

India-Afghanistan Relations: Opportunities and Challenges in the Era of Taliban 2.0

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Abstract: *The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has got major shifts to the political strategic landscape of south Asia. For India this development presents a complex mix of challenges of opportunities. This paper looks at how India is navigating its relationship with Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Historically, India has played a key role in Afghanistan's development, with significant investment infrastructure, education and humanitarian aid. The recent changes, however, have risen new concerns-particularly around security, the influence of Pakistan and china's expanding presence in the region. At the same time, India has the chance to reassert its role through soft power, development partnership, and regional connectivity projects like the Chabahar Port. This study suggests that India's approach must be balanced-combining humanitarian engagement with strategic cautions-to protect its interests and support regional stability.*

Keywords: India-Afghanistan relations, Taliban 2.0, South Asia strategy, Foreign policy, Chabahar port

1. Research Question

In the wake of the Taliban's resurgence to power in August 2021, what primary opportunities and critical challenges define the trajectory of India-Afghanistan relations in the era of 'Taliban 2.0'?

2. Research Methodology

To investigate the central research question, this study relies on a qualitative research approach. The methodology is grounded in extensive desk-based research, involving the collection and examination of secondary data from diverse and credible sources. These include scholarly journals, government and institutional reports, expert policy briefs, and well-established news platforms.

A multi-layered analytical framework has been employed to ensure depth and contextual accuracy:

- 1) **Comparative Evaluation:** This component compares the governance styles, diplomatic conduct, and ideological positions of the first Taliban regime (1996-2001) with those of the current regime (2021 onwards). The objective is to understand the extent of continuity or change in the group's operational and political behavior.
- 2) **Historical Reflection:** The study revisits the history of India's involvement in Afghanistan to provide context for current engagements. Past development projects, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic interests are examined to assess how these historical ties inform present-day policy directions.
- 3) **Geopolitical Mapping:** India's position in relation to other influential regional and global players-such as Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia, the United States, and the European Union-is analyzed. This helps to identify external factors influencing New Delhi's approach to Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0.
- 4) **Thematic Exploration:** The paper also focuses on identifying recurring themes within India-Afghanistan relations under the current regime. These include:

- **Opportunities:** Strengthening regional influence, economic and infrastructure investments, counterterrorism cooperation, and humanitarian assistance.
- **Challenges:** Ideological incompatibility, heightened security risks, diminishing diplomatic access, investment uncertainty, and concerns over water security and regional instability.

This comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach enables a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping India's current and future engagement with Afghanistan under the Taliban's second regime.

3. Introduction: Navigating a New Era in India-Afghanistan Relations

3.1 Understanding the Shift after August 2021

In August 2021, the political and strategic landscape of South Asia shifted dramatically. The rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, followed by the unexpected collapse of the Afghan government, brought the Taliban back to power-an era now referred to as "Taliban 2.0." For India, which had nurtured close ties with Afghanistan's previous democratic setup, this change raised serious concerns. The developments forced New Delhi to reconsider its long-standing policies and regional strategies. With the Taliban in control, India had to find new ways to protect its interests, ensure regional security, and decide how—or whether—to engage with the new leadership in Kabul. This marked the beginning of a complex and uncertain phase in India-Afghanistan relations.

3.2 The Resurgence of the Taliban: A Critical Overview of Taliban 2.0

3.2.1 Governance and Ideological Outlook

Since reclaiming power on August 15, 2021, the Taliban have rebranded Afghanistan as the "Islamic Emirate," claiming centralized governance based on Islamic law. Despite presenting a more pragmatic face, the regime

remains ideologically rigid, authoritarian, and dominated by tribal factions. Decision-making is opaque, often dictated by religious hardliners rather than institutional mechanisms. Gender segregation, suppression of dissent, and a clan-based economic system remain hallmarks of Taliban governance.

3.2.2 Human Rights, Women, Minorities, and Economic Policy

The human rights situation has severely declined under Taliban rule. Women and girls face widespread exclusion from education and employment, and their freedom of movement is heavily restricted. Ethnic and religious minorities, especially Hazaras and Christians, remain vulnerable to systemic violence and discrimination. Afghanistan's economy, already weakened pre-2021, has collapsed further due to the withdrawal of international aid. Although some informal trade has improved marginally, development and industrial growth are stagnant. Opium continues to be a primary economic driver.

3.2.3 Continuities and Changes from Taliban 1.0

While Taliban 2.0 mirrors its predecessor (1996–2001) in terms of ideological conservatism, gender repression, and ties with extremist groups, some surface-level shifts have emerged. Early promises of amnesty and women's rights were quickly abandoned. Unlike Taliban 1.0, which gained recognition from a few countries, the current regime was diplomatically isolated until Russia's recognition in 2025. Although Taliban representatives now attend international forums, their continued domestic repression undermines their credibility.

3.2.4 Global Recognition and Internal Stability

As of 2025, most nations engage informally with the Taliban without granting official recognition. Internally, the regime faces little effective opposition but contends with factional divisions and the persistent threat of ISKP, which remains a major destabilizing actor. Al-Qaeda, in contrast, retains strong ties with the Taliban. These dynamics reflect a regime secure at home but vulnerable to international isolation and extremist spillovers.

4. A Legacy of Engagement: India-Afghanistan Relations Before 2021

4.1 Historical Ties and Strategic Partnership

India and Afghanistan share deep civilizational ties, which have translated into strategic cooperation in modern times. India maintained diplomatic relations even during the Soviet-backed Afghan regime (1980s), but engagement declined under Taliban rule (1996–2001). Post-2001, India re-established ties, becoming a key player in Afghanistan's reconstruction. The 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement formalized cooperation in development, education, governance, and diplomacy.

4.2 India's Developmental and Humanitarian Assistance (2001–2021)

India contributed nearly \$3 billion to Afghanistan's development—its largest regional aid. Over 500 projects

were implemented, covering sectors like energy, health, education, transport, and agriculture. India also provided crucial humanitarian aid (e.g., 75,000 tons of wheat, school meals for 1.4 million children), enhancing its image among Afghans.

4.3 Major Infrastructure Projects

India built symbolic infrastructure, including:

- **Salma Dam (2016):** Provided hydroelectric power and irrigation.
- **Zaranj–Delaram Highway (2010):** Connected Afghanistan to Iran's Chabahar Port.
- **Afghan Parliament (2015):** Symbol of Indo-Afghan democratic partnership.
- **Electricity Projects:** Improved Kabul's power supply.
- Additional contributions included rebuilding schools, hospitals, and transport facilities.

4.4 Challenges and Strategic Considerations

India's efforts faced security threats to personnel and logistical barriers due to Pakistan's denial of overland access. India avoided military involvement, relying on soft power like education and infrastructure to build goodwill.

5. India's Evolving Policy Post-2021: Pragmatism amidst Uncertainty

5.1 Initial Disengagement and Cautious Re-engagement

Following the Taliban's return in 2021, India closed its Kabul embassy. By mid-2022, a technical team was deployed for aid coordination—marking a shift to “pragmatic engagement” without formal recognition of the Taliban.

5.2 Rationale behind the Policy Shift

India's recalibration was driven by:

- **Humanitarian needs:** Preventing mass suffering.
- **Strategic concerns:** Countering China-Pakistan influence; monitoring security.
- **Protecting investments:** Safeguarding \$3 billion worth of development aid and goodwill.

5.3 Diplomatic Overtures

India gradually increased contact with the Taliban:

- High-level calls and meetings between Indian and Taliban officials.
- Taliban sent an unofficial envoy to Mumbai.
- India resumed visa services for Afghans in 2025.

The Taliban, in turn, welcomed Indian investment in infrastructure and mining sectors.

5.4 India's Stance in International Forums

India abstained from a 2024 UN resolution criticizing Taliban policies. It argued that condemnation without constructive solutions was ineffective. India stressed the need to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a hub for

terrorist groups like LeT and JeM. This pragmatic abstention reflects a nuanced foreign policy that balances humanitarian concerns, national security, and geopolitical competition.

6. Opportunities for India in the Era of Taliban 2.0

6.1 Strategic and Geopolitical Leverage

India's historical ties and humanitarian goodwill position it uniquely to re-engage with Afghanistan under the Taliban without starting anew. A key opportunity stems from deteriorating Pakistan-Taliban relations-especially over cross-border militancy and refugee deportations-which creates strategic space for India. Analysts view this as a potential moment for a "reverse strategic depth" policy, using Afghanistan to exert indirect pressure on Pakistan. Additionally, Afghanistan's geographic position offers India access to Central Asia, aligning with its broader strategic interests.

6.2 Economic and Connectivity Prospects

India's regional strategy centers on the Chabahar Port in Iran, providing a vital link to Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. Chabahar, tied to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), boosts India's connectivity and counters China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Afghanistan seeks deeper trade ties with India, especially in natural resources (e.g., iron, lithium, copper), while current bilateral trade remains limited to goods like dry fruits, saffron, medicines, and textiles. The Taliban are open to Indian investments, but India faces the challenge of engaging economically without legitimizing the regime. Careful navigation could yield long-term strategic benefits.

6.3 Security Cooperation: A Narrow Window

Terrorism remains a critical concern for India, especially with groups like LeT and JeM having operated from Afghan soil. The Taliban's rare condemnation of attacks like Pahalgam signals potential for limited counter-terrorism engagement. While rooted in Taliban pragmatism, this creates an opening for India to pursue discreet security dialogues to safeguard its interests.

6.4 Humanitarian Diplomacy and Soft Power Engagement

India's continued humanitarian aid-food, medicines, and emergency support-strengthens its image as a compassionate regional power. Plans to assist Afghan refugees expelled from Pakistan could further elevate its moral standing and counter Pakistani narratives.

India's soft power, rooted in people-centric diplomacy, remains influential-especially among Afghanistan's urban populations and minorities. Continued cultural and humanitarian outreach may help protect vulnerable groups like Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, reinforcing India's

civilizational commitment without formally recognizing the Taliban regime.

7. Challenges for India in the Era of Taliban 2.0

7.1 Ideological Disparities and Governance Concerns

India faces a deep ideological divide with the Taliban, whose rigid, autocratic, and exclusionary rule conflicts with India's democratic, secular, and pluralistic values. The Taliban's repression of women, denial of education, and marginalization of minorities like Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks stands in stark contrast to India's investment in democratic institution-building in Afghanistan. Engaging with such a regime risks alienating pro-democracy Afghans and eroding India's reputation as a rights-based democracy.

7.2 Persistent Security Threats

Afghanistan continues to pose significant security risks:

- **Terrorism:** Despite Taliban assurances, groups like **Al-Qaeda**, **ISKP**, **LeT**, and **JeM** remain active in Afghanistan. Reports of renewed terrorist camps raise alarm, especially given past events like the IC-814 hijacking from Kandahar.
- **Drug trafficking:** The Taliban's reliance on opium for revenue is fueling regional drug problems, especially in Indian states like Punjab.
- **Threats to Indian personnel:** Without a formal diplomatic presence or security arrangements, Indian nationals in Afghanistan remain vulnerable to kidnapping, extortion, and violence.

7.3 Safeguarding Investments and Future Projects

India's \$3 billion investment in over 500 projects faces existential risks:

- Key assets like the **Zaranj-Delaram Highway** are now under Taliban control and being used for military logistics.
- Large-scale infrastructure projects like the proposed Shahtoot Dam are stalled due to lack of security guarantees.
- India's development-first foreign policy is vulnerable in conflict zones where soft infrastructure can be militarized.

A shift towards community-driven, localized development with lower militarization risk and stronger safeguards may be necessary.

7.4 Diplomatic Dilemmas

India's current policy of unofficial engagement without formal recognition of the Taliban is a delicate balancing act, but:

- It may alienate former allies in the Afghan democratic movement and civil society.
- India risks losing its moral credibility if perceived as aligning with an oppressive regime just to counter Pakistan.

- The Taliban's lack of diplomatic reliability complicates long-term strategic planning.

Thus, while tactical engagement might offer short-term benefits, it could damage India's international image and undermine its normative diplomacy.

7.5 Water Security Implications

India's support for water infrastructure projects like the Shahtoot Dam on the Kabul River has hydro-political implications, especially for Pakistan, which relies heavily on the Indus River system (fed by the Kabul and Kunar rivers).

- India's role in upstream dam-building is viewed by Pakistan as a pressure tactic—especially after India paused the Indus Waters Treaty following the Pahalgam attack.
- This could escalate regional water tensions, trigger conflict, and destabilize the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan triangle.

To avoid this, India must pursue such projects with multilateral diplomacy, transparency, and cooperative water-sharing agreements.

8. Regional Power Dynamics and External Influences

8.1 Roles of Pakistan, China, Russia, and Iran

Afghanistan is a center of competing regional interests. India must carefully navigate this landscape as various powers assert influence:

- **Pakistan:** Historically a dominant force in Afghanistan through its support of the Taliban, Pakistan's relationship with Taliban 2.0 has deteriorated due to refugee expulsions, military clashes, and mutual distrust. This rift creates strategic space for India to expand influence and reduce Pakistan's traditional control over Afghan affairs.
- **China:** Beijing is focused on Afghanistan for security and economic interests, particularly for access to rare earth minerals and connectivity under BRI and CPEC. China has formalized diplomatic ties and is expanding its economic footprint while avoiding entanglement in internal instability.
- **Russia:** Russia became the first major power to recognize the Taliban, aiming to secure influence in Central Asia. It plans infrastructure projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway and energy corridors, positioning Afghanistan as a southern gateway to South Asia.
- **Iran:** A critical player due to its control over Chabahar Port—a key to India's regional connectivity. While cooperating with India, Iran has sometimes resisted Indian infrastructure projects like Salma Dam due to water concerns. Its Afghan refugee policy also affects its stance on Afghanistan.

In this multi-polar, transactional environment, the Taliban are leveraging rivalries to gain recognition and investment. India must position itself as a non-coercive, development-oriented partner, using opportunities from the Pakistan-

Taliban fallout and expanding humanitarian and connectivity efforts.

8.2 Impact of Major Global Actors: United States and European Union

- **United States:** Though it withdrew militarily in 2021, the U.S. still influences Afghanistan via humanitarian aid, counterterrorism surveillance, and diplomatic pressure. It avoids steps that could legitimize the Taliban, and criticized soft UN resolutions that might embolden the regime.
- **European Union:** The EU continues humanitarian aid, but broader engagement is hampered by Taliban human rights violations. Its Global Gateway infrastructure initiative remains limited in Afghanistan due to political and security risks.

Both actors face the dilemma of engaging without legitimizing the Taliban. Their limited and fragmented presence has opened space for China, Russia, and Iran to dominate, reducing Western influence in the Afghan equation.

9. Conclusion: Strategic Implications and Recommendations for India

India's evolving engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan presents a dual landscape of opportunities and risks. On the one hand, the Taliban's growing desire to diversify partnerships—particularly by reducing dependency on Pakistan—offers a strategic opening for India. Decades of Indian humanitarian assistance and developmental investment have created considerable goodwill among the Afghan populace. Infrastructure initiatives such as the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) provide India with critical leverage in promoting regional connectivity and counterbalancing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

However, major challenges persist. The reactivation of anti-India terrorist groups, the Taliban's suppression of civil liberties—especially women's rights—and the absence of inclusive governance severely limit India's capacity for meaningful, long-term engagement. Internal fragmentation within the Taliban, coupled with opaque decision-making processes, further complicates diplomatic and developmental cooperation.

Adding to these difficulties is the changing geopolitical terrain. Russia's formal recognition of the Taliban and China's resource-centric diplomacy have accelerated a regional power competition. In this environment, India must pursue a more assertive yet calibrated strategy.

Strategic Recommendations:

- 1) **Prioritize Counterterrorism Dialogue:** Engage the Taliban to ensure Afghan soil is not used by anti-India terror groups.
- 2) **Invest in Low-Risk Development Projects:** Focus on health, education, and agriculture through localized, community-based efforts.

- 3) **Strengthen Regional Connectivity:** Expand Chabahar and the INSTC in cooperation with Iran and Central Asia.
- 4) **Maintain Humanitarian Support:** Deliver aid through neutral channels like the UN to ensure transparency and reach.
- 5) **Coordinate Multilaterally:** Work with democratic allies to apply collective pressure and offer calibrated incentives.
- 6) **Build Soft Power:** Promote education, cultural exchange, and skill development-especially for Afghan women and youth.
- 7) India's policy must be pragmatic yet principled, guided by national security, humanitarian values, and long-term regional interests.

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