



The Operational Nexus Between Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP): Implications for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The evolving security environment along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has increased concerns about the relationship between Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Although the two groups differ in ideology, leadership, organizational structure, and strategic objectives, evidence suggests growing operational overlap between them. This study examines the nature and extent of this relationship and assesses its implications for Pakistan's national and regional security. Using a qualitative research approach based on recent United Nations reports, think-tank studies, academic research, and credible journalistic sources, the study analyzes patterns of cooperation, shared territory, recruitment, financing, training, and logistics. The findings indicate that TTP and ISKP do not constitute a formal alliance but have developed an operational nexus involving limited tactical coordination and overlapping support networks, despite continued ideological rivalry. The study argues that this flexible relationship increases the complexity of Pakistan's counterterrorism challenge. It concludes that Pakistan requires integrated intelligence, border management, regional cooperation, and group-specific counterterrorism strategies to address this evolving threat.

Keywords: Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Operational Nexus, Afghanistan-Pakistan Border, Pakistan Security.

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1. Introduction

Pakistan's western border region has emerged as a major security concern, particularly since the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021. The region has become an important operating environment for several militant organizations,

among which Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) are particularly significant. TTP is primarily focused on Pakistan and seeks to challenge the Pakistani state, while ISKP represents the regional branch of the Islamic State and follows a broader transnational jihadist agenda. Both groups have operated in and



around the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region and have posed serious security challenges to Pakistan.

For the most part, TTP and ISKP have been looked upon as competitors instead of collaborators. ISKP was established in 2015 and some of its members were former commanders and members of the TTP. This common past led to rivalry for fighters, resources, influence and support from the locals for the two groups. Their differences in ideologies haven't been without, either. TTP has been working more on a Pakistan centric agenda while ISKP has been pushing for a more transnational agenda and against current nation state system. These disparities have convinced many observers of the two groups being different and rivals in the field of militancy.

However, recent events indicate that the relationship is a complex one, rather than is a rivalry. There is evidence that TTP and ISKP are increasingly sharing recruitment and support networks and geographical areas. The United Nations has also recently identified a proliferation of operational and facilitation ties between TTP, ISKP, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups. There is also evidence of operational level cooperation, such as shared training and resources, commanders meeting, and overlapping attack claims.

This budding trend poses a crucial security challenge for Pakistan. Pakistan could have a more nuanced challenge than it realizes if two organisations with fundamentally opposed views, are able to operate in the same space but with different identities, and limited degree of coordination. That is not to say that TTP and ISKP are allies, but that the small overlaps in their operations are enabling a more extended militancy that enhances their ability to threaten Pakistan.

2. Statement of the Problem

In spite of the ideological and organisational distinctions between TTP and ISKP, there has been evidence to date of increasing overlap in timings of attacks, recruitment networks, training, logistics, etc. between the two groups. Current debates tend to focus on either the conflict or on the independent threat of the two, rather than on the new working relationship that is developing. This poses an important research challenge as Pakistan's counterterrorism policies could be less effective if not informed by the areas where these groups

interact, overlap and have access to shared resources and sanctuary.

3. The Nature and Extent of the Operational Relationship

The core empirical question is whether TTP and ISKP now act, in any meaningful sense, together. The evidence indicates that there is a relationship that is not an alliance, but more than a mere co-existence.

3.1 Shared Territory without Open Conflict

After years of prediction, more than anything, that TTP and ISKP would be at each other's throats over their common turf in eastern Afghanistan, neither of the two groups has done so so far (Eurasia Review, 2025). This is significant as there is a possibility of conflict between rival militant groups from the same recruitment pool and operating area, as ISKP was to do with the Afghan Taliban in previous years. There are no reports of any conflict between TTP and ISKP, indicating either acquaintanceship or perhaps a simple and pragmatic understanding between the local commanders that avoiding a costly two-front war would be more beneficial, as both groups are targeting the Pakistani state.

3.2 Claim Overlap and Consistent Messaging

In some of the latest attacks, the TTP and ISKP have attributed the same attack in different ways. For instance, after an attack on a government vehicle in Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, resulting in the death of an assistant commissioner and four other officials, TTP termed it a 'vehicle blast' while ISKP through its Amaq media outlet, termed it a 'motorcycle bombing' (Eurasia Review, 2025). These multiple claims are not peculiar to Pakistan but do pose a problem when it comes to attribution of the Pakistani security agencies and indicate, at least, the loose overlap of operational planning or reconnaissance in the same areas.

3.3 United Nations Assessments of Operational Linkages

The most recent and reliable information is from the United Nations (UN) Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, which publishes periodic reports on the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and affiliated terrorist groups. According to the Team's 37th report (July-December 2025), the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) had linked up

with the TTP and ISIL-K (UN's designation for ISKP) through "shared training camps and resources, coordinating attacks and meetings between commanders" (Dawn, 2026). The thirty-eighth report took this one step further, noting that "growing operational and facilitation linkages" had been established between TTP, Al-Qaeda, ISIL-K and the BLA, and that ISIL-K had consolidated much of its operational infrastructure in the northern region of Afghanistan while also expanding training networks in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area, including in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Dawn, 2026; The Diplomatic Insight, 2026). In a previous report on Al-Qaeda (dated 16th) in the same series, it was seen that Al-Qaeda had made itself "completely at home" with TTP, even if the Afghan Taliban were not happy with the deal (Dawn, 2025). Collectively, these reports suggest a militant environment in Afghanistan, in which operational boundaries between groups are becoming more blurred, even in the absence of formal command structures.

A separate United Nations assessment reported that TTP has been evolving into something like an umbrella organization, with growing collaboration involving Al-Qaeda and ISKP that has, in some instances, produced coordinated attacks carried out under the banner of a newer front group calling itself Tehrik-i-Jihad Pakistan (Eurasia Review, 2025). Such a move suggests a conscious effort on the part of the leadership of TTP to absorb or coordinate with smaller groups and even the rival networks to increase its activities without losing its identity.

3.4 ISKP's Ambivalence Toward TTP

This evidence is hardly an example of a full partnership. Real tensions exist between ISKP and TTP as revealed in ISKP's own propaganda. In April 2025, ISKP's media arm released a comprehensive statement, derogatory and threatening, regarding TTP's strategy, as it claimed that they had developed plans at a shura council meeting (The Khorasan Diary, 2025). This implies that the central leadership of ISKP still considers TTP as a competitor for the allegiance of Pakistani militants and, ideologically, a lackadaisical in its commitment to ISKP's global jihadist agenda.

4. Ideological and Organizational Differences

Although both TTP and ISKP have a similar

operating profile, they can be differentiated in many aspects of their ideology and organizational structure as shown above.

4.1 Ideology

TTP is based on Deobandi Islam and Afghanistan's Taliban Islamic Emirate model, sharing historical, ideological, and operational links with the movement. They are both pursuing a goal of establishing a Taliban-led shariah-based Islamic state in Pakistan, but TTP also explicitly supports Pashtun nationalist movements and views the Durand Line as an illegitimate international border (XCEPT Research, 2025). The group has at times positioned itself as an advocate for Pashtun and Afghan refugees in Pakistan, criticizing attempts to forcibly repatriate them as "un-Islamic" (XCEPT Research, 2025).

ISKP's ideology is centered around the Islamic State's Salafi-jihadi message, which seeks to impose a purist interpretation of Islam that reverted to the earliest Arabian practices and subsequently develop a global caliphate (CJA, 2025). Unlike the Taliban's vision, which is focused on Pakistan, ISKP's goal is international in scope, and the group actively opposes other Islamic groups to position itself as the true inheritor of Mohammed's legacy. ISKP's message directly targets TTP and the Afghan Taliban, which it holds responsible for "compromising" Islam by pursuing a policy of cooperation with international authorities, presenting itself as a more pious alternative (Stimson Center, 2021).

4.2 Organizational Structure

TTP is a conglomeration of Pakistani insurgent groups bound together by the shura council, which delegates authority to regional commanders to a large extent. The structure has enabled the group to incorporate lesser actors, such as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, which in 2014 briefly pledged allegiance to IS, later returning to TTP's banner in 2020 (Wikipedia, 2025 as per group's history). ISKP follows a different organizational model, which is essentially the Islamic State's framework adapted to the local conditions. It has a formal structure with an emir who serves as the supreme leader of the wilayat, a deputy emir, and various councils, including military commanders, finance, and recruitment (Stimson Center, 2021). ISKP's organizational structure is also formally centralized, but the group

suffers greatly from the Islamic State's inability to enforce loyalty, and its leadership is regularly rotated among deceased or captured emirs (Jadoon & Mines, 2019).

4.3 Attitudes Toward the Afghan Taliban

The most evident difference between the groups is the contrasting stance toward the Afghan Taliban, which is simultaneously an ideological and logistic issue. TTP's relationship with the government in Kabul is one of open-ended support; despite the Taliban's denials, multiple sources report that TTP enjoys the protection of the Islamic Emirate, including economic and logistic support (Dawn, 2026b). ISKP regards the Afghan Taliban as heretics and has repeatedly attacked Taliban officials and militants since the Islamic Emirate's rise to power in 2021 (CSIS, 2021). Thus, ISKP is actually in direct conflict with a government that openly facilitates TTP's activities, which is why experts do not consider ISKP and TTP to be united movements.

5. Recruitment and Financing Patterns

5.1 Recruitment

TTP has been primarily dependent on domestic recruitment as a result of anti-military sentiments, Pashtun pride, and sympathy for the persecuted Afghan refugees. TTP is an umbrella organization of different Pakistani insurgents, and it attracts foreign elements like Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, that has become an independent faction of it.

ISKP has been more active in recruiting Pakistani and Afghan nationals, and it has been reported that they offered monetary rewards to lure disaffection from groups such as TTP and Lashkar-e-Taiba to join the Islamic State (IS) (CSIS, 2021). According to experts from the Combating Terror Center, West Point, TTP was one of the most prolific providers of man power for IS's regional affiliate, along with Lashkar-e-Taiba (Jadoon & Mines, 2019). Interestingly, both TTP and ISKP have expanded their footprints in educated middle-class population with extremist thinking, which has created a greater impact in the society, outside the rural areas, than ever before. But in this segment, ISKP can be much more successful in using more complex propaganda to resonate with the Pakistani and Afghan nationals in the cities of both nations (Stimson Center, 2021). In more recent years, the Islamic State's propaganda

machine has been shown to be quite sophisticated and multilingual, targeting many foreign audiences, with similar patterns identified by researchers using GNET's social media analysis to the recruitment process carried out by TTP (Global Network on Extremism and Technology [GNET], 2025).

5.2 Financing

TTP has now evolved to much more sophisticated methods of raising money, and less from the outside. According to local reports, the TTP's extortion network has proliferated, and local businesses, government institutions and ordinary citizens are reportedly being extorted to donate to the TTP's coffers each month (The Friday Times, 2024). Many of these donations are made via phone calls that are placed from phone operators within the Afghan cellphone service providers, showing the Islamic Emirate's involvement in TTP fundraising efforts on Pakistani soil (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021). The Taliban, on their part, have clearly shown their friendship to TTP, by sending monthly donations of about 43,000 dollars to them apart from providing other logistic support, as per one report by the UN (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). Apart from extortion and donations, the financial activities of the TTP are said to include traditional informal banking system, and drug trade, especially in Balochistan and KPK (Research Gate, 2025).

ISKP's funding is comparable to TTP's in terms of the amount of money but not the type of funding. The bulk of ISKP's revenue is generated from extortion, kidnapping for ransom and private donations to ISKP's treasury, with direct payments being an especially important source for the recruitment of foreign fighters (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2024; CSIS, 2021). In fact, ISKP has a formal finance council, indicating that the money raised is channeled through the ISKP leadership, but also uses the same techniques as other rival groups affiliated to the Afghan Taliban. ISKP and TTP also use informal hundi/hawala banking system to transfer money across the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Stimson Center, 2021).

6. Implications for Pakistan's National and Regional Security

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) are connected by an

operational component that poses significant challenges to Pakistan's national, regional and international security. Even with all these differences, the environment, networks, resources, and to some extent, action, have made it a complex scenario for Pakistan. The implications can be separated into five key areas.

6.1. Challenges for Pakistan in Countering Terrorism

The operational nexus presents serious challenges to Pakistan in the battle against terrorism. The challenge springs from the fact that each group has its own agenda and capacities, they operate in the same environment, share a network and share resources. TTP have been a loose conglomeration of various Pakistani militant groups, but ISKP has a more formally structured organization and international outreach. Thus, the counterterrorism strategies should be developed for each group separately and this would be difficult for Pakistan. But the inter-connectivity of the two groups poses the same challenge which must be tackled by Pakistan's national security establishment.

6.2. Increased Terrorism and Internal Security

The nexus also carries implications towards combating the menace of terrorism in Pakistan. Based on the evidence presented in this paper, we can see that the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has surged in 2025. For instance, in 2025, it had suffered 1,709 incidents of terrorism and 3,967 fatalities due to such attacks, as reported in 2025 by The Diplomat. Likewise, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026 has revealed that Pakistan is the worst hit nation for terrorism with 1139 deaths and 1045 incidents reported during 2025. The military in Pakistan claimed to have carried out more than 75000 intelligence operations in the country in 2025, whereas the country has officially reported 5,397 terror attacks, with the epicenters including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, respectively according to the report by Ahmed (2026).

The impact of the TTP/ISKP in the internal security arena is more pronounced than the threat it poses as indicated by the figures. If several terrorist groups join forces, it will result in rising violence in the region, having serious social and economic consequences in Pakistan. Meanwhile, exchanges between the groups can help bring each one more

manpower, expertise, money and networks, and help boost their effectiveness and ability to weather law enforcement operations. Hence, it is essential for Pakistan to adopt a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that considers countering the TTP, ISKP, and other home-grown insurgent groups, with an understanding of the linkages between the groups.

6.3 Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations and Border Security

The nexus of TTP and ISKP has huge ramifications for Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan. The UN has also found that the Taliban have admitted to providing safe haven for TTP militants in Afghanistan, which has led to the Pakistanis accusing them of doing the same, though this claim has been disputed by the Taliban (Dawn, 2025; Security Council Report, 2025).

The competition is exacerbated by the fact that ISKP is openly anti-Taliban. This has posed a security dilemma for Pakistan, the country has to maintain a balance between cooperation with the Taliban and elimination of ISKP. The rivalry between Pakistan and the Taliban for influence and domain could lead to further clashes between the country's militants and their group, inflicting heavy losses and stoking regional insecurity. Meanwhile, both Pakistan and Afghanistan are at war with the TTP and ISKP, respectively, which opens an opportunity for some cooperation between them.

The nexus also has implications for the Pakistan-Afghanistan relations in the sense that there is a need for better security on the border between the two countries. The border area is prone to smuggling of prohibited materials and infiltration of militants due to the convergence of militants in these areas, so it has to be patrolled more actively. In the same region, however, there are many informal trade routes and networks that may be conducive to the transfer of militants or the materials needed for terrorist operations across the border. This makes the situation in the border area a national security concerns for both countries and they have to work together to achieve stability in the border region.

6.4. Regional and International Security Implications

The implications of the nexus go beyond the

Pakistan Afghanistan border and both TTP and ISKP can invite foreign fighters, resources and networks. The cooperation among TTP, Al-Qaeda, ISKP and other militant groups in the region has shown noticeable improvement, according to the UN reports (Eurasia Review, 2025a; Dawn, 2026a). Thus, there is a genuine risk of the spread of TTP beyond the borders of Pakistan, creating new security challenges for Pakistan, Afghanistan and regional actors.

The danger is further exacerbated given that ISKP's aim is not confined to Pakistan or Afghanistan. As evidenced by its attack on the Abbey Gate in Kabul in 2021, ISKP can become a global terrorist outfit with influence. ISKP has the potential to become a global terrorist outfit with influence, as it has done in 2021 when it attacked the Abbey Gate in Kabul, and Pakistani authorities arrested its mastermind, Muhammad Sharifullah, in 2025 (The Diplomat, 2025). In 2025, Pakistan's security forces have also foiled an attack by ISKP in Balochistan that could have wrought havoc in the area.

The above examples illustrate not only that Pakistan is a victim of terrorist attacks, but also a hub for them to target neighbouring and international countries. For this reason, the national security of Pakistan is bound up in regional and international security and, therefore, Pakistan has a responsibility to ensure that its territory is not used for an attack on any other country. In this regard, Pakistan should cooperate with regional and international counterterrorism organizations so as to make it difficult for any militants to use Pakistan's soil for their geopolitical plans.

6.5. Economic, Social and Humanitarian Implications

The challenges for the national security apparatus of Pakistan are economic, social and humanitarian that cannot be ignored due to the nexus of TTP and ISKP. The violence in the border region could most importantly affect the trade corridor and affect the investment and economic growth. In October 2025, for instance, the war between the Afghan and Pakistani security forces caused the closure of the border and a loss of \$1 million per day to the Afghan economy, as reported by Dawn (2025). In the same way, it can be inferred that Pakistan has also experienced a huge loss of its economy due to the worsening security threats.

KP and Balochistan, where militancy is very much on the increase, are especially hard hit. The turbulence in these areas will inevitably lead to economic disruptions as companies and investors will not want to conduct business in these areas. The humanitarian impact of the crisis will also be more impactful on the people of KP and Balochistan as they will face further insecurity and related problems.

There are also humanitarian implications to the breakdown of inter-community dynamics and social cohesion related to the enduring state of militancy and violence. It is not uncommon for communities that have been living relatively peaceful lives to be exposed to other stressors, such as property destruction, security concerns and economic hardship, that can escalate conflicts between communities and lead to social turmoil. Thus, the indirect effects of the militancy can give rise to more security issues to Pakistan.

In all, the five areas of implications to the Pakistan's national security from the nexus between TTP and ISKP are multi-faceted challenge for Pakistan. Pakistan is dealing with a militant situation in the region where various groups act independently, but pool resources and sometimes even co-operate in attacks. Therefore, a holistic strategy against militancy needs to be adopted in Pakistan, that puts into consideration the threats from every group of militants and possible synergy between the groups.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined the operational relationship between Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and its implications for Pakistan's security. There is no evidence that the two groups were forming an alliance. They are ideologically and strategically different: TTP's focus is primarily on Pakistan and has been aided by the support of the Afghan Taliban while ISKP has a transnational Salafi-jihadist agenda and a hostile attitude towards the Taliban government. But both work within overlapping regions and there are reports from the UN that there have been indications of limited cooperation in training, logistics and attack-related areas. It is a non-formal alliance that poses a critical security threat to Pakistan as it could enable both groups to take advantage of the shared resources and operating space without losing their identities.

Monitoring is crucial in the context of high level of terrorism related violence in Pakistan. Future research should examine whether this nexus

develops into deeper cooperation or weakens because of their ideological differences.

Conflict of Interest

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