

Unlikely Friends: What role would the USA play in the fight between ISIS-K and the Taliban?

Cosmin Timofte

29.11.2021



Key Points

- The withdrawal from Afghanistan does not mark the end of the conflict in the country, with the Taliban and ISKP still fighting for control.
- The US has a security interest in preventing ISKP from turning Afghanistan into a hub for international terrorism, and it might be forced to support the Taliban to prevent this.
- The support the US can provide is greatly limited due to political backlash and narrow military options available.

Introduction

The United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan after 20 years of fighting, which then paved the way for the Taliban to return to power at a speed that exceeded many estimations; reaching Kabul in around 10 days since the retreat started.¹ The evacuation was made on the basis of the peace deal the US and the organisation forged under Trump.² During the evacuation, the Taliban were declared as “professional” and “cooperative” by Biden’s Administration, which is a positive signal for the relationship the two parties may have.³ **However, the emerging chaos from the evacuation and the change in government has prompted the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to strike with the intent of establishing and empowering themselves and destabilising the new Taliban rule.** This is most accurately acknowledged when one considers the timing of the Kabul airport attack, which killed over 100 people during the evacuation.⁴ With the Taliban striking back against ISIS-K, who is perhaps their biggest contender in the region at the moment,⁵ the United States is put in a position where it must consider its post-war role in Afghanistan. It is a not question of whether the US might intervene,

¹ Visual Journalism Team, “How the Taliban stormed across Afghanistan in ten days”, BBC, 16 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-58232525>

² BBC, “Afghan conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war”, BBC, 29 February 2020, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51689443>

³ The White House, “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Qatar Airways Charter Flight from Kabul”, White House, 9 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/09/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-qatar-airways-charter-flight-from-kabul/>

⁴ Visual Journalism Team, “Kabul airport attack: What do we know?”, BBC, 27 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58349010>

⁵ Latifi M. A, Haris M., “Taliban takes on ISKP, its most serious foe in Afghanistan”, Aljazeera, 27 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/27/afghanistan-taliban-promises-to-eradicate-groups-seeking-chaos>

but in what measure it will.⁶ Chairman of the US Joint Chief of Staff General Milley said “it’s possible” for the US to work with the Taliban against ISKP.⁷ **If cooperation between the US and the Taliban is possible, then one must take a look into how will it materialise. It is not simply a question of eradicating a common enemy, but also the first glimpse over the new relationship between the two will have in the future.**

The Enemy of my Enemy: The Triangle of the USA, Taliban and ISKP

To understand what role the United States will have in the fight between the Taliban and ISKP, one must first understand the background each of these actors has and how this influences their course of action.

The Taliban, an Islamic, Pashtun-ethnic organisation with branches in Afghanistan and Pakistan (who do not always cooperate⁸), was formed in the 1990s.⁹ **After the Soviet withdrawal from the country, the mujahideen factions started fighting among themselves, which offered the Taliban an opportunity to amplify a message of bringing stability and peace.**¹⁰ This painted the Taliban as a welcome alternative to chaos, and their ability to recruit and establish networks across the Afghani tribes, including the Haqqani Network (a powerful Islamist group), helped the Taliban assume power in 1998.¹¹ They would then implement their own interpretation of Sharia law, with many similarities to the one seen in the policies today.¹² After they were forced out Afghanistan, the senior Taliban leadership formed the “Quetta

⁶ Khalid A., “Biden Pledged To End The Forever Wars, But He Might Just Be Shrinking Them”, NPR News, 8 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/08/1034140589/afghanistan-biden-pledge-to-end-forever-wars>

⁷ Mark M., Austin L., “Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing on the End of the U.S. War in Afghanistan”, US Department of Defence, 1 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2762169/secretary-of-defense-austin-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-mille/source/GovDelivery/>

⁸ Khattak D., “The Complicated Relationship Between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban”, in *Combating Terrorism Center*, 5:2 (New York: West Point, 2012), Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-complicated-relationship-between-the-afghan-and-pakistani-taliban/>

⁹ BBC, “Who are the Taliban?”, BBC, 18 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11451718>

¹⁰ Nagourney E., “Who Are the Taliban, and What Do They Want?”, New York Times, 7 October 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-are-the-taliban.html>

¹¹ Olomi A., “The history of the Taliban is crucial in understanding their success now – and also what might happen next”, The Conversation, 26 August 2021, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-history-of-the-taliban-is-crucial-in-understanding-their-success-now-and-also-what-might-happen-next-166630>

¹² Ibrahim A., “Explainer: The Taliban and Islamic law in Afghanistan”, Aljazeera, 23 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/hold-the-taliban-and-sharia-law-in-afghanistan>

Shura”, a leading council responsible with much of the military operations the organisation had.¹³

After taking over in 2021, the Taliban sought to re-engage with the international community as part of bringing stability to the country, claiming that their new regime changed and that it would include, among others, a diverse cabinet.¹⁴ It did not happen,¹⁵ and they proceeded to re-instate their version of Sharia law once more and hunt down Afghans who cooperated with the West.¹⁶ This aggravates the international community and lessened prospects of future cooperation.¹⁷ They also suffer from faction infighting.¹⁸ A notable example is the physical fighting between Mullah Baradar, the new Taliban Prime minister, and Khalil ul Rahman Haqqani (member of the Haqqani network) and the Minister of refugees.¹⁹ This highlights that the organisation is not without deep inner tensions that can be seen across history and even result in the creation of the ISKP.

The ISKP, who is currently attacking the Taliban and is responsible for the vicious attack at the Kabul airport during the evacuation²⁰, is an organisation that can trace its origins in 2015.²¹ Historically, the movement was formed after disillusioned members from both Talibans decided to leave the organisation.²² This was exploited by the Islamic State, who sent

¹³ Mazol J., “The Quetta Shura Taliban: An Overlooked Problem”, *International Affairs Review*, 24 November 2009, Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200807015302/https://iar-gwu.org/2009/11/24/the-quetta-shura-taliban-an-overlooked-problem/> [Archived Online]

¹⁴ Aljazeera, “Afghanistan: Mullah Baradar promises ‘inclusive’ government”, Aljazeera, 4 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/4/afghanistan-mullah-baradar-promises-an-inclusive-government>

¹⁵ Euronews, Agence France-Presse, “EU blasts new Taliban-formed government as neither ‘inclusive nor representative’”, Euronews, 8 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/09/08/eu-blasts-new-taliban-formed-government-as-neither-inclusive-nor-representative>

¹⁶ Khurram Z., “Taliban carrying out door-to-door manhunt for Afghans on blacklist, report says”, NBC News, 20 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-carrying-out-door-door-manhunt-afghans-blacklist-report-says-n1277231>

¹⁷ Wintour P., “US-led meeting to set out framework for Taliban cooperation”, *The Guardian*, 8 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/us-led-meeting-set-out-framework-taliban-cooperation-afghanistan>

¹⁸ Kugelman M., “Opinion: How real is the threat of Taliban infighting?”, *DW News*, September 2021, Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-how-real-is-the-threat-of-taliban-infighting/a-59250547>

¹⁹ Nasar N. K., “Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say”, *BBC*, 15 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58560923>

²⁰ Burke J., “Islamic State claims responsibility for Kabul airport blasts”, *The Guardian*, 26 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/26/isis-affiliate-iskp-is-prime-suspect-for-kabul-airport-suicide-bomb>

²¹ Krauss J. et. al., “Kabul airport attack kills 60 Afghans, 13 US troops”, *Associated Press News*, 27 August 2021, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/europe-france-evacuations-kabul-9e457201e5bbe75a4eb1901fedee7a1>

²² Ressler D., “Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan”, in *Combating Terrorism Center*, Bay`A Special Issue 8:3, (New York: West Point, 2015), Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/situating-the-emergence-of-the-islamic-state-of-khorasan/>

representatives to both Pakistan and Afghanistan and successfully recruited various members towards establishing the Khorasan branch.²³ The group's religious foundations differ from both Al-Qaeda's and the Taliban's, which is important as it antagonises the alliance between the two groups. **Despite them practicing Sunni Islam, Al-Qaeda bases its foundations on a literal interpretation of the Koran (Wahhabism), while the Taliban practice a more Pashtun interpretation of the religion based on more tribal beliefs.**²⁴ ISKP disregards the Taliban's interpretation as being too moderate, while theirs is more extreme than the former's, and believe the Taliban's ideology is not based on religion but on more nationalistic tendencies; prompting the ISKP to declare war on the Taliban to both overtake their rule and also as part of a religious duty.²⁵ They also pose the greatest threat to the Taliban's objective of establishing order in Afghanistan, with their numbers being boosted by prison breakouts²⁶ and with numbers reaching in the thousands under a decentralised command since June 2021.²⁷ These numbers have grown since the Taliban freed prisoners on the eve of taking over Kabul.²⁸

The United States, during its deployment, fought both the Taliban and ISKP. In collaboration with the Afghan security forces, they have extensively used air superiority to weaken strongholds and strike highly valued targets. This both weakened the ISKP and offered the Taliban a tactical edge. **During the war, the US coordinated many drone strikes against ISKP when the Taliban were engaged in combat with them, exercising "strategic restraint"; so much so that many Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) members jokingly called this the "Taliban Air Force".**²⁹ They did not engage in communication with the Taliban, due to the reluctance of the US and in part because JSOC tapped into the Taliban's

²³ Hernandez J., "What We Know About ISIS-K, The Group Behind The Kabul Attack", NPR News, 28 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/26/1031349674/isis-k-taliban-who-what-you-need-to-know>

²⁴ Tetlow A., "ISIS-K, Islamic State, The Taliban and Al-Qaeda: How Are They Different?", forces.net, 1 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.forces.net/evergreen/islamic-state-taliban-and-al-qaeda-how-are-they-different>

²⁵ Sayed A., "Opinion: ISIS-K is ready to fight the Taliban. Here's how the group became a major threat in Afghanistan.", Washington Post, 29 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/29/abdul-sayed-isis-k-taliban-afghanistan-threat/>

²⁶ Mashal M., Ghazi Z., "29 Dead After ISIS Attack on Afghan Prison", New York Times, 3 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/world/asia/afghanistan-prison-isis-taliban.html>

²⁷ United Nations Security Council, "Letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council", UNSC, 20 May 2021, Available at: <https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>

²⁸ Wani A., "Taliban overruns Kandahar jail, frees hundreds of prisoners as part of offensive", India Today, 11 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/afghanistan-taliban-kandahar-prison-jailbreak-prisoners-released-video-1839742-2021-08-11>

²⁹ Morgan W., "Our secret Taliban air force", Washington Post, 22 October 2020, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/22/taliban-isis-drones-afghanistan/>

communications to understand their situation.³⁰ Such was this knowledge that it offsets the need for communication, and the US would decide how it would provide its “limited” support based on battlefield conditions.³¹ Interestingly, the Taliban also waited for the drone strikes to happen before they would strike ISKP.³² Through the combination of both US air strikes and Taliban offensive, ISKP was weakened enough that they would be removed from entire regions, such as Jawzjan in 2018.³³ Therefore, there is evidence of the US supporting the Taliban tacitly and indirectly, but also allowing the two of them to fight and avoid risking US lives.

“Over The Horizon”: The Interests and Options of the US

After retreating, the US still has many reasons to be concerned with the current developments in the country, especially from a military perspective. However, the aftermath may force Washington to help its old enemy. **Both the Taliban and the United States aim to prevent ISKP from taking over Afghanistan for two different reasons: the former seeking to ensure stability and international engagement in order to solidify their rule, while the US wants to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a hotbed for international terrorism.**³⁴ Potentially, the West would wish to prevent ISKP from succeeding to avoid an empowering morale boost for the wider Islamic State and prevent Afghanistan from becoming point where other branches might gravitate towards. Furthermore, Afghanistan’s fall to the ISKP might result in a possible prospect of invading again. In fact, the peace deal bans the Taliban from letting either Islamic State or Al-Qaeda from operating in the country, forcing the Taliban to fight regardless if it wishes to respect the terms.³⁵

Another reason for the US to help the Taliban is that they may have limited alternatives, if they wish to engage ISKP in combat. Firstly, they do not have many viable deployment locations

³⁰ Fritz I., “What I Learned While Eavesdropping on the Taliban”, The Atlantic, 19 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/what-i-learned-while-eavesdropping-on-the-taliban/619807/>

³¹ Morgan, “Secret Taliban Air Force, Online

³² ibid

³³ Ali O., “Qari Hekmat’s Island Overrun: Taleban defeat ‘ISKP’ in Jawzjan”, Afghanistan Analysis Network, 4 August 2018, Available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/qari-hekmats-island-overrun-taleban-defeat-iskp-in-jawzjan/>

³⁴ Murphy C. et al., “Once Enemies, U.S. and Taliban Find Common Ground Against ISIS”, Bloomberg, 27 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-27/once-enemies-u-s-and-taliban-find-common-ground-against-isis>

³⁵ Department of State, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, Department of State, 29 February 2021, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

around Afghanistan.³⁶ The country is landlocked and surrounded by states within Russia's sphere of influence (Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), but also by China, Pakistan, and Iran.

While the US tried to discuss the possibility of establishing a presence in the three northern states since July 2021,³⁷ despite the fact that they were of help to the US in 2009,³⁸ nowadays the Kremlin disagrees with US military presence and exerts heavy pressure on the three states to not cooperate with Washington.³⁹ This is further exacerbated by Uzbekistan's laws which do not allow foreign troops in its borders.⁴⁰ Tajikistan could be a solution, considering it engages with France in diplomacy as a response to the existing Taliban government, but the extent in which the US (or even France) can exploit this possibility remains unknown.⁴¹ Pakistan was a previous partner to the US against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, however, they now have a cold relationship with Washington.⁴² This may be due to the fact that the intense drone strike regime caused the deaths of thousands of civilians over the last decade.⁴³ China and Iran would also not be willing to give the US a base of operations due to growing rivalries. The US will require access to the airspace of these countries if it cannot deploy from them, not to mention longer travelling times means less operational longevity.

³⁶ Lubold G., Salama V., "Afghan Pullout Leaves U.S. Looking for Other Places to Station Its Troops", Wall Street Journal, 8 May 2021, Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-pullout-leaves-u-s-looking-for-other-places-to-station-its-troops-11620482659?mod=article_inline

³⁷ Pamuk H et. al., "U.S. looks into having 3 Central Asian states take in at-risk Afghans", Reuters, 2 July 2021, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-looks-into-having-3-central-asian-states-take-at-risk-afghans-sources-2021-07-02/>

³⁸ Hodge N., "U.S. Faces New Afghan Test", Wall Street Journal, 28 November 2011, Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204753404577064361792550488?mod=article_inline

³⁹ Gordon R. M., "Putin Rejected Role for U.S. Forces Near Afghanistan at Summit With Biden", Wall Street Journal, 19 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-rebuffed-u-s-plans-for-bases-near-afghanistan-at-summit-with-biden-11629398848>

⁴⁰ Radio Free Europe, "Uzbekistan bans foreign military bases", Refworld, 30 August 2012, Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5040b02a1e.html>

⁴¹ Puts C., "Emomali in Paris: Tajikistan, Europe, and the Afghanistan Problem", The Diplomat, 20 October 2021, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/emomali-in-paris-tajikistan-europe-and-the-afghanistan-problem/>

⁴² Shinkman D. P., "Frosty U.S.-Pakistan Relations Complicate Efforts to Keep Terror At Bay in Taliban's Afghanistan", US News, 20 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-08-20/frosty-us-pakistan-relations-complicate-efforts-to-keep-terror-at-bay-in-talibans-afghanistan>

⁴³ Lutz C., Crawford C. N., "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan and Pakistan (October 2001 – October 2019) Iraq (March 2003 – October 2019); Syria (September 2014–October 2019); Yemen (October 2002–October 2019); and Other", Watson Institute Brown University, 13 November 2019, Available at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/pakistani>

Thus, the US has to continue cooperation with the Taliban, otherwise, it will risk a significant limitation of its counter-terrorism operations against ISKP.⁴⁴ If the possibility of collaboration with the Taliban in Afghanistan will continue, it will be covert, as one can assume from the CIA Director William J. Burns' visit to Kabul.⁴⁵ **Yet, the Taliban themselves may be reluctant to collaborate with the US due to the ongoing infighting they face, where even if they concede slightly on ideological issues, they will see members from their ranks joining ISKP.**⁴⁶ **The Haqqani network is a good example of a faction that refuses US support, stating so publicly.**⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the evidence of the US and Taliban working together can be best seen in the evacuation period, where the Taliban escorted US citizens⁴⁸ and Washington gave the names of those allowed at the checkpoints (which is controversial since the Taliban can enact revenge upon those who cooperated with the West more easily).⁴⁹

If the US is to intervene in the fight between the Taliban and ISKP, then it will not only do so in a limited fashion but also in a discreet manner. While the options remain to be explored, Biden's "over the horizon" pledge has, at its core, the essence of avoiding the deployment of more forces as it was in the past. This can result in, most likely, relying on air strikes to prevent the ISKP from spreading. Thus, the "limited support" the US provided to the Taliban would continue at least like before.⁵⁰ But this in itself has numerous challenges. First of all, there are geographical constraints to enacting this strategy, which was explained above. Second of all, the effectiveness of these drones is dependent on the intelligence provided on the target: if the intelligence is faulty, it can lead to tragedy, as it happened with the "righteous" US drone strike in retaliation to the ISKP suicide attack in the Kabul airport; instead, it killed an aid worker

⁴⁴ Venable J., "U.S. Over-the-Horizon Capability for Afghanistan", Heritage Foundation, 7 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/us-over-the-horizon-capability-afghanistan>

⁴⁵ Peña-Pérez R., Barnes E. J., "The C.I.A. director visited Kabul for secret talks with the Taliban.", New York Times, 24 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/world/asia/cia-taliban-william-burns-afghanistan.html>

⁴⁶ Sayed A. et.al, "The evolving Taliban-ISK rivalry", The Lowly Institute, 7 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/evolving-taliban-isk-rivalry>

⁴⁷ Tolo News, "Taliban: Int'l Help to Fight Terrorism Not Needed", Tolo News, 3 September 2021, Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174499>

⁴⁸ Keilar B., Starr B., "Taliban members escorted Americans to gates at Kabul airport in secret arrangement with US", CNN, 1 September 2021, Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/31/politics/taliban-escorted-american-kabul-airport/index.html>

⁴⁹ Desiderio A. et.al., "U.S. officials provided Taliban with names of Americans, Afghan allies to evacuate", The Politico, 28 August 2021, Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/26/us-officials-provided-taliban-with-names-of-americans-afghan-allies-to-evacuate-506957>

⁵⁰ Keller J., "The US is apparently providing 'limited' support for the Taliban against ISIS", Task and Purpose, 10 March 2020, Available at: <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/us-aiding-taliban-against-isis-afghanistan/>

and at least 10 civilians.⁵¹ The lessons learned from Pakistan would be a much needed reminder to highlight that intensive drone strike campaigns can cause civilian casualties⁵² (much so when US-Taliban intelligence sharing may be limited) and aggravate the people enough as to be exploited and recruited into the ISKP.

An alternative option would be the continued deployment of CIA operatives. This would mean a re-deployment of US operatives in Afghanistan, undermining the symbolic value of the evacuation at home. However, this can infuriate the more radical Taliban fighters and prompt them to join ISKP. **ISKP can exploit and interact with these members through possible recruitment networks across urban centres and even within Taliban ranks proportionally to how much the US will intervene.**⁵³ This, in turn, can result in the Taliban being paralysed by internal fighting and allow the ISKP to regroup and grow to become an even bigger threat to their rule. Finally, if the CIA is deployed in Afghanistan, one must take into consideration what their support against ISKP will entail and if the US will be willing to provide military support such as combat training. Such a scenario is less likely, and instead, the alternative could be that the CIA is deployed there more for intelligence purposes than to empower one of Washington's rivals after it took Kabul.

Conclusion

The evacuation of the US left Kabul to the Taliban, who instated their own austere government after 20 years of war. The chaos that resulted from them taking over allowed ISKP to rise from the shadows and make their presence known globally as the key challenger to this outcome. While the Taliban are not America's friends, the two can be put in the awkward position of working together with different interests (the former for power and stability and the latter for security) to prevent a worse scenario from occurring: that of Afghanistan becoming a training ground for international terrorism and revitalising the Islamic State globally. The US

⁵¹ Aikins M. et.al., "Times Investigation: In U.S. Drone Strike, Evidence Suggests No ISIS Bomb", New York Times, 10 September 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/asia/us-air-strike-drone-kabul-afghanistan-isis.html>

⁵² Open Society Foundations, "After the Dead Are Counted: U.S. and Pakistani Responsibilities to Victims of Drone Strikes", Open Society Foundations, November 2014, Available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/after-dead-are-counted-us-and-pakistani-responsibilities-victims-drone-strikes>

⁵³ Reals T., Yousafzai S., "ISIS-K is trying to undermine Afghanistan's Taliban regime, from inside and out. That's America's problem, too.", CBS News, 8 October 2021, Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-k-taliban-afghanistan-regime/>

has fewer options than before to prevent this from happening, but in doing so, Washington must balance the level of intervention it can provide with regards to the political situation domestically and in Afghanistan whilst also ensuring that the Taliban do not become more empowered as well. From the possibility of drone strikes to CIA covert operations, the US evacuation marked the impossibility of returning full force, but the ongoing struggle highlights that they will not fully leave Afghanistan in foreseeable future either.

Recommendations – for the USA

1. Fighting the ISKP will result in helping the Taliban, which in turn means great political repercussions domestically by framing the operations as a continuation of the war post-evacuation. Any support given against the ISKP must be done so as discreetly as possible to avoid such backlash, with the deployment of US forces not being an option anymore.
2. One must take into consideration the reasoning behind Taliban defectors towards ISKP. If this is because of continued US intervention, then once again the role the US will play must be limited with respect to this variable as well since the greater the operations the higher the likelihood of aggravated, anti-US Taliban warrior might join ISKP.
3. The leverage the US has against the Taliban be used for both non-military purposes as well, such as pushing the Taliban to be more open and responsive to Western demands with regards to both women's rights and preventing Afghanistan from being used for terrorism.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cosmin Timofte. Graduate student of Politics and Intelligence Studies at Aberystwyth University and International Security at University of Warwick. Former exchange student in the United States. Participant in an analytical project of the media narratives around Brexit in the United Kingdom and Romania. His main research interests are Middle Eastern armed conflicts, disinformation and intelligence.

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