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How Did Taliban's Surge Affect India's Afghanistan Policy?

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the dramatic political challenges and shifts India's commitment to maintain relations with Afghanistan remains unchanged. What does make this South Asian giant to keep engaged in its tumultuous neighbour's affairs?

This paper argues that while India's core strategic interests in Afghanistan have not changed, the approach has evolved from proactive state-building to cautious engagement when the Taliban came to power in 2021. India's continuing engagement in Afghanistan, regardless who is in power, might be explained via the following several reasons;

Firstly, India has vital interests in Afghanistan including security, economic as well as political. India is concerned about emerging different terrorist groups in its neighbourhood which could destabilise the region and potentially impact India. Secondly, India wants to counter balance Pakistan's influence in the region through economic initiatives. For example, for India Afghanistan may serve as a gateway to Central Asia which is rich in natural resources and has huge trade potential. Taliban's return to power, however, presented new challenges to India's Afghanistan policy, forcing a recalibration of its approach while maintaining its core objectives. India's long-term interests have significantly influenced its engagement with Afghanistan over many years. This influence is apparent in India's responses both during and following the U.S. invasion in 2001.

India provided Coalition forces with vital intelligence during the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, helping them to topple the Taliban government. When the new government was formed, India promptly established diplomatic relations with it and actively participated in government formation endeavours in Afghanistan. Since then, India has been the biggest donor to Afghanistan in the region and fifth



largest in the world [1].

INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW (2001-2021)

India's engagement with Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 was calculated and multi-dimensional with security relations being paramount. One of the key pillars of India's Afghanistan policy was developed around the idea of Afghanistan never being used against India's interest by terrorist groups along with containing Pakistan's influence in the region. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India emerged as one of the important partners in the reconstruction and stabilisation of Afghanistan. From intelligence to military support to the US-led coalition forces could be examples of building up security apparatus in Afghanistan.

Over the years, India has trained over 4000 Afghan National Army officers and soldiers [2], besides, provided military equipment like Mi-25 attack helicopters and counterterrorism training to Afghan security personnel [3]. This extensive security engagement by India marked a commitment to long-term stability in Afghanistan avoiding direct military intervention. Capacity building through such initiatives by India tends to establish substantial internal security in Afghanistan without engaging in any form of confrontation with regional powers like Pakistan.

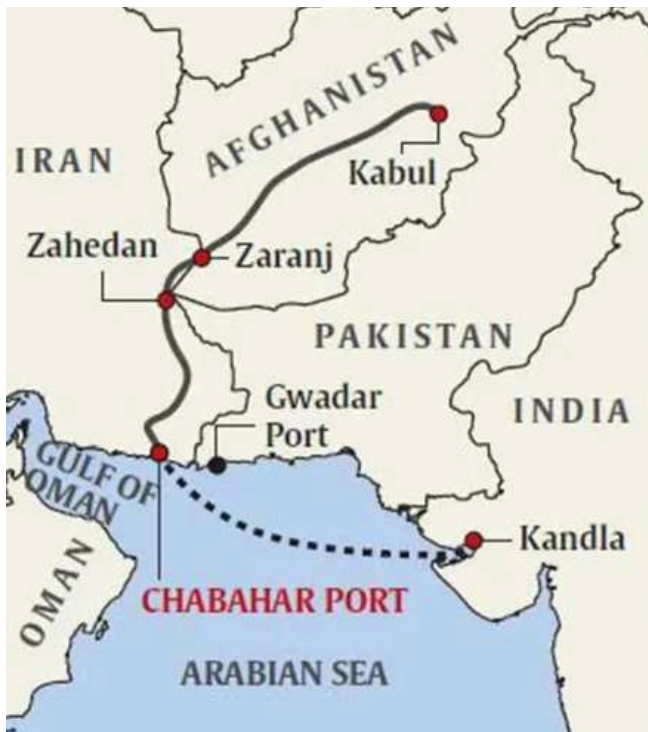
However, this cooperation faced significant challenges. The bombing of India's embassy in Kabul in 2008 which killed 58 people highlighted the existential threat to India's interests as well as unstable security environment in Afghanistan [4].

[1] Brookings Institution. India, Afghanistan, and connectivity in South Asia: Address by H.E. Shaida Abdali, Ambassador of Afghanistan to India. <https://www.brookings.edu/events/india-afghanistan-and-connectivity-in-south-asia-address-by-h-e-shaida-abdali-ambassador-of-afghanistan-to-india/>.

[2] The Kabul Times. Female Afghan soldiers train at Indian academy. <https://thekabultimes.com/female-afghan-soldiers-train-at-indian-academy/#:~:text=India%20has%20so%20far%20trained,of%20security%20forces%20in%20Afghanistan>.

[3] Gady, F.-S. (2016, December 1). India delivers 4th combat helicopter to Afghanistan. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/india-delivers-4th-combat-helicopter-to-afghanistan/#:~:text=India%20has%20finally%20delivered%20the,according%20to%20local%20media%20reports>.

[4] France 24. (2009, October 8). Taliban claims responsibility for attack outside Indian embassy. <https://www.france24.com/en/20091008-taliban-claims-responsibility-attack-outside-indian-embassy->



Source: *The Indian Express*

Economically, the strategic motivation for India was guided by interest in the improvement of regional connectivity, reducing Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan. India invested around \$3 billion in diverse projects and is one of the largest donors in the region [5]. Since the inception of the Zaranj-Delaram highway in 2009, which was constructed over 218 km, Afghanistan has become within its reach to access Iranian ports without having to rely on Pakistan for trade in a large way [6]. This project, together with India's support for the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran, underlined India's more extensive ambitions in regional connectivity, especially in Central Asia.

India's economic approach was not limited to infrastructure development alone. Setting up an air freight corridor in 2017 increased bilateral trade to over \$1.5 billion annually by 2019-2020 [7]. Furthermore, facilitating Afghanistan's accession to the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2011 was an unequivocal signal of India's intention to establish long-term economic connections and deepen regional economic cooperation. All this strengthened India's position as a potential economic partner of Afghanistan and at the same time served its strategic interests in the region.

[5] Brookings Institution. (2017, April 25). India, Afghanistan, and connectivity in South Asia: Address by H.E. Shaida Abdali, Ambassador of Afghanistan to India. <https://www.brookings.edu/events/india-afghanistan-and-connectivity-in-south-asia-address-by-h-e-shaida-abdali-ambassador-of-afghanistan-to-india/>.

[6] International Monetary Fund. (2005). *Reconstructing Afghanistan*. International Monetary Fund. https://books.google.co.uz/books?id=Lg8xc42UAWcC&pg=PA18&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[7] Embassy of India. Bilateral trade between India and Afghanistan. <https://eoi.gov.in/eoisearch/MyPrint.php?11360?000/0001#:~:text=Bilateral%20trade%20between%20India%20and,Afghanistan%20around%20US%24,530%20million>.



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 [8].

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 contributing to the infrastructure and needs of Afghanistan [9].

India's development involvement was indeed comprehensive, reaching to the grassroots levels through the Small Development Projects scheme, covering all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The annual disbursement of 1,000 scholarships for Afghan students for higher education in India, as also the Self-Employed Women's Association program, in which over 3,000 Afghan women were trained, underlined the commitment to human resource development and social progress in Afghanistan [10]. This approach helped India to gain goodwill among the Afghan people and presented itself as a responsible partner in nation-building. Its attention to high-visibility projects and other public development initiatives has helped to differentiate the country from other international actors in Afghanistan.

With this sustained and all-encompassing effort, India had undoubtedly earned its place as a factor in Afghanistan's destiny. While this furthered Indian interests in the field of strategy, at the

[8] 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>.

[9] Press Information Bureau. (2016, June 4). Prime Minister's visit to Afghanistan. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=145967>.

[10] Brookings Institution. (2017, April 25). India, Afghanistan, and connectivity in South Asia: Address by H.E. Shaida Abdali, Ambassador of Afghanistan to India. <https://www.brookings.edu/events/india-afghanistan-and-connectivity-in-south-asia-address-by-h-e-shaida-abdali-ambassador-of-afghanistan-to-india/>.



same time, it contributed much value to the nation-building endeavours that went on in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. But, sudden political changes in 2021, brought fresh challenges to India.

INDIA-TALIBAN CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIPS (2021-PRESENT)

Sudden developments of events in Afghanistan in 2021 created numerous challenges for India. This, in turn, necessitated the insertion of some readjustments for India in its decades-long involvement in the war-torn nation. The fall of the Republic, which New Delhi sponsored for more than two decades, had revealed a more vital need for reassessment of the approach.

Initially, India in a slightly cautious way responded to the resurgence of Taliban. Aware of the new ground realities, India was looking to retain a diplomatic presence in Kabul despite evacuating its personnel in the immediate aftermath of the takeover by Taliban [11]. It was instinctively driven by pragmatic recognition that despite the fast-changing political dynamics, keeping open channels of communication and at least a modest influence in Afghanistan remained vital for India.

Economically, India shifted its focus to address the worsening humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. With the Taliban led government failing to secure continuous international aid and recognition, India turned into an important provider of humanitarian aid through wheat, COVID-19 vaccines, and emergency relief supplies [2]. This humanitarian diplomacy has offered New Delhi a way to engage in constructive way with the new Afghan authorities while asserting its commitment to the welfare of Afghans.

[11] Economic Times. (2021, August 24). MEA calls India's evacuation mission from Afghanistan named 'Operation Devi Shakti'. The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/mea-calls-indias-evacuation-mission-from-afghanistan-named-operation-devi-shakti/articleshow/85589396.cms?from=mdr>.

[12] Laskar, R. H. (2022, January 1). India donates 500,000 COVID vaccine doses to Afghanistan. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-donates-500-000-covid-vaccine-doses-to-afghanistan-101641060000708.html>.



India's approach involves balancing the decision to withhold formal recognition of the Taliban government while keeping open the channels of communication. New Delhi signalled that a genuinely inclusive and representative government should be in Kabul – one that accepts all Afghans' rights, including those of the minorities and women. This principled attitude was a part of the Indian way of acquiring credentials to establish itself as a responsible regional power working for peace and stability in Afghanistan.



Source: *The Organisation for World Peace*

The various aspects of the Taliban coming to power have opened up a set of new challenges for India in the realm of security. A revived transnational terrorist group and the spillover effects on India's security landscape created concerns and required careful recalibration of India's counter-terrorism cooperation with Afghanistan.

The new phase of India's Afghanistan policy has been gradual inching away from overt state-building and democracy promotion to more cautious and selective engagement, in which New Delhi seeks to protect core interests while being responsive to the changing realities on the ground. The resurgence of the Taliban presented a challenge for India that needs careful diplomatic, economic, and security-oriented calibration in engagement with Afghanistan.



INDIA'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY PRE- AND POST-TALIBAN RESURGENCE

A comparison of Indian foreign policy towards Afghanistan, before and after the arrival of the Taliban, demonstrates major changes in tactics with maintaining the permanence of strategic goals. Between 2001 and 2021, India relied on close cooperation with the official Afghan authorities, using “soft power” to strengthen its position. This multifaceted strategy included economic, developmental, cultural, and educational initiatives, as previously stated. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 has required India to strategically reorient its regional approach. While maintaining its long-term strategic objectives, India has opted to engage indirectly with Afghanistan. Therefore, India has stepped up its engagement in international platforms such as the UN Security Council, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

At the same time, New Delhi continues to offer humanitarian support through platforms like the UN, by providing essential food, medicine, and vaccines. Moreover, continuing scholarship programs for Afghan students in Indian educational institutions helps to maintain people-to-people ties.

India uses its economic influence in Central and South Asia as a means of indirectly influencing events in Afghanistan. In an effort to maintain economic relevance in the region, India has been strengthening trade ties with its neighbours.

Despite the political changes, India continues to promote culture through media and educational programs. In this way, India maintains its soft power and keeps the channels of communication open for possible future engagement. These indirect methods thus help India protect its interests and maintain its influence in Afghanistan without engaging directly with the Taliban government. This well-thought-out strategy thus allows India to adapt to the new political reality while pursuing its long-term regional goals.



India's contemporary foreign policy approach towards Afghanistan strikes a fine balance between cautious engagement and strategic necessity. The world, including India, did not officially recognize the Taliban government unless they established an inclusive government that protects women's and minority rights. But India's interests in Afghanistan require a certain degree of involvement, which cannot wait forever for political issues to be resolved - as they say, until the dust settles. This creates a very complex political dilemma for India. On the one hand, commitment to an international consensus of non-recognition promotes the principles of democracy and human rights. On the other hand, security considerations, economic goals and regional plans dictate some pragmatic interaction with the current rulers of Afghanistan. India has therefore pursued a cautious policy of open informal contacts and offers humanitarian assistance, continuing to insist that the Afghan government be more representative and inclusive.

This plan helps India to protect its long-term interests in Afghanistan while preserving its own beliefs about responsible governance and human rights. As events unfold, India's policy is likely to continue to adjust, balancing between moral values and political realities in this volatile region.

CONCLUSION

India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan strived for continuity and adaptability in the face of dramatic political changes. From 2001 to 2021 India used a multifaceted approach of economic cooperation, development assistance and soft power projection to strengthen its position in Afghanistan and in the region. All of these were aimed at achieving the following objectives: stability in Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, balancing against Pakistan's influence, and strengthening India's economic ties with Central Asia. The Taliban's return in 2021 has required readjustment of its approach, rather than a change in India's core strategic interests. India has shifted from direct nation



building efforts to a more thoughtful involvement strategy. This shows India's pragmatic recognition of new political realities in Afghanistan and its enduring commitment to the Afghan people and regional stability.

Looking ahead, India's Afghanistan policy is likely to remain volatile, adapting to the realities on the ground. The challenge for Indian policymakers will likely be maintaining delicate balance between moral imperatives and strategic necessities. The further engagement with Afghanistan appears to be underscoring India's increasing potential seeking to play a constructive role in promoting stability in South Asia. How successful will this new approach be might depend on the India's ability to work with diverse international partners and its response to the dynamic environment in and around Afghanistan.