

India-Afghanistan relations in Taliban 2.0: geopolitical shifts and emerging dimensions

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Abstract

This paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of India's Afghan foreign policy changes during 2021 after the Taliban takeover. For two decades India has been actively engaged with Afghanistan by investing heavily in infrastructure improvements as well as security developments and governance schemes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserts that India switched from supporting the Afghan government to adopting a more realistic stance towards the Taliban administration. This research seeks to advance these shifts while investigating elements that focus on security worries and diplomatic methods together with regional military forces. This study examines how regional stability, together with geopolitical strategies in India, has been altered because of these recent developments. The research follows a qualitative design method which performs systematic analysis of new political developments in India through case studies. This paper analyses the geopolitical transformation factors impacting India through the application of realism, securities theory, and strategic autonomy. India's diplomatic reactions, security measures, and economic responses to the Taliban takeover between 2021 and the present period make up the paper's study scope. The paper thoroughly investigates security implications by studying regional architecture security roles between Pakistan and China. India's complicated foreign policies under Modi become clearer through this paper, which reveals how Indian national security interests, together with regional factors, determine the government's response to the Taliban's return to power. The study generates a better comprehension of the current geopolitical frameworks in South Asia.

Keywords: counter-terrorism, foreign policy, India-Afghanistan relations, regional security, Taliban, terrorism

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Introduction

This study investigates on how the thrust of India-Afghanistan relations shifted from taking place within the framework of the war on terror to becoming a form of geopolitics. Against the backdrop of the Taliban's return to power, this thorough examination of India's foreign policy under Modi and his government not only stresses the significant challenges facing the establishment in managing its regional security concerns in an evolving geopolitical setting but also sets India in the context of an Indo Pacific regional threat network. Since then, India's investment in Afghanistan has been a playing card in the foreign policy of India, which has engaged in the South Asian region throughout the U.S.-led military intervention from 2001, which led to the ousting of the Taliban regime. Over the past two decades, India has made substantial investments in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, driven by a multi-faceted objective: to help stabilise, combat terrorism, and keep Pakistan from dominating the region (Kaura,

2017). The engagement in Afghanistan has included developing infrastructure, providing humanitarian assistance, and having educational programs targeted at creating an Afghanistan which is stable and democratic (Yar & Niazmal, 2025). These investments rest on a conviction that a prosperous, peaceful Afghanistan would be good for regional security and good in balancing Pakistan's strategic ambitions. India and Afghanistan enjoy a historical legacy of trade, migration and cultural exchange having close cultural, historical and trade links (Wink, 2019). The familiarity and shared destiny resulting from this long-standing relationship have created an environment conducive to cooperation. Nevertheless, the state of relations between India and Pakistan had been complicated by the realities of geopolitics in the region, which had been caused mostly by Pakistan's long-continued endeavour to undermine Indian influence in Afghanistan. India's interaction with Afghanistan, therefore, goes beyond bilateral ties, as India's wider strategic equation with the region nests around Afghanistan (Chattopadhyay, 2013). Afghanistan has always been an insecure place, particularly since the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the Taliban's return to power. This has developed new concerns for India which requires to rethink its strategic interests, security concerns and diplomatic approaches. This is also where the Taliban's resurgence poses its most critical questions: about Afghanistan's ability to sustain itself as a country, the potential return of the terrorist threat, and what it will mean for regional security dynamics (Hassan, 2023). For India, the return of the Taliban poses a dual challenge: But it will also create a security vacuum which could be filled by anti-India militant groups and complicate India's long-standing goal of a stable and democratic Afghan state (Manzoor, 2022).

India's foreign policy has increasingly become increasingly pragmatic, emphasising national security, and domestic and regional leadership under the able leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The payoff potential of the Modi Doctrine stems from a proactive approach to dealing with global affairs, whose principal aim is to somewhat boost India's standing in the world and safeguard its interests (Hall, 2017). In Afghanistan, this doctrine has meant cautious but continued engagement with the Taliban, even as India balances them out with security requirements and the imperative of its presence in a region of geopolitical and strategic importance to the country (Imranullah & Hakimuddin, 2024). This paper endeavours to motivate a full analysis of the changes in Indian foreign policy towards Afghanistan under the new reign of the Taliban, with a special focus on Modi's foreign policy approach. It will analyse how the Modi government has modified its strategies in response to geopolitics and the problem of the Taliban's comeback to power (Chattopadhyay, 2013). In addition, the paper will examine the greater ramifications for regional security in the context of Pakistan and China (Murthy, 2000). To overcome these issues these issues can be best tackled if the historical relationship of India and Afghanistan is considered along with ongoing geopolitical dogmas. The stakes have risen for India now that the U.S.'s withdrawal from Afghanistan has left behind a power vacuum which both Pakistan and China are keen to fill. India's position, however, is complicated by Pakistan's long history of supporting the Taliban, part of Islamabad's effort to broaden its influence in Kabul at India's expense (Datta, 2022). China's growing involvement with the Taliban also threatens India since Beijing has its own strategic interests to protect and safeguard against Indian influence. To understand the nuanced engagement of India in Afghanistan under Modi, one needs to comprehend the strategic underpinnings of India's engagement in Afghanistan ("India and Its Neighbours," 1991). Inspection of the entire geopolitical environment, the position of international actors and the meaning of

domestic political determinants in India. Modi government's handling of Afghanistan is a combination of realist calculations, security and stability trump everything else, along with the recognition of the need for playing the strategic game to uphold India's stakes in the region.

Modi's foreign policy makes strategic autonomy its leitmotif with the idea that India has the ability and capability to pursue its national interests independently while collaborating with a number of international partners (Singh & Philip, 2023). Especially in the case of Afghanistan, where India has a complicated set of its own alliances and rivalries in place, this is an especially timely maxim. In its own way, engaging with the Taliban is essential for India to protect its long-term interests and remain invested in Afghanistan (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Instead, the Modi government's nuanced approach aims to hit a middle ground between security imperatives and diplomatic engagement, acknowledging that a full retreat from Afghan theatre may leave it without influence and make the region more unstable (Guite, 2024). Further, this paper will evaluate how India's recalibration of its foreign policy in practice has affected certain policy measures and diplomatic moves. It looks at India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, security cooperation with regional powers, and attempts at participation in multilateral channels for region stabilisation. The Modi government's intent on holding strategically to Afghanistan for all of its Taliban-related problems also means it has a broader grasp of the importance of stability in India's national security overall (Sharma & Banerjee, 2022). This paper, therefore, adds to the ongoing discussion on India-Afghanistan relations through an in-depth analysis of shifting dynamics and the strategic recalibration efforts undertaken by the Modi government. This analysis aims to carefully situate India's foreign policy within the broader politics of the region and globe so as to clarify India's engagement with Afghanistan and its broader implications for regional security. While Afghanistan remains stuck in the uncertain area of the Taliban regime, India finds itself at a crossroads in its foreign policy approach (Ansari & Tiwari, 2015). The results have high stakes and the need to keep a level head about the shifting tectonics of geopolitics has never been more urgent. In this paper, we will examine how India can work through these challenges to safeguard its interests and meet its core duty to provide a stable and prosperous Afghanistan that will help realise the larger objectives of regional peace and security (Ganguly, 2014).

The concern, which has been reflected in literature on India and Afghanistan before 2021, is that New Delhi has significant developmental investments serving as mechanisms of influence in the region (Gupta, 2013). According to analyses of MEA data, the Indian government has spent more than 3 billion US dollars on Afghanistan reconstruction since 2001, and such major investment projects as the building of the Afghan Parliament and Salma Dam have been implemented (Ranjan, 2022). World Bank and Asian Development Bank records reinforce such figures and reflect disbursements channelled to infrastructural projects and capacity-building programs (Sultani & Srivatsa, 2025). Researchers have suggested that these projects had humanitarian as well as strategic purposes, namely reducing the role of Pakistan in Kabul (Mullen & William, 2017).

The post-Taliban dispensation, which started in August 2021, saw a significant change of tone and informed policy with a greater emphasis on security matters. The shift in discourse, reflected in the EA annual reports and parliamentary debate transcripts, was to position Afghanistan as an axis of cross-terrorism and provide a rationale to increase cooperation with the United States, Russia, and the states of

Central Asia, with regard to counterterrorism (Ahmad, 2022). According to counterterrorism experts, this securitisation discourse reared its head in a shared statement issued by the Moscow Format and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) under their 2022 communique, in which reference was made to the threat of state-sponsored terrorism originating in Afghan territory (Hanauer & Chalk, 2023).

A developing literature is positioning these policy changes as part of a larger ideology of strategic autonomy that Modi follows. The national interest of foreign policy identified in Government White Papers places priority on engagement with various parties on a non-recognition basis, which is a representation of an autonomy-based hedging strategy (Destradi, 2014). The accounts of India's BRI countermeasures reveal economic statecraft instruments such as Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor as important factors of the New Delhi geoeconomic competition with China in Afghanistan (Nath, 2019). Comparative analyses also highlight how India has responded cautiously and pragmatically to Pakistan and China, whereby the former received extreme Taliban support, and the latter has crassly taken advantage of BRI investments.

The theoretical framework that is used in this study is composed of a combination of realism, securitisation theory, and the power of strategic autonomy in order to explain how India has recalibrated its foreign policy concerning Afghanistan in the light of Prime Minister Modi (Galston, 2010). Realism brings to the fore a national security and power dynamic that justifies why New Delhi changed its developmental engagement and oriented its approach towards security to counter the Taliban-allied militancy threat and Pakistani strategic depth in Afghanistan (Adlam, 2022). The theory of securitisation supplements realism by showing how Indian policymakers have communalised the resurgence of the Taliban into an existential threat, justifying the deepening of collaboration with the United States, Russia, and the Central Asian states in counterterrorism and securitised policies such as greater border security and intelligence-sharing (Benitez, 2023). India has also demonstrated its doctrine of strategic autonomy, a key element in this strategic posture that enables the country to relate flexibly with different actors, even proceeding to limited diplomatic contacts with the Taliban, without formal recognition, as a form of ensuring the exertion of its own national interests in conditions of great-power rivalry and regional instability (Rossi, 2023).

Building upon these paradigms, the framework brings in the ideas of constructivism, liberal institutionalism, geoeconomics and soft power. Constructivism points to the fact that the identity of India as a responsible regional power, supported by historical-cultural connections, explains its efforts to support humanitarian aid and processes of diplomacy (Al-Sharif, 2021). Liberal institutionalism highlights the role of India in engaging in multilateral forums, namely, the Moscow Format, the SCO, BRICS and deliberations at the UN to normalise regimes and stability (Singh, 2021). Economic statecraft in the form of India supporting the Chabahar Port and connectivity projects is viewed as an infrastructural investment in an effort to counter the Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan through geoeconomic interpretation (Tsygankov, 2022). Lastly, India used soft power to court Afghan goodwill through cultural diplomacy and aid in order to maintain influence using the theory of soft power (Chrisman, 2019). Collectively, these strands of theories provide a multidimensional perspective on how India has managed security imperatives, normative commitments and strategic independence in its response towards the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 and its shifting of its Afghanistan policy (Nunez, 2023).

Research Methods

Through qualitative and document-research methodology based only on primary and authoritative secondary sources, this study analyses the reorientation of India's foreign policy toward Afghanistan under the prime minister Narendra Modi, in the context of the Taliban resurgence of 2021. The emphasis on the primary work sources guarantees the study's empirical rigour and analytical transparency, as consistently prioritising the unmediated policy writings and official records is encouraged. The data sets prioritise an in-depth investigation of the official government publications of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of the Government of India, such as its annual reports, the Foreign Policy White Papers, and the budgetary ones that outline India's financial assurances to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. These include descriptions of infrastructure investments, such as transport corridors, energy projects and humanitarian assistance. Other secondary sources of data used to triangulate the financial and developmental data include reports and project databases of popular international multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to validate the database of India in terms of the level of disbursement and project outcomes. Content analysis is the methodological heart of the inquiry. It is used in the parliamentary debate transcripts of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, with particular emphasis on the parliamentary speeches of the Prime Minister and the External Affairs Minister that set out Indian strategic objectives. These discussions and speeches are coded based on specific thematic areas, including the security necessities, diplomatic engagement and strategic independence, among others, which enables a balanced comparison between the pre- and post-takeover of Taliban policies. This process of systematic analysis helps in locating a change and pattern shift in rhetoric and its direction based on an empirical legislative record.

Multilateral diplomatic text analysis of such communiques as the Moscow Format, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) declarations, Brazil-Russia-India-China-South-Africa (BRICS) summit statements, and United Nations General Assembly resolutions in 2022-24 further provides the context of the Indian diplomatic stance at the regional and global levels. These texts are discussed to highlight discursive markers and signalling patterns indicating the calculated foreign policy engagements of India with regard to major actors, namely the Taliban regime, Pakistan and China. Combining the MEA press releases and Cabinet Secretariat directives with the triangulation allows drawing causal inferences about when and why India initially starts to engage in the rollout of an engagement strategy. In complement to the document analysis, high-quality academic journal articles and government monographs can offer explanatory value and help validate the primary information without either replacing the document-based data or superseding it.

Results and Discussions

Recalibrating Engagement: India's Strategic Response to Afghanistan's Geopolitical Shift

This research seeks to answer some key questions about India's Afghanistan foreign policy in the aftermath of the Taliban capturing power in 2021. Secondly, this study studies how India's foreign policy has adapted to this major geopolitical change. This research analyses the adjustments in diplomatic tactics, regional union compacts, and contact with the Taliban as India attempts to manoeuvre in a tangled security environment yet with protective interests in mind. The second inquiry in the study is

into the principal security concerns that are prompting India's present policy towards Afghanistan. The Taliban revival has posed the greatest challenge to the situation by giving dangerous threats to India's internal and regional security in the form of terrorism and extremism. These security concerns strongly form India's strategic posture in view of the Taliban's historical relationship with militant groups hostile to India. Secondly, the research analyses India's attitude towards the Taliban regime in light of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy doctrine. Modi's foreign policy goes into policy discovery as artefacts of pragmatism, national security focus, and depth of strategic autonomy. India's strategic recalibration is explained in relation to how these elements relate to India's actions toward Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Finally, the research extends itself to the broader regional effects of the return of the Taliban on India's national security, specifically in the context of Pakistan and China. The Taliban has long links with Pakistan, and China is expanding its footprint there through its Belt and Road initiative. India faces a pivotal situation in this region, and an acute need has arisen to evolve a strategic approach because of the dynamics involved which have a direct impact on the regional position and also the security of India. Through these research questions, the study is intended to produce a detailed analysis of how India's foreign policy toward Afghanistan has changed at the beginning of the post-2021 period by taking into account the security, diplomatic and strategic aspects of India's foreign policy vis a vis Afghanistan.

India's journey with Afghanistan has usually been a combination of a close historical relationship with hard geopolitics and security necessities. Historically, India and Afghanistan relations have connexions for many centuries in terms of politics and culture (Manzoor, 2022). These ties have developed through trade, migration, and cultural exchange, making them the basis of present diplomatic relations, say scholars. Second, India has invested large sums of money in Afghanistan with particular force after 2001, having committed over three billion in developmental projects designed to create stability and dilute Pakistani influence (Aryal & Bharti, 2021). Researchers contend that this was not some altruistic investment but rather a calculated play to cement India as a premier regional power that Pakistan busies itself with games in Kabul to the chagrin of New Delhi. The fundamental premise is that Afghanistan is of Indian national interest and that a stable, prosperous Afghanistan helps India to contain the threat from terrorism owing to the proximity of the country to the region (Kumar Sharma, 2023). India, globally regarded as one of the leading active countries ensuring security, has been critically challenged by the return of the Taliban in 2021, as the security landscape of Afghanistan has fundamentally changed (Van Der Veer, 2007). Any literature that has focused on this resurgence also points out that Afghanistan can once more become a sanctuary for the extremist groups hostile to India. Analysts say this is no time for India to relax: Its dangerous links with terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed mean that India should change its strategic posture (Paliwal, 2017). From a realist point of view, preference for state security and national interests takes priority, implying that India's foreign policy should be based on a proper knowledge of the changing balance of power in South Asia. India's objective is based on cautious engagement with the Taliban, which rises in the wake of Taliban resurgence, and maintaining a balance between the necessity to remain in diplomatic dialogue on every possible level and the necessity to ensure Indian national security (Ahlawat & Izarali, 2022).

Since coming to power with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy has changed to one of a more pragmatic, assertive direction, one that has sought

to firmly anchor itself and provide regional leadership in its foreign policy with a clear focus on national interests (Ranjan, 2022). The basis of the Modi doctrine is realism, with security and power having an ethical edge over ideology. Existing literature on Modi's foreign policy documents a dual strategy of engagement and deterrence in Afghanistan. Modi's government has been pragmatic in pursuing influence in Kabul and simultaneously making security a priority. It has taken the form of guarded diplomatic outreach toward the Taliban to protect Indian investments and promote a conversation that can stifle terrorist threats (Ram & Humayun, 2022). This approach is argued by researchers to be informed by the recognition of the complexity of the politics of Afghanistan, where the Taliban now has *de facto* power. Besides realism, the constructivist framework provides India's engagement with Afghanistan with some valuable insights. According to constructivism, international relations are constructed through social constructs, identities and norms. India's identity as a responsible regional power in the region is what really matters when it comes to deciding foreign policy in Afghanistan.

Various literature suggests that India's prior relations with Afghanistan and its affinity with Afghan culture guide its efforts to support democratic governance and development in the region. The claim of constructivist theorists is that, notwithstanding the difficulties of a Taliban theocratic regime, India's diplomacy strives to uphold norms of governance and human rights. The interplay of India's identity and policy is, however, central to the emphasis that India places on cultural diplomacy in order to underline its role as a stabilising power in South Asia. In addition, the liberal view of international relations further enriches the analysis of India's foreign policy when it claims international institutions and cooperative mechanisms to be an important factor. Typically, scholars studying India's contribution to Afghanistan focus on development aid and humanitarian aid as a means to long-term stability. While Modi's government has continued giving aid to Afghanistan, defining such assistance as a moral obligation and strategic investment, the evidence points clearly towards a shift. According to the liberal framework, India can enhance its role and increase regional stability through multilateral cooperation with international organisations as well as through economic cooperation with other states (Jash, 2022). According to literature, India's aid to Afghan citizens, which has included infrastructure projects as well as educational initiatives, is an essential way to goodwill among Afghan citizens and counter the narrative being put forward by the Taliban (Kronstadt, 2010).

India's Afghanistan strategy can also be better understood on the basis of the theory of geoeconomics as it ties with India's rivalry with China. Geoeconomics is about using economic instruments to solve geopolitical problems. As China's presence in Afghanistan grows larger, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative, India has a strategic challenge of holding on to its role (Bharti, 2022). Analysts say Indian investments in Afghan infrastructure and economic development aren't just about building stability but are also intended to offset Chinese encroachment (Elik & Uslu, 2021). The relationship between India's economic engagement in Afghanistan and its mainline goal of emerging as a regional power and security provider is demonstrated, in line with the literature, through a combination of economic statecraft and geopolitical strategy to achieve these goals (CHACKO, 2021).

Furthermore, the use of soft power has a determining extent in India's foreign policy. Soft power refers to the ability to do that, and not dictate. India has, in the past, tended to exploit its cultural links to Afghanistan, having used education, cultural exchanges and humanitarian aid to bolster diplomatic relations (Ito, 2014). Soft power

literature also often points to India's involvement with Afghan civil society via educational scholarships and cultural programmes as the foundation of a positive image and long-term relationship. Modi government's repeated promise of humanitarian assistance after the Taliban takeover is indicative of a recognition of the importance of soft power in creating the right kind of public opinion and having the intended influence over Afghan society (Anas, 2021). The point is, that India has to involve Afghanistan beyond security issues alone but other means of cultural and humanitarian dialogue (Lal, 2015). By the time we synthesise these theoretical frameworks, we find that the Indian foreign policy towards Afghanistan is a uniquely complex mix of realism, constructivism, liberalism, geoeconomics and soft power (Dar, 2021). There is a fair amount of value added to understanding exactly why India is doing what it is and what implications this has for regional security. According to the literature, the resurgence of the Taliban has great obstacles, but it also forces India to restructure its strategies and adopt new methodologies to preserve its influence in Afghanistan (Rizvi, 2011). In terms of theoretical synthesis, this paper recommends that India's engagement with the Taliban will entail a nuanced understanding of the evolving geopolitical context in order to deal with the numerous challenges posed by the current regime (Nath, 2019).

Examining India-Afghanistan Relations Through a Historical Overview

India's entry into Afghanistan, starting with its entry associated with the US-led intervention in 2001, was both strategic and humanitarian. India was one of the largest regional donors to Afghanistan and played a key role in the country's reconstruction on things like infrastructure, education health and governance (Mazumdar, 2014). The projects included the Afghan Parliament building, Salma Dam and the Zaranj-Delaram highway, which stood as examples of India's commitment to stability in Afghanistan in the long term. India also supported to build capacity of Afghanistan, building civil servants, military, and police. These were merely part of a wider strategic thrust of India to overturn Pakistan's previous influence in Afghanistan, and to ensure India's own battlefield in Central Asia (Pant, 2010). Afghanistan was regarded as an essential element in furthering India's regional security policy from a geopolitical point of view. The aim of fostering a stable and friendly government in Kabul would have been to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for anti-India terrorist groups, which are deeply entrenched with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Ganaie, 2018). But investing in Afghanistan was also part of India's greater regional connectivity initiative, one that included the Chabahar Port in Iran, an alternative trade route that did not pass through Pakistan.

India's Response to the Taliban's Return: Key Shifts in Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy towards the region depicted a real turning point after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Instead, Modi's government had to strike a fine line between staying influential in Afghanistan, addressing India's own security concerns and bigger implications for the region if the Taliban came back in power (Ganaie, 2018). One major issue after 2021 for India has been to reconcile its record of engagement with Afghanistan's development with the security challenges emanating from the Taliban regime. India is one of Afghanistan's most trusted partners, with investments in infrastructure, education and health, but the growth of the Taliban has proved complicated (Shah, 2023). But India has kept up its humanitarian efforts helping Afghanistan's food security, providing medical supplies and supporting refugees. But these efforts have been tempered by the growing security threats raised

by the Taliban coming together with Pakistan and its likely support for anti-India terrorist groups (Shahab, 2022). Consequently, Modi's foreign policy has moved from an exclusively developmental focus to a more securitised one that reflects India's new security sensibilities regarding cross-border terrorism and regional instability. India had its reasons to fear the possibility of Taliban-inspired terrorism, but its interests in the region for safeguarding investments and other interests were important enough to maintain some degree of engagement with the new regime (Pati, 2023).

Counter-terror concerns and Security Concerns

India's first order of security business following the Taliban's recapture of Afghanistan is to ensure that it doesn't facilitate terrorist outfits targeting India. Close ties of the Taliban to Pakistan's ISI and the presence of groups, including the Haqqani Network, within the Taliban leadership conjure up alarm bells in New Delhi. India's core concern centres around Afghanistan becoming a platform for the export of cross-border terrorism in Kashmir (Ganaie et al., 2025), an area of the country that has seen a decline in militancy after the rollback of Article 370 earlier this year. In response, Modi's government has stepped up security in Kashmir and improved the capabilities of its counter-terrorism efforts. India has also moved to deepen its intelligence-sharing arrangements with the USA, Russia and Central Asian countries to track terrorist movements and preempt any attack. As India mounts a heightened military presence along its border and its security presence in Kashmir goes on high alert, the securitisation of Afghanistan is evident under the Taliban (Rehman & Khan, 2014).

Diplomatic Engagement with the Taliban

However, India has not severed ties with Afghanistan completely. But Modi's government has taken a practical approach that squares security interests against a desire for diplomatic opening. India took part in a number of discussions on Afghanistan's future conducted in the framework of the Moscow Format consultations and a Regional Security Dialogue which Russia organised. These are engagements, India has shown a willingness to engage with the Taliban, but cautious willingness without any formal recognition (Wagner, 2010). India's diplomacy has thus far been filtered through the knowledge that shunning the Taliban is unlikely to further its long-term strategic interests. Instead, India is continuing to maintain limited channels of communication with the Taliban as a way of safeguarding physical investments in Afghanistan, preserving some influence with Kabul and hedging against the potential risks associated with the Taliban's closeness to Pakistan (Riedel, 2008).

Regional Implications: The China-Pakistan Nexus

The Taliban's return to power is a strategic victory for Pakistan, as it strengthens Islamabad's hand in Afghanistan and gives it a bigger say in its tussle with India (Batabyal, 2011). Pakistan's military and its spy agency, the ISI, exceptionally, have maintained a connection to the Taliban and have employed Afghanistan as a strategic depth against India (Sahora, 2019). But the ascent of the Taliban has empowered Pakistan's handling of the Kashmir issue, with Islamabad sure to exploit its clout in Kabul to assist an enemy of India exercises (Akbarzadeh, 2003).

China's Expanding Role

With the withdrawal of U.S. forces, China's involvement in Afghanistan has taken a much larger turn. From Beijing's point of view, opportunities and risks coexist in Afghanistan. China is eager to push into Afghanistan using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to access the country's wealth of minerals and its strategic location (Rehman &

Khan, 2014). But China is also worried that extremism could spill over into its Xinjiang region, where it is fighting the Uyghur insurgency. But the more power Beijing obtains in Afghanistan, the more palpable anxiety India feels about the terms of the regional balance of power tilting further in the direction of the China-Pakistan axis (Wagner, 2010). Thus, Modi's government has attempted to extend its partnerships with other regional players, like Iran, Russia, and Central Asian republics, in order to counterbalance the increasing China-Pakistan nexus in Afghanistan (Pattanaik, 2008).

India's Strategic Engagement in South Asian Geopolitics: Balancing Regional Stability and National Interests

An analysis of South Asia's geopolitical landscape highlights the importance of the inflexion of historical grievances, unresolved territorial disputes, insurgencies and the strategic alignments of India and China to regional security and foreign policy (Schleich, 2020). This multi-faceted approach to the security of India's regional interests and countering Pakistan's influence has been adopted by India's subtle involvement in these issues (P. Ahmad & Singh, 2017). India has successfully managed complex problems through a diplomatic mosaic that mixes developmental aid with strategic alignments ranging from participating in the Durand Line confrontation to its implicit support for Baloch and Pashtun grievances and simultaneously cooperating with China's interests in Afghanistan to adapting to the emergence of Taliban 2.0 and its consequences for Pakistan's security environment (Batabyal, 2011; Haboudinejad & Ali, 2022). Taken together, these elements provide elements to India's broader South Asian strategy and, of course, bring into focus the historical complexity and current geopolitical realities of the region (B. Singh et al., 2022).

India's Role in Durand Line Confrontation

The Durand Line, a border that was established in 1893 between India and Afghanistan, the Durand Line, which would remain one of the most unsettled lines in South Asia, separating Afghanistan from Pakistan (Schetter, 2013; Tellis, 2017). Afghanistan's refusal to formally acknowledge the existence of this border, which traces back to its claim that it divides the Pashtun ethnic community over the lines of artificial state-forced boundaries, underscores how the memory of colonial borders of demarcations continues its repercussions for regional stability (Azam, 2022). Control over this border is part of Pakistan's national security framework, particularly managing cross-border militancy and asserting Afghanistan's influence, as Pakistan views the Durand Line as its western border. India's position around the Durand line follows India's policy line and intends to thwart Pakistan's power in Afghanistan in favour of Afghanistan's suzerainty concerns. Though India does not officially take a position on this territorial dispute, India does actively support Afghanistan's non-recognition of the Durand Line, by continuously promoting strong bilateral relations in diplomacy and development (Schofield, 2011). India's \$3 billion-plus investment in Afghan infrastructure, education and healthcare is strategic, helping tie into the rot and leverage its role in stabilising the region. It is in India's long-term interest to align India's interests to help limit Pakistan's strategic depth in Afghanistan and thus counter Balochistan's efforts of projecting power in the region. By deploying this skilful diplomacy, India reinforces its ability to be a main regional ally of Afghanistan while keeping involvement in military affairs on a minimal scale, as it seeks to maintain a stable regional order, which would bring Pakistan's clout down in Afghanistan (Mazloun Yar et al., 2022).

Baloch and Pashtun Movements

Further demonstration of the ethnic and socio-political fractures of the Pakistani state is the Baloch and Pashtun movements in Pakistan, which, if anything, increase the challenges of internal stability with the Baloch having a separatist movement (against Pakistan) (Bödeker, 2009). The Pashtun had a movement (i.e. to unite with their group in Afghanistan) oriented towards the socio-political instability (Zahab, 2002). Repression of grievance also underpins the Baloch nationalist movement that centres in mineral-rich and economically backward Balochistan province within Pakistan. Balochistan is a key supplier to Pakistan's economy but is severely underdeveloped, with high poverty rates and very limited access to basic services. By extending beyond cultural identity, the Baloch nationalist sentiment also takes the form of a demand for greater autonomy and control over local resources that are seen as being extracted for the end of the sake of the central government in preference for the local population. As with the Pashtun movement, the manifestation of which is evidenced most distinctly through the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) (Zaheer & Asim, 2021), it revolves around the matters of human rights violation, marginalisation and socio-political consequences of Pakistan's counterinsurgency policies in its Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and tribal areas (Khan, 2022). These have many times been heavy militarising and of questionable tactics, resulting in large civilian casualty numbers and displacement. As a last resort, the PTM has risen to the occasion by calling for justice and accountability for what Pashtuns are said to suffer at the hands of the state, defying the state's narrative on national security and shining a light on what the cost of its policies in the tribal regions have been. India's attitude toward these movements is cautiously supportive, using principles of advocacy for human rights rather than interference. India's support for narratives of self-determination reflects Pakistan's governance challenges by helping people across the world to raise awareness of Pakistan's human rights record on international platforms. India has implicitly backed Baloch and Pashtun grievances, calling attention to both Pakistan's internal fault lines as well as Pakistan's weakness internationally (Boedeker, 2013). This comes as part of India's long-term strategy of countering Pakistan's reach in its neighbourhood, not through head-on confrontation but through invoking universal principles of justice and rights.

China-Afghanistan Relations: The Positive Perspective and Impact on India's Relations with China and Afghanistan

China's involvement in Afghanistan recently and its aims across the Central and South Asian region are underscored in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which looks to economically connect Afghanistan into a wider network (Aria et al., 2023). China hopes to be able to use large-scale infrastructure projects, trade partnerships and investment in Afghanistan's energy sector to adopt Afghanistan as a stable economic corridor with an added function as a buffer against possible unrest in its Xinjiang province. China's backing for Afghanistan's developmental need hinges on its alignment with the country's security interests through focusing on infrastructure and connectivity, which jointly chart the course of a mutually beneficial partnership (Boni, 2021). India's answer to China's engagement in Afghanistan is complicated but indicates a move to the pragmatic arts of regional diplomacy. China's growing footprint in Afghanistan, albeit perceived as a competitive threat to India's interests, is where the two countries' interests overlap (Encarnation & Fair, 2024). India, like China, has an interest in an Afghanistan that is secure and prosperous, one which would help reduce terrorism risks, reduce trade stability and mitigate the risk that Afghanistan will become

a haven for extremist ideologies. India, however, has cautiously involved China in understanding the possibilities of positive results deriving out of China's engagements by considering areas of opportunities for collaboration, beginning with joint infrastructure projects or concerted anti-terrorism, in the framework of a trilateral approach to Afghan stability. India's evolving regional policy emerges from this pragmatic stance, combining competition with a dose of cooperation and mutual interest emerges. To achieve its strategic objectives, India engages constructively with China's interests in Afghanistan. Still, without this provoking direct confrontation with China, China is losing influence in Afghanistan (Boedeker, 2013).

Geopolitical Factors: Impact of Taliban 2.0 & Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on Pakistan.

Pakistan has suffered the consequences of 'Taliban 2.0' in its old avatar as the Taliban in Afghanistan has resurged considerably (Manish & Mani, 2023), changing the geopolitical landscape of South Asia (Achakzai, 2022). Pakistan has historically maintained friendly relations with the Taliban, but the reality of the group's return to power was, surprisingly, tougher than imagined (Verma, 2023). But, just as that humiliation makes Islamists roar louder, the Taliban's success has reinvigorated factions within Pakistan (Calvillo Cisneros, 2023), especially Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, an insurgent group with an ideological lineage with the Taliban. The TTP has only spurred its activities following the TTPs' achievement of its objectives in Pakistan, like in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, following the footsteps of the TTP, who have launched its insurgent operations against the Pakistani state. They undermine Pakistan's internal security and its counter-terrorism policies (Snider, 2022). There is a careful assessment of the regional security dynamics on India's stance on the TTP and the unfolding of the Taliban 2.0. But Pakistan has accused India of covert support for the TTP to disrupt the country. India's chief interest is in observing how Pakistan handles this internal menace, consuming Pakistani resources and attention that serves to undermine other key activities, including the Kashmir issue.

The activities of the TTP, however, reinforce India's point that Pakistan, through its practice of engaging Islamist factions to adopt its foreign policy agenda, creates unintended consequences (Akbari & True, 2022). This internal instability contravenes Pakistan's position within the region in the interests of an India that views the preferences on a scale of power balance, in which Pakistan's influence is limited (Westcott, 2022). India's response to Taliban 2.0 has been a nuanced one because of its larger aspiration of a stable regional environment characterised by curtailing extremist factions (Tabish et al., 2022). In India, Pakistan is seen as being vulnerable on matters of its internal security, and India's strategy consists of diplomatic efforts without the involvement of its military (Akram et al., 2024). This helps India yield to its regional ends by making a stand for an Afghanistan that maintains a stable and balanced ground, one that impedes the reasons for globalism and one that instigates favourable circumstances for South Asia to stay (Ullah, 2022).

The complexities of India's role in South Asia are distilled in synthesising these interconnected issues. It was found to be a sophisticated balance of competition and cooperation amidst complex historical, ethnic and geopolitical dynamics (Achakzai, 2022). India's foreign policy focuses on a regional stability framework that is opposed to Pakistan's patronage yet assuaging to principles of human rights, development, cooperative security and supporting Afghanistan's sovereignty claims along the Durand Line, engaging with China's economic initiatives in Afghanistan (Hussain, 2022). The

problems being created by Taliban 2.0 and TTP only reinforce the strategic objective India has to keep extremism within its borders and to ensure the region does not compromise its own national security. For example, India's strategy is reactive but at the same time well informed by knowledge of South Asia's internal and external complexities (Manish & Mani, 2023). It has put itself in the posture of a proactive actor that could exercise shaping influence in the future of South Asia, balancing national security with a broader aspiration for peace and greater stability through selective engagement, developmental diplomacy and the promotion of the region's stability (Boni, 2023). In that sense, its nuanced approach reveals India's designation of a regional order that respects its security priorities, diplomatic principles and a balance in a South Asian power structure, which reflects, in this case, all stakeholders (Achakzai, 2022).

Conclusion

With the Taliban's return to power in 2021, India-Afghanistan relations have seen a sea change. The anti-India terrorist groups once harboured by the Taliban rise provokes serious security, diplomatic and strategic challenges for New Delhi. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi however, India's foreign policy has been able to rise up to the challenge, indeed to tackle that challenge with a practical and measured approach. India is too sensible or rather too smart to abandon Afghanistan. Regardless of Modi's foreign policy doctrine, based on realism, strategic pragmatism, and national security, it recalibrated its relations with the country without totally withdrawing from the theatre of operations, which is not easy and which other powers have found confusing as they try to decipher it.

Previously, India's Afghanistan policy has been clearly and consistently developmental; India has invested very heavily in infrastructure projects, education and humanitarian aid to help stabilise the region. The first approach was not just about greater peace in Afghanistan but also about curtailing Pakistani influence: Pakistan wanted strategic depth via its Taliban and other militant ties in the region. Such a strategic investment in Afghanistan provided India with a foothold in a volatile but important South Asian neighbourhood, which it can use as a buffer against the spread of extremism and, should extremism spread secondarily, as a possible launching pad for terrorist activities directed against India. But the Taliban's resurgence in 2021 changed the regional dynamics so fundamentally to oblige India to rethink its India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. The collapse of its US-backed Afghan government and the return of an Afghan regime that had offered safe havens to anti-India terrorist groups came at a time when India had to deal with its security concerns and also protect its long-term interests in Afghanistan. Leaving Afghanistan could dilute India's influence in the entire region to such an extent that it could create a void which would be filled by Pakistan or China, both of whom have stakes in increasing their strategic depth in Afghanistan.

A review of the big picture also informs India's pragmatic approach to the Taliban regime. Long suspicious of Pakistan's hegemonic designs in Afghanistan, the world's biggest sponsor of terrorism, Islamabad, has always used its leverage with the Taliban to serve Pakistan's own geopolitical interests, including neutralising India's interests in the region. Pakistan's close ties with the Taliban, in particular through its strong intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have aroused suspicions in New Delhi about an unprecedented spate of cross-border terrorism and eventual instability in Kashmir. To tackle the risks arising from the rise of Islamic extremism, the

country's counter-terrorism efforts, border security and the intelligence sharing partnership with the U.S., Russia and Central Asian republics have, thus, been elevated by the Modi government. China's growing involvement in Afghanistan is another serious problem for India. But now after the U.S. exit from Afghanistan, China looks bright to expand its Belt and Road Initiative or BRI into the country and, along with it, access to its mineral wealth. Besides, China has engaged with pragmatism with the Taliban, regarding Afghanistan as a critical element of its regional aspirations. India is worried that China's clout is rising in Afghanistan, which will undermine the regional power balance in South Asia further as part of its ChinaPakistan nexus.

Thus, Modi's Afghan foreign policy has gradually assumed a counterbalancing posture with respect to China. Strategic autonomy is at the heart of India's foreign policy under Modi and means he's been trying to practise the doctrine of following one's national interest without any obligation to any particular person or alliance. India's position between different stakeholders in Afghanistan, such as the U.S. and Russia, Iran and the Taliban, has not been limited to the country's conversation with one stakeholder. Like Modi, however, the calculation is most evident in India's response to the return to power of the Taliban. New Delhi has chosen to take part in multilateral discussions over Afghanistan's future, along with keeping a low level of communication with the Taliban, with an eye to its own terms while making its national security interests paramount. India's balancing act within the Afghan context is also part of the global and regional geopolitical picture of the Pacific region. With India rising as a power, the Modi government's foreign policy has become increasingly strident in the Indo-Pacific, where India has found asserting its influence more difficult with a more assertive China. Geographically separated from the IPR's core, Afghanistan remains central within the ambit of India's regional security architecture. The importance of keeping Afghanistan stable and secure to India is to realise its dream of accessing Central Asia and its aspiration to play a countervailing role vis a vis Chinese influence in South Asia. And so, Modi's government has attempted to keep its hands in Afghanistan by creating strategic partnerships, receiving humanitarian assistance and improving security ties with key regional and international powers.

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