

# **Understanding India's Relations with Afghanistan from 2001 to 2022**

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To counterbalance Pakistan and China, as well as to reach out to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and West Asian nations like Iran, Afghanistan plays a crucial role in India's strategic thinking. Afghanistan is significant from India's point of view in terms of security, trade, establishing regional and international footholds, and its energy aspirations. However, security has evolved into the main factor influencing Afghanistan's relevance to India as Afghanistan has been a critical factor for both internal and regional stability. Till the Taliban has regained its position as the de-facto ruler of Afghanistan in 2021, India has invested and aided Afghanistan over \$3 billion US dollars. Regarding infrastructural development assistance in Afghanistan, India has built over 400 projects, including a dam, a paediatric hospital, a highway, and its parliament building, which gained India overwhelming goodwill from Afghan citizens. However, with the complete diplomatic pullout from Afghanistan questions arise about India's gains and interest in Afghanistan in the future. With a historical perspective on India-Afghan relations, this study discusses India's interactions with the Afghan government under Hamid Karzai after the Taliban's overthrow in 2001. With the 2014 political changes in both countries, the study discusses the relationship of India with the Ashraf Ghani government. The study also analyses India's Afghan policy after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021. It also examines India's attitude and perspective on recent events and their impact on its geostrategic objectives in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** India-Afghanistan, Foreign Policy, Pakistan, Taliban

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To counterbalance Pakistan and China, as well as to reach out to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and West Asian nations like Iran, Afghanistan plays a crucial role in India's strategic thinking. Afghanistan is significant from India's point of view in terms of security, trade, establishing regional and international footholds, and its energy aspirations. However, security has evolved into the main factor influencing Afghanistan's relevance to India as Afghanistan has been a critical factor for both internal and regional stability. With continued rivalry and even war, countering Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan has been one of India's prime goals. Preventing anti-India terrorism, sponsored by Pakistan which has inflicted serious attacks through Afghanistan on India and Indian interests, makes Afghanistan important to India (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). For example, one of the deadliest suicide attacks on the Indian security forces by the Jaish-e-Mohammad happened on 14 February 2019 in Pulwama which claimed 40 casualties (Singh S., 2020). According to the National Investigative Agency (NIA), cited in their Pulwama attack investigation report, there

exists a close link between anti-Indian terror groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammad, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. According to the charge sheet by the agency, the main accused of the Pulwama attack were trained at the Sangin camp of Helmand province in Afghanistan (Arunima, 2020). Sunni Islamist militant organisations like the Haqqani Network which is primarily based in North Waziristan in Pakistan engage in cross-border attacks into eastern Afghanistan. The group which is known to be closely aligned with al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has time and again attacked Indians and Indian interests in Afghanistan. (Lurie, 2020) For example, on 7th July 2008, the Indian Embassy was attacked by a bomb blast amounting to 58 deaths and 141 injuries. Among the deaths were Indian Foreign Service Officer V. Venkateswara Rao, a defence attaché Brig. Ravi Dutt Mehta and Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) personnel Roop Singh and H.A.S Pathania (Paliwal, 2017). On 8th October 2009, the Indian Embassy again came under attack by a suicide car blast leaving 17 dead including three ITBP personnel, and 93 injured. Investigators concluded by stating the role of the ISI and the attack was perpetrated by the Haqqani Network. The involvement of the Pakistani intelligence was put up by the Afghan envoy to the United States (Pant, 2012).

A stable relationship with Afghanistan helps India to strengthen its diplomatic foothold and provides an upper hand to counter Pakistan's influence (Chatterji, 2020). However, concern lies with India after the US troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban back in power in August 2021. Pakistan being pro-Taliban enables it to transform Afghanistan into a haven and training base for anti-Indian activities. On the other hand, India, the world's second-fastest-growing energy market, is expected to need to import 80 percent of its fuel by 2030 (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). With the uncertainty of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, a question arises on the successful operation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. The TAPI project is a 1,814 km long trans-country gas pipeline from Turkmenistan (via Afghanistan and Pakistan) to India. The pipeline will be extremely beneficial for India to meet its growing requirements as India is estimated to receive 33 billion cubic meters of gas (Basu, 2022). Moreover, Central Asia is rich in minerals and hydroelectric resources, with Kazakhstan being the largest producer of Uranium, Turkmenistan having the fourth largest reserves of natural gas, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan holding a huge potential in hydroelectricity makes the CARs important in terms of resources in the region (Chauhan, 2022). India with its rising energy requirements needs to collaborate with the CAR states, however, before that a stable Afghanistan is requisite.

The first section after the introduction of this paper aims to offer a historical viewpoint on India-Afghan relations. Relationships between the two regions during the colonial era, the evolution of Afghan and Indian ties after their independence, the Cold War, and up until the Taliban took power in 2001. After the Taliban were overthrown in 2001, India's interaction with the new Afghan government under Hamid Karzai is discussed in the second section. The numerous initiatives India took concerning Afghanistan are detailed in this section. The third segment aims to examine the relations between India and Afghanistan in light of the 2014 political changes in both nations. The part Pakistan plays in ties between India and Afghanistan is discussed in this section. In the fourth section, the relationship between India and Afghanistan is analysed after the Taliban took control of the country in 2021. The

attitude and perspective of India on the recent events in Afghanistan and how they impact India's geostrategic objectives concerning Afghanistan are analysed in this section.

### **Historical Perspective of India-Afghanistan relations**

India-Afghanistan relations can be traced back to the Indus Valley period and are truly civilisational. The depth of both India and Afghanistan's geographical and historical proximity can be understood by the Grand Trunk Road which dates back to the Mauryan empire. It was considered to be one of Asia's longest and oldest roads that connected Kabul with Chittagong through Delhi and Lahore. The road had strategic importance due to its both commercial and military value and also connected cultures of this region. Buddhism spread in some areas of Afghanistan during the rule of Emperor Ashoka. Following Ashoka, Afghanistan saw decades of instability, with the development of Greco-Bactrians, Indo-Greek kingdoms (Kushan empire), and Indo-Scythians. India was conquered by many invaders having origins in today's Afghanistan, for example, the Mughal empire that ruled India from 1528 to 1858 entered India from Afghanistan. Starting with Babur whose grave is in Kabul, the Mughal Empire had great rulers such as Akbar, Shahjahan, and Aurangzeb who still today play an influential role in the contemporary historical imagination of India (Paliwal, 2017).

Ahmed Shah Durrani an Abdali Pashtun who later established the Durrani Empire in 1747, actually laid the foundation of the origin of modern-day Afghanistan. Being a former general in the Persian Army he led the military expedition in 1761 against the Maratha Empire of India. The English East India Company became the most dominant entity in the entire sub-continent with the defeat of the Marathas. Which eventually paved the way for the emergence of British rule in the South Asian region. During the nineteenth century, the British desired control over Afghanistan's affairs to carve out Russian influence over the area. The immediate threat to British India came from the rivalry with Russian expansionism, as both tried to gain influence over Afghanistan and Central Asia, which later came to be known as the Great Game. (Mazumdar, 2015) To defend the British Indian Empire's territorial bounds and exert control over its territories, British political, diplomatic, and military effort was directed towards Afghanistan (Paliwal, 2017). An agreement in 1907 between Russia and Britain eventually brought an end to the Great Game (Mazumdar, 2015).

Both India and Afghanistan had close ties during the period of British rule, notably during the independence struggle in India led by Mahatma Gandhi and comparable nationalist figures in the Pashtun territories led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also known as Frontier Gandhi (Mullen, 2017). However, the bloodiest partition of India in 1947 separated both India and Afghanistan geographically. Therefore, the Indian strategic imagination was occupied by Pakistan rather than Afghanistan. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship on 4th January 1950 was signed between India and Afghanistan. The treaty aimed to strengthen trade and cultural links and initiation of diplomatic exchanges mutually (Paliwal, 2017). On the other tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan emerged as Afghanistan laid claim over the Pashtun-dominated areas on the other side of the Durand Line in Pakistan. Afghanistan later refused Pakistan's claims over Jammu and Kashmir and became the only country to oppose Pakistan's membership in the United Nations (Mazumdar, 2015). These developments served

to strengthen the relationship between India and Afghanistan. The Bandung Conference, known as the Asian-African Conference for International Order, was held in 1955 and provided an international framework for India and Afghanistan to establish their bilateral relations. The non-alignment platform was utilised by both India and Afghanistan to criticise the Cold War binary. It was also meant to criticise Pakistan's decision to side with the US when the two countries signed the Mutual Defence Treaty in May 1954. Pakistan's membership in the Southeast Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in September 1954 and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1955 pulled India and Afghanistan closer together owing to a common objective in countering Pakistan (Paliwal, 2017).

During the India-Pakistan war of 1965, Afghanistan officially objected to India's targeting of Peshawar and Kohat in Pakistan, because Afghanistan considered these areas parts of Pashtunistan, not Pakistan. As Pakistan's military gamble had failed to yield strategic gains by October 1965, Afghanistan joined India's campaign for Pashtuns and Baloch people's right to self-determination in a diplomatic move. Two days after signing the Tashkent Declaration on 10 January 1966, Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri was supposed to visit Afghanistan, but his trip was cancelled owing to his untimely death. Then India's Vice President Zakir Hussain visited Afghanistan in July 1966 which set the stage for mutually favourable economic collaboration between the two countries. A series of developmental projects were introduced by the Indian government during the 1970s. Projects like the Indira Gandhi Hospital in Kabul, the Chardeghorband Microhydel Scheme, and various technical assistance in mining, power, and irrigation were initiated. In Kabul, Kandahar, and Bamiyan, agricultural research centres were established. On the geo-political side, India and Afghanistan departed from their declared objective of non-alignment by taking a strong lean toward the Soviet Union in the 1970's. For Afghanistan, India became an important nation to have good relations with, to pressure Pakistan over the Pashtun issue. The signing of the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation drew India closer to the Soviet Union. Similarly, Afghanistan also became more dependent on military and economic support from the Soviets as the two factions of the PDPA were supported by the Soviets (Paliwal, 2017).

By the 1970s, Afghanistan had become India's most important development partner under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program (Mullen, 2017). However, the decade of the 1970s saw a major political upheaval within Afghanistan. Zahir Shah was ousted in a bloodless coup by former Prime Minister Mohammad Daud Khan who mostly believed in socialist principles and saw monarchy as an unsuitable system. Daud Khan's strong stand against Pakistan on the Pashtunistan issue was viewed as a welcome sign by the Indian leadership. In the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, the USA lifted the arms embargo on Pakistan. The Daud regime criticised the move which created considerable concerns in Afghanistan. Daud's request for India's active military support against Pakistan's atrocities against Baluchistan and the Pashtun-dominated territories was rejected by India (Paliwal, 2017). During this period, there were continued attempts by Pakistan to influence Afghan affairs as Pakistan aimed to create a friendly state towards its western border. The difference over the Durand Line with Afghanistan, its conflict with India, and being an ally of the Western bloc determined Pakistan's action towards India during the Cold War. (Mazumdar, 2015).

The Saur Revolution in 1978 eventually led to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Daud's assassination by the Khalq faction, led to Nur Mohammad Taraki becoming the PM of Afghanistan with Soviet support. India's reliance on the Soviet Union and rising Islamic radicalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan influenced India's decision to recognise the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan or the PDPA regime. Due to Bhutto's assassination in 1977 and General Zia-ul-Haq coming to power in Pakistan, who had a strong Islamist inclination influenced the Janata Party Government's decision to accept the new regime in Afghanistan. India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Afghanistan in September 1978 and reiterated the continuity of friendly relations with Afghanistan. (Paliwal, 2017) Factional struggles among the PDPA led to Taraki's short rule on 14 September 1979 due to the ongoing tussle between Deputy PM Hafizullah Amin. The failure to maintain order in Afghanistan eventually led to direct Soviet interference in the country in December 1979 (Mazumdar, 2015). In an interregnum of Indian politics as the polls were scheduled by early 1980, then PM of India Charan Singh rejected Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. However, with the polls over and results declared Indira Gandhi assumed the PM office on 20 January 1980 and undid Charan Singh's stance. Pakistan's refusal to deny support to the Mujahideen who were actively fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan paved Indira Gandhi's dependence on her pro-Soviet support in Afghanistan. Indira Gandhi's Afghanistan policy came under criticism as India lost its stature as a NAM leader. With the Cold War politics, India's Afghanistan policy was greatly dominated by the relationship with the Soviet Union. India's pro-Soviet tilt allowed India to engage with Karmal and later Najibullah, however, it also alienated it in influencing the other factions like the Mujahideen. As Indian Media reported in February 1980 anti-India sentiments swelled up among the Afghan people for the first time (Paliwal, 2017). This position of India in support of the Soviet-supported governments in Afghanistan alienated the Pashtuns from India and also led to the erosion of India's standing among Afghans (Mazumdar, 2015).

After Indira Gandhi's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi had strong support for Najibullah against all odds during the late 1980's. Close relations with Najibullah gave India practical measures to undercut the influence of Pakistan. Both Najibullah and Rajiv's anti-Pakistan partisanship and the Soviet Union's support at the time of its impending withdrawal brought them together as a necessity rather than a choice. As the Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) received active support from Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati (KhAD) or State Information Services agency of Afghanistan on issues related to the Khalistan and Kashmir militants trained and armed by the ISI in Afghanistan and Pakistan. With the Soviets's decision to withdraw and the Mujahideen gaining more control in Afghanistan, India chose to maintain its ties with Najibullah rather than negotiate with the Mujahideen. Therefore, striking a balance between the various political factions became an important theme in India's Afghan policy debates. (Paliwal, 2017)

With the Mujahideen gaining more ground in Afghanistan the Islamic Unity of the Afghan Mujahideen based in Peshawar was acknowledged by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as Afghanistan's government in exile in February 1989. By 15th February 1989, the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan and by April 1992, the Mujahideen ousted Najibullah. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 shifted India's position in Afghanistan, as Pakistan emerged as an important visible actor in Afghanistan by the 1990s and supplemented its significance on India's Afghan policy comparatively.

Pakistan affected Afghan politics after the Soviets left, as seen by the Peshawar Accord on April 24, 1992, which placed the Mujahideen administration in Afghanistan. In 1991, along with the introduction of the New Economic Policy in India, Narasimha Rao initiated several policy changes in its outlook towards Afghanistan with the willingness to move beyond the boundaries of anti-Pakistan, despite very tense relations with Pakistan. Known as the “Rao Doctrine”, India initiated to engage with all existing Mujahideen groups and deal with whosoever is in power in Afghanistan and focused on P-2-P (people-to-people) relations in Afghanistan. India recognised the Mujahideen government on 30 April 1992 two weeks later Najibullah’s fall. The Indian government announced medical supplies and humanitarian reliefs, which were airlifted to Kabul in July 1992 and 44,000 tonnes were sent off on a grant basis to Afghanistan. India’s change in policy was also driven by the fact that the Soviet Union’s disintegration had led to the creation of five new resource-rich countries in Central Asia. India’s view on Afghanistan was seen in a Central Asian context. Apart from the economic interest India also had the desire to gain support on the Kashmir issue at the UN from these new Central Asian countries (Paliwal, 2017).

Narasimha Rao resigned as PM of India on 16th May 1996 and by 25th September Kabul was under the Taliban’s control. The two unrelated events changed the track of India’s Afghanistan Policy. India closed its embassy and had no diplomatic foothold in Afghanistan during the Taliban’s rule from 1996 to 2001. India also supported the UNSC Resolution 1076 which criticised the Taliban’s violation of human rights and did not recognise the Taliban government as the legitimate one. However, India continued diplomatic relations with the Rabbani government as it was recognised internationally and also hosted Massoud Khalili, a political aide of Rabbani as ambassador to India. India also provided covert military, medical, and financial support to the United Front (UF) or the Northern Alliance fight against the Taliban along with Iran, Russia, and the CARs. From India’s perspective supporting the UF was an option to make a balance between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Paliwal, 2017). The rise of the Taliban was seen by India as a threat to its regional security interests which led India to start engaging with anti-Taliban groups such as the Northern Alliance. Domestically, the rise of the Taliban was linked to the rise of fundamentalist groups within Kashmir. India continued its humanitarian aid and medical help to the Northern Alliance through its Farkhor air base in Tajikistan (Mullen, 2017).

The 1999 hijacking of Indian Airlines aircraft IC-814 from Kathmandu to Delhi by the Pakistan-based Harkat-ul-Ansar (later known as Harkat-ul-Mujahideen) confirmed India’s concerns. The jet was flown to Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. Due to a lack of official relations with the Taliban, the Indian government was compelled to engage in discussions with them. (Choudhury, 2019) The eight-day deal to release the hostages convinced India of the Pakistani-Taliban nexus and also showed India its strategic failure for not developing ties with the other Afghan groups (Paliwal, 2017). The incident deepened India’s policy perception of Pakistan-Taliban relations. The hijacking also enhanced awareness of Afghanistan’s strategic significance to India and resulted in more support being provided to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in the areas of logistics, security, and humanitarian development (Mullen, 2017). However, the tide shifted following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US can also be referred to as a “blessing in disguise” which paved India’s way back into Afghanistan.

### **India's Policy towards Afghanistan 2001-2014**

The US-led War on Terror campaign that ousted the Taliban regime led to the induction of an Interim Authority. Here India's engagement in Afghanistan became multidimensional (Pant, 2012). Following the change of events in Afghanistan, India's representation was immediately upgraded from a Liaison Office to an Indian Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Satinder Lambah, who visited Kabul in November 2001. Soon after India reopened its Embassy in Afghanistan in December 2001 with the visit of then EAM, Jaswant Singh on 22nd December for the inauguration of the interim authority under Hamid Karzai's chairmanship (Ashraf, 2007). With the quick re-opening of its Embassy in Kabul, India also established its consulates in Kandahar, Mazari-Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad. These consulates provided enormous opportunities for India to connect with ordinary Afghans, promote democracy, and also to monitor its economic assistance to Afghanistan. These consulates also helped India understand the intra-Pashtun tribal and political dynamics. However, these consulates are alleged by Pakistan of collecting information in its tribal areas and also supporting an armed separatist insurgency in Pakistan's province of Baluchistan by R&AW (Mazumdar, 2015). India began to follow a strategy of engagement with Afghanistan through wide-ranging and extensive humanitarian, financial, and project assistance. India continued participation in various international efforts that are aimed at economic rebuilding and political reconciliation in Afghanistan (Pant, 2012).

India's continued support to the Northern Alliance during the period of 1996-2001 against the Taliban helped India to strengthen its relationship with Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period (2001-2021). Many members of the Northern Alliance held key and influential positions in the interim government. India backed interim Afghan President Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun who was educated in India and attempted to strengthen connections with Pashtuns. India did not choose to send troops to the US-led international security efforts in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime. Domestic factors which included the compulsions of coalition politics along with internal insurgencies and the US's deep reluctance to antagonise Pakistan, restricted India from participating in Afghanistan militarily. India instead focused more on economic assistance to engage in Afghanistan (Mazumdar, 2015). India's support stayed confined to building physical infrastructure, improving security, building human capital, agriculture, and other major sectors of Afghanistan's economy (Pant, 2012). India's re-engagement with Afghanistan after the Taliban ouster was mainly motivated by two factors. Firstly, due to regional and domestic security, India wanted a democratically elected and secular Afghan government. India's goal was to prevent the rise of the fundamentalist Islamic regime which posed threats to India's domestic and regional goals as it attributed the rise of insecurity during the Taliban regime of 1996-2001. India's active engagement with the Karzai government was seen as a key to safeguarding India's security in the region and economic aspirations. Secondly, it safeguards India's ambition to establish itself as an important regional power with global ambitions. Afghanistan serves as a gateway for India to reach out to the CARs and West Asian nations. Increased engagement with Afghanistan was also seen as a key to continuing engagement with other neighbours, ensuring economic growth and regional harmony along with a growing footprint.

Hamid Karzai accompanied by 13 ministers visited India on 26 February 2002.

During the visit, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced a grant of \$ 10 million to the Afghan government (Ashraf, 2007). India and Afghanistan signed a Preferential Trade Agreement during the visit. Moreover, President Karzai as an alumnus was conferred with an honorary doctorate by the Himachal Pradesh University. The agreement provided substantial duty exceptions on various categories of Afghan dry fruits ranging from 50 percent to 100 percent imported to India. Indian products such as cement, tea, sugar, and pharmaceuticals were allowed reciprocal concessions by Afghanistan. The trade agreement was aimed at the integration of the domestic Afghan market into the Indian market and vice versa (Mazumdar, 2015). On his visit to India on 23rd February 2005, Hamid Karzai signed a MoU on cooperation in the field of Civil Aviation and a MoU on Media and Information. By December 2005, nine private sector and seven public sector Indian companies were involved in TV transmission, air ticket sales, power transmission, construction of common facilities, dam construction, telecom banking, and offering cold storage facilities in Afghanistan employing over 798 employees. Afghan women received vocational training from the Self-Employed Women's Organisation (SEWA), which was financed by India's Ministry of Women's Affairs. Increased media cooperation between the two countries was seen as India helped to develop various channels, such as Jalalabad TV, and Kabul TV, and big media conglomerates such as Tolo TV. Flights between Delhi to Kabul were operationalised by India Airlines by 31 March 2005 while Iran agreed to operate flights from Tehran and Delhi via Kabul. India gifted three civilian airplanes to Afghanistan and a total of 274 buses to Afghanistan (Paliwal, 2017).

Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Afghanistan in August 2005 after 29 years of Indira Gandhi's visit. Despite security concerns, Singh's visit demonstrated commitments by India aiming at reaffirming to reinvigorate past ties and develop new partnerships (Pant, 2012). During this visit, the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Healthcare and Medicinal Sciences, MoUs on Co-operation in the Field of Agricultural Research and Education, and Small Developmental Projects were signed. India also declared that it would adopt 100 villages to encourage integrated rural development through the use of rainwater collection technology and solar energy. On President Karzai's visit to India in April 2006. India and Afghanistan signed a total of three MoUs on Cooperation in the Field of Education, Cooperation in the Field of Rural Development, and Cooperation in the Field of Standardisation (Ashraf, 2007).

India played an important role in Afghanistan's inclusion in SAARC as Afghanistan officially joined the group in its 14th summit in April 2007. Membership in SAARC provided Afghanistan with a platform to address various issues related to trade and transit with other South Asian nations and to promote economic development (Mazumdar, 2015). Moreover, this inclusion also enabled South Asia to reach out to West and Central Asia more meaningfully through Afghanistan as a SAARC member. On the 12th of May 2011, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Afghanistan for a two-day visit, during which he pledged a new \$500 million commitment for Afghanistan's development, in addition to India's previous aid of roughly \$1.5 billion. India emerged to be one of the six top donors by extending a \$500 million aid package. During this visit, India and Afghanistan reached an agreement on a strategic relationship between the two countries, which would be executed through a partnership council led by their respective foreign ministries.



Security, organised crime, law enforcement and judiciary, narcotics trafficking, financial crimes, and the fight against global terrorism were among the areas where the two countries committed to cooperate. Manmohan Singh also addressed a joint session in the Afghan Parliament. India has expressed its support for the Afghan government's national reconciliation initiative with the Taliban (Pant, 2012).

India's aid to Afghanistan also covered both small development projects and big infrastructural projects. Big infrastructural projects such as the 220 km long Zaranj-Delaram highway (Route 606 and A71) enabled Afghanistan to gain access to the sea via Iran's Chabahar port built by India (Pant, 2012). The road was completed in 2008 by India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at the cost of \$135 million in 2010, connecting Afghanistan's ring road with the Iranian border and the Iranian Chabahar port. The road provides an alternative to India and Afghanistan without relying on Pakistan to export and import from Afghanistan (Mullen, 2017). From Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Kandahar to Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region, the Zaranj-Delaram route links 16 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. By connecting the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia, the highway establishes a North-South transportation route (Kaura, 2017). An unstable and unfriendly government in Afghanistan threatens the potential to use the Delaram-Zaranj highway and Chabahar port in India's interest. India used the Chabahar port for the first time in March 2012 to transport wheat of 100,000 metric tons as humanitarian aid and by September 2013 India received 20 containers of dry fruits from Afghanistan (Bhatnagar & John, 2013). Various other big infrastructural project financed by India includes the 42-megawatt Salma dam on the Hari-Rud River located in Herat, the parliament building in Kabul, and with collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) India installed a power transmission line between Kabul and Pul-e-Kumari (Paliwal, 2017). These developmental projects created enormous goodwill for India among the common Afghans. According to a 2009 BBC/ARD/ABC News poll, 74 percent of Afghans thought India was a good country, whereas 8percent of Afghans preferred Pakistan. Only 5percent of respondents acknowledged Pakistan's beneficial contributions while 86percent saw Pakistan as hurting Afghanistan. In a similar vein, 10 percent of Afghans acknowledged the negative influence of India while 41percent acknowledged its beneficial influence (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012).

India and Afghanistan signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement on 4th October 2011 during Karzai's visit to India (Paliwal, 2017). India and Afghanistan agreed to cooperate and consult at the UN and other international forums, focusing on sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, mutual respect, mutual benefit, and non-interference in their internal affairs. The cooperation included actions on critical international and regional concerns and support for India's membership in the UN Security Council. Both nations agreed to establish Strategic Dialogues to boost regional peace and security, intensify joint measures against global terrorism, and support Afghan National Security Forces. The agreement aimed to create a favourable environment for trade and investments, simplify customs, and coordinate international trade. Which would assist Afghanistan in becoming a trade, transportation, and energy hub by enabling free transit linkages under SAARC. India continued expanding its Small Development Projects (SDPs) for rural and remote areas, and expanded scholarships in engineering, medical, and management institutes in Afghanistan, based on the success of the annual scholarship program through ICCR and ITEC. The agreement was administered under the frame of a Partnership

Council led by the foreign ministers of both India and Afghanistan. The council consists of different joint Working Groups on Trade and Economic Cooperation, Political and Security Consultations, Social, Cultural & Civil Society, and Capacity Development and education including high-ranking officials from the various ministries. With the strategic pact signed, two more agreements were signed on India-Afghanistan cooperation in developing hydrocarbons and mineral resources. Moreover, underscoring its role as a major economic partner to Afghanistan, India hosted the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan on 28 June 2012 inviting regional states and private sectors to invest in Afghanistan (Mullen, 2017).

In the 1990s, India backed non-Pashtun interest groups over Pashtun people. India supported the Northern Alliance which was dominated by ethnic Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmens who fought against the Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime during 1996-2001. However, post-2002 India began to emphasise pro-Pashtun commitments. The SDPs by India were mainly focused on the Pashtun-dominated east and south of rural Afghanistan (Paliwal, 2017). India's efforts to develop Afghanistan had to consider these regions because Pashtuns make up approximately 50percent of the country's population.

As, in 2003, the Taliban leadership fled to Quetta, and other Pashtun-dominated areas in Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, where they reconstituted the Rahbari Shura, the central leadership council (International Crisis Group, 2012). The Shura directed the insurgency from Pakistan's sanctuaries. In 2007, the Taliban used safe havens in Pakistan to re-establish and expand their rule over Afghanistan. In 2008, the Taliban controlled about 10percent of Afghanistan, while Karzai's government-controlled 30percent, and other parts were mainly controlled by the regional warlords (Congress, 2008). The Karzai Government's incompetence in rural Afghanistan led to the Taliban gaining control and installing shadow governments. The Taliban provided security, basic aid, and Sharia-based law and order services, which the coalition and government failed to deliver (Schroeder, 2014). As Afghanistan's security issues worsened, with assaults against prominent figures like the assassination of Vice-President Haji Abdul Qadir in 2003 (Cottey, 2003). By 2006, the fighting escalated into a full-blown insurgency as attacks reached three times higher by 2007 compared to 2002. During 2005-2006 suicide attacks quadrupled to 139 from 27, bombings detonated through remote, doubled to 1,677 from 783, and armed attacks nearly tripled to 4,542 from 1,558. Just as the US and its allies agreed to expand ISAF's (International Security Assistance Force) mission beyond Kabul, the focus of the force transformed from peacekeeping to counterinsurgency (Dobbins, Poole, Long, & Runkle, 2008).

Despite regaining access to Afghanistan after the Taliban ouster in 2001 India's aim to develop a substantive footprint in Afghanistan was severely hampered by the Taliban regaining and strengthening its position in Afghanistan. On the other hand, due to ISAF's failure to provide a security umbrella beyond Kabul, attacks, killings, and kidnappings of Indian nationals engaged in different infrastructure projects in areas beyond the jurisdiction of ISAF and Karzai's government raised. According to the South Asian Terrorism Portal, we can draw a few examples such as in 2003, an Indian engineer was killed while working for an Afghan Wireless Company. In 2005, a driver under India's BRO project was abducted and killed in Zaranj. In 2006, an engineer was killed in a bomb attack by the Taliban in Farah and an Indian telecommunications engineer was abducted and beheaded. In 2007, two bombs

were thrown into the Indian consulate in Jalalabad, without casualties. In 2008, two ITBP soldiers and two Indian nationals were killed in Nimroz Province. In 2009, a Taliban suicide bomber targeted the Indian embassy in Kabul. In 2010, the Taliban carried out synchronised suicide attacks at two hotels in Kabul, killing at least nine Indians. In 2013, a suicide attack targeted the Indian Consulate in Jalalabad, killing nine Afghans, and Indian author Sushmita Banerjee was shot dead by Taliban militants in the Paktita Province. In 2014, gunmen attacked the Indian Consulate in Herat Province. Due to India's complete commitment to the Karzai administration and lack of diplomatic outreach towards the Taliban, have hampered India's outreach in the areas (controlled by the Taliban) beyond Kabul.

### **India's Policy towards Afghanistan 2014-2021**

After the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan, a major power tussle broke out between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah which ultimately led the US and UN to intervene. A new National Unity Government (NUG) came into effect in Afghanistan in 2014 with the power-sharing agreement signed between Abdullah and Ghani. Ashraf Ghani was declared the President and Abdullah was the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The continued political bickering between the president and CEO resulted in poor accountability which ultimately helped the Taliban to acquire more areas under its control. The takeover of Kunduz by September 2015 and the fall of Helmand province by December 2015 under the Taliban define the weakening of the NUG to govern. (Ishtiaq & Shah, 2016) On the other hand, after the 16th general elections of 2014, Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India. As ISAF's combat operation in Afghanistan came to an end, the number of soldiers on the ground dropped from 100,000 in 2010 to about 16,000 by 2014. Both military involvement and donor financing dropped, and the NUG's economic and political capabilities turned fragile which were heavily reliant on Western support and assistance. However, India's developmental assistance to Afghanistan continued to increase from \$1.5 billion in 2014 to \$2 billion by 2017 (Mullen, 2017).

The change of governments in both countries also resulted in a change of political parameters, President Ghani at the beginning of his tenure seemed to have more tilt towards Pakistan. Ghani began his presidency by bringing about a paradigm shift in his Afghan foreign policy. By conciliating Pakistan and forging strong relations with China which made India conscious of Ghani's fundamentally different foreign and security policy from Karzai. As Ghani soon after assuming the presidency prioritized his policy towards Pakistan by calling on the Chief of Army Staff in Rawalpindi before meeting Pakistan's Prime Minister or President (Prasad, 2021). Despite this strain in Indo-Afghan relations, India's developmental assistance remained stable. President Ghani first officially visited India on 28 April 2015, after completing visits to China in October 2014, and to Pakistan in November 2014. During Ghani's visit to India, dialogues on diversified sectors of cooperation and assistance were put forward, which included education, health, disaster management, agriculture, electoral and power management. Both sides agreed to cooperate with the global community to combat terrorism and called on the international community to deal with safe havens of terrorism referring to regional and global security. Afghanistan's Embassy decided to build a sister-city relationship connecting Ahmedabad and Asadabad, Hyderabad and Jalalabad, Ajmer Sharif and Herat, Mumbai and Kandahar, Delhi, and Kabul, and also the state of Assam and the Province of Helmand (Kaura, 2017).

Soon after, Narendra Modi visited Afghanistan for the first time after becoming the Prime Minister of India in December 2015. During the visit, Narendra Modi inaugurated the newly constructed Afghan Parliament, India also handed over four Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan. It was a shift in India's policy towards Afghanistan from just providing training and non-lethal assistance like transport vehicles to providing lethal assistance to the Afghan armed forces. The foreign ministers of both nations decided to convene the inaugural Strategic Partnership Council meeting in early 2016, which would include four joint working groups (Kaura, 2017). On the other hand, India gained significant goodwill from the Afghan citizens with the help of many low-cost, unconventional projects in 2014 as a symbol of friendship India gifted a 97 by 65-foot Afghan flag with the construction of a 200-foot-high flagpole. Other Indian initiatives include the signing of an MoU in 2015 "between the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) to utilise the Shahid Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex" as the Afghan cricket team's home arena. As cricket is a popular sport in both nations, support for the Afghan national cricket team's participation in the International Cricket Council (ICC) in 2007 aided their growth. This goodwill development and cooperation in uplifting Afghan sports has helped India to gain goodwill within Afghanistan (Mullen, 2017).

P.M Modi revisited Afghanistan in June 2016 within a span of six months, to jointly inaugurate the \$290 million Afghan-India Friendship Dam also known as the Salma Dam. PM Modi was awarded the highest civilian honour, the Amir Amanullah Khan Award during the visit, India also announced \$1 billion in economic aid to the war-torn country. The Salma Dam was designed to irrigate fields of 640 villages across Afghanistan's districts of Obe, Pashtun Zarghun, Chist-i-Sharif, Gozara, Koshan, Injil, Karokh, and Ghoryan. The Salma Dam is expected to help the people of these districts the opportunities to capitalise on the operationalisation of the Chabahar Port as a Trilateral Transit Agreement for international transit and transport which was signed between Iran, Afghanistan, and India in May 2016 (Ishtiaq & Shah, 2016). During this period the first major shipment by India of 1,30,000 tonnes of wheat via Chabahar port to Afghanistan was sent in October 2017 (Kaura, 2017). Due to Pakistan's continued refusal to allow land access for trade to India and Afghanistan an air-freight corridor was instituted in June 2017. Within three years of operationalisation of the corridor, it has entitled about 1,000 flights, carrying goods valued at over US \$216 million (Prasad, 2021).

Disillusioned by Pakistan's inability to broker peace with the Taliban in 2016 and the increase in the Taliban's territorial gains, led Ghani to reengage with India. India-Afghanistan partnership heightened as Western security and assistance decreased through 2017 (Mullen, 2017). Abdullah visited India on 31st January 2016 where both countries held discussions on issues concerning bilateral, regional, and global security and the reconciliation process with the Taliban. The CEO addressed the Counter Terrorism Conference held in Jaipur and an agreement on Exemption from Visa Requirement for Holders of Diplomatic Passports was signed (Kaura, 2017). Abdullah re-visited India on 27 September 2017 where both the countries signed an MoU on Technical Cooperation and Police Training to create an enabling framework for cooperation and capacity building of the Afghan police force. The Foreign Minister of Afghanistan visited India on 10th September for the meeting of the Strategic Partnership Council to make use of the fresh \$1 billion as announced by PM Narendra

Modi. India agreed on the implementation of new projects in the form of connecting Shahtoot Dam, water supply for Charikar city, drinking water initiative for Kabul, low-cost housing for the returning refugees in the province of Nangarhar, promoting tourism by road network to Band-e-Amir in Bamyan province, gypsum board manufacturing plant in Kabul and a polyclinic in Mazar-e-Sharif. In 31 provinces of Afghanistan India aimed to take 116 high-impact community development projects. India announced the continuation of its ongoing developmental programs such as education, skill and human resource development, and capacity building for a further period of five years from 2017-2022 (IANS, 2017).

President Ghani visited India in October 2017, the visit came after Abdullah and Foreign Minister Salahuddin's key visits. The visit reviewed the progress of the multifaceted Strategic Partnership Council and a New Development Partnership which was brought in to promote peace, stability, prosperity, and security in Afghanistan combating terrorism and discuss global and regional issues of mutual interest. On this particular visit a storm was created by Ghani by asserting that Afghanistan would not be a part of the CPEC project if Pakistan refused land connectivity to India and Afghanistan via Attari and Wagah, Ghani also asserted to restrict Pakistan's access to the CARs via Afghanistan (Kaura, 2017). Afghanistan's disadvantage of being a landlocked country and its dependency on Pakistan's Gwadar and Karachi ports which serve as a lifeline for Afghanistan's trade gives Pakistan an upper hand. However, Afghanistan's access to Iran's Chabahar port gives the country the potential to decrease its dependency on Pakistan's ports. Pakistan has always denied any overland permission for transit of trade between Afghanistan and India, which has been one of the prime obstacles to any serious trade between the two countries. Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for imports limits Afghanistan's coordination and collaboration with India. Afghanistan's trade with Pakistan between 2014 to 2015 amounted to \$ 2.7 billion, however, severe rules along with rivalry between the two nations reduced the amount to \$ 500 million in 2018. This eventually made Iran, with its Chabahar and Bandare Abbas port a substitute for Afghanistan's trade (Khan & Shirazi, 2021).

Afghanistan and Pakistan signed the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) in 2010 which permits Pakistan to transit its goods to CARs and Pakistan allowed Afghanistan to export to India through the Wagah crossing point between India and Pakistan. However, the agreement has not permitted Afghanistan to import goods from India through Pakistani territory. Interestingly, Pakistan granted Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) status to India on November 2nd, 2011, to normalise its bilateral ties with India. However, Pakistan continues to block any Indian exports to Afghanistan aimed to limit India's access to Afghanistan. Pakistan has vociferously opposed any vigorous Indian position in Afghanistan and U.S. support for such a position. Pakistan has retaliated against India with military, economic, and political pressure. While restraining Afghan exports to India, most of which crossed through Pakistani territory. Pakistan has turned towards China for assistance with commercial, military, and infrastructure development assistance, which further impedes Indian initiatives to showcase or uphold power in South and Central Asia (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012).

The complex strategic alliance between India and Afghanistan kept growing. The momentum of high-level bilateral contacts was preserved, particularly through the visits of the CEO in June 2018 and September 2018. As a result of initiatives like the

“Air Freight Corridor” bilateral trade has surpassed 1 billion dollars; India’s capacity-building program for Afghanistan increased; and cooperation, including in the areas of security, connectivity, and the boosting of friendly exchanges strengthened. In keeping with its steadfast policy that all such efforts should be “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled”, India has pledged its assistance to all efforts for inclusive peace and reconciliation. It has also committed to assisting in promoting peace, security, unity, sovereignty, plurality, and democracy in Afghanistan (MEA, 2021). The Afghan people have welcomed India’s increased involvement in Afghan politics, while Pakistan has bitterly opposed this. The Afghan populace has been overwhelmingly opposed to Pakistan, but it has been more amenable to Indian engagement and support (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). A survey by BBG-Gallup conducted in 2016 stated 62 percent of Afghans held India favourable. On the other hand, only 3.7 percent of the respondents favoured Pakistan (Constantino, 2020).

### **India’s relation with Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021.**

By the conclusion of his tenure, President Obama’s administration had withdrawn around 90percent of the US soldiers from Afghanistan, despite talking about doing so for practically the entirety of his presidency (Miller, 2020). The Trump administration gave up the idea that the Afghan government needs to be involved in the negotiations, as the Taliban have since taken control of significant portions of Afghanistan and the NUG has failed to govern the country. In July 2018, the US complied with the Taliban’s request for a meeting in Qatar without Afghan officials or ministers under NUG (Sheikh & Khan, 2019). In February 2020, the US and Taliban signed an agreement in Doha to end the war in Afghanistan. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a deputy to Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, signed the agreement with US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad (Chaudhuri & Shende, 2020). Three months in office, President Joe Biden declared the withdrawal of all American troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, declaring “It’s time to end America’s longest war” (Deshmukh & Sahgal, 2021). With the US hasty withdrawal before schedule by August 2021 and the Taliban regaining its position as the de-facto ruler of Afghanistan, India has invested and aided Afghanistan with over \$3 billion. Regarding infrastructural development assistance in Afghanistan, India has built over 400 projects, which has gained India overwhelming goodwill from Afghan citizens (Kugelman, 2021). However, with the Taliban in Kabul, India launched Operation Devi Shakti to securely evacuate Indian and Afghan citizens working for the GOI, redoing its 2001 stance, and putting a question on India’s Afghan policy (MEA, 2022).

US withdrawal left India’s position in Afghanistan vulnerable. The Indian MEA reacted cautiously to the US decision, saying “Any political settlement (in Afghanistan) must be inclusive and should preserve the socio-economic and political gains of the past 19 years” (Deshmukh & Sahgal, 2021). S Jaishankar India’s EAM called for a permanent ceasefire in Afghanistan during a UN Security Council debate, aiming to reduce violence and protect civilian lives. He reiterated New Delhi’s support for an “inclusive, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process,” he maintained that “any political settlement in Afghanistan must ensure that the gains (by India) of the last two decades are protected, and not reversed.” Specifically, he brought the world’s attention to the urgent necessity of eliminating terrorist havens and cutting off terrorist supply routes calling for “zero tolerance for terrorism in all its forms and manifestations including cross-border attacks.” He added that it is

crucial to “preserve the constitutional democratic framework and ensure the protection of rights of women, children and minorities” (Pant, 2021). Officially, India backed “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.” However, the negotiations revealed that neither Afghanistan was in charge nor did it lead the process. It was mostly supervised and under American authority. Pakistan’s influence over the Taliban and India’s limited impact in the reconciliation process made India’s position weak in Afghanistan.

Soon after the Taliban takeover, India repeated its 2001 strategy of a complete diplomatic pull-out from Afghanistan, questioning the diplomatic foothold in Afghanistan, that the country has gained over the period of two decades. India’s waning influence in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover not only represents a strategic loss but has also put many of its investments in the country at risk. The complete diplomatic pull-out has jeopardised India’s ambition of becoming a major regional power in the region. However, India kept interacting with the world community at several fora to figure out how to aid and support the Afghan people. India took the lead in advocating for the UN to play a significant role in Afghanistan. India’s UNSC chairmanship during Kabul’s fall led to the adoption of Resolution 2593 in August 2021, urging the international community to prevent Afghanistan from being used for attacks or financing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi encouraged G20 countries to keep the Taliban accountable at the G20 Extraordinary Summit on Afghanistan in October 2021 (Shekhawat, 2023). Despite Russia and China’s abstention, India’s resolution was a significant accomplishment. A slight change in India’s past reluctance to acknowledge the Taliban’s new role in the nation was also evident in the resolution. In several instances, it has become clear that India’s position on the Taliban has changed.

On November 10, 2021, India sponsored the “Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan” (MEA, 2022). An Iranian initiative on Afghanistan was convened by the heads of seven National Security Councils. The meeting was chaired by Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and was attended by the representatives of Iran and Russia and the five CARs namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. Both immediate neighbours of Afghanistan; China and Pakistan refused to join the meeting despite India’s invitation (Ghosh, 2021). Publicly stating “(India) a spoiler can’t be a peacemaker”, Pakistan’s NSA Moeed Yusuf rejected India’s invite, while China stated, “scheduling difficulties” (Sood, 2021). An important joint statement known as the Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan which specifically referred to the political situation in Afghanistan was issued by the participating nations. Issues regarding the rise of terrorism, Islamist radicalisation, drug trafficking, and the ongoing poor humanitarian conditions regarding the refugee crisis and food shortage. India and the other six country’s foremost concern about the use of Afghan soil for training, sheltering, financing, or planning terrorist activities was warned. The declaration called for an inclusive government and asserted the UN to play a central role in ensuring the fundamental rights of women children and other minority communities in Afghanistan. The conference served India an opportunity to be back on the stage of the Afghan regional-political scenario. However, due to India’s limited relations with the Taliban and the non-participation of two prime regional actors, Pakistan, and China; the conference tends to do little to strengthen India’s position in Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and China have hosted various senior Taliban officials, however, India has yet to do so (Kugelman, 2021). The nonattendance

of both Pakistan and China also proves that neither country plans nor is ready to help India pursue its Afghanistan interest. Pakistan which has time and again alleged India of sponsoring anti-Pakistan activities has also recently rejected India's request to allow trucks of India to deliver shipments of food to crisis-affected Afghanistan.

In terms of India's Afghan policy, the Delhi Declaration is undoubtedly one of the significant approaches by India. The declaration contradicts India's stand on Taliban in the year of 1996. It highlights India's readiness to coordinate its Afghan policy with the regional countries while willing to assert its role as a key interlocutor. The aspects highlighted in the declaration are extremely critical for India's security and regional aspirations. However, various challenges lie ahead against India's goal of transforming these pledges into practice. With the constant Pakistan factor, the road ahead for India's goal of a harmonised and coordinated approach regarding Afghanistan is expected to be difficult. Though not invited, the Taliban welcomed the Delhi Declaration and has repeatedly asserted India to reopen its embassy in Afghanistan (Sood, 2021). India has been in a 'wait and watch approach' as the Afghan scenario unfolds. As the West, India being an important part of the South-Asian region, cannot completely disengage.

Controversies involving everything from brutality against minorities to disregard for women's rights continue to cloud the Taliban's leadership. More contentious factors that have complicated the security situation in Afghanistan and the surrounding area include affiliations to terrorist organisations like al-Qaida, internal strife, and growing attacks by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Taliban aims to gain domestic and international legitimacy after regaining power. With Pakistan's poor economy, the Taliban is aware that they cannot continue to place all of their hopes in that country (Gill, 2022). The Taliban have correspondingly been trying to strengthen connections with India to take advantage of its growing normative and material capacity given their intention to demonstrate more autonomy vis-à-vis Pakistan. The Taliban seeks India's assistance in training Afghan forces in addition to asking India to play a bigger part in the development of Afghanistan by restarting its development assistance programs. Since their return, the Taliban have also made known their intention to strengthen connections with India on the diplomatic and business fronts. One illustration of this is their support for the Chabahar Port project in Iran as a hub for connectivity and trade throughout the area. On the other hand, India provided multiple shipments of humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, including 40,000 MT of wheat, 55 tonnes of medications, 500,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccination, and winter clothes. India sent 28 tonnes of urgent relief supplies in two planes to Afghanistan in the wake of the dreadful earthquake that occurred in Eastern Afghanistan on June 22, 2022. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN World Food Programme, Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital, and Afghan Red Crescent Society received the assistance shipments (MEA, 2022).

The change in behaviour of India towards the Taliban is evident as J.P. Singh, joint secretary of the Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran Division of the MEA of the Government of India (GOI), led India's first official trip to Afghanistan since the Taliban seized power there on August 15, 2021 (Basu, 2022). The Indian delegation travelled to Kabul to supervise the distribution of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. While there, they met with officials of international organisations and key decision-makers involved in aid distribution. Later, an Indian technical team was sent to



Kabul to oversee and plan India's humanitarian assistance activities (MEA, 2022). Taliban acting foreign minister Amir Khan Mottaki was introduced by J.P. Singh. The group toured numerous locations where Indian projects are carried out, according to a representative for the MEA in the press briefing. Bilateral trade and humanitarian aid were topics of discussion at the meeting between Singh and Mottaki, according to a statement released by the Taliban government. Mottaki also discussed the continuation of India's projects in Afghanistan, its diplomatic presence, and the provision of consular services, particularly to students and the sick, according to Abdul Qahar Balkhi, spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Basu, 2022).

India's cautious approach and willingness to engage with the Taliban is evident, as in March 2023 when an internal memo from the Afghanistan Institute of Diplomacy (IoD) under the interim administration of the Taliban was leaked to the press. The memo requested officials (under the Taliban) to enrol in a short-term capacity-building program organised by the Indian MEA under ITEC programs. In January 2023, the Taliban requested India to station its envoy in New Delhi, making 14 attempts to remove the Ghani government-appointed Ambassador Farid Mamundzay. In May, the Taliban appointed Mohammad Qadir Shah as the new envoy to India leading to a power struggle with Mamundzay (Shekhawat, 2023). India's diplomatic dilemma with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is a major issue in the ongoing power struggle for the ambassador position at the Afghan embassy in New Delhi. The expiration of Qadir Shah's visa complicates the power struggle. (Kaura, 2023) If India reissues the visa for Qadir Shah it will potentially indicate India's willingness to accept a Taliban-appointed diplomat.

Afghanistan's embassy in New Delhi, previously run by the deposed Ashraf Ghani government, ceased operations on October 1, 2023, citing a lack of support from the "host government". India's MEA refuted the embassy statement, stating "Afghan embassy in New Delhi is functioning or continuing to function." MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said that "the Afghan consulates general in Mumbai and Hyderabad voiced their objection to that decision or to such a decision." Which indicates the power struggle between Afghan officials appointed by the Ghani administration and Taliban. It also indicates India's cautious approach and willingness to engage with the Taliban. On the other hand, China's rapid diplomatic engagement with the Taliban regime is influencing India's desire to build its ties with the Taliban. China signed major business agreements with the Taliban and became the first country to station an ambassador in Kabul in 2023 (Ramachandran, 2023). Therefore, the possibility of India posting an ambassador to Kabul and accepting a Taliban-appointed ambassador in the coming months is uncertain however it cannot be ruled out.

### **Conclusion**

Regime changes in Afghanistan have been a constant phenomenon. To deal with the government of the day with different sets of ideologies, India has consistently changed its position. The ideological changes with every new regime did not influence India's quest to engage with the regimes in Afghanistan. However, after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996, India shifted to a complete diplomatic withdrawal and non-engagement approach, hindering its influence in the region. Despite working with the Karzai and Ghani administrations for nearly twenty years, India redid the diplomatic pullout after the Taliban takeover in 2021, losing all diplomatic advantages

over a two-decade period. India needs to re-adopt the strategy of the “Rao Doctrine” to engage and deal with whosoever is in power in Afghanistan. Priority should be on more P-2-P (people-to-people) relations in Afghanistan to maintain and strengthen its regional and global considerations.

India-Afghan relations have always been dictated due to three important factors i.e., political instability in Afghanistan, the Pakistan factor, and changes in geopolitical situations. Firstly, political instability in Afghanistan has had a profound impact on bilateral ties. The ever-changing political landscape in Afghanistan has often created uncertainties with challenges for India in maintaining a stable relationship. The continued tussle for power in Afghanistan between various factions has hampered India's efforts to build strong and enduring relationships with Afghanistan. Secondly, the complex and often strained relationship between India and Pakistan plays a considerable role in shaping India's relationship with Afghanistan. As both India and Pakistan's strategic policy towards Afghanistan differs and often contradicts, both countries want a prominent foothold in Afghanistan. Pakistan being a major player in Afghanistan has time and again dominated India's strategic aspirations towards Afghanistan. Lastly, Afghanistan with its geo-strategic location between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East has been a centre of important geo-political happenings. Be it during the period of the Cold War or the US-led war on terror against the Taliban in the early 2000s and the US withdrawal in 2021. These geopolitical situations have significant changes in India's Afghan policy as it provided both opportunities as in 2001 with the Taliban ouster and challenges as in 2021 the Taliban back in power.

Pakistan, a significant foreign player in Afghan politics, prioritises defending against Indian incursions over achieving larger economic and geopolitical objectives. Concerns arise over the potential training, equipping, and encouragement of anti-India terror organisations under Taliban control, which could spread unrest in Jammu and Kashmir. The absence of a democratically elected government and the law-and-order situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule further exacerbate these concerns. As in the past, India's immediate priority should be to guarantee that Pakistan does not take advantage of Afghanistan's instability and utilise its land for anti-India activities. A Pakistan-dependant administration in Afghanistan is not desirable for India, as it would exacerbate security issues. India must increase engagement with the Taliban and adopt a pragmatic diplomatic approach, continuing humanitarian assistance, capacity-building projects, and infrastructure-building programs.

Nations such as China, Russia, and Iran have opposed the Taliban regime of 1996-2001 due to various domestic and regional issues. With Taliban re-emergence in Afghanistan, these nations are seen to directly engage with the new Taliban regime contradicting India's cautious position and late response. Two of India's geo-political rivals with border disputes with India; China and Pakistan received an upper hand with the US withdrawal, where's India options in Afghanistan are limited. India has significant geopolitical interests in the region that range from the development of connectivity throughout South and Central Asia to concerns about the security of the energy supply and the spread of terrorism. In addition, as India is still committed to the Afghan people, it is required to facilitate long-term points of agreement outright endorsing the Taliban. India cannot afford to lag behind other regional players that are considering the Taliban and Afghanistan as part of their geopolitical considerations. India must, above all, continue to hold a position that takes future

uncertainties into account.

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