

India's Strategic Reorientation in Post-2021 Afghanistan: Navigating Strained Taliban–Pakistan Relations

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Abstract

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 fundamentally changed the geopolitical and strategic landscape of South Asia. The fall of the Western-backed Afghan Republic and the exit of US and NATO forces posed new regional security challenges, heightened geopolitical competition, and changed interstate relations in the region. Initially, Pakistan saw the Taliban's return to power as a strategically beneficial development. However, developments after 2021 increasingly exposed the cracks in relations between the Taliban regime and Pakistan over the Durand Line dispute, cross-border militancy, the activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and border management. Such evolving tensions gradually altered the regional balance of power and provided new strategic openings for India to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy.

This paper analyses India's strategic recalibration in Afghanistan after 2021 in the context of deteriorating Taliban-Pakistan relations. The study analyses India's diplomatic engagement, security calculations, economic interests and geopolitical strategy towards Taliban-led Afghanistan using the theoretical lenses of Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism to understand how changing regional dynamics have influenced these factors. The paper contends that India has moved from strategic disengagement to cautious engagement to safeguard its security interests, to preserve regional connectivity, to maintain developmental influence and to counterbalance the growing roles of Pakistan and China in Afghanistan. India's re-engagement through humanitarian assistance, diplomatic outreach, economic cooperation and soft power initiatives is a pragmatic adjustment to the changing geopolitical realities, not a formal political endorsement of the Taliban regime.

The study further highlights that despite emerging opportunities arising from Taliban–Pakistan tensions, India's Afghanistan policy continues to face significant challenges,

including terrorism, political instability, regional power competition, connectivity constraints, and concerns related to legitimacy and human rights. The paper concludes that India is likely to continue pursuing a cautious, calibrated, and interest-driven approach toward Afghanistan while balancing strategic engagement with regional security concerns and broader geopolitical considerations in South Asia.

Keywords: *India–Afghanistan Relations, Taliban, Pakistan, Strategic Reorientation, South Asia, Regional Security, Geopolitics, Diplomacy*

Introduction:

Afghanistan is a country of enormous geopolitical significance, because of its strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East. Afghanistan's proximity to major regional and global powers such as China, Russia, India, Pakistan and Iran has made Afghanistan a flashpoint of strategic rivalry and geopolitical contestation. Moreover, its geographical proximity to the Eurasian region and the Middle East, both of strategic importance to European countries, further augments the importance of Afghanistan in regional and global geopolitics (Cacicedo, 2022; Chaghaty & Bagramwal, 2025). Afghanistan is a vital connective corridor between various Asian regions and a buffer zone. It has an important role in regional connectivity, trade and strategic affairs.

This geostrategic location has made Afghanistan a magnet for foreign intervention and external influence by contending powers seeking to expand their geopolitical and strategic interests. Afghanistan has a history of military interventions and occupations. The British Empire invaded the country in the nineteenth century, the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and the United States and its allies following the September 9/11, 2001 attacks. The United States formally ended its military presence in Afghanistan in August 2021 with the withdrawal of American and NATO forces, resulting in a dramatic political transformation, including the collapse of the Western-backed Afghan government and the return of the Taliban to power (Wani, 2022; Yousuf & Mir, 2024).

The return of the Taliban has changed the regional strategic landscape and created new geopolitical uncertainties for South Asia. The return of the Taliban regime not only redefined the domestic political order of Afghanistan but also affected the regional power equations, security dynamics and interstate relations especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Seyidbayli, 2025). While Pakistan initially welcomed the Taliban's return for

strategic reasons, the post-2021 period has increasingly been characterised by tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban regime over border management, cross-border militancy and the activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Growing tensions in the relations between the Taliban and Pakistan have gradually changed the regional strategic environment and forced new diplomatic and security calculations on neighbouring countries, especially India (Popalzay, 2024).

The coming back of the Taliban presented India with significant strategic and security challenges in the initial period, given New Delhi's long-standing backing for the earlier Afghan Republic and its large developmental footprint in Afghanistan. India was concerned with the possibility of the re-emergence of extremist networks, expansion of Pakistan's strategic influence, and the deterioration of conditions for the security of the region. India, thus, took a cautious approach initially, closed its embassy in Kabul and did not officially recognise the Taliban regime (Bhattacharya, 2023). However, changing regional dynamics and the rising tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban compelled India to review and recalibrate its Afghanistan policy (Singh, 2025).

Rather than remaining strategically disengaged, India slowly adopted a more pragmatic, interest-driven approach with the aim of protecting its security interests, regional connectivity, developmental investments and diplomatic engagement with the Taliban-led administration (Kidwai, 2025). In this context, India's Afghanistan policy post-2021 is to be viewed as a part of a broader strategic recalibration necessitated by changing regional geopolitics, evolving security imperatives and shifting power equations in South Asia.

This study explores India's strategic reorientation in post-2021 Afghanistan amidst deteriorating relations between the Taliban and Pakistan. It discusses the implications of shifting regional dynamics on India's diplomatic engagement, security calculations and geopolitical strategy towards Taliban-led Afghanistan.

Historical Evolution of Indo–Afghan Relations:

India's relationship with Afghanistan is rooted in deep historical, cultural and civilisational linkages going back to ancient times. Prior to the Partition of 1947, the two countries had a shared border and interacted closely through trade, migration, religion and cultural exchanges. Historical interconnection between the two societies is demonstrated by ancient Indian texts like the 'Rigveda' and 'Bharat Samhita' by Varah Mihira (a famous Indian astronomer) which mention areas and peoples linked to present-day Afghanistan. The

ancient Sanskrit names of cities like Kandahar, Kabul and Balkh were Gandhara, Kubha and Balhika, which shows strong cultural and linguistic ties with the Indian subcontinent (Jafri, 1976). Such historical linkages indicate that the India-Afghanistan relationship is not just confined to geography and trade, but also to shared historical memory, culture and civilisational interaction. For centuries Afghanistan has been an important gateway for the flow of trade and ideas between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The Afghan traders and caravans were a familiar sight in India. Many Afghans settled in the Indian cities and became a part of the local society. Rabindranath Tagore's famous story 'Kabuliwala' immortalised the image of the Afghan trader, who represented friendship, honesty and emotional bonds between the peoples of the two regions.

Political relations were also strengthened during the Indian freedom movement by the leaders such as Abdul Ghaffar Khan who had close ideological and political relations with Mahatma Gandhi (Ved, 1998). Moreover, the cultural and historical exchange between the two regions was boosted by the propagation of Buddhism, Hinduism, Persian culture and Sufi traditions, which established enduring social and cultural linkages between the people of India and Afghanistan (Tyagi, 2025). Afghanistan has also been a strategic link, historically, between India and Central Asia, and the larger Silk Route network, enabling not just trade but also the transfer of ideas, languages, art and religious traditions (Rezavi, 2026).

These historical and civilisational linkages provided a strong foundation for the growth of modern Indian-Afghan diplomatic and strategic relations in the post-independence era. After India's independence in 1947, friendly and cooperative relations between both countries continued on the basis of mutual respect, non-alignment and regional cooperation. In 1950 the Indo-Afghan Treaty of Friendship was signed, which formalised the bilateral relations and enhanced the political, economic and cultural ties between the two countries (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 1950). However, the emergence of the Pakistan-supported Taliban 1.0 regime in 1996 significantly reduced India's influence in Afghanistan, while Pakistan became the Taliban's principal regional supporter. During this period, India extended support to the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban resistance group largely composed of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. India also suspended diplomatic engagement with Kabul under Taliban rule, making this phase one of the lowest points in India-Afghanistan relations (Singh, 2016). Despite periods of regional instability, regime changes, civil war, Taliban rule and external interventions in Afghanistan, India has consistently sought to maintain constructive engagement through diplomatic support, developmental assistance, infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance and people-to-people cooperation. The fall of

the Taliban 1.0 regime in 2001 saw India emerge as one of Afghanistan's key regional development partners with significant contributions to infrastructure, education, health, connectivity and capacity building initiatives (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2016). The withdrawal of United States and NATO forces resulted in the return of the Taliban to power in 2021 which again changed the regional strategic environment and compelled India to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy in response to changing geopolitical and security dynamics (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022). Thus, contemporary India–Afghanistan relations are still shaped by a mix of historical affinity, strategic interests, developmental cooperation and regional security considerations.

Theoretical Framework:

The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 ushered in a new phase of political and diplomatic engagement between India and Afghanistan. The increasing tensions between the Taliban regime and Pakistan further changed the regional strategic environment and opened new geopolitical challenges and opportunities for India. The study uses the major theoretical frameworks of International Relations namely Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism to analyse these changing dynamics. Collectively these theories help provide a comprehensive understanding of state behaviour, regional security concerns, changing power dynamics and the changing nature of diplomatic engagement in South Asia.

Realism and Neo-realism:

Realism emphasizes power, security, and national interest as the central pillars of international relations. According to this perspective, states operate in an anarchic international system where survival and security remain their primary objectives (Mearsheimer, 2001). In the context of post-2021 India–Afghanistan relations, realism explains India's contact with the Taliban as a pragmatic approach to protect its security, economic and geopolitical interests in a situation where Pakistan and China are getting stronger in Afghanistan. At the same time, the Taliban seek international legitimacy and economic support through improved relations with countries such as India (Acxir, 2025).

Neo-realism, developed by Kenneth Waltz, further explains how the regional balance of power and the involvement of external actors shape the state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has seen the strategic roles of China, India,

Pakistan, Russia, and the United States significantly influence the country's regional security dynamics (Popalzay, 2024). The resurgent Taliban, cross-border militancy and regional competition further underline the relevance of realism and neo-realism in understanding India's changing foreign and security policy towards Afghanistan.

Liberalism:

By contrast, liberalism stresses cooperation, interdependence, diplomacy and the importance of international involvement in international relations. Liberalism explains India's approach in the post-2021 India-Afghanistan relations through its soft power, humanitarian assistance, developmental projects and people-to-people engagement. India has had informal diplomatic contacts with Afghanistan since 2021 and has extended humanitarian assistance, such as food, medical aid and development cooperation to Afghanistan, to sustain its presence and influence in the country. India has adopted a non-confrontational, gradual engagement and non-political cooperation approach to promote regional stability, rebuild trust and create enabling conditions for future cooperation (Acxir, 2025).

Constructivism:

Constructivism explains international relations by means of identities, norms, ideas and perceptions that affect the behaviour of states. This theory argues that international politics is socially constructed through interaction and changing perceptions (Wendt, 1999; Popalzay, 2024). In the India–Afghanistan context, India's perception of the Taliban was shaped by past experiences, such as the Taliban's previous rule, the IC-814 hijacking and India's support for the Northern Alliance. But with the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, India's perception gradually began to alter through diplomatic engagement, humanitarian assistance and renewed interaction with the Taliban regime (Zabihullah, 2024). Similarly, the Taliban try to repair their image at the international level and to be accepted by countries like India (Acxir, 2025).

The recent worsening of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations is another example of how identities, mistrust, and regional perceptions play a role in regional politics beyond strategic interests. The shifting regional narrative about the Taliban shows how identities and perceptions influence diplomatic and security policies (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Popalzay, 2024). Hence, identity, mutual understanding and the reconstruction of mutual trust

are still important constituents in the shaping of the emerging India-Afghanistan relations within the constructivist framework.

This paper combines the insights of Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism to provide a comprehensive analysis of India's strategic reorientation in post-2021 Afghanistan in the context of evolving Taliban-Pakistan tensions. Taken together, these theoretical approaches explain the interplay of security concerns, national interests, diplomacy, identities and regional power politics that continue to shape the strategic landscape of South Asia.

Taliban–Pakistan Tensions after 2021:

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 was initially perceived by Pakistan as a significant strategic success. Islamabad expected the Taliban regime to be politically aligned with Pakistan's regional interests and to reinforce Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. For decades Pakistan had close ties with sections of the Taliban leadership and saw a friendly government in Kabul as critical to its strategic depth doctrine vis-à-vis India. However, contrary to Pakistan's expectations, the post-2021 period increasingly witnessed growing tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban regime over issues related to border disputes, militancy, sovereignty, and regional security (Seerat,2025; Behera, 2025).

Durand Line Dispute and Border Tensions:

One of the principal sources of tension between the two sides has been the long-standing dispute over the Durand Line. The Durand line was drawn in 1893, during British colonial rule, and has been a sore point between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Successive Afghan governments including the Taliban regime have been reluctant to formally recognise it as the permanent international border. Following the Taliban's return to power, tensions intensified as Pakistan accelerated border fencing and strengthened security measures along the frontier. Taliban fighters reportedly dismantled sections of the fencing on several occasions, arguing that such activities violated Afghan sovereignty and territorial rights. These incidents reflected the persistence of historical mistrust between the two sides despite Pakistan's longstanding support for the Taliban movement. The Afghanistan–Pakistan border witnessed repeated military escalations, driven largely by cross-border militant activity and unresolved sovereignty disputes (Saraswat, 2025; Chintan Research Foundation, 2025).

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Cross-Border Militancy:

Another important factor that has contributed to the worsening of relations between the Taliban and Pakistan after 2021 has been mainly driven by the increasing activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Since March 2024, Afghanistan and Pakistan have engaged in a series of tit-for-tat cross-border strikes. Pakistan accused TTP militants of operating from Afghan territory to carry out attacks on Pakistani security forces and responded with airstrikes in eastern Afghan provinces, mainly Khost and Paktika. Taliban forces retaliated by attacking Pakistani border posts, further escalating tensions between the two countries (Behera, 2025, Saraswat, 2025, Fong, 2026).

Afghan Refugee Crisis and Border Security Concerns:

The Afghan refugee crisis has been a significant problem in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations since the Soviet-Afghan War. Pakistan's policy has become much stricter since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Islamabad stepped up border controls, erected a fence along the Durand Line and tightened visa rules for Afghan refugees in response to security concerns and the escalating activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Increasing border clashes, terrorism and drug trafficking further aggravated the tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan (Khan & Ahmed, 2025).

The escalating tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban had wider regional ramifications too. Pakistan had hoped that the return of the Taliban would significantly reduce India's influence in Afghanistan, but that hasn't completely happened. Rather, the deterioration of Taliban-Pakistan relations opened opportunities for India that was seeking to gradually re-engage with Afghanistan through pragmatic diplomacy, humanitarian aid and limited political outreach. At the same time, the Taliban leadership sought to diversify Afghanistan's regional relationships in an effort to not be overly dependent on Pakistan, and thus contribute to a shifting strategic landscape in South Asia. (Khan & Ahmed, 2025).

Drivers of India's Afghanistan Reorientation

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 changed the regional geopolitical landscape, forcing India to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy. For New Delhi, disengagement from Kabul was no longer a viable option because Afghanistan remains central to India's long-term strategic, security, and connectivity interests in the broader

Eurasian region. India's policy shift is therefore driven less by ideological acceptance of the Taliban and more by geopolitical realism and strategic necessity.

Geostrategic Importance of Afghanistan:

Afghanistan's geographical location gives it strategic significance for regional security, connectivity and great power competition. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, Afghanistan plays a crucial role in shaping regional power dynamics (Ghosh, 2026). For India, one of the key strategic concerns has been preventing Pakistan from gaining excessive influence in Afghanistan, as this could undermine India's regional interests and security objectives. India views Afghanistan as a gateway to the resource-rich Central Asian Republics (CARs). Due to Pakistan's denial of direct overland access, Afghanistan has become essential for India's connectivity ambitions toward Central Asia and Eurasia.

This strategic importance increased with India's 'extended neighbourhood' approach and the Connect Central Asia Policy which emphasised for greater political, economic and people-to-people engagement with the Central Asian states (Yousuf & Mir, 2024). Afghanistan's geographic position at the center of the historic Silk Road increases its importance for trade, connectivity and strategic mobility. Projects like the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) are central to India's efforts to bypass Pakistan and expand regional connectivity. Afghanistan is also important for energy projects like Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India (TAPI) pipeline (Borthakur, 2025). The return of the Taliban in 2021 has dramatically altered the regional calculus involving India, Pakistan and China. These developments have prompted India to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy to safeguard its strategic, economic, and security interests in the region.

Security Concerns:

Security concerns continue to be a key driver of India's engagement with Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. The return of Taliban has renewed New Delhi's fears that Afghanistan could once again become a hub for transnational terrorism and extremist activities targeting India. India has long been concerned about the threat of Pakistan-sponsored militant networks operating in the region, including the Haqqani Network (Ganaie, 2025). Therefore, India wants to ensure that Pakistan does not consolidate strategic influence in Afghanistan and Afghan territory is not used for anti-India activities. India is particularly concerned about the presence of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian

Subcontinent (AQIS), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Historical links of the Taliban with militant groups and reports of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan have further heightened India's threat perception. A 2022 U.N. report identified at least 11 Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training camps in Afghanistan's Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. Alleged links of these groups with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have been a cause for further security concerns for New Delhi (Borthakur, 2025). The 1999 hijack of Indian Airlines Flight 814 revealed the limitations of India's diplomatic disengagement with the Taliban regime (Khatri & Choudhary, 2022). Since then, New Delhi has recognised the strategic importance of maintaining communication channels with Kabul in order to track security developments and communicate its red lines directly. The Taliban has assured India that Afghan territory will not be used against Indian interests and has largely refrained from anti-India rhetoric since 2021 (Sharma, 2025). However, India continues to engage with the Taliban cautiously and conditionally and primarily on security considerations.

The China Factor:

China's expanding engagement in Afghanistan has had a major impact on India's post-2021 Afghanistan policy. After the US pullout, China has strengthened diplomatic and economic ties with the Taliban regime to boost its regional influence and to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing has invested in Afghanistan's energy, mining, and infrastructure sectors and has backed the potential extension of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan (Seyidbayli, 2025). China's growing footprint in Afghanistan has significant strategic and security implications for India. New Delhi fears that greater cooperation between China, Pakistan and the Taliban could boost Pakistan's regional clout and undermine India's strategic interests in Central Asia. The growing China–Pakistan nexus compounds concerns about strategic encirclement and the potential for strengthening anti-India networks in the region (Yousuf, 2023; Singh, 2025). As a result, India has adopted a cautious engagement policy towards the Taliban while improving its relations with Iran, Russia and the Central Asian states to counterbalance China's growing influence in Afghanistan (Ganaie, 2025).

Economic Interests:

India's engagement with Afghanistan continues to be driven by economic interests. As a gateway to resource-rich Central Asia, Afghanistan offers immense opportunities for trade, energy and mining sectors. Because of Pakistan's restrictions on overland access, India has developed alternate connectivity routes like the Chabahar Port in Iran and the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, to enhance trade ties with Afghanistan and Central Asia (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018; Latef & Nousheen, 2025). Since 2001, India has committed more than \$3 billion in development and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. Major projects include Afghan Parliament building, Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam), power transmission lines, healthcare, education and telecommunications projects. These investments have not only increased India's economic footprint but also created goodwill among the Afghan people. India has long-term economic benefits from Afghanistan's large untapped mineral wealth like lithium, copper, iron ore, gold and rare earth minerals (Amin & Ganaie, 2026). India sees the potential investment in Afghanistan's mining as strategically important, especially since China is becoming a bigger economic player in Afghanistan. Thus, India has been talking to Kabul after the Taliban's return to power in 2021 to safeguard its economic and strategic interests, regional connectivity projects and its long-standing developmental footprint in Afghanistan.

India's Strategic Reorientation in Post-2021 Afghanistan

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant turning point in the regional geopolitics and led India to re-assess its long-standing Afghanistan policy. The recent years' renewed and proactive engagement of India with Afghanistan indicates a major recalibration of its foreign policy due to changing geopolitical realities following the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan (Hasan & Alam, 2026). A number of interrelated factors have been pushing this strategic pivot, among them the increasing volatility of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, the fracturing of the international order following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war, US, Israel-Iran war and the rising political and economic footprint of China in South and Central Asia. The escalation of Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions in 2025, occurring shortly after the brief India-Pakistan confrontation of the same year, further reinforced the importance of Afghanistan within India's regional security framework (Reghunadhan, 2026). These developments

compelled New Delhi to maintain strategic relevance in Afghanistan through cautious diplomatic engagement, humanitarian outreach, and limited political interaction with the Taliban regime.

Diplomatic engagement:

In August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, India once again closed its embassy in Kabul and has not formally recognised the Taliban government as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. However, the gradual deterioration of relations between the Taliban and Pakistan created new strategic space for New Delhi to cautiously re-engage with Afghanistan. This prompted India to send a team of “technical experts” to Kabul in 2022 to restart limited diplomatic operations, which eventually led to the official reopening of its embassy in the Afghan capital in 2025 (Shankar, 2026). India also allowed the Taliban regime to run Afghan consulates in Mumbai and Hyderabad, signalling a gradual normalisation of diplomatic communication even if formal recognition has not been granted.

The diplomatic engagement between Indian and Taliban officials grew over the following years with meetings held in Kabul, New Delhi and third countries. In January 2025, Amir Khan Muttaqi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan met Vikram Misri in Dubai, signalling increasing diplomatic engagement between the two sides. In October 2025, the engagement was further deepened when Muttaqi visited New Delhi and held talks with Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, marking the first political level engagement between the two countries since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. After the meeting, Muttaqi said Afghanistan “has always sought good relations with India”, while the two countries in a joint statement pledged to maintain “close communication and continue regular engagement”. These developments further highlighted India’s evolving strategy of pragmatic diplomatic engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan to retain strategic influence, enhance regional connectivity and safeguard long-term security and geopolitical interests in the region (Reghunadhan, 2026; Shankar, 2026).

Humanitarian Assistance and Soft Power Continuity:

Humanitarian assistance has become a central pillar of India’s Afghanistan policy after 2021. India has also in recent years expanded its humanitarian and developmental outreach in Afghanistan as part of its broader strategy of maintaining long-term influence and goodwill among the Afghan people. India also announced a host of healthcare and infrastructure projects including a 30-bed hospital in Bagrami district, an Oncology Centre, a

Trauma Centre and specialised clinics in several Afghan provinces. Indian humanitarian assistance also assisted in reconstruction and relief efforts in earthquake-affected areas such as Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan and Balkh Province in northern Afghanistan in 2025 (Reghunadhan, 2026). These initiatives improved India's image as a trustworthy development partner dedicated to the welfare of the common Afghans in the midst of political uncertainty. Besides humanitarian assistance, India cautiously revived elements of its traditional soft power diplomacy. Medical visas, scholarships for Afghan students, cultural exchanges and people-to-people linkages were gradually resumed, showing India's intention to maintain its long-standing social and cultural influence in Afghanistan (Hasan & Alam, 2026). Even during Taliban rule India attempted to maintain this hard earned goodwill and societal ties, apart from any formal political recognition by continuing its humanitarian outreach and soft power engagement. Thus, the continuity of humanitarian diplomacy reveals that whereas India's strategic approach towards the Taliban has become more pragmatic, its broader normative commitment towards the Afghan people has remained largely intact.

Expanding Economic Cooperation:

Since 2021, India's engagement with Afghanistan has increasingly expanded into the economic sphere through trade, connectivity and developmental cooperation. A major milestone in this process was the visit of Amir Khan Muttaqi to India in October 2025 where both sides discussed strengthening bilateral economic relations and regional connectivity. A crucial outcome of the visit was the decision to restart the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor, which was established to bypass Pakistan and allow direct bilateral trade. The corridor connected Delhi, Mumbai and Amritsar with Kabul and Kandahar, allowing Afghanistan to export agricultural products, in particular fresh and dried fruit, nuts and carpets to Indian markets, while India exported pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, textiles and dairy products to Afghanistan. The revival of the corridor was an indication of India's sustained commitment to keep Afghanistan's economic connectivity independent of Pakistan's transit routes. The economic cooperation was further discussed during a roundtable interaction at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) where Muttaqi called for greater regional connectivity, liberalisation of visa procedures and increased people-to-people interaction to strengthen bilateral trade relations. He also invited Indian investment in Afghanistan's mining sector and urged establishment of pharmaceutical manufacturing units inside Afghanistan. These initiatives took on increased

strategic importance against the background of increasing regional competition for economic influence in Afghanistan, especially with the increasing Chinese presence. The changing dynamics of Afghan-Pak tensions also created a favourable environment for India's cautious economic re-engagement with Kabul (Saraswat, 2025).

Key Challenges in India's Strategic Reorientation in Post-2021 Afghanistan

India's strategic reorientation in Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has created new diplomatic opportunities, especially against the backdrop of deteriorating Taliban-Pakistan relations. But New Delhi's engagement with Taliban 2.0 is fraught with a raft of geopolitical, security, diplomatic and humanitarian challenges.

Legitimacy and Human Rights Dilemma:

One of the key challenges for India is how to manage pragmatic engagement with the Taliban without compromising its democratic image and normative commitments. The Taliban is still diplomatically isolated and not widely recognised internationally because it rules in an authoritarian way and has a poor human rights record. Its limitations on women's education, civil liberties and minority rights are starkly at odds with India's democratic and pluralistic values (Halsana, 2025; Borthakur, 2025). So New Delhi faces a difficult dilemma: while engagement with the Taliban might be strategically needed but too much cooperation could damage India's image as a rights-based democracy and alienate parts of the international community.

Terrorism and Security Threats:

Security concerns continue to dominate India's policy towards Afghanistan. Despite the assurances of the Taliban, extremist organisations like Al-Qaeda, Islamic State Khorasan Province, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed are still active in Afghanistan. India fears Afghan territory could again be used as a safe haven for anti-India militant groups. The continued presence of the Haqqani Network within the Taliban architecture exacerbates Indian security concerns given the group's historical links with Pakistan's security apparatus and past attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan (Halsana, 2025; Amin & Ganaie, 2026).

Pakistan and China's Expanding Regional Influence:

Taliban-Pakistan relations have grown tense, but Pakistan still wields considerable influence in Afghanistan through historic connections with several Taliban groups. Islamabad

has been against India's growing footprint in Afghanistan and may seek to block India's strategic and connectivity initiatives. At the same time, China has deepened its diplomatic and economic ties with Afghanistan through mining investments and connectivity initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative. China's efforts to incorporate Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor system pose long-term strategic challenges for India and could diminish New Delhi's regional influence (Hasan & Alam, 2026; Amin & Ganaie, 2026).

Political Uncertainty and Internal Fragmentation:

The political situation in Afghanistan remains very volatile and uncertain. The Taliban is now centrally controlled, but long-term stability is threatened by factionalism within its ranks, ideological divisions, ethnic tensions, economic collapse and humanitarian crises. The Taliban is divided into competing factions that often disagree on governance and foreign relations, making it difficult and unpredictable to engage diplomatically. Thus, India needs to engage the Taliban, while simultaneously remaining in touch with other Afghan political actors, civil society groups, and the Afghan diaspora to prepare for future political contingencies (Borthakur, 2025).

Economic and Connectivity Constraints:

India's investments of more than USD 3 billion in Afghan infrastructure projects face an uncertain future under Taliban rule. Projects like Salma Dam, Afghan Parliament building and Zaranj-Delaram Highway are still vulnerable due to instability and lack of security guarantees. Also, India's regional connectivity plan via Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor is facing geopolitical hurdles due to sanctions on Iran, growing influence of China and regional instability. The absence of transit access through Pakistan constrains India's economic interaction with Afghanistan and Central Asia (Amin & Ganaie, 2026).

Information Warfare and Misinformation:

India also faces the challenge of misinformation campaigns and competing narratives regarding its engagement with the Taliban. Social media platforms and Diaspora-based political networks have often spread distorted claims about India's diplomatic efforts, humanitarian assistance, and relations with Taliban authorities. Such stories have a tendency to read India's humanitarian engagement as an implicit recognition of the Taliban regime and in doing so complicate New Delhi's diplomatic posture. Therefore, it is increasingly important to manage information warfare and effectively communicate India's nuanced policy on Afghanistan (Borthakur, 2025).

Since 2021, India has adjusted its strategy in Afghanistan to keep up with changing regional dynamics, especially the shifting relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan. However, India's dealings with the Taliban face ongoing security risks, diplomatic hurdles, regional competition, humanitarian concerns, and the influence of countries like China, Pakistan, Russia and other actors. Because of these challenges, India is likely to continue a careful approach, combining strategic engagement, humanitarian aid, counterterrorism efforts, and regional diplomacy, while holding off on formally recognizing the Taliban government.

Conclusion

India's strategic reorientation in post-2021 Afghanistan is a pragmatic adjustment to the changing regional geopolitics, especially the rising tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan. Although the return of the Taliban had initially caused serious concerns regarding terrorism, regional instability and Pakistan's influence, shifting regional dynamics slowly nudged India towards a policy of cautious engagement rather than complete disengagement. India has been pursuing its long-term strategic, security and connectivity interests in Afghanistan through diplomatic outreach, humanitarian assistance, developmental cooperation and economic cooperation.

The study highlights that India's Afghanistan policy is being increasingly influenced by geopolitical realism, regional power competition, security concerns, and the need to counter the growing influence of China and Pakistan in the region. At the same time, issues such as terrorism, political instability, humanitarian crises and the lack of formal international recognition of the Taliban regime continue to make India's engagement with Afghanistan difficult. In the days to come, India is likely to adopt a calibrated and balanced approach in Afghanistan, keeping in mind its strategic interests and regional stability. India's Afghanistan policy will continue to strengthen some of its important components such as diplomatic communication, humanitarian and developmental cooperation, regional connectivity initiatives, and coordination with regional powers on counterterrorism efforts.

Therefore, India's engagement with Afghanistan since 2021 is a cautious, flexible and interest-driven strategy to maintain regional influence and contribute to long-term stability and connectivity in South Asia and the wider Eurasian region. The future of India–Afghanistan relations will depend, to a large extent, on the changing regional balance of power, the internal stability of Afghanistan and the trajectory of Taliban–Pakistan relations.

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