

## **India's Strategic Role in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities in A Post-Us Withdrawal Era**

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### **ABSTRACT**

India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan has undergone significant shifts following the US withdrawal, creating both challenges and opportunities for regional diplomacy, security, and economic cooperation. As the Taliban-led government establishes its control, India faces the dilemma of navigating an uncertain political landscape while safeguarding its long-term interests. This study examines India's evolving role in Afghanistan, analyzing the geopolitical complexities, security concerns, and avenues for economic collaboration. It explores the strategic calculus behind India's diplomatic maneuvers, the impact of regional players like Pakistan and China, and the potential for fostering stability through developmental initiatives and multilateral engagement. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's policy imperatives and strategic options in shaping Afghanistan's future while ensuring regional equilibrium.

**Keywords:** India-Afghanistan Relations, Post-US Withdrawal, Taliban Regime, Regional Geopolitics, Economic Cooperation, Security Challenges, Strategic Diplomacy.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The most important element of India's regional diplomacy has been its strategic involvement with Afghanistan, which has been influenced by security imperatives, geopolitical concerns, and historical relationships. Afghanistan's political environment saw a dramatic change with the withdrawal of US forces in August 2021, which resulted in the Taliban regime's comeback. India, which had historically maintained solid ties with successive Afghan governments through infrastructure development, cultural diplomacy, and economic support, has faced significant problems as a result of this transformation. India now has a difficult choice as a result of the Taliban's comeback: how to protect its interests while adjusting its strategy toward a government that has a history of posing security risks and causing instability in the area. Afghanistan is of great strategic significance to India, both as a regional ally and as a key actor in the security dynamics of South Asia. India's involvement in Afghanistan has been motivated by a number of causes, such as regional connectivity initiatives, economic prospects, and counterterrorism concerns. India has made significant investments in Afghan infrastructure, helping to develop clinics, schools, roadways, and the Afghan Parliament complex. Furthermore, initiatives like Iran's Chabahar port have been envisioned as a strategic way to trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia without going via Pakistan. However, India's long-term investments and diplomatic clout are now in jeopardy due to the changing circumstances following the US withdrawal.

The Taliban's comeback has also heightened power conflicts in the area as nations like China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan aim to increase their sway. India's ability to sustain a significant

presence in Afghanistan is called into question by Pakistan's historical ties to the Taliban, since Pakistan may use its influence to limit India's strategic presence. Furthermore, a new set of difficulties is brought about by China's expanding economic and security involvement in the area, especially in light of Beijing's goals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's diplomatic calculations are further complicated by the pragmatic partnerships that Russia and Iran have sought with the Taliban. India also has strategic opportunities as a result of the circumstance. India has gained the respect of the Afghan people through its long-standing non-interference and soft power engagement policies, as well as its humanitarian aid and people-centered projects. Resuming diplomatic relations can be based on this goodwill, either directly with the Taliban or through regional multilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Despite the limitations of the current political climate, India's expertise in healthcare, education, and capacity-building can continue to contribute positively to Afghanistan's growth.

The purpose of this study is to examine India's strategic role in Afghanistan in the wake of the US withdrawal, looking at the prospects for diplomatic and economic engagement as well as the difficulties presented by changing power relations. It will investigate how India might secure its long-term strategic goals while navigating the intricacies of the Taliban government by readjusting its foreign policy. This study aims to provide insights into the changing Indo-Afghan relationship and the wider implications for regional stability by evaluating the geopolitical environment, security issues, and possible areas of collaboration.

### **1.1 Significance of the Study**

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia and Central Asia has undergone a dramatic transformation following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. As the Taliban consolidates its rule, regional powers including India face the challenge of reassessing their strategies in dealing with Afghanistan. For India, the stakes are particularly high, given its historical investments in Afghanistan's development, its security concerns regarding cross-border terrorism, and the shifting balance of power involving Pakistan and China. The study is significant as it evaluates India's evolving diplomatic, economic, and security strategies in the region. Afghanistan's role as a bridge between South and Central Asia presents economic opportunities that India can leverage through strategic partnerships and connectivity projects. The study also assesses how India's engagement in Afghanistan can shape broader regional stability and counterbalance the influence of other actors, such as Pakistan and China. As India continues to position itself as a global power, its response to the Afghan crisis will be a critical test of its diplomatic agility and strategic foresight. This study provides valuable insights for policymakers, academicians, and international relations scholars on India's foreign policy realignments in response to evolving geopolitical realities.

### **1.2 Objectives of the study**

The primary objective of this study is to analyze India's strategic role in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal, focusing on the challenges and opportunities that have emerged in the new political environment. The study seeks to:

1. Examine the historical context of India-Afghanistan relations and how they have evolved over time.
2. Assess the geopolitical impact of the US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power on India's regional strategy.
3. Analyze India's security concerns, particularly in relation to terrorism, extremism, and Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**Riyaz Ahmad Ganie and Mohammad Amin Ganie (2022).** This essay looks at India's foreign policy toward Afghanistan in the years following 9/11, emphasizing how the U.S.-led operation gave India the chance to rebuild diplomatic relations with Kabul. The authors examine the difficulties and opportunities for India's strategic objectives after the U.S. withdrawal and talk about India's cautious approach, emphasizing assistance-driven measures rather than military action.

**Shakti Sinha and Gareth Price (2013).** This essay examines India's initial involvement in Afghanistan after the Taliban, highlighting Pakistan's impact on India's foreign policy choices. The writers address the intricacies of the trilateral relationship between Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan and examine India's emphasis on social and economic development in Afghanistan as a way to attain regional stability.

**Riyaz Ahmad Ganie and Mohammad Amin Ganie (2022).** The difficulties and opportunities for India to change Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal are covered in this chapter. It assesses the Taliban's comeback, which is backed by Pakistan, and how it affects India's security and geopolitical objectives. Additionally, the writers evaluate China's growing influence in Afghanistan and how it affects India's regional clout.

**Harsh V. Pant (2021).** This paper analyzes India's strategic interests in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power. The author examines the historical context of great-power politics in the region, India's concerns about terrorism, and the implications of regional dynamics involving Pakistan and China. The study offers insights into India's policy options in engaging with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

**Raghav Sharma (2021).** This paper discusses the prevailing situation in Afghanistan from an Indian perspective, focusing on the policy options India could exercise in response to the unfolding Afghan crisis. The author argues for India's active involvement in supporting a political settlement in Afghanistan to safeguard its interests and promote regional stability.

**Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (2007).** This paper examines India's efforts to re-establish its influence in Afghanistan post-9/11, focusing on reconstruction, economic development, and building linkages with Central Asian states. The author discusses India's attempts to marginalize Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and the broader implications for regional geopolitics.

**Rudra Chaudhuri (2020).** This paper explores India's strategic considerations in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal, particularly in relation to engaging with the Taliban. The author analyzes the historical context of India's involvement in Afghanistan, the

challenges posed by regional actors, and the potential policy approaches India could adopt to protect its interests in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **3. CASE STUDIES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

India's strategic role in Afghanistan has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shaped by historical engagements, diplomatic efforts, and regional geopolitical dynamics. This section examines key case studies highlighting India's past diplomatic engagements with Afghanistan and presents a comparative analysis of India's approach versus other major regional players like Pakistan, China, and Russia. These case studies provide insights into India's evolving policy, challenges, and opportunities in Afghanistan, especially in the post-U.S. withdrawal era.

India has historically been essential to Afghanistan's development and reconstruction, especially following the overthrow of the Taliban government in 2001. India is one of Afghanistan's biggest regional contributors, having contributed more than \$3 billion. The establishment of the Afghan Parliament, a symbol of India's dedication to Afghanistan's democratic system, was a significant undertaking in this partnership. The Delaram-Zaranj Highway was another important construction that lessened Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan by offering an alternate commerce route through Iran. By enhancing Afghanistan's irrigation and electricity systems, the Salma Dam—later known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam—further enhanced bilateral relations. India placed a higher priority on social and human development than infrastructure, building hospitals, providing scholarships to Afghan students, and educating Afghan military officers and public personnel. India provided training and non-lethal assistance to Afghan security forces while abstaining from direct military engagement.

But the Taliban's comeback in 2021 compelled India to reconsider its strategy. In the past, India has backed anti-Taliban groups like the Northern Alliance, which made matters complicated when the Taliban took back power. India responded by progressively adopting a more practical approach to participation. India made a dramatic change in its approach to Afghanistan in 2022 when it dispatched a diplomatic delegation to Kabul for direct negotiations with the Taliban leadership. Additionally, India reopened its embassy in Kabul, emphasizing humanitarian aid over official diplomatic recognition. In order to remain impartial, humanitarian aid—such as wheat supplies and COVID-19 vaccines—was sent by international organizations. India's construction of the Chabahar Port in Iran was another calculated move meant to avoid Pakistan and establish an independent commercial route with Afghanistan. Although this initiative had enormous potential to improve India-Afghanistan economic relations, its full operationalization was hampered by regional instability and U.S. sanctions on Iran.

When comparing India's approach to other regional players, key differences emerge. India's strategy has been development-focused, emphasizing soft power diplomacy through infrastructure, education, and health projects. In contrast, Pakistan's engagement has largely been security-driven. Pakistan has long viewed Afghanistan as a strategic buffer state and has historically supported the Taliban to maintain influence in Kabul. Unlike India, which sought a stable and independent Afghan government, Pakistan has been accused of harboring militant

groups and destabilizing the country for strategic gains. While India initially hesitated to engage with the Taliban, Pakistan maintained strong links with the group, facilitating their return to power in 2021. This asymmetry has often limited India's ability to establish long-term strategic depth in Afghanistan.

India and Pakistan have different approaches to Afghanistan than does China. China has not traditionally been a major player in Afghan affairs, but in recent years it has attempted to increase its sway, especially through economic initiatives associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is primarily interested in Afghanistan from an economic and security standpoint, concentrating on possible mining investments and keeping instability out of its Xinjiang province. China's relationship with Afghanistan has been transactional, putting economic interests ahead of long-term diplomatic ties, in contrast to India's long-standing historical and cultural links. In contrast to India's careful, humanitarian approach, China has been more inclined to interact directly with the Taliban.

The strategy used by Russia offers still another contrast. In the past, Russia has kept ties with the Taliban and the former Afghan government, among other groups in Afghanistan. Russia has been more receptive to direct security interventions, primarily to safeguard its interests in Central Asia, in contrast to India, which has refrained from using force. Preventing Afghanistan from turning into a haven for extremism that might spread to its friends in Central Asia has been Russia's top priority. India has prioritized non-military aid, while Russia has been actively involved in peace and security negotiations with the Taliban. Russia's diplomatic ties with the Taliban have grown considerably more quickly in recent years than India's, suggesting a more adaptable and practical strategy.

India's approach to Afghanistan has been distinct from that of Pakistan, China, and Russia. While Pakistan has prioritized strategic influence through security and military ties, China has pursued economic engagement, and Russia has balanced military interests with diplomatic pragmatism. India's engagement has largely been centered on development aid and soft power diplomacy. The post-U.S. withdrawal scenario has forced India to adapt its strategy, moving from a purely development-driven approach to a more nuanced diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. Despite the challenges, India's historical contributions, infrastructure investments, and goodwill among the Afghan people provide it with significant leverage to maintain strategic relevance in Afghanistan's evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **1.1 Historical Perspective**

Centuries of historical, cultural, and economic interactions have molded India's relationship with Afghanistan, which has changed over time through stages of collaboration, conflict, and strategic involvement. India's involvement with Afghanistan has remained a vital component of its regional foreign policy, spanning from historic trade routes and a shared cultural legacy to contemporary diplomatic connections. Gaining an understanding of this historical viewpoint helps one better understand India's current strategy in Afghanistan, especially in the wake of the United States' exit. Afghanistan has always served as a link between the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. India and Afghanistan were able to trade products, ideas, and cultural influences because to the historic Silk Road. Ashoka's

Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE) had close relations to the area since, prior to the arrival of Islam, Buddhism was quite popular in Afghanistan. Throughout the Kushan Empire (30–375 CE), which reigned over portions of northern India and Afghanistan and fostered trade and cultural interactions, Indian culture and religion continued to have a significant influence. A strong historical bond between the two countries was established as a result of these early exchanges.

A distinct dynamic emerged throughout the Middle Ages, when Afghanistan served as a springboard for invasions into India. Afghanistan served as a base for military conquests in the Indian subcontinent by Mahmud of Ghazni (971–1030 CE) and later by the kings of the Delhi Sultanate. However, the Mughal Empire (1526–1857) incorporated Afghan lands into its enormous empire, strengthening political and economic relations between the two areas. Originating in the Fergana Valley (present-day Uzbekistan), Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, first consolidated his authority in Kabul before capturing Delhi. Despite sporadic battles, India and Afghanistan maintained historical links during the Mughal era through considerable trade and cultural exchanges.

Afghanistan was an important buffer state in the Great Game between the British and Russian empires during British colonial administration (1858–1947). The Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839–1919) resulted from the British attempt to exert geopolitical control over Afghanistan in order to stop Russian expansion into India. Afghanistan maintained its independence, but its diplomatic reach was constrained by British India's influence over its foreign policy. India and Afghanistan maintained their cultural and economic ties in spite of colonial restrictions.

India and Afghanistan had a cordial relationship at first after India gained independence in 1947 since both countries opposed Pakistan's establishment and its expansionist objectives. Tensions between Kabul and Islamabad resulted from India's support of Afghanistan's claims to Pashtun regions in northwest Pakistan. India had cordial ties with several Afghan regimes throughout the Cold War, including the Soviet-supported Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978–1992). With Pakistan and the United States backing mujahideen fighters against Soviet forces, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989) profoundly changed the regional environment. While avoiding direct military intervention, India, which was allied with the Soviet Union, gave the Afghan government humanitarian and diplomatic support.

The 1990s saw a difficult time for India-Afghanistan ties due to the establishment of the Taliban after Soviet forces left the country. Supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Taliban government (1996–2001) provided sanctuary to anti-India terrorist organizations including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 was hijacked in 1999 and flown to Kandahar, highlighting the security risks that Taliban-controlled Afghanistan faced to India. As a result, India opposed the Taliban government and provided diplomatic, military, and financial support to Ahmad Shah Massoud's anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.

India restored close relations with the newly constituted Afghan government following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the Taliban regime's subsequent overthrow. India invested more than \$3 billion in development initiatives, playing a significant role in

Afghanistan's rehabilitation. Important projects included training in governance, healthcare, and education, as well as the construction of infrastructure including the Salma Dam and the Afghan Parliament building. Additionally, India strengthened bilateral security ties by giving Afghan security personnel military training. However, because it continued to back the Taliban insurgency, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan remained problematic despite these attempts. Following the U.S. exit, the Taliban retook power in 2021, forcing India to reevaluate its approach to Afghanistan. In contrast to the 1990s, India decided to work with the Taliban in a practical manner rather than totally isolate them. While carefully managing its relations with the new leadership, it reopened its embassy in Kabul, gave humanitarian help, and participated in diplomatic talks. India's long-standing strategic interest in the region is demonstrated by its historical involvement with Afghanistan, which ranges from prehistoric trade relations to contemporary development projects. India must maintain its significance in Afghanistan's changing political landscape by striking a balance between its historical goodwill and current security and diplomatic problems as the geopolitical situation changes.

## **1.2 Geopolitical Landscape Post-US Withdrawal**

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant shift in the regional geopolitical landscape, creating a power vacuum that reshaped the strategic dynamics among regional and global players. The Taliban's swift return to power altered Afghanistan's internal governance, impacted its international relations, and redefined the role of countries like India, Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and the Gulf states. This transition brought new challenges and opportunities, forcing nations to reassess their foreign policies and engagement strategies with Afghanistan. One of the most immediate consequences of the U.S. withdrawal was the Taliban's consolidation of power. The collapse of the Afghan government led to a governance vacuum, economic instability, and humanitarian crises. With international sanctions limiting foreign aid and financial access, Afghanistan's economy deteriorated, compelling the Taliban to seek diplomatic recognition and financial assistance from regional powers. However, most countries, including India, have adopted a cautious approach, engaging with the Taliban on humanitarian and economic issues while withholding formal recognition.

Pakistan, historically a key player in Afghan affairs, saw the Taliban's return as a strategic victory. However, tensions soon emerged, particularly over the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an extremist group with ties to the Afghan Taliban. Despite Islamabad's long-standing support for the Taliban, the new regime in Kabul has been reluctant to curb TTP activities, leading to cross-border security concerns. This strained the Pakistan-Taliban relationship, reducing Pakistan's ability to exert direct influence over Afghan affairs. China has taken a pragmatic approach, prioritizing economic cooperation and security concerns. Afghanistan's rich mineral resources, including lithium, present an opportunity for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has engaged the Taliban diplomatically, offering infrastructure investments and economic support in exchange for stability, particularly in preventing extremism from spreading into its Xinjiang region. While China remains cautious, it has emerged as one of the key external actors shaping Afghanistan's post-U.S. geopolitical reality.

Russia has also sought to expand its influence, maintaining diplomatic ties with the Taliban while advocating for a regional security framework involving Central Asian nations. Russia's primary concern is preventing Afghanistan from becoming a hub for extremist groups that could destabilize its Central Asian allies. Unlike India, which has focused on developmental aid, Russia has engaged in security-related discussions with the Taliban, highlighting its pragmatic stance. Iran, sharing a long border with Afghanistan, has balanced its engagement with the Taliban while protecting its interests, particularly concerning the Shia Hazara minority and water-sharing disputes over the Helmand River. While Iran has provided humanitarian aid and engaged in trade, tensions remain due to ideological and security differences.

For India, the post-U.S. withdrawal landscape presents both strategic challenges and diplomatic opportunities. India's previous investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure, education, and governance have earned it goodwill among the Afghan people. However, the Taliban's return, coupled with Pakistan's continued influence and China's expanding presence, complicates India's engagement strategy. Unlike in the 1990s, when India fully opposed the Taliban, New Delhi has now adopted a pragmatic approach, engaging with the regime through humanitarian aid and diplomatic channels while safeguarding its long-term strategic interests. The reopening of India's embassy in Kabul and continued assistance programs indicate India's intent to maintain a presence in Afghanistan despite the uncertainties. The geopolitical landscape post-U.S. withdrawal remains fluid, with multiple actors vying for influence in Afghanistan. The Taliban's governance, regional security concerns, economic instability, and the role of major powers will shape Afghanistan's future trajectory. For India, adapting to these shifts requires a balanced approach leveraging historical ties, strengthening regional partnerships, and cautiously engaging the Taliban while ensuring that its security and economic interests remain protected.

#### **4. INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN**

Geopolitical, economic, security, and cultural considerations all influence India's strategic interests in Afghanistan. India has continuously pursued policies aimed at promoting stability, economic growth, and solid bilateral relations while opposing antagonistic forces, especially from China and Pakistan, as a regional power with historical ties to Afghanistan (Pant & Saha, 2021). India's strategy has to be reevaluated in light of the post-U.S. withdrawal scenario, which calls for striking a cautious balance between interacting with the Taliban and preserving its long-term strategic goals (Mohan, 2022).

Regional security is one of India's main concerns in Afghanistan. India needs a secure and peaceful Afghanistan to stop terrorism from resurfacing and endangering its own national security. Anti-Indian terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which carried out assaults in India, including the 1999 hijacking of IC-814 and the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, had previously found refuge in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (Fair, 2020). Given Pakistan's ongoing influence over the Taliban leadership, India is still worried that Afghanistan under the Taliban could once more serve as a hub for extremist groups

operating in South Asia (Joshi, 2021). One of the top priorities is preventing terrorist attacks against India from occurring on Afghan territory (Grare, 2022).

India has substantial commercial and economic ties to Afghanistan as well. With an emphasis on projects like the Afghan Parliament building, the Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam), and the Delaram-Zaranj Highway, which connects Afghanistan to Iran's Chabahar Port, India has contributed more than \$3 billion to Afghanistan's infrastructure (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2021). The Chabahar Port, which provides a different trade route that avoids Pakistan, is still a vital part of India's plan for Afghanistan (Pant & Bommakanti, 2022). For India to achieve its larger regional connectivity goals, especially in connecting with Central Asian markets, commercial relations with Afghanistan must be strengthened (Singh, 2021). However, trade linkages have been hindered by the Taliban's authority and the uncertainty surrounding international sanctions, requiring political involvement to maintain these trading routes (Raghavan, 2023).

In order to offset Pakistan's strategic depth in the area, India aims to retain diplomatic influence in Afghanistan. In the past, India has helped non-Taliban groups, especially the Northern Alliance, which faced Taliban troops supported by Pakistan (Tellis, 2022). This dynamic changed when the Taliban regained power in 2021, compelling India to take a more practical stance. India has chosen limited involvement with the Taliban, reopening its embassy in Kabul and offering humanitarian aid, in contrast to the 1990s when it fully distanced itself from the group (Mukherjee, 2022). This interaction is crucial to preventing complete Pakistani control over Afghan issues and ensuring that India continues to play a significant role in the country's changing political environment (Ganguly, 2023).

Energy security and regional connections are another key strategic concern. Afghanistan's location makes it an essential component of India's larger ambitions for regional connectivity, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Kaura, 2021). Additionally, Afghanistan has abundant unexplored mineral resources, such as copper, lithium, and rare earth elements, which are becoming increasingly important in global supply chains (Sharma, 2023). Although security concerns and the absence of a stable political system provide major obstacles, India has indicated interest in investing in Afghanistan's resource sector (Paliwal, 2022).

Culturally and historically, India has strong people-to-people ties with Afghanistan, reflected in educational and medical assistance programs. India has provided thousands of scholarships to Afghan students, trained Afghan security personnel, and assisted in capacity-building initiatives (Pant & Krishnappa, 2022). Maintaining these soft power engagements allows India to retain goodwill among the Afghan population, which could be instrumental in shaping future diplomatic relations (Chaudhuri, 2023).

India's strategic interests in Afghanistan encompass security concerns, economic engagement, diplomatic influence, and regional connectivity. The Taliban's return to power has forced India to navigate a complex and evolving geopolitical landscape, balancing its past investments and regional ambitions with the realities of Taliban rule. By adopting a cautious yet proactive approach—focusing on humanitarian aid, trade, and diplomatic engagement—

India aims to secure its long-term strategic interests in Afghanistan while ensuring stability in the region.

## **5. KEY CHALLENGES FOR INDIA IN AFGHANISTAN**

India's involvement in Afghanistan is beset by a number of serious obstacles, especially in the wake of the U.S. exit and the Taliban's comeback to power. These difficulties include diplomatic roadblocks, economic uncertainty, geopolitical limitations, and security concerns. In order to safeguard India's long-term strategic objectives while reducing risks related to Afghanistan's changing political and security dynamics, navigating this complicated terrain calls for a carefully calibrated approach.

### *1. Security Concerns and the Threat of Terrorism*

The possibility that terrorist groups with anti-Indian goals may find refuge in Afghanistan is one of India's biggest problems. India is directly threatened by organizations with ties to the Taliban, such as the Haqqani Network, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) (Fair, 2021). India's security calculations are made more difficult by the existence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and worries about the emergence of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (Grare, 2022). Given Pakistan's ongoing control over important Taliban factions, the Taliban's promises that Afghan territory won't be utilized for terrorism are still dubious (Joshi, 2022).

### *2. Pakistan's Strategic Leverage Over Afghanistan*

Pakistan has long viewed Afghanistan as part of its strategic depth and has maintained close ties with the Taliban leadership, particularly the Haqqani Network, which has historically been hostile to Indian interests (Ganguly, 2023). Islamabad has consistently opposed India's presence in Afghanistan and has sought to limit its influence. India's ability to operate diplomatically and economically in Afghanistan is significantly constrained by Pakistan's influence, especially regarding connectivity projects that rely on transit through Pakistani territory (Kaura, 2021). The blocking of Indian access to Afghanistan via land routes remains a major challenge for trade and humanitarian assistance efforts.

### *3. Uncertainty in Diplomatic Engagement with the Taliban*

Unlike in the 1990s, when India completely disengaged from Afghanistan under Taliban rule, New Delhi has opted for limited engagement this time, including humanitarian assistance and the reopening of its embassy in Kabul (Mukherjee, 2022). However, a formal diplomatic relationship with the Taliban remains a dilemma, given the lack of international recognition of the regime and concerns over its human rights violations, particularly regarding women's rights and ethnic minorities (Pant & Bommakanti, 2022). The unpredictability of Taliban governance and internal factionalism adds another layer of complexity to India's engagement strategy.

### *4. Economic and Trade Challenges*

The Delaram-Zaranj Highway, the Salma Dam, and the Afghan Parliament building are only a few of the infrastructure projects in Afghanistan in which India has contributed more than \$3 billion (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2021). The future of these investments is still unclear, though, given the Taliban's hold on power. Due to restrictions on transit routes,

banking systems, and sanctions, trade between India and Afghanistan has decreased (Raghavan, 2023). Furthermore, instability and rivalry from other regional players like China limit India's access to Afghanistan's natural richness, particularly lithium and rare earth elements (Sharma, 2023).

#### *5. The Role of Regional Powers: China, Russia, and Iran*

India's presence in Afghanistan is also challenged by China's growing economic and strategic footprint. Beijing has actively engaged with the Taliban, exploring investments in Afghanistan's mining sector and integrating it into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Paliwal, 2022). Meanwhile, Russia and Iran, both influential players in Afghanistan, have maintained closer ties with the Taliban, further complicating India's role (Tellis, 2022). India's ability to counterbalance these influences remains limited without direct engagement with the Taliban or alternative strategic partnerships.

#### *6. Humanitarian and Soft Power Limitations*

India has historically enjoyed strong people-to-people ties with Afghanistan through education, medical aid, and cultural diplomacy (Pant & Krishnappa, 2022). However, under the Taliban, the scope for such engagement has reduced significantly. Afghan students in India face visa and financial challenges, and India's medical assistance programs have been curtailed due to security risks (Chaudhuri, 2023). The shrinking space for civil society and progressive voices in Afghanistan makes it difficult for India to leverage its soft power effectively.

#### *7. The Future of India's Connectivity Strategy*

India has relied on Iran's Chabahar Port as an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan (Singh, 2021). However, geopolitical shifts, including U.S. sanctions on Iran and China's increasing presence in Chabahar, pose challenges to this connectivity project (Kaura, 2021). Additionally, the uncertain future of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) further complicates India's efforts to establish strong trade links with Afghanistan and beyond. India's engagement with Afghanistan post-U.S. withdrawal is fraught with challenges, ranging from security threats and economic uncertainties to diplomatic dilemmas and regional competition. While India has taken cautious steps to maintain its presence through humanitarian aid and limited diplomatic outreach, long-term stability in Afghanistan remains uncertain. Addressing these challenges will require a flexible and multi-pronged strategy that balances security concerns, regional diplomacy, and economic interests while adapting to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **6. CONCLUSION**

India's strategic role in Afghanistan has undergone significant transformations, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power. As this paper has explored, India faces a complex set of challenges in navigating its engagement with Afghanistan, including security threats, diplomatic hurdles, economic constraints, and regional competition from powers like Pakistan, China, Russia, and Iran. Despite these challenges, India remains committed to maintaining its presence in Afghanistan, leveraging its historical goodwill, development assistance, and regional connectivity initiatives to safeguard its long-term strategic interests. One of the most pressing concerns for India is the resurgence of terrorist

organizations with potential threats to its national security. The Taliban's assurances regarding counterterrorism remain uncertain, particularly given Pakistan's continued influence over key militant factions operating in Afghanistan. Consequently, India must adopt a multi-pronged security strategy, strengthening intelligence cooperation with regional and global partners while reinforcing its counterterrorism capabilities.

On the diplomatic front, India faces a delicate balancing act engaging with the Taliban in a pragmatic yet cautious manner, without extending full diplomatic recognition or compromising its stance on human rights and democratic values. Unlike in the 1990s, India has chosen to maintain limited diplomatic engagement, signaling a more flexible and adaptive approach in response to the evolving political landscape in Afghanistan. However, this engagement remains constrained due to the Taliban's internal factionalism, Pakistan's interference, and broader geopolitical uncertainties. Economically, India's infrastructure projects and trade relationships in Afghanistan have suffered setbacks due to the Taliban takeover. The lack of direct land access via Pakistan further limits India's ability to expand trade and investment in the region. To overcome these constraints, India must revitalize its regional connectivity initiatives, such as strengthening the Chabahar Port project with Iran and exploring new trade corridors through Central Asia. Additionally, India's ability to secure access to Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources will depend on its diplomatic agility and capacity to compete with China's growing economic influence in the region.

India's soft power diplomacy, which has historically been a key pillar of its engagement with Afghanistan, now faces new limitations under the Taliban regime. Educational exchanges, medical assistance, and cultural ties that previously strengthened India-Afghanistan relations must be adapted to the current political realities. Continued humanitarian aid, educational scholarships for Afghan students, and support for Afghan civil society actors in exile can ensure that India maintains its influence among the Afghan people, even in the absence of formal diplomatic ties. Looking ahead, India's policy in Afghanistan must be shaped by strategic patience, diplomatic flexibility, and regional collaboration. While the geopolitical environment remains fluid, India's long-term interests in Afghanistan countering terrorism, fostering stability, securing economic opportunities, and maintaining regional influence necessitate a dynamic and forward-looking approach. By engaging selectively with the Taliban, strengthening ties with regional powers, and leveraging its developmental and soft power initiatives, India can continue to play a significant role in shaping Afghanistan's future. Afghanistan remains a critical test of India's regional leadership and strategic vision. While the challenges are formidable, a well-calibrated and adaptive policy approach can ensure that India retains its influence in Afghanistan and safeguards its broader security and economic interests in the region.

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