

India-Afghanistan Relations from the Taliban 1.0 to 2.0 Regimes and New Geopolitical Consequences in South Asia

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Abstract— India has maintained deep historical and geopolitical ties with Afghanistan since ancient times, yet these relations have frequently been disrupted by interventions from external powers. The Soviet invasion in 1979 and the Taliban's insurgencies and authoritarian governance, particularly during its first regime (1996-2001), along with the U.S.-led intervention in 2001 created instability in Afghanistan's state structure, repeatedly disrupted the India-Afghanistan bilateral relationship, and generated security challenges for the wider South Asian region. The authoritarian rule of the Taliban, marked by insurgency and repression, further erected significant obstacles to the relationship of these two nations. Following the US military withdrawal and the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021, Indo-Afghan relations have entered a distinct new phase, characterised by pragmatic engagement, humanitarian assistance, and cautious diplomatic outreach despite the absence of formal recognition. This evolution stands in notable contrast to the previous Taliban regime (1996-2001), when India maintained minimal contact and actively supported anti-Taliban forces. The current trajectory reflects India's strategic recalibration, seeking to safeguard its interests in connectivity, counter-terrorism, and reconstruction while navigating the persistent influence of external powers. This paper aims to analyse India-Afghanistan relations across the Taliban regimes and highlights the adversarial stance of the 1996-2001 period compared with the pragmatic, positive dimensions emerging post-2021. The analysis reveals both continuity in security concerns and a shift towards constructive, people-centric diplomacy under the present Taliban dispensation, reflecting India's broader geopolitical interests in South Asia.

Index Terms— Soviet invasion, Taliban's insurgencies, South Asian, Indo-Afghan, humanitarian assistance.

I. Introduction

The relationship between India and Afghanistan has deep roots that trace back to ancient times. The ancient kingdom of Gandhara (mentioned in the Mahabharata) is presently known as Kandahar and was once a prominent centre of Buddhism and Hinduism. The expansion of Arab forces into the Afghan region not only consolidated their political presence but also facilitated the introduction and gradual spread of Islam. Despite these early transformations, relations between India and Afghanistan have been shaped by a much deeper and longstanding historical and cultural interconnectedness. This relationship extends beyond formal state interactions and is rooted in enduring people-to-people exchanges (Ali, 2019). One notable example of such societal linkages is the presence of Afghan merchants, commonly referred to as *Kabuliwalas*, who historically engaged in trade across India. Their interactions with local communities became a symbol of everyday cultural contact and mutual familiarity. Over time, these grassroots connections helped sustain

cordial Indo-Afghan relations, even amidst shifting regional geopolitical dynamics. Although the relationship has generally remained stable, there have been moments of strain. A significant instance occurred when India recognized the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, which created a temporary divergence in bilateral ties. Nevertheless, India continued to play a supportive role during Afghanistan's periods of instability. During the Afghan civil war, for example, India extended financial assistance through multilateral channels, including contributions routed via the United Nations in 1990.

From 1996 to 2001, relations between the two countries became more complex. During this period, the Taliban seized power, and their extremist activities, such as the destruction of Hindu and Buddhist heritage, the spread of Islamic extremism, and the promotion of terrorism, significantly strained bilateral relations. Following the establishment of the Taliban regime in 1996, which received substantial backing from Pakistan, India recalibrated its approach toward Afghanistan. In response to the changing political landscape, India extended support to the Northern Alliance, a coalition of anti-Taliban forces. This alliance was composed largely of ethnic minorities, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, who opposed Taliban rule. India's engagement with the Northern Alliance reflected both strategic considerations and its broader objective of countering Taliban influence in the region (Kaura, 2017).

India's strategic engagement with Afghanistan became more pronounced in the early 21st century. The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent intervention by U.S. and NATO forces, which led to the removal of the Taliban regime, created new geopolitical opportunities. India utilized this context to re-establish and expand its presence in Afghanistan. This renewed phase of engagement included strengthening diplomatic relations and providing intelligence and developmental support to the Afghan government (Ali, 2019). In sum, Indo-Afghan relations reflect a complex interplay of historical continuity, cultural affinity, and strategic adaptation, evolving in response to both regional and global developments. India has played a substantial role in Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction through sustained financial and developmental assistance. India initially extended economic aid amounting to approximately US \$2 billion and indicated the possibility of allocating an additional US \$1 billion in subsequent years for Kabul (Kaura, 2017). Following the collapse of the Taliban regime, India emerged as one of the leading contributors to Afghanistan's rebuilding efforts, with its total commitments eventually reaching nearly US \$3 billion. Indian assistance has been directed toward a wide range of priority sectors identified by the Afghan government, including hydroelectric projects, power transmission infrastructure, road construction, and support for agriculture and industrial growth. In addition, India has contributed to the expansion of telecommunications, information technology, and broadcasting services, while also providing humanitarian aid and strengthening the education and healthcare sectors. These initiatives reflect a comprehensive approach aimed at promoting long-term stability and development in Afghanistan.

India's reconstruction efforts are guided by multiple strategic considerations. These include countering the influence of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Taliban-aligned groups perceived as adverse to Indian interests, addressing challenges posed by drug trafficking that threaten regional and human security, and enhancing Afghanistan's role as a key corridor for trade and energy connectivity with Central Asia. Collectively, these objectives highlight the broader geopolitical and economic dimensions of India's engagement in Afghanistan (Singh, 2023). However, in 2021, when the United States withdrew its military forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban once again seized power, displacing the Afghan government. This development posed significant security challenges for India. However, unlike during the first Taliban regime, India did not completely sever its engagement with Afghanistan. Instead, it maintained limited interaction with the Taliban-led administration to safeguard its geopolitical interests and regional security concerns.

II. Scope of the Research

This study explores the strategic and pragmatic motivations behind India's decision to establish communication with the Taliban despite ideological differences, focusing on how the emergence of Taliban-led Afghanistan has reshaped regional power dynamics in South Asia and beyond. It seeks to analyse the evolving roles and interactions of key regional actors, including the implications of shifting Afghanistan-Pakistan relations for India's strategic interests and re-engagement opportunities. The research further intends to explore the role of humanitarian assistance and development cooperation as instruments of India's diplomatic engagement, enabling it to sustain influence without formal recognition of the regime. Overall, the study aims to assess the transformation of India-Afghanistan relations under Taliban (2.0) rule and evaluate its broader implications for regional geopolitics, security, and economic interactions.

III. Literature Review

India-Afghanistan relations have evolved significantly since 2001. During Taliban rule in the 1990s, India had almost no engagement with Afghanistan due to the Taliban's anti-India stance and close ties with Pakistan, and tensions worsened further after the 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight to Kandahar. Following the 9/11 attacks and the fall of the Taliban, India rebuilt ties under President Hamid Karzai, focusing on development, diplomacy, and "soft power" rather than military involvement, supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction, democratic institutions, and security forces, and formalizing cooperation through a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2011. India's interests in Afghanistan are driven by security, energy, and economic goals, as it seeks a stable Afghanistan to prevent terrorism and counter Pakistan's influence, while also viewing the country as a key transit route to Central Asia through projects like TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) and as a gateway for trade and connectivity. Since 2001, India has played a major role in reconstruction through a soft power approach, investing around \$3 billion in infrastructure, education, and development projects such as roads, dams, and the Afghan Parliament building. However, the return of the Taliban in 2021 has posed new challenges; although India has not officially recognized the regime, it has engaged cautiously through backchannel talks, while remaining concerned about Pakistan and China's influence, regional security threats, and the future of its investments and strategic interests in Afghanistan (Singh, 2023).

India-Afghanistan relations have largely been friendly, except for brief political disruptions such as India's recognition of the Soviet-backed Afghan government, with India consistently supporting Afghanistan through financial aid during the civil war and especially in the post-2001 period. After the fall of the Taliban regime, India significantly expanded its role by establishing diplomatic ties, offering developmental assistance, and strengthening cooperation in sectors such as education, health, governance, infrastructure, humanitarian aid, and capacity-building projects. Strategically, Afghanistan remains important for India as a gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East and as a means to counter regional security challenges, with the United States supporting India's growing involvement after 9/11, thereby enhancing its influence. Despite ongoing challenges such as terrorism and regional rivalries, Indo-Afghan relations have remained strong, with generally favourable public opinion in Afghanistan toward India, reflecting mutual trust, shared interests, and long-standing historical connections that continue to sustain and strengthen the partnership. (Ali, 2019).

India has historically maintained strong political, cultural, and developmental ties with Afghanistan, investing significantly in infrastructure, education, and governance to promote stability and counter Pakistan's influence. However, the Taliban's resurgence has significantly altered the regional security environment and prompted a shift in India's approach from a primarily development-focused policy to a more security-driven and pragmatic strategy. A central concern is that Afghanistan could once again become a safe haven for anti-India terrorist groups, particularly given the Taliban's links with extremist

organizations and Pakistan, leading India to strengthen counter-terrorism measures, enhance intelligence cooperation, and maintain vigilance in sensitive regions like Kashmir. Despite these challenges, India has not disengaged but instead adopted cautious diplomatic engagement with the Taliban without formally recognizing the regime, participating in multilateral dialogues and maintaining limited communication to safeguard its strategic interests and past investments. At the regional level, India also faces challenges from the growing China-Pakistan nexus, especially with China's expanding presence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, prompting India to deepen ties with countries such as Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states to maintain strategic balance. Overall, India's Afghanistan policy now reflects a blend of realism, strategic autonomy, limited engagement, and humanitarian support, aimed at protecting national security, preserving regional influence, and adapting to evolving geopolitical realities while avoiding direct confrontation (Ganaie, 2025).

India's strategy in its extended neighbourhood focuses on becoming the leading power in the Indian Ocean region, shaping regional security, and safeguarding its interests through soft power, particularly economic and political influence, while promoting itself as a model of development and building strategic ties across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, often in cooperation with countries like Iran and Russia. India-Afghanistan relations have historically been strong, rooted in shared political positions, cultural ties, and mutual concerns about regional stability; during the Cold War, India maintained a cautious stance on Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, later opposing the Taliban and supporting the Northern Alliance alongside Iran and Russia, and after 2001 emerging as a key partner in rebuilding Afghanistan by supporting a stable, democratic system. India has contributed significantly to Afghanistan's development through over \$2 billion in aid, as well as initiatives in education and trade, including the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor and the Chabahar Port route via Iran to bypass Pakistan and enhance connectivity. Ties remain deep, while economically India has become a major trade partner and investor, encouraging international investment in Afghanistan's resources; overall, India views Afghanistan as crucial to its broader regional strategy and, amid changing geopolitical dynamics especially after the U.S. withdrawal, seeks to maintain its influence, support stability, and counter regional threats (Saqib, 2021).

IV. Research Gap

After an in-depth literature review, it has been found that every author highlighted the Indo-Afghan relations in the several eras. Some of the authors analysed the overall relations between both countries under the Taliban regime. The main point that emerges is that India does not have as clear a stance against the Taliban (2.0) as it did in 2001. Also, it can be focused on why India seeks to establish a positive relationship from the aim of its geopolitics through the name of humanitarian assistance and development cooperation without recognition.

V. Objectives of the Research

In light of this discussion on Indo-Afghan relations based on the Taliban, the main objectives of this research are:

- To investigate the key factors driving India's decision to establish communication with the Taliban despite ideological differences.
- To examine the nature and scope of contemporary diplomatic and strategic relations between India and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.
- To analyse the evolving dynamics of India-Afghanistan relations in the context of Taliban rule and assess their implications for regional geopolitics in South Asia.

VI. Research Questions

This research addresses the following central questions regarding Indo-Afghan relations in the context of the Taliban issue:

1. What are the key factors driving India's decision to establish communication with the Taliban despite ideological differences?
2. What is the nature and scope of contemporary diplomatic and strategic relations between India and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan?
3. How are India-Afghanistan relations evolving under Taliban rule, and what are their implications for regional geopolitics in South Asia?

VII. Methodology of the Research

To analyse India-Afghanistan relations during the Taliban 1.0 and 2.0 regimes, this study adopts a qualitative research approach based on secondary sources. The data have been collected from a range of materials, including academic journals, books, online news articles, and credible websites. These sources are used to trace the historical evolution of bilateral relations, examine the current state of engagement, and assess the broader regional and geopolitical implications.

VIII. Taliban 1.0 and India-Afghanistan Relations

Between 1994 and 1996, Pakistan played a pivotal role in mobilizing radicalized and educated youth into a cohesive movement that came to be known as the Taliban. This group was envisioned as a unifying force capable of providing leadership and stability in Afghanistan amid ongoing internal conflict. By 1996, with substantial backing from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Taliban successfully seized power in Afghanistan. In response to the Taliban's rise, India, in collaboration with Russia and Iran, extended support to the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan - commonly referred to as the Northern Alliance. This coalition comprised diverse ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, and functioned as the principal opposition to Taliban rule (Singh, 2021). In September 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul and proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the country's legitimate government. Their regime was characterized by the enforcement of a strict and puritanical interpretation of Islamic law across territories under their control. India, however, refused to recognize the Taliban government, leading to a significant deterioration in India-Afghanistan relations between 1996 and 2001. India's reluctance to engage with the Taliban regime stemmed from multiple concerns, including the Taliban's stance on the Kashmir issue and reports of militant training camps in Afghanistan that hosted Kashmiri, Pakistani, and other Central Asian militants. These trained militants were allegedly deployed into Jammu and Kashmir under the banner of "liberation," further intensifying India's security concerns (Chatterjee, 2017).

During the period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan (1996-2001), India suspended its diplomatic relations with Kabul, reflecting a sharp decline in bilateral ties. This estrangement can be understood through a combination of political, ideological, and security-related factors that shaped India's perception of the Taliban regime. A central concern was the Taliban's dismantling of democratic institutions and the imposition of a rigid interpretation of Sharia law under the justification of jihad, which India viewed as regressive and incompatible with democratic governance. Additionally, Pakistan's sustained political, military, and logistical support to the Taliban contributed to regional instability, with Afghanistan increasingly emerging as a hub for extremist activities. Another significant factor was the growing ideological and operational influence of the Taliban on sections of youth in Jammu and Kashmir, which was

perceived to have intensified separatist sentiments and insurgency in the region. Cultural destruction also played a symbolic role in worsening relations, particularly the demolition of the ancient Buddha statues at Bamiyan, which drew global condemnation and reinforced negative perceptions of the regime. Besides this, security concerns were heightened by the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight in 1999, when the aircraft was seized from Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu and taken to Kandahar. The resolution of the crisis involved the release of detained militants, including Masood Azhar, in exchange for hostages, leaving lasting implications for India's national security policy (Nandy, 2020). Moreover, reports indicated that Taliban-linked militants found refuge in Pakistan, where they allegedly collaborated with local extremist groups to plan and execute operations against India (Nandy, 2015). These developments collectively explain the hostile nature of India-Afghanistan relations during the Taliban regime.

During the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, India adopted a nuanced and dual-track strategy to safeguard its regional interests. On the one hand, New Delhi extended covert military assistance, along with overt diplomatic and moral support, to the Northern Alliance, which served as the principal opposition to the Taliban regime. This approach aligned India with other regional actors seeking to counterbalance Taliban dominance. On the other hand, India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), is believed to have maintained discreet and indirect channels of communication with elements within the Taliban. These covert engagements were aimed at preserving strategic flexibility and ensuring that India retained some degree of influence in an evolving and uncertain political environment. This combination of overt opposition and covert engagement characterized India's Afghanistan policy until 2001. Through this calibrated approach, India sought to manage the complexities associated with the Taliban's rise while mitigating potential security and diplomatic risks (Singh, 2021).

In the post-Taliban period, India-Afghanistan diplomatic relations were recalibrated in response to the evolving regional and international context, particularly the presence of the United States in Afghanistan and India's strategic alignment with Iran. These factors played a significant role in shaping India's renewed engagement with Afghanistan, with a focus on reconstruction, political cooperation, and regional stability. High-level diplomatic exchanges further reinforced this relationship. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai undertook multiple visits to India, reflecting the strengthening of bilateral ties during his tenure. Similarly, his successor, Ashraf Ghani, also engaged in several official visits, underscoring continuity in diplomatic cooperation and shared strategic interests between the two countries (Nandy, 2020).

IX. Taliban 2.0 and India-Afghanistan Relations

In 2021, the situation in Afghanistan changed dramatically with the withdrawal of U.S. military forces. Following this withdrawal, the Taliban swiftly regained control, overthrowing the democratic government and establishing an extreme autocratic rule under the guise of Sharia law. The state system was effectively disrupted, and widespread human rights violations were reported. However, India's policies toward Afghanistan and the Taliban in this second regime differ significantly from its approach during the first Taliban era, reflecting both changes in regional geopolitics and India's strategic priorities. The unexpected fall of Kabul in August 2021 took the international community, including India, by surprise. In response, India promptly evacuated its diplomatic staff and citizens, temporarily suspending its formal diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. Officially, India expressed concern over the rapidly deteriorating security situation and emphasized the protection of vulnerable groups, including minorities, women, and children.

India's Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan

By mid-2022, India cautiously began re-engaging with Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The reopening of a "technical mission" in Kabul marked a significant policy adjustment, signalling India's intent to maintain diplomatic channels while deliberately avoiding formal recognition of the Taliban government. This

calibrated approach allowed India to monitor developments on the ground, protect its strategic and humanitarian interests, and coordinate aid delivery (Ramachandran, 2022). On 10 October 2025, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, met with Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, in New Delhi for extensive discussions. The dialogue covered a broad range of bilateral issues as well as key regional developments of mutual concern (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Importantly, India emphasized a people-centred approach to engagement rather than a regime-focused one. Diplomatic interactions with Taliban officials remained limited and functional, focusing primarily on ensuring humanitarian access, securing commitments on safety and security, and safeguarding Indian interests (Hasan & Alam, 2026).

India's Security Interests in Afghanistan

Security considerations continue to be a major driver of India's engagement with Taliban 2.0. During the first Taliban regime, Afghanistan effectively aligned with Pakistan's military objectives, providing strategic depth and hosting Arab and Afghan militants targeting Indian Kashmir. Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan became a hub for terrorist training against India, with as many as 21 camps reportedly established. Pakistan actively supported militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen/Harkat-ul-Ansar, and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, all of which received training on Afghan soil. These activities heightened India's security concerns, particularly given the Taliban's involvement in the 1999 Kargil conflict and the hijacking of an Indian airliner to Kandahar (Singh, 2023).

The potential resurgence of terrorist groups hostile to India, including ISIS-K (Islamic State-Khorasan Province) and Pakistan-based networks, has further intensified New Delhi's threat perception. In bilateral discussions, India's External Affairs Minister appreciated Afghanistan's acknowledgment of India's security concerns. In response, the Afghan Foreign Minister reaffirmed that Afghan territory would not be used by any group or individual to carry out operations against India (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Although the Taliban have publicly committed to preventing such use of their territory, India remains cautious about their capacity and willingness to control transnational militant actors effectively. This scepticism underpins India's reluctance to fully normalize diplomatic relations and reinforces a strategy of conditional engagement based on security assurances and operational realities (Hasan & Alam, 2026).

India's Geopolitical and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's geopolitical location is of considerable strategic importance due to its role in regional security dynamics and its potential as a transit hub for trade and connectivity. For India, a primary strategic concern has been to prevent Pakistan from gaining disproportionate influence over Afghanistan's political and institutional structures (Singh, 2021). Within this strategic context, it is essential to analyse how a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is reshaping regional power dynamics involving India, Pakistan, China, and Central Asia, particularly in ways that affect the balance of power and Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. This analysis includes examining changes in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and identifying strategic opportunities for India to safeguard its interests. Additionally, it considers how humanitarian assistance and development cooperation serve as key instruments of India's diplomatic engagement, while assessing the evolving trajectory of India-Afghanistan relations under Taliban (2.0) rule and the broader implications for South Asian geopolitics.

India's aspiration to emerge as a major global power has increasingly influenced its regional foreign policy, particularly in South Asia. As part of this broader vision, India has sought to expand its influence in Afghanistan through sustained developmental engagement. A key instrument in this approach has been "aid diplomacy." India has positioned itself as a significant development partner for Afghanistan by investing in infrastructure, capacity building, and humanitarian initiatives. These efforts have enhanced India's image as

a constructive and reliable partner in Afghanistan's reconstruction. As a result, India has gained substantial goodwill and acceptance among Afghan authorities and the wider society. In comparative terms, India's development-centric approach is often perceived more favourably than Pakistan's, further strengthening India's diplomatic standing in Afghanistan (Nandy, 2020).

Historically, Pakistan has regarded Afghanistan as a vital element of its strategic depth strategy in relation to India. The Taliban movement, which emerged in the 1990s, received substantial support from Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies. In 2021, Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize and support the Taliban's return to power. Islamabad initially expected that the Taliban 2.0 regime would closely align with its regional and security objectives, thereby reinforcing Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and the wider region. However, developments since 2021 indicate growing tensions in Taliban-Pakistan relations. Key sources of friction include disagreements over the Durand Line, challenges in border management, and the Taliban's reluctance to act decisively against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has carried out attacks inside Pakistan from Afghan territory. These developments have challenged Pakistan's expectation of unconditional Taliban compliance and exposed the limits of its influence over the regime (Hasan & Alam, 2026).

From India's perspective, China's growing engagement in Afghanistan is a long-term strategic consideration rather than an immediate threat. Unlike Pakistan, China does not seek to use Afghanistan as a direct platform against India. Nevertheless, its expanding influence, coupled with its strategic partnership with Pakistan, requires India to remain vigilant and adopt a cautious, hedging strategy to safeguard its regional interests. India has deliberately avoided open rivalry with either China or Pakistan over influence in Afghanistan. Instead, New Delhi has pursued selective engagement, emphasizing humanitarian diplomacy and cooperation with other regional stakeholders. This approach involves providing aid, maintaining limited diplomatic channels, and coordinating with countries such as Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian countries to promote stability and protect shared interests in the region. These multilateral efforts reflect a pragmatic foreign policy aimed at balancing competing powers while advancing India's strategic objectives without formally recognizing the Taliban government (Hasan & Alam, 2026).

Afghanistan occupies a strategically pivotal position at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. Historically, it has functioned as the north-western frontier of the South Asian subcontinent, shaping patterns of interaction, trade, and movement across the region. Owing to its unique geographic location, Afghanistan holds significant potential to emerge as a hub for regional connectivity. Its territory can facilitate the development of trade routes, energy pipelines, and transportation corridors linking multiple regions. Consequently, Afghanistan's geostrategic significance extends beyond its immediate neighbourhood, positioning it as a critical node in broader transregional economic and infrastructural networks (Singh, 2021a).

X. Conclusion

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a major turning point in the country's political trajectory, with wide-ranging implications for regional geopolitics across South and Central Asia. This development disrupted the existing policy framework and compelled India to recalibrate its approach toward Afghanistan. Engaging with Taliban 2.0 presents a significant normative challenge for India due to the regime's authoritarian governance and contested human rights record. At the same time, complete disengagement could jeopardize India's strategic interests by creating space for rival actors to expand their influence and reducing India's situational awareness on the ground. Historically, India's policy towards Afghanistan has balanced normative principles with strategic imperatives. On one hand, India has consistently emphasized support for democratic governance, human rights, and inclusive political processes. On the other hand, strategic concerns - including Pakistan's influence, cross-border militancy, access to

Central Asia, and China's growing regional presence - have required New Delhi to adopt a pragmatic and adaptable policy. Even during periods of overt opposition to the Taliban, India maintained informal and covert communication channels, reflecting the realist considerations underlying its Afghanistan strategy (Hasan & Alam, 2026).

India's idealist tendencies are evident in its consistent diplomatic and rhetorical support for a sovereign, peaceful, and inclusive Afghanistan. New Delhi has repeatedly opposed external interference in Afghan affairs and raised normative concerns regarding violations of Afghan sovereignty. While India's response to the 1979 Soviet invasion was constrained by Cold War dynamics, it nonetheless expressed clear apprehension about foreign military intervention. During the Taliban's first regime (1996-2001), India refused to recognize the Taliban government, citing objections to its authoritarian governance, systematic human rights abuses - particularly against women and minority communities - and its links to transnational terrorist networks (Hasan & Alam, 2026). So, India's engagement with Afghanistan following the Taliban's return in 2021 has focused on delivering humanitarian assistance and maintaining functional diplomatic channels, while deliberately refraining from formally recognizing the Taliban regime. Recognizing Afghanistan's urgent need for economic recovery and development, both sides agreed that India would expand its involvement in key areas such as healthcare, public infrastructure, and capacity-building initiatives (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). This carefully calibrated approach allows India to sustain long-term influence and monitor developments on the ground without legitimizing a political order that is ideologically incompatible with its values. The strategy emphasizes people-centric support and risk mitigation over direct political alignment, reflecting India's continued balancing of normative restraint with pragmatic, realist considerations in its policy toward Taliban 2.0. The post-2021 Taliban regime, referred to in this study as Taliban 2.0, differs from its earlier iteration (1996-2001) in its diplomatic behaviour, regional engagement, and interaction with international norms. Nevertheless, it continues to uphold the core ideological principles that defined the original Taliban movement (Hasan & Alam, 2026).

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