but the discovery of al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri in Kabul under the protection of senior Taliban leadership—a violation of the agreement—clearly indicates the unreliability of these pledges. Terrorist threats directed against nuclear-armed Pakistan

are also growing rapidly. India-Pakistan relations remain strained, and the prospect of Pakistan ramping up support to anti-India terrorist groups persists.

Amid such a dynamic terrorism landscape in the region, the lack of focus on counterterrorism will allow threats against US interests and citizens regionally and globally to grow. And terrorist events would not only result in the tragic loss of lives but also hurt the strategic competition agenda. For example, a major terrorist attack against US homeland or other global interests would generate a barrage of political criticism and public dissatisfaction, creating significant political pressure to respond forcefully. And such a response would require significant policymaker attention, which would compel policymakers to divert resources amid a crisis without planning and would distract from pressing strategic competition priorities.

Furthermore, a significant attack would undermine America's reputation, especially with European allies and India.¹⁷ The Indian government, for example, continues to prioritize counterterrorism. Moreover, since the April 2021 announcement that the United States would withdraw military forces from Afghanistan, the administration has assured allies in Europe that it will remain capable of preventing terrorism from Afghanistan.¹⁸ Thus, a major attack, particularly against an ally or a major partner, would tarnish America's standing.

The United States retains a core interest in preventing nuclear war between India and Pakistan.¹⁹ Although there are several potential triggers of a crisis in the region, a large-scale terrorist attack on Indian security forces or civilians traced to Afghanistan or Pakistan—which India might well attribute to Pakistan—is the most plausible one. Such a crisis would be a decidedly negative outcome with respect to the goal of preventing military escalation with the risk of nuclear war; even in a scenario without a large nuclear escalation risk, the crisis would distract India from an Indo-Pacific focus, which is a priority for the strategic competition agenda.

An expansion in terrorist activity would also distract from strategic competition by destabilizing nuclear-armed Pakistan. A long-standing American priority in Pakistan has been to ensure the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and to prevent them from falling into the hands of terrorists.²⁰ A destabilized Pakistan would present greater opportunities for terrorist groups and a range of risks for the United States, its allies and partners, and the South Asian region—and mitigating these risks will demand greater policy attention from senior policymakers.

Finally, reducing terrorist threats against the homeland and Americans overseas remains important to the American people. Americans expect their government to protect them from the threat of terrorism both at home and abroad.²¹ Despite a decline in the level of concern among Americans about international terrorism compared with a decade ago, polling continues to show that Americans view terrorism as a greater threat than several other significant issues high on the policy agenda, such as climate change and China's territorial ambitions. This perception of terrorism as a significant threat to American security is rooted in the traumatic experience of the 9/11 attacks, which left a persistent mark on the country's psyche. Another, similar attack would defy the public's expectations, and responding would become the greatest political imperative regardless of policymakers' preference for prioritizing strategic competition.

Afghanistan's and Pakistan's Dangerous Threat Landscape for US Interests

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, several terrorist groups (see box, page 22) remain active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The post-US-withdrawal environment in Afghanistan is favorable for terrorist groups, offering them a range of new opportunities for regrouping, plotting, and collaborating with one another. These groups are positioned to tap into the vast pool of trained militant personnel in Afghanistan and to some extent in Pakistan, and they also benefit from the reduced US monitoring and targeting capabilities in the region.

Current government assessments classify these terrorist groups into distinct categories of threats: for example, transnational, US homeland–specific, regional, and local.²² Such categories are important, but they often do not capture the fluid intent and the cross-cutting relationships of the groups; many groups have connections and opportunities across different categories that are difficult to track.

With this threat landscape in mind, the study group identified four terrorism trends and challenges that directly affect US interests: Taliban policies enabling terrorism in the region, anti-US threats from Afghanistan, terrorists targeting and destabilizing Pakistan, and anti-India militancy from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Terrorist groups active in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the **Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K)** has been present in eastern Afghanistan and adjoining northwestern Pakistan, around Kabul, and parts of northern and southern Afghanistan.^a It has approximately 2,000 to 2,500 fighters in Afghanistan, including Central Asian recruits and supporters from and in Europe.^b The group maintains operational and financial ties to the ISIS core.^c According to US Central Command (CENTCOM), ISIS-K intends to strike both the US homeland and US interests in the region—such as US diplomatic facilities, Department of Defense personnel and equipment, and US citizens—but its limited capabilities currently prevent it from plotting against the US homeland. ISIS-K’s external plotting can involve both physical training of operatives in Afghanistan before sending them overseas to undertake attacks and connecting its operatives with online supporters to provide direction and instruction.^d

A recent US government assessment observed that **al-Qaeda** is at its “historical nadir” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its revival is unlikely.^e A 2022 National Intelligence Estimate, declassified by the Biden administration, noted that al-Qaeda is observing Taliban strictures on not using Afghan soil as a launchpad for international terrorism.^f At the same time, since the US withdrawal, al-Qaeda’s senior leadership has retained some degree of support from the Taliban, as evidenced most clearly when the group’s last leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was located in Kabul under Taliban protection.

A United Nations monitoring team offered a contrasting position, based on reporting of member states: It assessed that al-Qaeda is rebuilding, and its senior leadership is seeking haven in Afghanistan. This reporting has been refuted by senior US officials, who note that much of it defies judgments of US intelligence as well as those of partners and allies.^g Nevertheless, in 2023, according

to the DIA, “The Taliban almost certainly provided covert sanctuary to legacy al-Qaeda members and their families in Afghanistan.”^h In October, al-Qaeda and its South Asia affiliate (discussed below) called for attacks against the United States and threatened attacks against US citizens, embassies, and bases, including those in South Asia.

The **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)** is the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan, with reports of around 5,000 fighters in 2022 due to a sanctuary provided by the Taliban, and it has a growing presence inside Pakistan.ⁱ The group has expanded its numbers of trained fighters, suicide bombers, weapons, and equipment; public reporting suggests that Taliban fighters are now joining the TTP.^j In 2022, the TTP and Pakistan negotiated with the mediation of the Taliban. In these talks, which ultimately broke down, the TTP demanded major concessions in Pakistan’s former tribal areas, including implementation of sharia law and the withdrawal of Pakistani security forces.^k Other affiliates of the group such as the Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Lashkar-e-Islam, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar also carry out attacks in Pakistan and have sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda’s South Asia arm, known as **al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)**, has a presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group has the intent to conduct attacks against US interests in the region, but it lacks the capability to conduct regional attacks.^l In March 2024, CENTCOM reported that AQIS “operates training camps, safehouses, and religious schools in Afghanistan.”^m Moreover, AQIS continues to attempt to operate through its network of affiliate and aligned organizations in broader South Asia, including India and Bangladesh.

In Pakistan, the government took steps to restrain anti-India militants of **Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)**, **Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM)**, and **Hizbul Mujahideen**, but the groups retain some

of their infrastructure. In Afghanistan, LeT and JeM are reported to retain a presence; however, recent information on the groups' presence in Afghanistan is limited.ⁿ

Central Asian militant groups with political aims against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain in Afghanistan with

the permission of the Taliban. These groups include the **Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)**, **Islamic Jihad Group (IJG)**, and **Jamaat Ansarullah**.^o Another regional threat with a presence in northern and eastern Afghanistan is the anti-China **Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)**.^p

Notes

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- i. "Operation Enduring Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress."
- j. Christina Goldbaum, "Taliban Fighters, Unsettled by Peace, Seek New Battles Abroad," *New York Times*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/14/world/asia/taliban-fighters-pakistan-jihad.html>.
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- m. *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2025 and the Future Years Defense Program, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 118th Cong. (2024) (statement of General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, commander, US Central Command, "Two Visions for the Future of the Central Region"), 12, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/24.pdf>.
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Women mourn in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on October 22, 2021, following deadly bombings at two mosques by the Islamic State of Khorasan. (Photo by Jim Huylebroek/New York Times)

Taliban Policies Enabling Terrorism in the Region

The Taliban's policies in Afghanistan are the main generator of opportunities for terrorist groups in the region. Despite their commitment to not allowing terrorists to use Afghanistan's territory, the Taliban are providing sanctuary to groups designated as terrorists by the United Nations and United States, including al-Qaeda and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—although there are reports that the Taliban may have initiated measures to restrict and restrain al-Qaeda. For their part, these groups seek to work with the Taliban in Afghanistan and have pledged allegiance to the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada.

The Taliban's reasons for providing sanctuary are intentionally opaque. Given the groups' allegiance to the Taliban leader, it is plausible the Taliban view them as a core constituency whose support they must retain in order to also retain support among their broader group of followers. In the past, Taliban interlocutors have framed foreign fighters as political dissidents who deserve their support.²³

Because of sympathetic views among their followers, the Taliban may worry about potential backlash if they act against these groups, including defections from their own ranks to their competitor ISIS-K. One dangerous possibility is that the Taliban see the groups as a reserve military capability that they could use to bargain with, deter, or even act against regional and major powers. Such logic could explain their continued association with and protection of al-Qaeda in relation to the United States, their support for the TTP in relation to Pakistan, and their relationship with the Turkistan Islamic Party with respect to China.

The Taliban's educational, social, inclusion, and security policies also present a counterterrorism challenge. Through an expanding network of madrassas and a significantly revised educational curriculum in parts of the country, the Taliban are promoting ideas of jihad as the path of political change; this practice might encourage Taliban followers to seek jihadist causes outside of Afghanistan.²⁴ Separately, the Taliban's exclusivist political system limits space for "normal politics," possibly contributing to a political climate that could push Afghans toward violent extremism. In addition, the Taliban's security approach remains heavy-handed, often relying on collective-punishment-style tactics against select social and religious groups, such as the Salafi population that ISIS-K has drawn from.²⁵ This approach could be radicalizing parts of the population.

The Taliban's example continues to be an inspiration for terrorist groups not just in Afghanistan but also beyond. Their return to power after a successful 20-year insurgency against the United States has motivated Taliban allies to engage in long-term campaigns against their respective adversaries. This example also fuels inter-jihadist competition. Even a major adversary such as ISIS-K seeks to compete with and surpass the Taliban and establish itself as a major jihadist movement in Afghanistan.

Anti-US Threats from Afghanistan

According to the National Counterterrorism Center, the US government's internally reported aggregated threats of violence against the United States attributable to al-Qaeda and ISIS show an enduring intent—and the reported level of threats has marginally increased since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.²⁶

The most significant threat to the United States from Afghanistan is ISIS-K. In March 2024, CENTCOM commander General Kurilla assessed that ISIS-K retained a "safe haven" in Afghanistan and it has managed to "regenerate and harden [terrorist] networks, creating multiple redundant nodes that direct, enable, and inspire attacks."²⁷ The group remains a key affiliate of ISIS's Iraq- and Syria-based core and enjoys transnational support from ISIS cells and affiliates in other regions, including Africa. The National Counterterrorism Center's senior analysts judge that there is an "increased threat from ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan—which has become more intent on supporting external plots" and that the group's "increased external focus is probably the most concerning [counterterrorism] development."²⁸ Several ISIS-K plots against US interests have been detected

It is clear that rivalry with the Taliban has not altered ISIS-K's international terrorism ambitions—the group maintains a strong intent to strike both the US homeland and US regional interests.

since the withdrawal from Afghanistan. In 2022, ISIS cells tried attacking the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar—targeting, among others, Americans and Europeans.²⁹ In 2023, arrests by Austrian, Dutch, and German authorities disrupted ISIS-K plots and funding networks.³⁰

Given ISIS-K's intentions to also topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Taliban see ISIS-K as an implacable enemy and actively target it. In 2023, the Taliban killed several top operatives of the group. Still, ISIS-K managed to do some damage to the Taliban in retaliation, including killing senior Taliban leaders, and were able to carry out a large-scale attack in neighboring Iran. It is clear that rivalry with the Taliban has not altered ISIS-K's international terrorism ambitions—the group maintains a strong intent to strike both the US homeland and US regional interests.³¹ Despite the Taliban's targeted pressure, the group has sought to damage Western interests inside

Afghanistan and overseas and has carried out attacks against diplomats and citizens of China, Pakistan, and Russia in Afghanistan, as well as in Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.³² On March 22, 2024, ISIS struck outside Moscow, leaving 140 people dead and 80 others critically wounded; the US government believes the attack was conducted by ISIS-K.³³

Apart from ISIS-K, al-Qaeda—a Taliban ally—is the main terrorist group with the intent to target the United States and its interests. The US intelligence community asserts that the group is at its “historical nadir” in Afghanistan and Pakistan and has “lost target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment.”³⁴ Yet the group's most recent messaging includes threats of attacks against the US homeland and reiterates its commitment to a long-term fight against the United States.³⁵ In October 2023, al-Qaeda, along with its South Asian affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), threatened attacks against US embassies, military bases, and citizens. Separately, it also threatened to bomb Danish and Swedish embassies and called on its supporters to carry out attacks in both countries.³⁶

Intelligence assessments note the anti-US and anti-Western aims of al-Qaeda but assert that al-Qaeda is not regrouping in Afghanistan.³⁷ The assessments suggest that the Taliban will restrain al-Qaeda's threat from Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.³⁸ However, the Taliban's decision to host al-Zawahiri in Kabul in 2022 complicates such assumptions.³⁹ More likely, al-Qaeda's leadership will retain some type of haven in Afghanistan, which the group could leverage to direct its affiliate network even if its leadership does not plot against the United States from Afghanistan in the near term. The important takeaway from al-Zawahiri's sanctuary in Kabul is to not rely on the Taliban's word to mitigate the uncertain threat posed by al-Qaeda.

Terrorists Targeting and Destabilizing Pakistan

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, anti-Pakistan terrorist groups have further intensified their operations in Pakistan. The TTP is the leading group targeting Pakistan, with the goal of overthrowing the government and establishing a Taliban-like state in the country. Much of the group's leadership and thousands of fighters are based in Afghanistan, where the Taliban are providing a permissive sanctuary and access to leftover weapons and equipment from the former Afghan government's security forces.⁴⁰ Leveraging the haven and enhanced capabilities, the TTP has expanded its campaign of violence against Pakistan, which is undermining an already fragile state armed with more than 100 nuclear warheads.

When the TTP first emerged in 2007, it supported the Taliban's insurgency against US coalition forces in Afghanistan and the former Afghan government. In December 2009, in a joint operation with al-Qaeda, the TTP carried out a suicide bomb attack at a forward base in eastern Afghanistan, resulting in the death of multiple officers of the US Central Intelligence Agency. In 2010, the TTP attempted an attack in New York City's Times Square, which failed.

In recent years, the TTP has steered clear of targeting the United States and directed its attention to Pakistan. This situation can change if the TTP makes major territorial gains in Pakistan, but the group could lose factions through defection to ISIS-K, which would strengthen ISIS-K's regional and transnational terrorism capabilities. The TTP is also incubating other direct threats to the United States, for example by being allied with al-Qaeda and AQIS.⁴¹ If the TTP gains territory in Pakistan, groups of foreign fighters will likely find space in territories controlled by the TTP as well.

Anti-India Militancy from Afghanistan and Pakistan

Several terrorist groups with anti-India aims, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Muhammed, and AQIS, continue to operate in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Groups including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammed have received sustained support from Pakistan as part of its long-standing rivalry with India. The Taliban maintain ties with and support AQIS, having worked with this group during their insurgency against the United States and the former Afghan government.⁴²

Sustained threats of sanctions and also private admonitions by the United States and other Western nations have pressured Pakistani leadership into restricting the Pakistan-based operations of anti-India groups. Pakistan and India have also observed a ceasefire along the border in the Kashmir region, called the Line of Control, which has reduced cross-border infiltration of terrorists.⁴³ Pakistani leadership remains worried about potential blacklisting by the multilateral body charged with countering terrorist financing, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), particularly at a time when Pakistan's economy is struggling. Yet tensions between India and Pakistan remain high. And since 2022, some sources of pressure restraining Pakistan's use of anti-India

militants, such as the FATF blacklisting threat, have abated. As a result, Pakistan's assessment of its own interests in the use of anti-India militants could change, and America's ability to predict when or why that may happen is not strong. Additionally, Taliban-allied AQIS, which has threatened India with major terrorist attacks since the US withdrawal, and ISIS-K can also direct terrorist violence against India from their bases in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

A New Counterterrorism Approach for Afghanistan and Pakistan

The United States needs to recalibrate the post-withdrawal counterterrorism strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to protect the American people and US interests overseas while advancing the strategic competition agenda. Such an approach need not involve reverting to the expansive counterterrorism posture of the past or breaking from the current focus on strategic competition. It is possible to embed a counterterrorism approach with limited aims in today's strategic competition framework.

The study group proposes the aims of deterring and, when necessary, disrupting terrorist threats in Afghanistan and Pakistan that target the United States and its interests overseas as well as its allies and major partners. The group also proposes that Washington improve its preparedness to respond judiciously to a major terrorist attack against the homeland or allies and major partners; such preparation can help minimize the diversion of resources, leadership attention, and political capital from the focus on strategic competition. These proposed aims differ from the broad objectives of counterterrorism strategies from the past 20 years, such as the defeat and large-scale degradation of terrorist adversaries.

Diplomatic Approaches to Mitigate Terrorist Threats

To deter and disrupt threats in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States could shape the Taliban's incentives to mitigate terrorism from the region by denying sanctuary and material support to their allied terrorists and by countering adversaries such as ISIS-K effectively. On the other hand, Pakistan needs to be persuaded to enable US over-the-horizon activities against Afghanistan-based threats, to act vigorously against threats to its own stability, and to restrain anti-India militants. A diplomatic approach to achieve these objectives requires a mix of pressure, positive inducements, and clear communication.

APPROACH TOWARD THE TALIBAN

The United States has three broad options to shape the Taliban's incentives on counterterrorism: (1) a cooperative approach that works with the Taliban, (2) an approach that pressures the Taliban while maintaining communication channels for counterterrorism exchanges, and (3) a total coercion approach that isolates the Taliban in a bid to pressure them to break with allied terrorist groups while also acting against terrorists they see as adversaries.

A cooperative approach with the Taliban would involve concessions and inducements, such as security and economic assistance and revocation of at least some sanctions against Taliban leaders in exchange for counterterrorism cooperation. However, the Taliban's behavior toward countries that have sought to cooperate with the group over the past two years demonstrates the limits of such an approach. Countries in the region, such as Pakistan, and major powers, such as China and Russia, have engaged with and offered normal relations to the Taliban. Yet the Taliban have not addressed the counterterrorism concerns of these countries. For example, the Taliban have breached pledges to their long-standing Pakistani allies by providing a sanctuary to the TTP; they have also not met Chinese expectations related to the Turkistan Islamic Party. When it comes to the United States, the Taliban seem interested in minimal information exchanges and providing unverifiable assurances, away from the public view, of restraining militants—but that may not be sufficient to assuredly deter al-Qaeda and disrupt ISIS-K to a level necessary for degrading external plotting capability over the long term.

An approach that publicly pressures the Taliban to mitigate terrorist threats while retaining the flexibility to work with the Taliban when opportunities arise can be more effective than a purely cooperative approach. The Taliban appear to be sensitive to Western and regional countries' collective condemnation of their inability to fulfill counterterrorism commitments, as well as references to ISIS-K's challenge to the Taliban and the threat ISIS-K poses from Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Bilateral, regional, and multilateral efforts highlighting the ways the Taliban are hosting, financing, or enabling terrorist groups with which they are allied on the one hand and failing to curb ISIS-K on the other hand could compel the Taliban to make a more serious effort to contain terrorist activity. Such pressure would require concurrent channels of communication with the Taliban to convey US concerns and clarify the steps the Taliban could take to mitigate terrorism threats and reduce this pressure. Ultimately, even if this approach were effective, terrorist threats might still remain, thus requiring military action.

This approach would also be more likely to work than would completely isolating the Taliban, such as by designating them as a state supporter of terrorism. Instead of being coerced into better behavior, a completely isolated Taliban might move closer to terrorist groups and, in the worst case, retaliate by supporting the groups' external operations capabilities. A total isolation approach might also aggravate the already dire humanitarian crisis, which the United States could be addressing as a core priority. Further pressure to isolate the Taliban might even cause the regime to collapse, a development that would have unpredictable consequences: it might open the aperture for more pro-Western forces in Afghanistan to reemerge, but, perhaps more likely, it might create even greater space for terrorist groups such as ISIS-K and Taliban-allied terrorists to gain ground.

APPROACH TOWARD PAKISTAN

The United States has two options regarding Pakistan. One option is to work with Pakistan to counter rising terrorist threats from Afghanistan and Pakistan, while also maintaining pressure to dissuade Pakistan from using anti-India terrorist groups. Alternatively, the US government could adopt a coercive approach to compel Pakistani action against threats of concern, including anti-India terrorist groups.

The first option, involving moderate cooperation with calibrated pressure, is a pragmatic choice due to the region's geography and Pakistan's past record of using anti-India groups. Given persistent US tensions with Iran and the lack of any substantial military footprint in Central Asia, Pakistani land routes and airspace remain the most viable avenues to access landlocked Afghanistan. Thus, any counterterrorism approach circumventing or completely marginalizing Pakistan would be challenging to implement logistically, if not outright impossible, and would probably be ineffective from conception.

The second option, a coercive approach, would involve disengaging with Pakistan politically and economically, as was done early in the Trump administration. Such an approach, however, would not offset the constraints imposed by geography and advance US counterterrorism interests in Afghanistan; Pakistan could also retaliate by refusing to cooperate against transnational threats and by closing its airspace.

The moderate cooperation option could incentivize Pakistan to help mitigate terrorist threats of primary concern to the United States, such as ISIS-K, even if countering them is not Pakistan's highest priority. Because Pakistan views the TTP as a top adversary, it does not need incentives to fight the TTP; still, a moderately cooperative approach would allow the United States to support Pakistan's capabilities and also address US concerns with respect to the TTP in addition to ISIS-K. Such cooperation could be combined with a modicum of pressure on Pakistan to restrain anti-India militants. Presidents Barack Obama (during his second presidential term) and Donald Trump employed policies of carefully communicated threats of multilateral and targeted sanctions that were generally effective at limiting Pakistan's support for anti-India militancy. Such an approach could work in the future as well and reduce the likelihood of Pakistan-backed terrorists striking in India in ways that would trigger a major military crisis.

Even the most favorable diplomatic options would not ensure the Taliban’s effective mitigation of terrorist threats from Afghanistan.

Therefore, the United States should have military and intelligence options to deter and disrupt such threats.

To monitor and counter Afghanistan-based threats, the US government needs access to Pakistani airspace—and for now, Pakistan appears to be providing this access.⁴⁶ However, anti-American sentiment in Pakistan’s domestic politics as well as Pakistan’s deepening relationship with China make the future of Pakistani counterterrorism assistance unpredictable; these factors could also potentially limit the kind of US military and intelligence operations Pakistan might agree to in case of a terrorist attack contingency. Still, recent regional developments create opportunities for near- to medium-term cooperation. First, Pakistan has strong concerns about the Taliban’s support for the TTP, which increases US-Pakistan alignment against Afghanistan-based threats. Second, ISIS-K—which has threatened and carried out attacks in Pakistan among other countries in the region—presents a strong regional threat encompassing Pakistan.

Washington could maintain cooperation by offering counterterrorism-specific intelligence and security assistance to support Pakistan’s offensive and defensive capabilities against terrorist threats. To align with the Indo-Pacific strategy, such assistance should be calibrated to reduce the likelihood that the Pakistani military would find the assistance useful in attacking and coercing India. Thus the US government would not offer Pakistan fighter jets or military hardware that would provide offensive military capabilities against India. The United States could also provide civilian assistance by building on long-standing in-country programming to counter extremism and promote tolerance and inclusion.

Military and Intelligence Approach to Afghanistan

As outlined earlier, even the most favorable diplomatic options would not ensure the Taliban’s effective mitigation of terrorist threats from Afghanistan. Therefore, the United States should have military and intelligence options to deter and disrupt such threats in Afghanistan. These options could be backed by adequate resources, adhere to legal frameworks and be transparent, and be executed in a way that would reduce the risk to civilians. Such an approach would be crucial for upholding the legitimacy of targeting actions on both domestic and international fronts.

However, America’s ongoing approach of reduced military and intelligence capabilities in the country is constrained for this purpose. For one thing, the current approach lacks sufficient resources. Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, resources available to CENTCOM for over-the-horizon operations have gradually decreased.⁴⁷ In addition, as part of the administration’s international counterterrorism strategy, the policy rules on counterterrorism action in the region have been tightened.⁴⁸ As a result, the administration has approved only one strike, which was against top al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri in Kabul.

The United States needs a more robust military and intelligence approach to mitigate the rising terrorism threats, in particular those that the Taliban are unwilling or unable to contain. This approach could prioritize lethal and nonlethal targeting of threats against the US homeland and select regional interests, such as threats that could seriously destabilize Pakistan, or against major partners such as India.⁴⁹ Implementing this approach would require two changes to the military and intelligence posture under the Biden administration's current policy.

First, the United States could recalibrate the latitude available to military commanders and the policy process for direct action against terrorist groups for the over-the-horizon approach. Under the 2022 presidential policy memorandum governing direct action counterterrorism operations outside areas of active hostilities, the administration has tightened the policy limits on military action against terrorist threats. These limits could be less restrictive, but not to the level available in areas of active hostilities (such as Iraq and Syria currently) or to the level that was available to US military forces before the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Second, the United States could increase military and intelligence resources but still keep them well below the pre-withdrawal level.⁵⁰ CENTCOM would require additional ISR aircraft as well as long-endurance alternate airborne ISR capabilities.⁵¹ CENTCOM would also need a boost in funds in the security cooperation account to fully support counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.⁵² To sustain critical reporting on terrorist intentions and warnings of not just persistent but growing terrorist threats, the intelligence community could also increase its collection and analytic capabilities to continue to detect plotting against the US homeland or interests, continue dialogue on counterterrorism with allies, and reinforce regional intelligence liaison relationships.

TARGETING TEMPO: METHODS, TARGET TIER, AND CRITERIA

A modified military and intelligence approach would not require the high-tempo targeting of the pre-withdrawal period in Afghanistan, but it could break from the restraint of the post-withdrawal period in order to deter and disrupt threats. Additionally, because military and intelligence resources will remain limited, the modified approach could distinguish and tier targets by type of threat, adopt clear criteria for targeting, and allow for both lethal and nonlethal methods of disruption. Distinguishing and tiering targets by the type of threat would be critical for differentiating the new approach from the military approach of the pre-withdrawal period, when the targeting criteria were broader and more permissive, partly to protect US military forces in Afghanistan.⁵³

The new approach could afford the US military flexibility in choosing from a range of direct action options and deciding on the appropriate option on the basis of the specific targeting contingency at hand. This would contrast with the current policy approach, which prioritizes the capture of terrorists over the use of lethal force. While capture is important, the United States should be able to eliminate terrorist leaders and operatives in select circumstances, such as when they pose a significant threat to the US homeland; this objective could be achieved with an armed drone or through a special operations forces raid. Among nonlethal options, one tactic involves shows of force by aerial platforms,

which would threaten escalation to the use of lethal force and thus offer deterrent value. Cyber intrusions into terrorists' communication networks in Afghanistan could be useful for disrupting the groups' internal communication; the intrusions could also be used to thwart communications that power propaganda seeking to inspire violence.⁵⁴ Finally, in the event of a kidnapping or hostage situation, the United States should be able to conduct a hostage rescue mission involving special operations forces.

There are four tiers of terrorist threats in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region against which targeting actions may be required (see page 35).⁵⁵ Under this classification, the higher tiers require greater resources and policy attention, whereas the lower tiers require comparatively fewer day-to-day resources and less attention, at least until a contingency arises necessitating a surge in effort. The first tier consists of terrorist leaders and operatives—such as those affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS-K—who have clear aims and plans for, or involvement in, attacks against the United States and its overseas interests, such as embassies and military bases. The second tier encompasses threshold threats. Although actors at this tier typically belong to groups with indirect or ambiguous roles in supporting transnational terrorists, these particular individuals or factions are assessed to have facilitated threats against the US government or its interests in specific situations. Members of the Haqqani Network, a US government-designated terrorist organization, are an example of a second tier threat, given the network's long association with al-Qaeda. The third tier involves terrorists who are involved in kidnapping US citizens or taking them hostage. The fourth tier comprises uncertain, potentially high-impact terrorist threats; actors at this level may have primarily local or regional aims that do not directly endanger the United States. However, they become uncertain threats due to their rapid territorial gains or unexpected plotting activities. For instance, in 2014, ISIS made rapid territorial gains in Iraq and Syria and leveraged the captured territory to pursue an international terrorism campaign.⁵⁶

In the first tier, targeting could be initiated on the basis of information identifying terrorist leaders who are directing plots or activating other terrorist operators and middle managers responsible for external plotting cells or members of the cells. Following a terrorist attack against US interests, the United States might target terrorist leaders and operatives in this category to hold them accountable for their involvement in the violence, as well as to disrupt the group's capabilities for future attacks. For second-tier threshold threats, nonlethal options such as displays of force and cyber intrusions could be employed against individuals or cells providing ongoing or recent operational support to transnational and regionally focused terrorists who pose threats to US interests through plotting or violence. In third-tier cases involving terrorists who have taken one or more US citizens hostage, rescue missions led by special operations forces might be initiated after all other political options have been definitively exhausted. Regarding fourth-tier, uncertain high-impact terrorist threats, lethal and nonlethal military options might be activated only when the group is on the verge of breaching politically significant milestones through territorial advances, such as in critical geographical areas of Pakistan or Central Asia.

Potential target tiers for terrorist threats and responses

TIER 1

Terrorist leaders and operatives with aims, plans, or involvement in violence against the United States in the homeland and overseas

CRITERIA: Intelligence identifying terrorist leaders directing, plotting, or instigating violence and terrorist operators and middle managers in charge of external plotting cells and propaganda and members of those cells

METHOD OF RESPONSE: Lethal action and nonlethal action (e.g., cyber intrusions)

TIER 2

Threshold threats (e.g., Taliban members assisting transnational or regional terrorists)

CRITERIA: Intelligence identifying individuals providing ongoing or recent operational help to transnational or regionally focused terrorists

METHOD OF RESPONSE: Nonlethal action (e.g., shows of force and cyber intrusions)

TIER 3

Terrorists involved in kidnapping or holding hostage US citizens

CRITERIA: Exhaustion of other options to secure release and hostage(s) at risk of being killed

METHOD OF RESPONSE: Special operations forces raid to rescue hostage(s)

TIER 4

Uncertain, high-impact terrorist threats

CRITERIA: Rapid territorial advances, (e.g., in areas of Pakistan)

METHOD OF RESPONSE: Lethal and nonlethal action (e.g., strikes, shows of force, and cyber intrusions)

**American principles
of justice and
humanity demand
that all use of force
be directed against
the country's
adversaries, sparing
innocent civilians.**

RISKS OF LETHAL ACTION

Targeting actions against terrorists in Afghanistan have the potential to backfire, and therefore, the United States should take steps to mitigate that risk. The main danger would be Taliban retaliation to America's targeting of an allied terrorist or, in case of action against ISIS-K, a Taliban response based on nationalistic fervor and concerns over a breach of territorial sovereignty. On the lower end of the retaliation spectrum, the Taliban could hit back by detaining Western aid workers; on the higher end, they could surge support for externally focused terrorist allies in Afghanistan, such as al-Qaeda.⁵⁷

Beyond retaliation risks, military action could also be counterproductive to efforts aimed at deterring and disrupting a target terrorist group. Strikes that killed senior terrorist leaders and operatives might generate martyrdom effects—an outpouring of support for the targeted terrorist, further radicalization, and perhaps a desire for revenge.⁵⁸ Another possibility is that the targeting might remove an ineffective or controversial leader, only to have that person replaced by a more effective, unifying, or extreme leader. For example, the killing of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a drone strike in 2016 helped resolve the Taliban's internal differences and set back the process of opening negotiations with the Taliban.⁵⁹ In such a scenario, targeting might inadvertently improve the efficiency of the target or make it more violent instead of meaningfully disrupting it.

The risks of such consequences would need to be weighed carefully for each target category. For example, in a scenario where terrorist leaders and operatives have clear aims to target the United States and overseas interests, the rewards from disrupting a plot and reducing the threat of terrorism would most likely outweigh the risks of targeting. But in a scenario where Taliban leaders protecting al-Qaeda leaders were targeted, the risks of retaliation might be higher than the rewards—in which case the exact roles of those Taliban leaders would be important to consider.

To deter the risk of renewed plotting and violence after US strikes and shows of force, targeting could be paired with clear public communication on the rationale of the action.⁶⁰ If the Taliban's allied terrorists were targeted, revealing some information to the public—including by declassifying intelligence on the Taliban's role in protecting those terrorists (when sources and method considerations permitted)—might help generate important, even if ultimately limited, international pressure on the Taliban; and this, in turn, might help compel shifts in the Taliban's approach toward such terrorists. In the case of continued violence, messaging to the Taliban and other terrorist targets about potential follow-on action would also be important.

MITIGATION OF CIVILIAN HARM IN LETHAL ACTIONS

In Afghanistan, the risk of civilian harm in carrying out targeting actions is considerable. Without a proximate on-the-ground military presence, information on civilian presence and identities in areas

of operations would be fuzzier. Furthermore, with CENTCOM's limited number of surveillance aircraft spending much of their flying time traversing long distances from bases in the Middle East to Afghanistan, targeting accuracy might be compromised.

An improved military and intelligence approach can and must include steps to minimize the risks to civilians. American principles of justice and humanity demand that all use of force be directed against the country's adversaries, sparing innocent civilians from physical harm caused by military action. In addition to contravening these principles, civilian harm can undermine the strategic objectives of counterterrorism efforts and contribute to anti-American sentiment.⁶¹ Protecting civilians is essential to make the case domestically and internationally that America's targeting decisions are legitimate and justified.

There are two main ways that civilians may get harmed in counterterrorism operations.⁶² First, civilians who happen to be in the focus area may be harmed during a military engagement against a lawful target. This could happen because risks to civilians are not foreseen—due to mistakes in pre-strike surveillance, a rapidly changing situation, or unanticipated secondary fires and explosions during the operation. It may happen because the military judges the level of civilian harm to be proportionate to the military gain of the targeting effort. Civilians may also be harmed because a military force misidentifies them as terrorist combatants. This could be the result of perceiving the civilians' behavior, appearance, or other signatures as similar to those of the targeted terrorist combatants.

Mistakes that lead to civilian harm can take place during different steps of the targeting process. This process involves determination of the pre-strike location and target, determination of target engagement authority and rules of engagement, positive identification of the target, analysis of the pattern of life by screeners, estimation of collateral damage, and credibility review of the civilian casualty assessment, among other factors. Each of these steps is layered and complex, requiring significant skill and judgment, and therefore liable to both mistakes and biases.

To reduce the probability of mistakes and check biases during the targeting process, controlling the targeting tempo—or the pace of operations—could be the starting point. The process also must be consistently disciplined by the availability and quality of intelligence collection and analysis. Instead of focusing more on targets, operators could be incentivized to prioritize civilians by doing additional checks during pattern-of-life analyses. To mitigate biases, commanders could create dedicated analytic capability within the targeting chain that checks cognitive biases and groupthink. The Department of Defense has recognized the value of "Civilian Harm Red Teams" in its plan to mitigate harm to civilians, which is an important step; implementation of this line of effort would remain critical.⁶³

These challenges and the approaches to counter them are not unique to Afghanistan and Pakistan, but they ought to be prioritized in a US counterterrorism strategy toward the region given the potential retaliation of the Taliban following a military operation and, in turn, the increased risk of escalation.

LEGAL AUTHORITY FOR OPERATIONS

The domestic and international legitimacy of America's targeting actions will depend on the level of legal oversight and accountability. For this reason, counterterrorism actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan could be governed by appropriate legal authorities, and these authorities could be applied in a relatively transparent manner to ensure maximum accountability.

There are two relevant sources of authority for counterterrorism operations in US domestic law. The first is the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF), which is the primary statutory authority for direct military action in counterterrorism operations. The AUMF authorizes the president to use "all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons that the president determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."⁶⁴ The AUMF's scope as interpreted by the executive branch is both expansive and at least partly secret. Over the past two decades, the executive branch has interpreted the 2001 AUMF to cover "associated forces" of al-Qaeda and the Taliban and later ISIS—including Afghanistan- and Pakistan-based groups. However, the full list of groups the executive branch deems covered by the 2001 AUMF is classified.

The second major domestic legal authority is Article II of the Constitution. However, the executive branch's specific interpretation of this authority is not publicly available, and it is unclear how it has been applied specifically to counterterrorism over the years. In 2014, Caroline Krass, head of the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel and nominee for the Central Intelligence Agency's General Counsel, told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence the following:

[T]he President has constitutional authority as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive and pursuant to his authority to conduct US foreign relations to direct the use of force to further an important national interest, provided that the use of force is not sufficiently extensive in nature, scope, and duration to constitute a "war" requiring prior specific congressional approval under the Constitution's Declaration of War Clause. For example, the President may authorize the use of force in self-defense to protect against an imminent threat to U.S. national security, such as the threat posed by terrorist attacks against the United States.⁶⁵

The Biden administration has given no indication that it requires additional legal authority to respond to the terrorism challenge from Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the question of how to use existing authority is tied to presidential guidance. As already noted, the administration has adopted a presidential policy memorandum that outlines rules and procedures for counterterrorism action outside of active battlefields.⁶⁶ The Biden memorandum limits the targets to those affecting US persons only, thereby placing restrictions on offensive action and taking away the option of signature strikes. Other parameters include targeting individuals who pose a "continuing and imminent threat to US persons" and requiring "near certainty" that the target is a member of an approved group and that no civilians will be killed or injured in the strike.⁶⁷ Capture is preferred when feasible, and presidential approval requires the listing of specific, named individuals or targets.

The legal authorities governing counterterrorism need updating to help clarify the permissible targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan and improve the accountability of operations. One option is to reform the 2001 AUMF, which, according to CENTCOM, still undergirds the authorization for necessary counterterrorism action for the region. The AUMF could better specify groups and the locations of operations, as well as introduce sunset provisions to the authority. Another option, which is not mutually exclusive, is to share publicly the executive branch's interpretation of the scope of authority under both the 2001 AUMF and Article II of the Constitution for counterterrorism direct action. This move would require specifying the groups, if not the specific individuals, covered under the authority. It would also require specifying the scope of the authority and whether it is congruent with self-defense under international law. In general, the operational accountability could be improved with more debate and discussion regarding the current presidential policy on use of force in areas outside of active hostilities.

Terrorist Attack Contingency Scenarios

In the unfortunate situation of a major terrorist attack originating from Afghanistan or Pakistan against the United States or an ally or major partner, how could the United States respond?

Amid such a contingency, policymakers would find themselves on the defensive, confronting difficult and time-sensitive trade-offs as well as considerable uncertainty about the threat picture. Anticipating such a flux amid a crisis, previous administrations—in particular, the Obama administration—put in place detailed interagency plans for the government to respond. However, under the current counterterrorism strategy, it is unclear the extent to which the administration has both war-gamed and otherwise prepared itself to respond to major terrorist attacks originating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. An unprepared administration might end up overcommitting resources, leadership attention, and political capital, which might distract from the long-term focus on strategic competition.

Specifically, the United States should be prepared to respond to two terrorism contingencies that might arise from the threats emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan: an attack against the United States either in the homeland or against US personnel or facilities overseas and an attack against a US ally or major partner, in particular India. The following simple, hypothetical scenarios for each contingency help tease out the key pressures and decision points of the crises and provide guidance to make the policy responses judicious and robust.

MANAGING A DIRECT ATTACK AGAINST THE UNITED STATES IN THE HOMELAND OR OVERSEAS

After a terrorist attack either in the homeland or against US personnel or facilities overseas, policymakers would look to prevent follow-on violence. Once the initial shock of the attack wore off, they might look to respond militarily. Policymakers could (1) be prepared to ward off the pressure to respond impulsively, (2) wait for high-confidence attack attribution before determining their response, and (3) swiftly arrange basing and intelligence access in the region for military options.

Addressing political pressures to respond. The foremost pressure to respond with military action would stem from domestic politics. Most likely there would be a higher threshold for restraint if the attack were against US personnel in the region; the American public might not demand as broad a response to an overseas incident of terrorism. It is difficult to prejudge public expectation in the case of harm to US diplomats or government personnel. In the past, some attacks on diplomatic and government personnel have generated demand for a substantial response, whereas in other cases, the expectation has been moderate. In general, the pressures would probably be more severe in the case of an attack directed from Afghanistan than an incident inspired by lone-wolf terrorists from the region. This is because an attack from Afghanistan would contradict the administration's argument, made at the time of US withdrawal, that it could prevent such attacks by using an over-the-horizon strategy.

Another driver of major pressure would be considerations related to signaling resolve and deterring further aggression by state adversaries and terrorists. Policymakers might see a swift response as necessary for asserting the principle that aggression against the United States does not go unpunished. Finally, the timing of an attack during the US election cycle would likely result in significant partisan pressures for a strong response.

Despite these pressures, however, policymakers could avoid a rapid escalation, partly to maintain the strategic direction of prioritizing near-peer adversaries. They could also keep in view the risk of an escalatory spiral. For example, a large-scale retaliation against the Taliban might increase the risk of further terrorist activity because the Taliban might respond by increasing their support to allied terror groups. In response to swift military action inside Pakistan against terrorist targets, Pakistan might retaliate by closing air lines of communication for the US military into Afghanistan. Such tit-for-tat responses would not advance counterterrorism interests amid a crisis.

Tying attack attribution to a response strategy. A key decision point in a terrorist attack contingency would be attributing responsibility for the attack. In some cases, attribution would be straightforward; terrorist groups might claim attacks, and perpetrators of violence might leave a trail of evidence leading to a specific terrorist organization. In other cases, attribution would be nebulous, especially if the terrorists made a concerted effort to conceal their identities.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, attribution of an attack would determine the US government's approach toward both the Taliban and Pakistan. For example, in the case of an attack by a group allied or affiliated with the Taliban, the counter-response would need to focus as much on the Taliban as the terrorist group behind the attack. For an attack by a group not linked to the Taliban, such as ISIS-K, the US government's response calculus would be more complex, requiring a choice between holding the Taliban accountable for failing to prevent terrorist activity—including through noncooperation on US asks on counterterrorism—and working with the Taliban to counter the threat. Thus, attributing the attack with high confidence would be critical to formulating a calibrated response strategy.

Arranging access for military options. If policymakers were able to attribute the attack and decided to respond militarily in retaliation, Washington would need to swiftly expand counterterrorism capabilities. There would be three key dimensions of building counterterrorism capabilities in a crisis scenario. First, the United States might have to redirect resources from preexisting priorities, most likely those related to strategic competition, in order to shore up unilateral intelligence and military capabilities. Second, it might have to ask regional partners to host forward platforms, such as ISR platforms or aircraft, for a military response option. Third, the US government might need to arm strike teams, possibly drawing from the Afghan opposition, to provide on-the-ground intelligence among other forms of support.

During a crisis, a warm start on these three dimensions is always better than a cold start. Such an advantage requires preexisting arrangements on emergency basing as well as forward-looking operational planning on where to pull resources from. In diverting resources and making major demands of regional partners for counterterrorism operations, policymakers would be taking focus and attention away from the strategic competition agenda and priorities. For example, the US government might need airspace, emergency airstrips or bases, or other forms of operational access in Pakistan for actions in Afghanistan. Separately, the creation of strike teams from the Afghan opposition would add to tensions with the Taliban. Policymakers must be prepared to accept the necessary trade-offs to obtain the required capabilities.

MANAGING A REGIONAL TERRORIST ATTACK CONTINGENCY: AN ATTACK IN INDIA

In the case of a major terrorist attack killing civilians or security forces in India, US policymakers should be prepared to avert runaway military escalation between India and Pakistan.⁶⁸ Much would depend on how the Indian government wanted to respond, but it is plausible that the Indian government would claim that Pakistan was behind the attack irrespective of where it originated and that India might not seek clear attribution of the terrorist group involved before deciding how to respond. The Indian government might want to undertake cross-border strikes against terrorist targets or Pakistani military or intelligence officials. In such a scenario, US policymakers could be clear-eyed on the trade-offs required to (1) avert increased tensions in the US-India partnership, (2) manage potential friction between the United States and India on attribution of the attack, and (3) instill the importance of US crisis diplomacy.

Balancing US-India partnership goals with the risk of a military escalation. The goals of the US-India partnership and the Indo-Pacific strategy would weigh on policymakers considering how to support India in such a contingency. Policymakers would want the US-India relationship to continue to deepen, which would require being sensitive to Indian expectations. Additionally, a terrorist attack would be very salient in Indian domestic politics. The Indian government might view the US policy position as a litmus test on US commitment to Indian concerns and as a guidepost on the direction to take amid strategic competition. Similarly, there might be alliance assurance considerations: Indo-Pacific nations as well as US allies in other regions might view the US policy

response to an attack in India as a signal of Washington's commitment to the security concerns of allies and partners in Asia and beyond. Policymakers might also seek to signal to Pakistan, especially if they identified Pakistani state involvement in the attack, that state-backed terrorist provocations are unacceptable.

At the same time, the US government would have to temper its own response. Fully backing any Indian action against Pakistan might lead to an uncontrollable spiral of escalation, eventually risking a nuclear exchange.⁶⁹ Policymakers would need to keep in mind that giving the Indian government carte blanche on military action in Pakistan and Afghanistan could also lead to a spiral of escalation and hostilities that would ultimately distract India from countering Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, policymakers would need to be mindful that escalation could also trigger greater Chinese involvement in India-Pakistan dynamics, which, in turn, could entangle the United States and provoke a global geopolitical crisis.

Coordinating attack attribution as part of a response strategy. For the United States, correctly attributing the attack to the responsible party would be a priority. After past attacks in India, the United States has sought to collect intelligence to identify the responsible organization and the Pakistani security establishment's involvement in and prior knowledge of specific attacks or plots, such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In contrast, India has quickly and often publicly blamed Pakistan's security establishment without having intelligence on its role in a specific attack; India has pointed to Pakistan's long-standing support for anti-India groups as sufficient evidence of its culpability. Because India's approach might lead to rapid escalation, the United States could seek to slow down the escalatory buildup and present diplomatic options to respond to the attack. At times, the United States' and India's different approaches to attribution have been a source of frustration and mistrust between them. To better manage the uncertainty and pressures related to attribution, the US government could work to improve US-India terrorist attack attribution coordination as part of bilateral counterterrorism exchanges.

Instilling US crisis diplomacy. Separately, US officials should be prepared to face the unique diplomatic challenge of responding to a terrorism contingency and be cognizant that poor diplomatic communication and public messaging could result in devastating consequences for the region and US interests. Policymakers, as well as mid-ranking officials, could be trained on complex terrorism-triggered crisis diplomacy in South Asia.

Priority Policy Options

To help mitigate terrorist threats against US interests in a way that also advances strategic competition priorities, the study group identified policy options in three key domains: diplomacy, military and intelligence, and crisis response.

Diplomatic Options to Influence the Taliban

The United States could systematically and publicly pressure the Taliban to mitigate terrorist threats while maintaining communication channels for counterterrorism exchanges. This method would probably achieve better results than the options of either pursuing a cooperative approach that offered only open-ended inducements or a campaign that completely isolated the Taliban.

The counterterrorism component of the 2020 US-Taliban agreement remains a key policy instrument for the United States to exert calibrated pressure on the Taliban. Given that the US government continues to see the agreement as the benchmark of the Taliban's security and counterterrorism commitments and that the Taliban also acknowledge the agreement, the United States could publish an annual report on the group's compliance with the stated counterterrorism terms.⁷⁰ Such a report could serve as a coordinating and signaling mechanism on how the Taliban are upholding their commitments to preventing Afghan soil from being used against others; it could also provide information for regional and multilateral actors to use in their own judgments of the Taliban. The report could even be used to track the Taliban's counterterrorism record and serve as support for one of the conditions that the Taliban would need to meet before normalization of diplomatic relations.

Additionally, Washington could work with countries in the region to identify informal and formal Taliban commitments to different countries on counterterrorism and codify them at a regional meeting. At this meeting, the United States could work with these countries to highlight the Taliban's noncompliance with their commitments, although these efforts might be more effective if the US government played a background role instead of being at the forefront.

Another tool available to policymakers for influencing the Taliban is the threat of and actual terrorist designation. The United States could create a watch list of Taliban leaders assessed to be significantly facilitating terrorist groups and then update the list every six months. If any Taliban leaders were still playing that role after a year, they could become specially designated global terrorists under Executive Order 13324.

Moreover, Washington could develop dedicated channels with the Taliban to convey counterterrorism concerns, regardless of the difficulties posed by the Taliban; share sanitized intelligence on pressing issues; and demand specific action on imminent threats. One channel could consist of periodic meetings between US officials and Taliban representatives in Doha. Any channels could be publicly recognized and branded as counterterrorism channels.

Finally, the United States could meet with the Taliban on a semiannual basis to discuss counterterrorism concerns. The meeting could be used to discuss steps that the group could take to be in compliance with the 2020 US-Taliban agreement. Such steps could include tightening entry and exit border controls and countering terrorist financing rules, clarifying rules and sharing information on radioactive material movement and nuclear terrorism protocols, providing details about how al-Qaeda and other allied terror groups in the country are being restrained and restricted, and collating and sharing intelligence on ISIS-K's external plotting.

Diplomatic Options to Influence Pakistan

The United States could negotiate with Pakistan a new counterterrorism arrangement to increase cooperation against ISIS-K, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan. In exchange, the United States could offer to assist with Pakistan's terrorism concerns. For example, the United States could offer intelligence on the TTP's activities in Afghanistan, when available and conducive to sharing; this exchange would, at the same time, advance the US interest of limiting the TTP's threat. If Pakistan demanded American targeting help against anti-Pakistan threats, Washington could seek high-value intelligence from Pakistan on top targets of US concern.

Washington could also sustain security cooperation with Pakistan to help counter the TTP's threat and to support actions against transnational terrorists. Specifically, the United States could seek, among other forms of counterterrorism cooperation, unfettered airspace access for aircraft and reliable military and intelligence access in the case of a terrorist attack contingency. In return, Washington could offer counterterrorism-specific assistance as well as counterterrorism training and capacity building that could not be used to attack or coerce India. At a time of rising threats against Pakistan, such offers would be likely to interest Pakistani interlocutors and improve their capacity to defend against threats—which would also create leverage for the United States.

To prevent a terrorism-triggered crisis in South Asia, the United States could continue pressing Pakistan to limit anti-India militancy inside Pakistan. Pakistani leaders could be reminded that any attacks in India by terrorist groups based in or backed by Pakistan would have significant negative repercussions for the US-Pakistan relationship, including potential sanctions. The United States could



A US Navy ship takes part in the Pakistan-led multinational Aman 23 exercise in the Arabian Sea near Karachi, Pakistan, on February 13, 2023. More than 50 countries participated in the effort aimed at enhancing cooperation in keeping the seas safe from pirates, terrorists, and smugglers. (Photo by Fareed Khan/AP)

encourage Pakistan to maintain the Line of Control ceasefire with India—which has reduced cross-border terrorist infiltration—and frame the ceasefire as a counterterrorism imperative.

Finally, Washington could offer assistance and programs to help Pakistan advance peaceful coexistence among at-risk youth; improve social cohesion by expanding the acceptance of religious, social, and political diversity; and deradicalize underage children detained in counterterrorism activities. The United States could work with Pakistan to develop disengagement and reconciliation programs for violent extremists.

Military and Intelligence Approaches

The United States could recalibrate its military and intelligence posture for counterterrorism actions toward Afghanistan and Pakistan in two ways. First, the policy limits on military action against terrorist threats—which the Biden administration tightened after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan—could be made less restrictive, but not to the level of a conventional war zone or the level it was before the

withdrawal from Afghanistan. Second, Washington could increase military and intelligence resources dedicated to counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but still keep them well below the pre-withdrawal level.

The Department of Defense could provide CENTCOM with additional ISR aircraft as well as long-endurance alternate airborne ISR capabilities to improve surveillance and make up for shortfall and degradation in collection due to long transit times from bases in the Middle East. The command's analytical capabilities—consisting of analysts, linguists, and screeners—and its offensive cyber capabilities could be increased. (These capabilities were reduced under the 2022 National Defense Strategy.)

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence could use the National Intelligence Priorities Framework process to ensure that collection in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region—in particular, on the terrorist groups operating in the region—is at an appropriate priority level to support reporting critical intentions and warnings as well as over-the horizon counterterrorism operations. In line with the director's National Intelligence Strategy 2023, the intelligence community could hold regular counterterrorism exchanges with Western allies on Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of a deliberate collection strategy akin to the ones in place for China and Russia.

These exchanges could include an annual counterterrorism tabletop exercise on mitigating the terrorist threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan and intelligence-related planning for terrorist attack contingencies. The United States could also expand its Rewards for Justice program for Afghanistan and Pakistan by increasing the reward money for those currently listed as well as including ISIS-K and al-Qaeda operatives currently not covered to generate leads.

Given limits on resources, Washington could prioritize targeting decisions against terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. To assist with this decision-making, targeting action could be separated into four tiers, with the higher tiers receiving the most attention and resources. The first tier could consist of terrorist leaders and operators with clear aims and involvement in plots against the United States and overseas interests. The second tier (threshold threats) could include individuals and factions with more ambiguous intent against the United States but who might play a role in enabling anti-US terrorist leaders or plots against the United States. The third tier could consist of those detaining and kidnapping US citizens. And the fourth tier could consist of uncertain, high-impact terrorist threats that present new dangers because of rapid territorial gains.

The United States could target leaders and personnel involved in plots against the United States. It could also employ cyber intrusions to disrupt terrorist propaganda and communications, and it could display aerial shows of force against terrorist operatives and Taliban leaders assisting groups threatening the United States.

Following military action, the Department of Defense could develop communication strategies to reinforce deterrence and manage escalation risks. Some risks could be alleviated by clearly and

publicly communicating the reason for the targeting as well as providing details on the target's identity. When targeting a Taliban-allied terrorist leader, policymakers could be prepared to declassify intelligence on the presence and identity of terrorist actors to counter the Taliban's narratives and de-escalate the situation.

Finally, to minimize the risk of civilian harm and avoid losing domestic and international backing for targeting actions, Washington could control the targeting tempo of military operations. The United States could also prioritize the detection of civilians during the targeting process by conducting well-resourced Civilian Harm Red Team analyses. Team members could include analysts who would question assumptions and interpretations of information, with an eye toward moving civilian harm up in the targeting chain and offering assessments to commanders before a final targeting decision is made. In addition, the White House could increase transparency around legal authorities for counterterrorism operations by clarifying the executive branch's interpretation of the 2001 AUMF and Article II of the Constitution, in particular as they apply to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Potential Crisis Responses to Attacks against the Homeland or Allies and Major Partners

For Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States could develop contingency military responses and associated force requirements, communications strategies, and intelligence capabilities in case of terrorist attacks against the homeland or allies and major partners. Instead of starting from a cold position, Washington could lay the groundwork now with countries in the region, in particular Pakistan and Central Asian countries, for sufficiently reliable military access. Such preparation would require counterterrorism dialogue with a focus on contingency scenarios, in addition to security assistance to retain the leverage and influence necessary for realizing turnkey access. Separately, the US government could socialize India, European allies, and partners in the Middle East on terrorism contingencies and responses.

To reliably attribute a terrorist attack, the National Intelligence Priorities Framework could retain adequate intelligence collection capability on Afghanistan-based terrorist groups as well as anti-India terrorist groups. Attribution also would require the ability to surge collection and analytical capability during times of crisis; therefore, the intelligence community needs budget incentives to invest and retain regional, linguistic, and counterterrorism experts for this purpose. The United States could also develop strategies for clearly explaining to the American public the importance of attributing an attack and the intelligence community's analytic standards in making such judgments.

To reduce the risk of terrorist kidnappings that diminish US leverage and constrain response options, the State Department could highlight in greater detail and frequency the threats from the region for Americans traveling and living overseas. The American public could be informed through leadership speeches, press releases, and briefings to members of Congress about additional information on the risks of terrorism.

To better respond to a crisis resulting from a terrorist attack in India, Washington could improve the coordination of, and confidence in, the US-India attack attribution process through regular exchanges on relevant investigatory and technical processes. As part of US-India bilateral exchanges, the US government could hold terrorism crisis war games and tabletop exercises. Such exercises could include sessions on attribution uncertainty and divergence in the views of the United States and India. To prevent runaway military escalation during a crisis, Washington could clearly signal the importance of attribution to its policy response and steer clear of ambiguous assurances, especially early in a crisis involving a terrorist attack that the Indian government might attribute to Pakistan.

Finally, the United States could prepare policymakers for complex terrorism-triggered crisis diplomacy in South Asia. Such preparation would require developing tabletop exercises for the policy and intelligence communities and then briefing senior officials in relevant agencies and embassies on the lessons of such exercises.

Conclusion

The threat of terrorism from Afghanistan and Pakistan is rising, with implications for US national security. The study group's diagnosis and options, while not a panacea, could help rectify gaps in the current US policy approach. The options also provide ways to mitigate terrorism challenges while staying within the parameters of the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, which focuses on strategic competition with China and Russia.

Irrespective of whether any of the study group's specific options are implemented, if the call herein for increased attention is not heeded, current trend lines suggest the possibility of a major terrorist attack against the United States or US interests and the expansion of terrorist activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan—both of which would greatly undermine US interests. Regional terrorist groups could also pose significant challenges, resulting in long-term security problems that would complicate identifying strategic competition priorities. Furthermore, these developments could yield domestic political pressures on policymakers to react forcefully, which could erode America's credibility and undermine the strategic competition agenda.

The study group recognizes that revitalizing the counterterrorism approach toward Afghanistan and Pakistan is challenging because of both the shadow of the past and competing foreign policy priorities. Yet the group believes Washington still has important equities and viable political and military tools to manage the challenge at hand. In using them effectively, the United States could mitigate the substantial costs that any major terrorist attack will incur on US interests, shore up national security, and further protect civilian lives in the region. The prudent course for US national security is to recalibrate ongoing approaches to address the growing risk of terrorism from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Notes

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About the Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan

President Joe Biden has identified counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an enduring and critical US national security interest. In 2022, the United States Institute of Peace convened the Senior Study Group on Counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan to examine the counterterrorism challenge from the region in light of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and growing strategic competition. The study group is a bipartisan group of experts who bring a range of policy, scholarly, operational, and analytical experience related to terrorism, counterterrorism, and South Asia policy issues. In meetings from 2022 to 2023, the study group assessed the terrorism threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan and its bearing on US interests and also reflected on lessons from efforts to mitigate terrorism risks over the past 20 years. Members developed political, military, intelligence, and legal options for a well-defined and sustainable counterterrorism strategy for the region to effectively mitigate existing threats, especially those directed against the US homeland and its allies and partners.



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