

REDEFINING REGIONAL STRATEGIES: INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE
TALIBAN

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Abstract: This article explores India's evolving diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, highlighting a shift from passive strategies to pragmatic policy execution. It examines India's balancing act among security concerns, humanitarian aid, and regional diplomacy in response to the Taliban's resurgence. The study contextualizes India's soft power initiatives, trade discussions, and developmental projects within the broader geopolitical framework. These findings underscore India's nuanced strategy to safeguard its presence in Afghanistan while navigating regional stability and security challenges.

Key Words: India-Taliban Engagement, Strategic Paradigm Shift , Soft Power, “strategic activity”, “strategic inactivity”, Humanitarian Aid, Belt and Road Initiative, “strategic reactivity”, “wait-and-watch” approach.

Annotatsiya: Mazkur maqola Hindistonning Tolibon bilan rivojlanib borayotgan diplomatik aloqalariga e'tibor qaratib, passiv strategiyalardan pragmatik siyosat yuritishga o'tish jarayonini yoritadi. Unda Tolibonning qayta kuchayishi bilan yuzaga kelgan vaziyatda Hindistonning xavfsizlik, gumanitar yordam va mintaqaviy diplomatiya masalalaridagi muvozanat saqlash jarayoni tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot Hindistonning yumshoq kuch tashabbuslari, savdo bo'yicha muzokaralari va rivojlanish loyihalarini kengroq geosiyosiy nuqtai nazarda ko'rib chiqadi. Ushbu natijalar Hindistonning Afg'onistondagi ishtirokini mustahkamlash va mintaqaviy barqarorlik hamda xavfsizlik bilan bog'liq muammolarni hal qilishga qaratilgan murakkab strategiyasini namoyish etadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Hindiston-Tolibon Hamkorligi, Strategik Paradigma O'zgarishi, Yumshoq Kuch, «strategik faoliyat», «strategik faoliyatsizlik», Gumanitar Yordam, «Bir Makon, Bir Yo'l» tashabbusi, «strategik reaktivlik», «kuzatish va kutish» yondashuvi.

Аннотация: Эта статья исследует развитие дипломатических отношений Индии с Талибаном, подчеркивая переход от пассивных стратегий к прагматичному выполнению политики. В ней рассматривается баланс Индии между вопросами безопасности, гуманитарной помощью и региональной дипломатией в ответ на возрождение Талибана. Исследование анализирует инициативы Индии в области мягкой силы, торговые обсуждения и проекты развития в более широком геополитическом контексте. Полученные выводы подчеркивают продуманную стратегию Индии, направленную на сохранение своего присутствия в Афганистане при одновременной ориентации на обеспечение региональной стабильности и безопасности.

Ключевые слова: Взаимодействие Индии с Талибаном, Изменение стратегической парадигмы, Мягкая сила, «стратегическая активность», «стратегическая пассивность», Гуманитарная помощь, Инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», «стратегическая реактивность», «подход наблюдения и ожидания».

INTRODUCTION

India and Afghanistan have long shared a profound bond rooted in their historical and cultural ties. India's strategic imperatives in Afghanistan encompass security, economic, and political dimensions. The proliferation of terrorist organizations in the region represents a substantial risk to regional stability, with direct implications for India's national security. Furthermore, Afghanistan serves as a pivotal site for India to mitigate Pakistan's influence through strategic economic engagements. It is also regarded as an access point to Central Asia, a region abundant in natural resources and presenting substantial opportunities for trade. In 2005, India advocated for Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), underscoring its commitment to Afghanistan's integration into regional frameworks. India's significant contributions to Afghanistan's reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts have further reinforced this partnership. Notably, the Strategic Partnership Agreement has solidified the multifaceted and dynamic relations between the two nations. While India does not officially recognize the Taliban regime, it has maintained humanitarian aid and developmental assistance as key components of its engagement. For instance, India has provided consignments of wheat and medical supplies to address Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. This highlights the significant paradigm shift in India's approach to its policy regarding Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's ascension to power has posed significant challenges to India's foreign policy, necessitating a recalibration of its approach while maintaining its core strategic objectives. India's enduring priorities have profoundly shaped its diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan over the years.

Methods: This study uses both primary and secondary data collection methods. It consults classical and contemporary sources to understand the existence, nature, and factors shaping Indian strategic engagement with Taliban, ensuring a balanced perspective by including Indian and non-Indian viewpoints. Additionally, it uses literature from think tanks in India and other countries to gain insights into the "Indian perspective" and "Afghanistan perspective". The research involves thematic analysis to identify key trends in India's foreign policy approaches. This includes examining case studies of India's aid initiatives and their impact on Afghanistan's socio-economic landscape, as well as policy shifts in response to evolving geopolitical scenarios. The analysis is grounded in concepts of soft power diplomacy and strategic culture, with a particular focus on India's strategies in humanitarian aid, cultural diplomacy, and developmental projects.

Literature review: Gilpin (1981) talks about how a state's potential strength and wealth can shape her strategic behavior. As states become stronger and wealthier they also tend to become more and more ambitious in their foreign policy postures and objectives. By this logic India's growing economic and military strength after 1991 can explain the "strategic paradigm shift" in her foreign policy in general and her Afghanistan policy in particular. India's pro-active Afghanistan policy over the past sixteen years is part of a broader attempt by New Delhi to control her "strategic environment".¹

The reluctant realist: A study of India's Afghanistan policy from 2001 to 2018 in the light of India's civilizational strategic culture by Hameed Shuja examines the factors influencing India's Afghanistan policy since 2001 and how Kabul has responded, within the debate of India's

¹ Gilpin, R. (1981). War and Change in World Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

strategic culture. The study focuses on the period from 2001 to 2017 to analyze the domestic factors shaping Indian and Afghan foreign policy thinking, such as the rise of Hindu nationalist politics in India and the transition of power in Afghanistan. It also considers external constraints during this period.² Historically, India's approach to Afghanistan was rooted in a realist perspective, a realist perspective in international relations emphasizes that states operate in an anarchic global system, where they compete for power and security due to the absence of a centralized authority³. This framework views states as rational actors primarily concerned with their national interests, security, and survival⁴. Realism contrasts with idealism or liberalism by focusing on the competitive and conflictual nature of international politics, often prioritizing self-interest over ethical considerations.

Building on the discourse surrounding India's strategic culture, Kanti Bajpai (2013) offers a contemporary perspective, asserting that India does, in fact, possess a grand strategy. Bajpai suggests a departure from both Nehruvian ideals and hyper-realism, ideological extremes that have historically defined India's foreign policy. Instead, he posits that India is increasingly embracing "neoliberalism" as the most suitable framework for its foreign policy choices.⁵

In the context of India's strategic approach to Afghanistan, Avinash Paliwal's book "My Enemy's Enemy" offers a nuanced analysis that identifies two dominant schools of thought within India's foreign policy establishment regarding its strategic objectives in Afghanistan:

1. The Conciliatory School: This group advocates for a more accommodating approach towards Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, believing that engaging with Pakistan is necessary for regional stability.
2. The Partisan School: This faction favors a more assertive Indian role in Afghanistan, even at the risk of antagonizing Pakistan.

Paliwal's work provides a more in-depth examination of the internal debates and policy contradictions within India's strategic thinking on Afghanistan. This analysis contributes to the broader discourse on India's strategic culture and foreign policy decision-making, offering valuable insights into the nuances and competing visions that influence India's approach to regional security and diplomacy in South Asia.⁶

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The one aspect of India-Afghanistan relations that transcends both geographical borders and the nature of political ties between the two Governments are the deep historical and civilizational ties between the two people. Over the centuries these relations have been both friendly and, at

² Shuja, H. (2018). *The reluctant realist: A study of India's Afghanistan policy from 2001 to 2018*. [Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University]. Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion.

³ Devetak, Richard, ed. (2012). *An introduction to international relations* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 36–41.

⁴ Korab-Karpowicz, W. Julian. (2023) "Political Realism in International Relations" . The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy , edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman,

⁵ Bajpai, K. (2013). India Does Do Grand Strategy. Global Brief [published online on 5 March 2013]. Available from: <http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2013/03/05/india-does-go-grand-strategy/> [Accessed on 2 April 2015]

⁶ Paliwal, A. (2017). *My Enemy's Enemy. India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal*. London: Hurst Publishers

times, thorny. Historically, Afghans have flooded into India for all sorts of reasons. They have come as conquerors of course, as traders, as Sufis and religious scholars spreading their faith and as ordinary laborer looking for survival. In more recent years they have been coming as tourists, medical patients and students. These historical interactions have resulted in an understanding of each other's history, culture and faith. Centuries of interaction between the two people has given birth to new knowledge and ideas, a shared art, a similar literature and an appreciation of each other's place and significance in the region and the world.⁷ India's interaction with the Taliban represents a pivotal evolution in its foreign policy, underscoring a shift from traditional realist approaches to a more pragmatic stance within international relations. Historically, India adhered to principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, shunning engagement with non-state actors like the Taliban due to their ties with militant groups hostile to Indian interests. However, the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 necessitated a recalibration of India's strategy, balancing its security priorities with humanitarian imperatives and regional diplomacy. However, recent shifts in India's policy reflect a pragmatic adaptation to new realities, balancing security concerns with humanitarian engagement and regional diplomacy.

India's traditional stance regarding bilateral relations with Afghanistan has been to focus on engaging with the Afghan Government directly. New Delhi has preferred to support and engage with whoever was in power in Kabul, with the years of the Mujahedeen regime and later the Taliban rule (1992 to 2001) being an exception.⁸ India, from the very beginning of the world's renewed engagement with Afghanistan in 2001, was playing a prominent role. Policy elites in New Delhi realized this was an opportunity to not only shape India's future strategic vision for the region but also to re-engage with a strategically important neighbor which India had pretty lost to Pakistan for many years. It is apparent from this, since 2001, India has pursued a non-military, non-coercive and soft power policy towards Afghanistan. India's soft power approach of forging economic (aid), humanitarian, capacity building and institutional links vis-à-vis Afghanistan tried to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan government and the ordinary Afghans.⁹

Scholars have already discussed the terms "strategic inactivity"- "passive engagement" which refers to a passive or "wait-and-watch" approach, where India refrains from taking proactive measures in Afghanistan, and "strategic reactivity"- "pragmatic response," on the other hand, involves responding pragmatically to emerging challenges without necessarily initiating bold actions. However, the Taliban's resurgence in 2021 required India to recalibrate its policy. Despite India's traditional reluctance to engage with the Taliban, recent developments reveal a shift toward pragmatic engagement. It could be proposed to introduce a third phase characterized by "strategic activity," reflecting a deliberate and goal-oriented approach to policy execution.¹⁰ India's engagement with Afghanistan is aligned with the region's changing landscape. India's approach to isolating the Taliban has faced limitations as global dynamics shift over the years. Many countries, including China and Russia, have begun engaging with the Taliban to secure

⁷ Kousary, H. (2016). Interviewed by Hameed Shuja in April 2016.

⁸ Shuja, H. (2018). *The reluctant realist: A study of India's Afghanistan policy from 2001 to 2018*. [Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University]. Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion.

⁹ Ahmad, P. T. (2022). *An Analysis of India's Soft Power Policy in Afghanistan*. India Quarterly, 78(4), 634-653. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284221127787> (Original work published 2022)

¹⁰ Shuja, H. (2018). *The reluctant realist: A study of India's Afghanistan policy from 2001 to 2018*. [Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University]. Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion.

regional stability and economic interests. For instance, China has integrated Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia views the Taliban as a counterbalance to extremist groups like ISIS. Meanwhile, China has increased its presence by appointing Ambassador Zhao Xing and showing interest in Afghanistan's vast natural resources, valued at approximately \$1 trillion. These resources are crucial for supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance regional connectivity and economic influence. In response, India aims to counterbalance China's influence by strengthening its ties with Afghanistan and leveraging this growing relationship to navigate its historically complex ties with Pakistan. Apart from that, Furthermore, India's security concerns, particularly the Taliban's ties with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, have made direct engagement increasingly vital. The Taliban's strained relationship with Pakistan, especially over issues like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), presents India with opportunities to recalibrate its approach. By engaging directly, India seeks to address cross-border terrorism and safeguard its interests.

India is Afghanistan's biggest regional donor in terms of financial aid. Although India may not rival the financial contributions of Afghanistan's other donors, particularly the United States, there are several compelling reasons why India is well-positioned to outperform even the US in development and reconstruction efforts. First, public opinion in Afghanistan is strongly in India's favor. Many of its developmental projects have been concerned with improving the lives of ordinary Afghans. Importantly, this public goodwill for India is spread around the country, transcending tribal, ethnic or regional borders. This has helped India expand its activities in Afghanistan. This is a unique status for India. Many other countries involved in the current Afghan quagmire, including the US, have failed to rally "large scale public support" for their engagement in Afghanistan.¹¹ Second, civilizational and historical ties between India and Afghanistan mean Indian aid workers operating in Afghanistan have a better understanding of the country's culture, traditions and religious sensitivities. This is one area where western countries and their militaries failed badly. Third, India is able to deliver far greater services with a relatively smaller budget. India has used her financial aid in Afghanistan smartly ¹² India's "soft power" strategies in Afghanistan have been a cornerstone of its foreign policy, emphasizing cultural diplomacy, developmental assistance, and humanitarian aid over military intervention. The Taliban has shown openness to India's involvement, encouraging the reopening of its Kabul mission and resuming direct flights. In turn, India has also provided substantial humanitarian aid, including food, medicine, and vaccines. Strengthening economic ties, particularly in infrastructure, agriculture, and energy, can create mutual benefits and foster stability.

From a development perspective, India emerged as a vital partner for Afghanistan in its process of rebuilding and stabilization. Almost 500 projects were implemented by India in the priority areas of power, water supply, road connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture, and capacity building. The landmark projects include the Afghan Parliament building, inaugurated in 2015, which symbolized the commitment of India towards Afghan democracy. The Salma Dam, earlier referred to as the India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam, built in Herat Province and completed in 2016, served 75,000 hectares of land and produced 42 MW of power, thereby significantly

¹¹ Shuja, H. (2018). *The reluctant realist: A study of India's Afghanistan policy from 2001 to 2018*. [Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University]. Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion. P-125.

¹² Mullen, R, D. (2016). Interviewed by Hameed Shuja on 20 March 2016.

contributing to the infrastructure and needs of Afghanistan.¹³ However, after the Taliban assumed power, India severed ties with them and closed its embassy in Kabul. In June 2022, India reopened its embassy in Kabul, assigning a technical team to oversee humanitarian aid and developmental initiatives. This represented a notable shift in India's stance, as the embassy had been closed following the Taliban's takeover. The Taliban responded positively, guaranteeing the embassy's security and urging other countries to follow India's example in resuming diplomatic activities. This action highlighted India's strategic intent to maintain a foothold in Afghanistan despite the challenges of engaging with the Taliban administration.

Apart from that, India has sent a team from the Ministry of External Affairs to Kabul to oversee its humanitarian aid operations and visit project sites. India has provided 20,000 metric tons of wheat, 13 tons of medicine, 500,000 COVID vaccine doses, winter clothing, and plans to send more aid. Notably, one million doses of COVAXIN were gifted to Iran for Afghan refugees, and UNICEF received 60 million polio vaccine doses. India's assistance, appreciated across Afghan society, reflects its longstanding civilizational ties with Afghanistan. The team will also meet Taliban leaders to discuss ongoing humanitarian efforts.¹⁴ India proposed sending 50,000 tones of wheat to Afghanistan via Pakistan in October 2021, and Pakistan approved the transit in November 2021. The first shipment of 2,500 tones was dispatched on February 22, 2022, and reached Jalalabad on February 26, 2022.¹⁵ These considerations position India as a highly suitable partner for Afghanistan. The Afghan Government acknowledges and values India's unique status.

India's main objective is to ensure its long-term presence in Afghanistan. India's commitment to maintaining a long-term presence in Afghanistan has been evident through various recent developments.

Consular Services in Mumbai: The Taliban appointed Ikramuddin Kamil as the acting consul at the Afghan Consulate General in Mumbai on November 12, 2024. This appointment aims to facilitate consular services for Afghan citizens in India. Kamil, who has been pursuing a Ph.D. in Delhi, is expected to strengthen diplomatic ties and assist Afghan nationals visiting India.

Bilateral Trade Talks in Doha: The talks between Indian diplomats and Taliban officials have focused on trade relations, especially through the use of Iran's Chabahar port, while New Delhi has also sought to counter Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. In November 2024, an Indian delegation, led by Singh, held discussions with Muttaqi to advance bilateral trade relations. Singh assured that India would address challenges faced by Afghan businessmen, streamline visa processes, and actively resolve existing trade issues. He emphasized increasing exports and imports through Iran's Chabahar port. Afghan businessmen highlighted certain trade-related concerns with Chabahar, prompting Singh to commit to making substantial efforts to address them. Additionally, Singh engaged in talks with Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi, focusing on Afghanistan-Iran-Pakistan relations, India-Afghan bilateral ties, and the Taliban's efforts against the Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP). According to a Taliban statement, the Indian delegation expressed New Delhi's interest in deepening political and economic collaboration with Afghanistan, particularly by enhancing trade through the Chabahar port. According to a

¹³ Hindustan Times. (2015, December 25). Modi in Kabul: PM meets Ghani, to inaugurate Afghan's parl building. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/modi-in-kabul-pm-meets-ghani-to-inaugurate-afghan-s-parl-building/story-wua2CtN8gj4IQsRnmNknHM.html>

¹⁴ [India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan](#) Ministry of External Affairs Government of India

¹⁵ Why India is reaching out to the Taliban now. The Economic Times. January 14, 2025. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>

statement on the Taliban's official website, "the focus was on fortifying relations between the two nations" and while Muttaqi stressed the importance of supporting the Afghan people to foster trade relations, specifically by improving the process of issuing Indian visas to businesspersons, the Indian special representative spoke about upcoming discussions between technical delegations from the region, Afghanistan, and India regarding the Chabahar port. In a move demonstrating pragmatism and strategic foresight, Senior representatives from India and the Taliban met in Dubai on January 8, 2025. Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi discussed expanding bilateral relations, enhancing trade through Iran's Chabahar Port, and potential collaborative development projects. The Taliban government expressed interest in strengthening political and economic ties with India, calling it a "significant regional and economic power".¹⁶ Discussions were centered on enhancing trade and utilizing Iran's Chabahar port, a key infrastructure project developed by India to circumvent Pakistan's Karachi and Gwadar ports. The Dubai meeting between Misri and Muttaqi took place amid escalating tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, intensified by Pakistani airstrikes on Paktika province's Barmal district in December 2024. While Pakistan views Afghanistan as a key element of its strategic depth, India regards strengthening ties with Afghanistan as vital for both its security and strategic objectives.¹⁷

Conclusion: Key finding of that research is that India's engagement with the Taliban represents a significant departure from traditional foreign policy norms, reflecting the need for pragmatic adaptation in a changing geopolitical landscape. By balancing humanitarian efforts, economic ties, and strategic diplomacy, India aims to uphold its influence and security interests in the region. This paradigm shift underscores India's broader ambition to shape its strategic environment while addressing domestic and regional challenges. As global powers increasingly integrate Afghanistan into their regional strategies, India's recalibrated approach demonstrates its commitment to fostering stability and ensuring long-term partnerships. India's engagement with the Taliban signals a significant departure from its traditional foreign policy norms, embracing pragmatism to navigate the evolving geopolitical terrain. This strategic recalibration not only underscores India's resolve to secure its interests in Afghanistan but also positions it as a key player in regional diplomacy. By intertwining humanitarian efforts with economic and strategic objectives, India exemplifies a nuanced approach to global engagement. Looking forward, the success of this engagement will hinge on its ability to balance domestic priorities with the shifting dynamics of South Asia, paving the way for sustainable partnerships and stability in the region.

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¹⁶ Why India is reaching out to the Taliban now. *The Economic Times*. January 14, 2025. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>

¹⁷ Indians diplomats seek bilateral trade relations with Afghan Taliban through Iran's Chabahar port. January 24, 2025. Middle East Media Research Institute. official site: https://www.memri.org/reports/indian-diplomats-seek-bilateral-trade-relations-afghan-taliban-through-irans-chabahar-port#_edn2



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