



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

India Forges Ties with the Taliban

Author

P. Stobdan

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Cover Photographs:

Foreign Secretary of India, Vikram Misri met Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai, on January 8, 2025. Source: [Ministry of External Affairs India](#)

India's Special Representative of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Director General of the Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan Department, Anand Prakash held a meeting with Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Maulvi Amir Khan Muttaqi, on April 27, 2025. Source: [X/@HafizZiaAhmad](#)

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P. Stobdan*

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PART I: THE PRESENT CONTEXT

In a dramatic and unexpected move, on April 23, 2025, the Taliban regime "categorically condemned" the Pahalgam massacre by Pakistani terrorists, stressed that "such incidents undermine efforts to ensure regional security and stability," and expressed condolences to the bereaved families.

Another diplomatic breakthrough soon followed, with External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar taking to X on May 15 to say that he had a "good conversation" with acting Afghan Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi. He deeply appreciated the Taliban leader's condemnation of the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack, and welcomed Muttaqi's "firm rejection" of recent attempts to create "distrust" between India and Afghanistan through "false and baseless reports".

This came in the aftermath of "Operation Sindoor" (May 7-10, 2025 and continuing), during which Pakistan had tried to play mischief by accusing India of launching drone strikes and ballistic missile attacks into Afghanistan's territory. The Pakistani media had also accused India of orchestrating a "false flag" attack with Taliban help.

The Jaishankar-Muttaqi phone call may have surprised some, for it was the first time an Indian foreign minister had communicated directly with a Taliban leader. However, this interaction was part of a carefully calibrated evolution of India's ties with the Taliban since 2021.

The Ministerial conversation marked a distinct shift in India's strategic thinking, while reaffirming India's traditional friendship with the Afghan people and its continuing support for their development needs. It also signalled the willingness of both India and Afghanistan to cooperate to counter the menace of terrorism.

Muttaqi has urged India to provide more visas to Afghan nationals, especially those seeking medical attention, increase bilateral trade, release Afghan prisoners, and progress the development of connectivity through the Chabahar port in Iran.

Mullah Mohammad Ibrahim Sadr, a leading Taliban figure and Deputy Minister of Interior Affairs, is reported to have quietly made an unofficial visit to New Delhi on May 3. Sadr's visit was likely intended to signal a shift in the Taliban's thinking vis-à-vis Pakistan.

After Pakistan's FM Ishaq Dar rushed to the Afghan capital to garner support for a "neutral probe" into the Pahalgam terror attack, an Indian delegation led by Joint Secretary Anand Prakash visited Kabul on April 27 to brief the Taliban leadership on this Pakistan-sponsored outrage. Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi strongly condemned the terrorist attack in his meeting with the Indian delegation.

India's engagement of the Taliban on the Pahalgam massacre helped underscore the importance of expanding diplomatic and economic relations between Kabul and Delhi. The Taliban side affirmed that it posed no threat to any country, and provided assurances that Afghan soil would not be used for anti-India activities.

The recent outreach to India by the Taliban has once again made it clear that the Taliban are loath to being seen as pliant puppets of Pakistan, and that they are capable of conducting direct foreign relations with India. It also shows that India is willing to recognise the new power structure in Kabul and expand diplomatic ties with the Taliban regime.

These moves strengthen mutual understanding of the imperative to push back against Pakistan. India's strategic outreach can help Afghanistan balance the growing Pakistani and Chinese influence, thereby safeguarding Afghanistan's interests.

India is reportedly considering launching fresh development projects for the Afghan people and extending humanitarian aid to Afghan refugees expelled by Pakistan.

India's calibrated response to the Taliban 2.0

While India had welcomed the February 19, 2020, Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban, it had placed New Delhi in a difficult position as it resembled more of an exit strategy than a genuine peace accord, which empowered the Taliban to seize control through force.

India had faced a dilemma regarding its next steps, as major global powers sought to engage with the Taliban regime to safeguard their interests. New

Delhi needed to protect its \$3 billion in investments in Afghanistan and address the security implications for Jammu & Kashmir.

As developments unfolded, the American policy towards Afghanistan appeared peculiar. The Doha Agreement was primarily focused on the Taliban's commitment to prevent al-Qaeda from launching attacks against the US or its allies from Afghan territory, highlighting that groups like Jaish-e Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) did not pose a threat to America. Given that India is not a US ally, it had to navigate its own course.

Additionally, India's longstanding security relationships with traditional partners such as Iran and Russia have evolved, demonstrating their adaptability in dealing with Pakistan based on mutual interests. Consequently, Delhi had to abandon its previous strategies of aligning with the US or leveraging relationships with Russia, Iran, and others.

Indeed, many of the old clichés, such as inclusive governance, no external interference, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned processes, and terms like moderate, nationalist, and secular, while once deemed essential, are now considered impractical. The distinctions between good and bad Taliban, between moderate and hardliner factions, have also proven to be misleading, obscuring the underlying reality.

It would be incorrect to assume that Delhi has had no interactions with the Taliban; however, openly embracing them appeared to be a challenge. Concurrently, New Delhi could not afford to repeat past errors of taking sides and disregarding the prevailing realities.

The Taliban made its initial overture to India in 2021, when spokesperson Mohammad Suhail Shaheen expressed, during a webinar, their desire to establish relations with India and their willingness to implement legislation against foreign terrorist organisations operating against any nation.

Following the Taliban's takeover, circumstances have further shifted, with Kabul actively seeking to enhance its engagement with New Delhi in various ways. India has also reacted favourably to the Taliban's overtures, as evidenced by Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla's swift visit to Kabul to express India's support. A shipment of 5,022 metric tonnes of wheat and medical supplies was dispatched to assist Afghanistan in addressing the COVID-19 crisis, despite opposition from some quarters regarding this change in approach.

Critics warned against recognising the Taliban and instead proposed reviving the old strategy of backing the former leaders of the Northern Alliance. This

situation necessitated that New Delhi adhere to its traditional Afghan policy to maintain Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity while avoiding interference in its internal conflicts, allowing for adaptability in response to the ongoing shifts in power within Kabul.

Another crucial principle was to refrain from interpreting the closeness of any Afghan political group to Pakistan through a zero-sum lens. This perspective was rooted in the Afghan cultural context and their aversion to being controlled by an external power, namely, Pakistan.

Historically, regimes in Kabul have had to seek legitimacy and protection from the perceived hegemonic threat posed by Pakistan, regardless of whether they were Sufis, Wahabis, Deobandis, or secular intellectuals. Their inherent desire to connect with their roots and a deep-seated nostalgia for Hindustan ultimately drew them towards Delhi. This intrinsic Afghan characteristic has often been detrimental to Pakistan.

American exit exposed Pakistan's duplicity

At first, the military leaders in Rawalpindi were thrilled by the Taliban's success, yet they were oblivious to the subsequent developments following the US withdrawal. Islamabad aimed to distance itself from the Taliban but was unsuccessful in doing so. It had intended to back US initiatives while avoiding antagonism towards the Taliban. However, once the Americans departed, Pakistan's strategy of covertly aiding the Taliban and Al-Qaeda while publicly endorsing international peace efforts became untenable. Pakistan found itself in a precarious position when it attempted to deceive the Taliban.

Consequently, the terror apparatus that had operated for thirty years collapsed after the US exited Afghanistan. Furthermore, the militants that the ISI had once supported returned to haunt them, akin to the proverbial chickens coming home to roost. In the altered security dynamics, TTP jihadist factions aligned with the Taliban were poised to launch attacks within Pakistan.

Nonetheless, a segment of the Pakistani populace remains antagonistic towards the Taliban regime, while others argue that abandoning the militia would constitute a betrayal. Imran Khan acknowledged in a 2021 article in The Washington Post that 'Islamabad has no favourites' and asserted that it would collaborate with any government.

The shifts in the Afghan landscape placed Pakistan in a difficult position, compelling it to deny the US access to military bases. Additionally, the implications of China's CPEC initiative, aimed at countering the US threat,

further complicated Islamabad's dealings with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the ISI continued to exert control over the terror ecosystem, despite Islamabad's denial of Taliban sanctuaries within Pakistan; a UN report indicates that over 6,500 Pakistani nationals are reportedly engaged in the Afghan conflict. Pakistan is bound to become increasingly entangled in this struggle. In 2021, Islamabad attempted to present Sirajuddin Haqqani as a member of the Kabul government. Haqqani advised the Taliban members to refrain from arrogance and to prepare for a transition from a military and jihadist context to a civilian framework, possibly on behalf of Rawalpindi.

The ISI, having refrained from engaging in high-risk provocations against India alongside the Taliban, has resorted to direct acts of terrorism against India, exemplified by the Pahalgam attack. This approach overlooks the significant changes that have occurred since the 1990s, a period during which it could freely support terrorist activities in Kashmir. Simultaneously, Pakistan is finding it increasingly challenging to fund terrorism while attempting to secure IMF loans and remove itself from the FATF 'grey list.'

The Turnaround

In the aftermath of the Doha Agreement, the ISI played a pivotal role in ensuring the orderly evacuation of US forces from Kabul, albeit after rendering the aviation equipment inoperable before their exit. While there was certainly a quid pro quo arrangement benefiting Pakistan, the Taliban perceived this as a betrayal, which could have serious implications for their future interactions with Pakistan.

In a scenario reminiscent of 1992, Deputy Foreign Minister Mullah Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai visited the Indian Embassy in Doha mere hours after the last US military aircraft left Kabul on August 30, 2021. This marked the first official engagement and caused unease in Islamabad.

Diplomacy has once again proven essential in shaping India's foreign policy. Stanekzai's overture to normalise relations with India indicated that the initial phase of a new geopolitical game was just beginning.

Following the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021, India adapted to the shifting political landscape and acted in a manner befitting its status as a civilisational power. India has approached the situation with considerable responsibility, refraining from making statements that could provoke the Taliban. From the outset, India sought to engage with the Taliban without becoming entangled in their affairs.

Notably, New Delhi made a prudent decision to look beyond a Pakistan-centric perspective and avoided complacency regarding the US's management of Afghanistan.

Washington's failure to anticipate the Afghan endgame has now become glaringly evident. Faced with an unwinnable 18-year war, the US opted to escape the status quo by reconciling with the Taliban, leaving India to navigate its own course.

The Taliban, for their part, have also refrained from issuing negative remarks about India, assuring that Afghan territory will not be used against it. They have expressed dissatisfaction, however, that despite their positive stance, India's negative portrayal of the Taliban remains unchanged. Nevertheless, the Taliban's return to power has undeniably introduced a greater degree of uncertainty.

India's formal engagement with the Taliban commenced in 2021, marked by a meeting between Deepak Mittal, then India's Ambassador to Qatar, and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai. Mittal articulated India's security apprehensions regarding militants utilising Afghan territory to target Indian interests.

Stanekzai, a graduate of the Indian Military Academy, assured that India's interests would remain safeguarded. Although India has not officially recognised the Taliban regime in Kabul, senior officials have consistently visited Afghanistan despite the associated risks.

In June 2022, a delegation led by MEA Joint Secretary J.P. Singh traveled to Kabul to discuss the continuation of Indian aid to Afghanistan. Singh engaged with Amir Khan Muttaqi and acting defense minister Mohammad Yaqub Mujahid, who expressed interest in military collaboration with India. He also met with Anas Haqqani, the Interior Minister, who urged India to resume diplomatic operations in Kabul.

Consequently, India partially reinstated a small mission in Kabul to facilitate 'technical' cooperation, oversee aid distribution, issue visas, and promote trade through the air corridor. The necessity to reopen a mission was further emphasised by increased Pakistani activities in Afghanistan which were concerning for India.

Additionally, India could not afford to remain isolated when over 40 countries had established some form of contact with the Taliban, which was a significant factor in India's decision to resume engagement. The rising influence of Pakistan and China posed a challenge to India's interests in Kabul, while the

growing distrust between Kabul and Islamabad presented a favourable opportunity for India.

Upgrading Diplomatic Ties

In 2022, New Delhi opted to enhance its engagement in a limited capacity, contingent upon the Taliban's commitment to prevent the use of Afghan territory for any anti-India activities. However, a significant policy shift occurred when New Delhi implicitly recognised the Taliban's legitimacy following the inaugural high-level meeting between India and the Taliban in January 2025, where Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met with Muttaqi in Dubai. During this meeting, Muttaqi expressed a desire to strengthen political and economic relations with India, referring to it as a 'key regional and economic power.' This development marked a diplomatic success for both India and the Taliban.

The breakthrough was driven by the Taliban's urgent need to connect with the international community, as they sought legitimacy from a world that had largely isolated them.

The Taliban acknowledges India's historical support for Afghanistan's development, which has persisted through various regimes in Kabul – be it monarchical, communist, or Islamist – resulting in a deep-rooted warmth between Delhi and Kabul. Over the years, India has invested over \$3 billion in more than 500 projects throughout Afghanistan, including the construction of roads, power lines, dams, hospitals, and clinics. India has also trained Afghan military personnel, provided thousands of scholarships to students, and constructed a new parliament building. Despite the Taliban's attempts to diminish India's presence, they cannot erase the enduring affection that Afghans hold for India. Furthermore, the Taliban recognise the value of the projects funded by India during the Karzai and Ghani administrations and are keen to see these initiatives continued and expanded.

The meeting between Misri and Muttaqi in Dubai focused on enhancing bilateral relations and expanding diplomatic and economic cooperation, particularly in areas such as humanitarian aid, development assistance, trade, commerce, sports, cultural connections, regional security, and national interest projects like the development of the Chabahar Port. The Taliban administration is eager to secure improved movement of persons between Afghanistan and India.

Amid advancing diplomatic ties and in light of the ongoing economic challenges, including unemployment, health issues, education deficits, and

inadequate infrastructure, the Taliban is actively seeking Indian investments to aid in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts.

Humanitarian assistance remains a crucial component of India's support program for Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, India has maintained its humanitarian initiatives, delivering 50,000 tonnes of wheat, 350 tonnes of medical supplies, 40,000 litres of Malathion pesticide, 28 tonnes of earthquake relief materials, and providing 2,000 online scholarships for Afghan students.

Relations have further improved since then, with India contemplating involvement in development projects, continuing humanitarian aid, including support for the rehabilitation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, utilising Iran's Chabahar port, and fostering cricketing relations between the two nations. New Delhi has shown a willingness to resume existing Indian projects while also initiating new infrastructure endeavors.

In March of this year, India informed the UN Security Council of its efforts to engage with the Taliban regime to enhance the 'special' ties between their peoples, which serve as the 'foundation' of India's involvement with Afghanistan. The UNSC has been made aware of India's dedication to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, alongside its ongoing humanitarian assistance initiatives.

While India is contemplating initiatives to renovate the Indus canals and enhance the utilisation of water discharge from the Western rivers of the Indus basin, coordination with Afghanistan regarding the potential cessation of water discharge from the Kabul River to Nowshera in Pakistan may be pursued. India should assist Afghanistan in constructing additional dams along the Kabul River.

Connectivity

Connectivity is a crucial factor for Afghanistan, which relies on land routes through Pakistan to access India. The closure of border posts by India and Pakistan following the Pahalgam terror attack has already affected Afghanistan. Consequently, the Taliban is now pursuing an alternative route through Chabahar to improve trade and connectivity with India.

In response to a request from Muttaqi, the External Affairs Minister has affirmed a commitment to facilitate visa issuance for Afghan traders and patients, as well as the release of Afghan prisoners.

Recently, the Taliban has been allowed to engage in diplomatic activities in New Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad to provide consular services to Afghan citizens and support Afghan entrepreneurs, students, and patients. In November 2024, the Taliban appointed Ikramuddin Kamil, a young Afghan student in India, as the Acting Consul at Afghanistan's Consulate in Mumbai, shortly after a delegation led by J.P. Singh, Joint Secretary in MEA, had visited Kabul.

India is now involved with the Taliban across various platforms, having participated in a Taliban-organised conference on regional cooperation in Kabul on January 30, 2024, alongside nine other countries. During the event, Amir Khan Muttaqi encouraged attendees to seize emerging opportunities in Afghanistan and emphasised the importance of exploring 'region-centric' pathways that yield mutual benefits, while also calling for the lifting of 'unilateral sanctions' on Afghanistan.

The Pakistan Factor

Restoring ties with Kabul is crucial, given Afghanistan's worsening relations with Pakistan, which stem from border conflicts, accusations of terrorism, and the large-scale expulsion of Afghan refugees by Islamabad. Pakistan has alleged that the Taliban is aiding the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in undertaking terrorist activities within its borders, a tactic employed by Pakistan to solicit financial support from Western nations for its counter-terrorism efforts.

In 2024, Pakistani military aircraft conducted airstrikes in Barmal, Paktika, resulting in the deaths of approximately 46 individuals, including women and children, under the guise of targeting TTP strongholds. The Afghan populace has expressed outrage over Pakistan's prolonged instigation of violence and disorder in the country for over twenty years. Kabul has reacted with anger, cautioning Islamabad against infringing upon Afghanistan's national sovereignty, which would inevitably lead to significant consequences for bilateral ties.

The Taliban are no longer passively accepting these Pakistani assaults. Ironically, the TTP, which has been nurtured and sheltered by Pakistan, has turned against its creator. The Taliban's growing rapport with India, particularly following the Pakistani airstrikes, has exacerbated tensions. Their acceptance of Indian humanitarian and infrastructure assistance has further complicated this relationship. An insecure Pakistan has intensified its connections with the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) to launch attacks against India.

Relations have deteriorated further after Islamabad decided to expel nearly 500,000 Afghan refugees who had resided in Pakistan for years. As the Taliban assert their autonomy, Pakistan has resorted to economic coercion against Kabul, leveraging Afghanistan's reliance on trade and transit routes through its territory. Islamabad has been obstructing traffic at Torkham and other locations to undermine the Taliban government.

Conversely, the Taliban do not acknowledge the Durand Line. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan militants frequently carry out armed assaults in Pakistan along the Durand Line, complicating Pakistan's efforts to secure the 2,640-km border with fencing.

India's Kashmir Anxiety

The apprehension that the Taliban might instigate further chaos in Jammu & Kashmir appears to be exaggerated. The unrest in J&K escalated in 1995, well before the Taliban's rise to power in 1996.

Historically, the Taliban's focus on Afghanistan has been more beneficial for India. Following a peak of over 6,000 Afghan militants in 1995, their influx into Kashmir diminished after the Taliban assumed control in 1996, with most Afghan Mujahideen returning to Afghanistan. While insurgency in Kashmir persisted, it was primarily supported by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Haqqani network, seemingly to appease the ISI.

Misconceptions regarding the Taliban in India may stem from the Pakistani media's tendency to sensationalise the Taliban's threat as a strategic asset of the ISI against India. However, the Taliban itself has not made any explicit declarations regarding Kashmir throughout its nearly thirty-year history, despite a notable fatwa issued in 2009 by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent cleric and supporter of the Taliban, advocating for jihad against India.

The Taliban's stance on Kashmir became evident following the revocation of Article 370 in 2019, when it issued a statement firmly rejecting Pakistan's attempts to associate the US-Taliban Doha negotiations with the Kashmir issue.

Most recently, on April 23, 2025, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, spokesperson for the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reiterated the Taliban's position by categorically condemning the Pahalgam attack.

Counter-terrorism

India's diplomatic efforts are advancing its primary objectives in combating terrorism. The Taliban has emphasised its awareness of India's security apprehensions, assuring New Delhi that it does not threaten any country.

The Misri-Muttaqi discussions in Doha occurred shortly after India firmly condemned the Pakistani airstrikes in the Barmal district. Delhi's formal protests regarding Pakistan's actions in Afghanistan resonated with the Taliban's assertion that "it is a longstanding tactic of Pakistan to blame its neighbors for its own internal shortcomings."

However, the Taliban continues to maintain connections with terrorist factions linked to Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and has made minimal efforts to dissociate from them. Addressing this issue will pose a significant challenge for India, necessitating careful cultural and political engagement. India's formal interactions may potentially encourage the Taliban to adopt more moderate policies, particularly concerning human rights and the treatment of women.

By engaging with the Taliban-led government in response to the Pahalgam massacre, India has effectively placed Pakistan in a difficult position. Pakistan, which had supported the Taliban with the expectation of using them against India, appears to have suffered a setback.

The warming of relations with the Taliban is driven by various pragmatic factors, indicating a degree of transformation within the Taliban and an acknowledgement of international realities, as they recognise the necessity of providing better governance to their populace. This also reflects the Taliban's growing confidence and relative moderation, gained through experience and lessons learned from the past.

India's longstanding hostility towards the Taliban originated from Pakistan's role in the IC 814 hijacking, during which the ISI leveraged archaic Islamist ideologies to intimidate India and facilitate the release of Masood Azhar and others from incarceration. Conversely, the Taliban harboured resentment towards India for not adequately acknowledging its efforts to resolve the hijacking crisis with minimal violence. Additionally, the Taliban criticised India for its initial support of both the Soviet and subsequently the US-backed regimes in Kabul, and they disapproved of India's approach to Afghanistan from a Pakistani perspective.

The change in India's Afghan policy represents a significant diplomatic strategy with regional implications, paving the way for notable geopolitical shifts. This change not only reflects India's desire to reconnect with the Afghan populace through health and welfare initiatives and address its own concerns regarding extremist factions, but it also aligns with India's broader geopolitical objectives. This includes utilising the Chabahar port to forge links with Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. The vision for such logistical connectivity has existed for at least two decades, but was previously unattainable due to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

These connections hold substantial potential for energy, trade, and investment that can now be pursued in strategically vital areas. Despite a faction of the Taliban, aligned with the ISI, opposing closer relations with India due to their extremist views, the Taliban government, having assumed power, now confronts the practical necessity of governance that requires external support to address the developmental needs of its citizens.

India's relationship with the Taliban illustrates the ongoing evidence of the Taliban adhering to their commitments regarding terrorism and their capacity for inclusive and effective governance.

PART II: AFGHAN IMBROGLIO AND INDIA: THE HISTORICAL BACKDROP

The history of Afghanistan is well-documented; the pride and national identity (mellat) of the Afghan people led them to engage in three wars against the British in their quest for independence, unlike the Indian surrender of their identity to the Raj.

The Afghan tribes recognize themselves as Yusufzai, Mamund, Afridi, among others. However, as their tribal identities became less distinct over time, particularly in the settled regions, they began to refer to themselves as Pashtuns, Pakhtuns, or Pathans, terms that have become synonymous with Afghan nationalism and identity.

In pre-colonial times, Afghanistan was segmented into the Western Afghans, known as the Abdalis (Durrani), who had strong connections with the Safavid dynasty of Iran. In contrast, the Eastern Afghans, primarily the Pathans, maintained political affiliations with the Muslim rulers of India. During the period of British colonialism, Eastern Afghanistan, situated along the Indus River, along with a portion of Baluchistan, came under British influence.

The Durand Line & Pashtunistan conundrum

The Durand-Line was drawn during the British-Russian "Great Game" in 1893, following the third Anglo-Afghan war. Under an agreement, Afghanistan and British India formalized the Durand Line (2,640 kilometers) to delineate their respective spheres of influence. It was not meant to be a formal boundary. The Line was drawn by a British diplomat, Mortimer Durand.

The Agreement was modified in 1919. Article 11 of the 1919 Agreement mandated that the British government must notify the Afghan government of all activities, including military operations conducted by British authorities. The treaty contained provisions for trade concessions to Afghanistan, including the right to engage in transit trade. However, since 1947, Pakistan has contested Afghanistan's rights.

Unfortunately, the Durand Line cuts through the core territory of the Pashtun population, separating the Pashtun and Baloch groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan in northern and western Pakistan from the northeastern and southern areas of Afghanistan. This demarcation was created to the detriment of Afghan nationalism, which aimed at unifying Pashtunistan. As a result, the Durand Line is regarded as one of the most dangerous borders in the world, sustaining an ongoing state of turmoil between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹

Following the departure of the British, Pakistan took over the Durand Line in 1947 and designated it as the international border. Nevertheless, Afghanistan vehemently opposed Pakistan's declaration, and Kabul continued to reject the legitimacy of the Durand Line, arguing that it was intended to demarcate spheres of influence rather than international frontiers.²

The dispute regarding the Durand Line arose when Pakistan obstructed transit points, subsequently igniting tribal sentiments against the Pakistanis and vice versa. Islamabad dissuaded Afghan activities in the tribal areas.

The issue of Pashtunistan emerged rapidly after Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud Khan came to power in 1953. Subsequently, the issue considerably impacted the geopolitical relations throughout the Cold War.

¹ "No Man's Land Where the imperialists' Great Game once unfolded, tribal allegiances have made for a "soft border" between Afghanistan and Pakistan--and a haven for smugglers, militants, and terrorists by Jayshree Bajoria. Council on Foreign Relations | Newsweek Web Exclusive Dec 2, 2007.

² Micallef, Joseph V. ["Afghanistan and Pakistan: The Poisoned Legacy of the Durand Line"](#). Huffington Post, 21 November 2015. Also, "No change in stance on Durand Line: Faizi". Pajhwok Afghan News. 24 October 2012.

The US position

In pursuit of its objectives, the Daoud administration sought closer ties with the Soviet Union for military assistance while simultaneously hoping to obtain economic support from the United States.

However, the relationship between the US and Afghanistan failed to develop due to suspicions that Afghanistan had aligned itself with the Soviet bloc. Additionally, Afghanistan's participation in the non-alignment movement was met with disapproval from Washington. This situation intensified the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan.

In the 1950s, American diplomats, including Angus Ward, the US Ambassador in Kabul, held a mutual disdain for Daoud, and the sentiment was reciprocated.

The Afghan request for military assistance received little serious consideration in Washington. In 1951, after a formal request from the Daoud government, Washington agreed to contemplate the request under the stipulation that a) the arms requested would amount to \$25 million, to be paid in cash; b) arrangements for transit through Pakistan would need to be made without US assistance; c) the sale would need to be publicly disclosed; and d) it would be beneficial if the Pushtunistan claim were abandoned.

In October 1954, when Mohammad Naim, the Afghan Foreign Minister, once again sought military assistance, John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State, rejected the request, stating that it would lead to a "problem"; instead, he urged Kabul to abandon the Pashtunistan issue. Dulles communicated this decision through a note to the Afghan Ambassador in Washington, Kabir Ludin, and also sent a copy to the Pakistani Ambassador in Washington.

Kabul was incensed, not merely due to the refusal, but because of the disclosure of the confidential information to its rival, Pakistan. The US's rejection signified Washington's position on the long-standing conflict regarding Pashtunistan.

The relationship between Afghanistan and the US could never be improved. The US initiative for economic assistance and projects in Afghanistan was consistently thwarted by Pakistani interference.

Furthermore, Pakistani officials, concerned about Daoud's policies, collaborated with CIA personnel in Kabul to incite tribal uprisings aimed at undermining the Daoud regime.

During his trip to Kabul in 1953, Vice President Nixon advised Daoud against the Pashtunistan claim. In 1956, at the SEATO conference, the US officially acknowledged the Durand Line as the international border separating Afghanistan and Pakistan, effectively extinguishing any Afghan aspirations for a neutral US stance on the Pashtunistan issue.

To cut it short, the manipulation of Afghan internal politics by Pakistan and the CIA forced Daoud to seek closer relations with the Soviets.

The Soviet position

As for the Soviet position, Moscow maintained that the Pashtuns in Pakistan have an irrefutable right to self-determination. The Kremlin always encouraged the Afghan regimes with major military and economic support. In 1955, the Pushtunistan conflict nearly escalated into war between Afghanistan and Pakistan, prompting an Afghan Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) to support the acceptance of military assistance from the Soviet Union.³

Towards the end of 1955, Bulganin and Khrushchev visited Kabul, where they reiterated Soviet support for the Pashtunistan cause and committed to providing military aid. Since that time, the Pashtunistan issue has grown more pronounced, leading the Kabul government to initiate a propaganda campaign in the tribal regions.

There were also reports in the late 1960s regarding the Chinese support for the Pashtunistan independence movement. Ayub Khan Achakzai, a radical Pathan, maintained close contact with the Chinese Embassy in Kabul.

India's position and Influence

India maintained a profound connection with the inhabitants of the Frontier Provinces, who supported India in its struggle for independence. It is important to remember that Abdul Ghaffar Khan, commonly referred to as Bacha Khan, along with other Khudai Khidmatgars, spearheaded the Bannu Revolution in June 1947, promoting the idea of an independent Pashtunistan and opposing the concept of joining Pakistan. For the Afghan people, Pakistan represented a dominating power. Bacha Khan conveyed his sense of betrayal regarding the

³ Hafizullah Emadi, "A Historical Perspective of the Durand Line and the Future of Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations", World Review 29 (1991), pp 5-12

partition in a correspondence to Gandhi, stating, 'You have thrown us to the wolves.'

In the past, India has been engaging with the Pashtun and Baluch communities through its All-India Radio (AIR) broadcasts in the Sindhi, Pashto, and Baluchi languages. However, these broadcasts primarily served cultural and informational purposes.

The primary aim of the AIR program was to ensure that the audience would not have to depend solely on Radio Pakistan for news about India and global events. The program did not address the hardships faced by the Baluch and Pathan people under the oppressive regime of Pakistan, except during the 1965 Indo-Pak conflicts, when AIR reported on the alleged suppression of the Pushtunistan freedom movement by Pakistan.

During the Cold War era, Indian diplomats, who lacked sufficient understanding of geopolitical matters, perceived the Pashtunistan issue primarily through the lens of the Soviet threat. They believed that if the dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan regarding Pashtunistan remained unresolved, Afghanistan would inevitably fall under Soviet influence.

There is limited information available regarding the establishment of the United Pakhtoonistan Front (UPF) in India in June 1967, which was led by Mehr Chand Khanna, a former Minister of Finance in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). The UPF advocated for Pakhtunkhwa to be recognized as the homeland for the Pathans.

Pakistan's Afghan "Strategic Depth" against India

During the Cold War, General Zia ul-Haq, in collaboration with Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief Hamid Gul, promoted the concept of 'Afghan Jihad' to the Americans and Saudis in the 1980s as a strategy to counter the Soviet Union. Zia conveyed to Selig Harrison, 'We will not permit Indians and Soviets to assert claims over our territory. We will establish a true Islamic state that will ultimately resonate with Muslims in the Soviet Union, you will see.' This notion received backing from the Jamaat-i-Islami (JU).

The United States allocated more than \$8 billion towards the Afghan conflict. Throughout the extensive Operation Cyclone, which commenced in 1979, the CIA financed the Mujahideen fighters with \$20–\$30 million annually in 1980, escalating to \$630 million per year by 1987. The funding from the CIA and Saudi Arabia was primarily funneled through the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

The ISI distributed 50 percent of the US and Saudi funding to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hizb-i-Islami, while the remaining 50 percent was allocated to other factions of the 'Peshawar Seven.' It is alleged that the duplicitous ISI Commanders accumulated vast fortunes, embezzling an estimated \$2.5 billion.⁴

Zia and Gul exploited the Afghan War to create a misleading sense of 'strategic depth' aimed at a) undermining the notion of 'Afghan nationalism' and b) leveraging the Cold War to incite conflict in Kashmir. They engaged in a double game by misappropriating funds to finance terrorism in Kashmir. Reports indicate that the Pakistani Army stockpiled at least three million small arms, which were subsequently redirected to Kashmir.

The ISI played a crucial role in assisting Hekmatyar to turn Afghanistan into a center for terrorism. By the years 1992-93, more than 120 training camps had been established along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, facilitating the training of 30,000 Jihadis from a global Sunni terrorist network. Weapons supplied by the United States, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, ultimately fell into the hands of terrorists who targeted Western interests.

A notable correlation existed between the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the onset of a low-intensity conflict in the Kashmir Valley during 1988-89.

The repercussions of the Afghan conflict began in June 1991 with the abduction of six Israelis in Kashmir, followed by the assassination of two CIA agents in Langley in 1993, and the bombings of a US military installation in Saudi Arabia in November 1995, among other events. To the shock of many, it was revealed that the attackers were Jihadis who had received training from the US, sending shockwaves across the Western world. This alarming situation prompted the Paris G7 Summit in 1996 to address the monitoring of Afghan Jihadi networks.

⁴ To gain a deeper understanding, one should refer to Peter Tomsen's book, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*, which outlines how the US, by delegating its military efforts to Pakistan, effectively endorsed the Pakistani Army's objective of transforming Afghanistan into a stronghold for Islamic fundamentalism—a strategy that persisted until the events of September 11, 2001.

Critics have accused the United States of complicity in the removal of Soviet-aligned progressive leaders, replacing them with a repressive political regime that oppressed the Afghan populace.

Tomsen reveals the deceptive tactics employed by Pakistan to convince the Western world that it favored a negotiated resolution, while in reality, its goal was to install its own allies in Kabul.

To cut a long story short, the Reagan administration in the 1980s provided a clear incentive for the emergence of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, ultimately leading to repercussions in the form of al-Qaeda.

India Bounces back

When the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989 and Najibullah's government collapsed in April 1992, it initially seemed that India would be left without allies and friends in Afghanistan. The prevailing sentiment was that New Delhi had made a grave mistake by supporting the Soviet-aligned regime in Kabul.

However, it didn't take long for India to bounce back when the first Afghan Jihadi government (Mujahideen), whom ISI helped create, immediately turned to Delhi to for improving ties.

In May 1992, shortly after Burhanuddin Rabbani told an Indian media about Kabul's willingness to enhance its relationship with India, the first interim President of Afghanistan, Sibghatullah Mujaddedi, promptly conveyed his intention to travel to India, ostensibly to honour his forebears interred in Sirhind, Punjab.

Mujaddedi headed the Naqshbandi Sufi order and was a descendant of Sheikh Ahmad of Sirhind (1624), also known as Mujaddid Alf-e-Sani, who spearheaded the Naqshbandi movement in India during the reign of Emperor Jehangir. History suggests that Sirhindi's family relocated to Afghanistan in the eighteenth century at the invitation of Ahmad Shah Abdali. The Sirhindis continue to maintain a robust support base among the Pakhtun communities in Paktia, Logar, and Ghazni.

Mujaddedi's visit signified an undeniable yearning among Afghan Jihadis to restore their previously severed connections with New Delhi. His successor, Burhanuddin Rabbani, desperately sought permission to land his aircraft in Delhi en route to Jakarta in 1992, ostensibly to talk to Delhi.

The Mujahideen eventually rejected being a mere puppet of Islamabad. The rift immediately erupted in 1992 after ISI chief Hamid Gul deceitfully resisted the Jamiat-i-Islami's leader, Rabbani, taking over the presidency from Mujaddedi as per the Peshawar Accord on June 30, 1992.

Gul was instead determined to install Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, a former drug peddler and the head of Hizb-i-Islami, which received major CIA funding through the ISI during the Soviet–Afghan War in the 1980s.⁵ Hekmatyar promised to unify Afghanistan with Pakistan by permanently abolishing the Durand Line. Hikmatyar also pledged to sever Afghanistan's longstanding relations with India and prevent Delhi's involvement in any peace negotiations. However, as part of the power-sharing efforts led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, Hekmatyar became Prime Minister of Afghanistan from 1993 to 1994. Later, the ISI-Hekmatyar efforts to remove Rabbani failed because Ahmad Shah Masood supported the latter.

Birth of the Taliban

The Taliban was originally formed in 1992 by the ISI after its former allies, the Mujahideen, whom the ISI had carefully supported, turned against Islamabad and sought assistance from Delhi upon establishing their government in Kabul in 1992.

This came on the heels of Benazir Bhutto's return to power in 1993, who decided to overhaul the Afghan policy by discontinuing support for the Mujahideen networks, including Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami group.

After abandoning the Afghan Mujahideen network, Benazir Bhutto's Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar, a rival of Hamid Gul, vehemently propped up the new militia – the Taliban. Maulana Fazlur Rahman of the Jamaat-ul-Ulema-Islam (JUI) backed the decision to raise Talibs from his seminaries.

Babar's policy was like old wine in a new bottle. The underlying goal of raising the Taliban was linked to its dirty conspiracy to water down the ideals of Pushtunwali ghayrat (honour) to replace them with a Pakistani brand of Islamic morals in Afghanistan. However, for the world outside, Pakistan justified the creation of the new Afghan militia ostensibly to disarm Afghan Mujahideen, reduce opium production, unify the nation, and expel all foreign terrorists residing in Afghanistan.

⁵ "Who is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar? Archived from [the original](#) on 1 May 1998.

The US falls into Pakistan's trap - again

In an attempt to amend its previous mistakes, Washington once again fell into a trap set by Pakistan. It uncritically relied on the ISI's strategic plan for Afghanistan, which aimed to establish the Taliban militia as a new force to disarm Afghan Mujahideen, reduce opium production, unify the nation, and expel all foreign terrorists residing in Afghanistan.

The Western nations found no objection to supporting the Taliban, as long as they served as a useful instrument to counter Iran's strategic interests in oil and geopolitics following the Soviet Union's collapse. The United States promptly sent Senator Hank Brown and Assistant Secretary Robin Raphel to engage with Taliban leaders in 1995. Naseerullah Khan Babar escorted the US Ambassador in Islamabad on a visit to Taliban strongholds. This clear American support facilitated the Taliban's rapid acquisition of one-third of Afghan territory within a matter of months.

The Rise of the Taliban

The Taliban was first heard in India in the fall of 1994, when the militia reportedly rescued a Pakistani truck convoy from local guerrillas in Kandahar. It became clearer when the new outfit was employed to counter the Indian and Iranian-backed strategic railway project to link Central Asia with the Persian Gulf via Sarakh in Turkmenistan and Tajan in Iran, which was completed in 1994.

India's Central Asia railway project swiftly led the US to endorse a Pakistani agreement with UNACOL and Saudi Delta to construct a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad subsequently engaged in negotiations with the Taliban on behalf of UNACOL. Benazir Bhutto's UNACOL project contrasted with the pro-India Rabbani government's preference for a contract with the Argentine company, Bidas.

Inevitably, the pipeline politics led the ISI, CIA, and Saudi General Intelligence Presidency (GIP) to support a speedy military capture of one-third of Afghan territory within a matter of months in 1995.

By 1994, all the Mujahideen leaders, including Hekmatyar, began to distance themselves from Islamabad. Hekmatyar reconciled with Rabbani and assumed the role of Prime Minister for the second time under a power-sharing agreement in 1996.

In a major diplomatic move, Indian Prime Minister Deve Gowda quickly sent his congratulatory message to Hekmatyar upon assuming his office. Hekmatyar

even found his way to attend India's Independence Day reception in Kabul on August 15, 1996.

India's endorsement of the power-sharing arrangement in Kabul, Prime Minister Deve Gowda's congratulatory message to Hekmatyar, and his presence at the Indian Embassy in Kabul shocked the US and Pakistan.

Thereafter, following the visit of Saudi Intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal Saud to Pakistan, the Taliban managed to seize control of Kabul in just 50 days, on September 27, 1996.

However, what has proved is that the Afghan leaders, even the most rigid ones like Hekmatyar, after their initial honeymoon period, eventually turned to Delhi. There are many on the list. Even Ghani, after taking a tilt toward Pakistan, ultimately fell into Delhi's line.

What worked for Delhi was its old historical links with Afghanistan, a non-prescriptive policy approach, a low-key presence, a minimal economic and humanitarian assistance, and the culture of open communication with all groups, which enabled India to gain ready political acceptance and wean any regime in Kabul from Islamabad's hold.

The Deviation

However, India did make a mistake by grossly deviating from the past by choosing the long-shot binary option of refusing to de-recognize the Rabbani government and rebuffing the Taliban in 1996, citing the militia as Pakistani protégés.

Instead, Delhi openly lobbied with Iran, Russia, and others to get the Northern Alliance back to power while lending overt financial support to the spent group.

Some delusion-prone India policy thinkers even took to playing a sort of mini-Great Game in Afghanistan by opening a military base and a field hospital in Tajikistan, along with the hubris played through the media. Delhi squandered away hundreds of crores, knowing well that the policy was untenable.

By decisively siding with one warring faction (non-Pashtun), Delhi not only shunned the prospect of engaging with Taliban but also induced an impression that India was opposed to the majority Pashtun, which wasn't the case. This ought to have been avoided.

The opposition BJP called it impractical and urged for dealing with the new victor in Kabul. But much-touted Gujral's 'neighborhood-first' policy provided the political foundation for India's Afghan management.

Alas! No clinical assessment was made on the Taliban except being dubbed as Pakistani protégés, so not to be trusted.

Surely, the US-sponsored Pakistani solution was unviable, but a one-sided perspective also proved unfeasible. Whereas India's partners like Iran and Russia retained their liveness for opening talks with the Taliban. Unsurprisingly, India found itself constrained, viewed as a foe of the Taliban rather than neutral. This was how India got played into Pakistani hands.

On the contrary, the Taliban during its rule in Kabul (1996-2001), made no hostile overtures towards India. Instead, amidst reports in 1996 of Pakistan raising yet another alternative Afghan force, the Taliban warned Islamabad that such an action would force it to turn around for India's help.

But for Delhi's own rigidity, the Taliban would have reached out to India sooner or later to offset Pakistani influence. Delhi decided to hold back, perhaps driven by the fear of the Taliban muddling its way into Kashmir through the Badakhshan-PoK axis.

US policy goals and the Taliban

The US quickly acknowledged the Taliban's victory in September 1996 after the State Department spokesman, Nicholas Burns, acknowledged that Washington had established communication with the new regime and would be sending diplomats there "within a few days" for formal contacts with the Taliban.⁶

The New York Times characterized the Taliban as a moderate entity that brought a degree of stability to the nation for the first time in many years. Zalmay Khalilzad contended that while the Taliban was a fundamentalist group, it did not engage in an Iranian-style anti-American agenda. The West viewed the Taliban's actions as 'anti-modernism' rather than 'anti-Western', who sought the revival of 'traditional Afghan society' instead of 'exporting Islam.'⁷

⁶ John F. Burns, "Afghanistan Reels Back into View", October 6, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/06/weekinreview/afghanistan-reels-back-into-view.html>

⁷ Zalmay Khalilzad, "AFGHANISTAN: TIME TO REENGAGE" <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1996/10/07/afghanistan-time-to-reengage/300b1725-8d30-4b98-a916-03f7b588bb2c/> October 6, 1996,

However, within a month following the Taliban's victory, Washington was compelled to retract its intention to recognize the Taliban regime due to escalating international condemnation of the militia's horrific, medieval-style brutality, which alienated the global community, including conservative Iranian clerics. In a reversal, Assistant Secretary Robin Raphel stated that 'the US supports none of the warring factions.'

Nevertheless, the damage had already been inflicted. The Taliban's harsh treatment of women had resulted in significant embarrassment for the US. Despite the Taliban's early commitment to expel foreign terrorists, Omar rejected every US overture made through Pakistani intermediaries to extradite Bin Laden for trial, even at the peril of being ousted from power.

The ISI portrayed the Americans as gullible by misleading them into believing that the Taliban would serve as a reliable ally for the United States. During this time, ISI Commanders diligently pursued their own agenda, securing \$2.5 billion allocated for Taliban operations.

Tomsen reveals the deceptive tactics employed by Pakistan to convince the Western world that it favored a negotiated resolution, while in reality, its goal was to install its own allies in Kabul.

To cut a long story short, the Reagan administration in the 1980s provided a clear incentive for the emergence of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, ultimately leading to repercussions in the form of al-Qaeda.

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration followed the ISI's counsel to support the Taliban as a means of safeguarding American interests, including the potential for oil pipelines across Central and South Asia, only to confront the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

During President Obama's administration (2009-2017), the United States implemented a revised Af-Pak Policy, emphasizing nation-building initiatives to address the complexities of the Afghan situation. This approach involved expanding the consultation process beyond Pakistan to include partners, donors, and various international organizations.

In August 2009, President Obama initiated a "surge" in Afghanistan by deploying the highest number of US troops, totaling 17,000 additional personnel, along with another 4,000 troops designated to aid in the training of the Afghan National Security Forces.⁸ He unexpectedly dismissed the US

⁸ "Putting Stamp on Afghan War, Obama Will Send 17,000 Troops",

commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, after a mere 11 months in the position, replacing him with a Special Operations general named Stanley McChrystal. In a comprehensive 66-page assessment, McChrystal called for an increase in troop numbers, a request that was subsequently leaked to the media, sparking significant controversy as public support for the war began to decline in the United States.

President Obama set a timeline for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by July 2011, while concurrently striving to dismantle al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations operating from their fortified locations in Afghanistan. Ultimately, US Special Forces successfully eliminated Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011 during Obama's presidency.

A key element of his administration's foreign policy was the creation of a new contact group for Afghanistan and Pakistan, which included NATO allies and other partners, as well as Central Asian states, Gulf nations, Iran, Russia, India, and China, all of whom have vested interests in the peace and security of the region.

McChrystal's evaluation that the majority of Afghans would back the Afghan government in its struggle against the Taliban was incorrect. The Afghan Taliban did receive backing from the ethnic Pashtuns, who ultimately presented a challenge to the administrations of Karzai and Ghani. Nevertheless, the belief that most Afghans possessed a sense of national identity, and that the sanctuaries in Pakistan would not sustain the Taliban indefinitely has been validated as an accurate assessment.

The US policy goals towards Afghanistan and Pakistan were always about serving its own interests. Even after 9/11, American naivety in gauging Pakistani motivation continues to cause a mess in Afghanistan.

The last peace agreement originated during Trump's previous 'America First' policy, when he accused Pakistan of harbouring 'agents of chaos' and sheltering at least 20 US-designated terrorist organizations. Washington then notified Pakistan to take decisive action against the Taliban and other extremists or face aid cuts and revocation of its major non-NATO ally status.

Furthermore, Trump advocated for an Indian role in US initiatives in Afghanistan. His commitment to deal with safe havens and cross-border terrorism pleased

New Delhi. Trump's policy also coincided with a strategic pivot from counterterrorism to focusing on China.

The Doha Accord, signed on 29 February 2020 in Qatar, did not involve the Afghan government.⁹ Under the US-Taliban clandestine understanding, the US and NATO forces gradually reduced air support operations, which left the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) defenseless to counter the Taliban's push. The US withdrawal finally led to the Taliban taking over Kabul on 15 August 2021.¹⁰

President Joe Biden's focus on 'fighting the battles of the next 20 years, not the last 20,' indicated the US shift in strategy away from Afghanistan to countering China by leveraging various Islamic groups to add to the Uyghur cause in Xinjiang. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo paid a stealthy visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to caution the region to stay away from the malign influence of 'external actors.'

One critical aspect and a consequence of the US withdrawal was the uncovering of Pakistan's deceptions. Islamabad's running with the hare and hunting with the hounds while simultaneously trying to play the American, Chinese, and Russian game with the sole aim of fomenting trouble in Kashmir, could not be sustained. The Taliban distancing itself from Rawalpindi became glaring by 2021.

However, the perception that the US-India strategic partnership, which progressed following Trump's emphasis on India's involvement in Afghanistan, which not only caused unease in Pakistan but also alarmed China, has proved misleading. Trump has now reversed his stance by abandoning the earlier de-hyphenating India and Pakistan approach in favor of re-hyphenating the Af-Pak region with Kashmir.

The recent tactical shift in Washington's stance has changed the context. Concurrently, 'Operation Sindoor' also signifies India's major transitional shift away from a US-centric approach to a more independent framework in decision-making.

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

¹⁰ US withdrawal prompted collapse of Afghan army: Report (18 May 2022)
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/18/us-withdrawal-prompted-collapse-of-afghan-army-report>

For a sustainable resolution, major powers like India, Russia, and China need to reach a basic level of mutual understanding regarding Afghanistan to safeguard their interests in Kashmir, Central Asia, and Xinjiang.

Growing Pashtun discontent

Since Jirga passed a resolution endorsing the rights of the Pathans, the Pashtunistan movement has remained vigorous across all frontier regions. During the 1960s, the Pashtunistan movement gained momentum due to Soviet arms shipments to the Pathans, aimed at countering the Chinese arms supply to Pakistan. Abdul Ghaffar Khan advocated for "self-determination" for the Pathans. Subsequently, the movement, spearheaded by Wali Khan and the National Awami Party (NAP), has been active in the Peshawar-Charsadda-Mardan region, which served as the core of the Red Shirt-NAP organizations throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

The activities led by the NAP have been significantly more assertive compared to the earlier movement spearheaded by Ghaffar Khan and the other senior figures of the former Red Shirts Surkh Posh movement.

Historically, the advocacy for the Pashtunistan narrative and the conflict between tribal nationalists and the Pakistani security forces were expressed through poetry or songs, which motivated the tribes to rise. The Afghan characterized the "Pakistani oppression" of the Pukhtuns as a direct extension of British domination; thus, the people must take up arms.

In the past, there were concerns that ongoing disturbances in the North West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) could escalate into a conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan, potentially inviting Soviet intervention.

When the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), referred to as the Homeland Party, assumed control in 1990, it asserted that Afghanistan's borders reached as far as the Indus River.

In 1976, Bhutto proposed a quid pro quo arrangement to release the Pashtun leaders of the National Awami Party (NAP) contingent upon Daoud Khan's acknowledgment of the Durand Line. Nevertheless, the issue remained unresolved following Bhutto's overthrow in 1977 and Daoud Khan's loss of power in 1978.

Nevertheless, in recent times, the unrest in both Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Provinces (NWFP), driven by the NAP and the Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), has presented a significant challenge to Pakistan.

The issue of Pashtunistan is no longer inactive. No Afghan government, including the Taliban, has recognized the Durand Line as a conclusive boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact, this is the only major political issue on which the Afghans are in general agreement.

In 2017, President Hamid Karzai asserted that Afghanistan would "never recognize" the Durand Line as the boundary dividing the two countries.

At present, ethnic Pashtuns in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of northern Pakistan are mounting challenge to the government in Islamabad. The Pashtunistan movement is being led by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), whose leader, Manzoor Pashteen, has been advocating for an end to the abuses perpetrated by the Pakistan army in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and for the rights of the Pashtun people.

A significant factor in the Af-Pak region is the resurgence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which comprises more than seven factions that primarily derive their strength from the tribal areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, particularly in Kandahar, Nangarhar, and adjacent provinces, where the Pakistan army conducts regular operations.

Similar to the Afghan Taliban, the TTP has been promoting Sharia law throughout Pakistan. Ideologically, the group has maintained a close alignment with al-Qaida and has aimed to establish a caliphate.

Nevertheless, the TTP appears to have shifted away from an Islamic agenda to adopt a more nationalistic focus that resonates with Pashtun identity, advocating for the concept of an autonomous state in the tribal regions. A notable change in the TTP's strategy was observed in 2021, when its leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, announced that the group would persist in its 'war against Pakistan's security forces' until it achieves independence.'

Over time, the TTP's methods have evolved from targeting civilians to primarily focusing on assaults against Pakistan's security forces, particularly in North and South Waziristan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Baluchistan. Current trends suggest that the TTP's armed resistance is strengthening, similar to the military confrontations posed by the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) against Pakistan.

The TTP has the potential to evolve into a political movement and may eventually align with the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), which seeks liberation from Pakistan and aims to establish an independent state in the tribal areas, with backing from the Afghan Taliban.

Importantly, both the Afghan Taliban and the TTP reject the legitimacy of the border, leading Islamabad to be cautious about the growing ties between the Afghan Taliban and India.

The ISI's ongoing efforts to create divisions within the Taliban ranks are aimed at promoting Sirajuddin Haqqani and other clerics educated in Pakistani madrassas to advance Pakistan's strategic interests. In 2024, Pakistan conducted two airstrikes in Barmal, Paktika Province, to pressure Kabul into taking action against the TTP.

Nevertheless, the Afghan Taliban are hesitant to confront the TTP, fearing that such a move could drive the TTP to ally with the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), which poses a more significant threat to Kabul. Additionally, the Taliban's support from China and Russia heavily relies on their capacity to manage the IS-K and al-Qaeda elements.

The IS-K, which boasts over 6,000 fighters, has formed alliances with the TTP and al-Qaeda, collectively posing a 'regional threat' to China, India, and Myanmar. The IS-K has established a chapter in India that regularly engages in anti-India propaganda centered on the Hindu-Muslim divide through its publications, *Sawt al Hind* (Voice of Hind). The IS-K affiliate, Ansar Ghazwa-tul Hind, has been intermittently inciting unrest in Kashmir since 2017.

It is also plausible that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) may be backing another Pashtun faction to supplant Taliban governance in Afghanistan.¹¹

India's Possible "Reverse Strategic Depth"

Rawalpindi's constant strategy is to create militant groups to utilize them for 'strategic depth' against India. Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, high-ranking Pakistani intelligence officials, including the then ISI chief, Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, hurried to Kabul to celebrate. The ISI pushed a recognized terrorist, Sirajuddin Haqqani, to be the Interior Minister in Kabul to steer a campaign of terror against India.

¹¹ Animesh Roul, "Islamic State Hind Province's Kashmir Campaign and Pan-Indian Capabilities", *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 18 Issue: 22
<https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-hind-provinces-kashmir-campaign-and-pan-indian-capabilities/> (December 3, 2020)

The Taliban's triumph in 2021 was initially viewed as a significant strategic loss for India, raising concerns that they would serve as a proxy for the Pakistan ISI, thereby providing 'strategic depth' against India.

However, the Afghan Taliban have once again squarely rebuffed Rawalpindi's designs. In the past three years, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have sharply declined, with hostilities escalating to the point of mutual bombardment.

In response to recent events, India's proactive diplomatic efforts have disrupted Pakistan's objectives. As India addresses the cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan through a robust response to the Pahalgam attackers and their supporters, its strategic maneuvers concerning Afghanistan may yield significant advantages.

Given the current situation, it is unlikely that the Taliban will permit or act as a proxy for Pakistan in the event of military hostilities with India. With Pakistan's aspirations of utilizing Afghanistan for 'strategic depth' against India proving futile, India is now positioned to employ reverse strategic depth against Pakistan.

The renewed contact with Kabul comes over three years after India experienced a significant strategic and diplomatic setback when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. This hiatus in Indian engagement allowed for an increased influence of Pakistan and China, diminishing India's strategic presence and heightening security apprehensions.

Nevertheless, India's stance is aligned with the prevailing consensus that opposes the recognition of the Taliban government unless it adopts an inclusive approach, abandons its oppressive treatment of women, upholds human rights, and ensures that its territory is not utilised for terrorist activities, among other issues.

It is important to note that the Taliban continues to have connections with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), although no significant incidents involving them have been reported. The challenge for India also lies in maintaining relations with various Afghan leaders who oppose the Taliban regime and have historically supported India in the face of threats from the ISI.

Concurrently, engaging with the Taliban is essential, as Afghanistan occupies a crucial geopolitical position not only in the context of India-Pakistan relations but also concerning Central Asia, China, Iran, and Russia.

Consequently, the geopolitical stakes for India are substantial, necessitating all efforts to solidify its presence in Kabul.

In addition to the implications for Pakistan, Afghanistan plays a crucial role for India in improving connectivity and access to Central Asia. Furthermore, Turkey's expanding influence, which strategically leverages Pakistan to counter India's efforts in the Eurasian Turkic region, is gaining importance and is now more significant than even Chinese initiatives.

India's Policy Underpinnings

Throughout periods of political turmoil in Afghanistan, India has consistently adhered to a framework that emphasizes its dedication to preserving Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while refraining from intervening in its domestic conflicts.

The following critical foundational elements play a crucial role in strengthening India's ability to adjust to the changing circumstances in Afghanistan:

1. India considers the unity and territorial integrity of Afghanistan to be of utmost importance, a viewpoint that has remained unchanged since the era of British colonialism. Any potential fragmentation of Afghanistan, whether into Pakistan or through internal divisions, poses a significant threat to India's security.
2. The deep-rooted historical ties and shared sentiments between India and Afghanistan hold great significance. Regardless of their affiliations—be they are Sufis, Wahabis, Deobandis, or secularists—their quest to reconnect with their heritage and their profound nostalgia for Hindustan ultimately led them towards Delhi. This situation has caused considerable concern for Pakistan, as the possibility of Afghan allies liberating themselves from their constraints has instilled fear and anxiety in Rawalpindi.
3. Historical records suggest there are no true victors in the Afghan conflict; those who become entangled in the Afghan crisis ultimately exhaust their resources.
4. India's unwavering policy of maintaining neutrality in the internal Afghan conflict has proven advantageous. Despite having established close operational ties with the Communist regime during the 1990s, New Delhi managed to maintain discreet communications with prominent leaders of the Mujahideen factions, including Rabbani, Sibghatullah, Hekmatyar, Abdul Sayaf, Ahmad Shah Masood, and Dostum, thereby

- enhancing India's political maneuverability following the Soviet withdrawal.¹²
5. India's commitment to encouraging progressive change and advancing modernity among the Afghan people has consistently yielded advantages for India, unlike the regressive agenda adopted by Pakistan.
 6. The approach of maintaining a low-profile presence while providing limited economic and humanitarian assistance, such as medical supplies, during the crisis from 1973 to 1992, has proven beneficial for India. Before the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Indian doctors successfully fitted 1,100 prosthetic limbs within a month in 1996, demonstrating a level of engagement that brought significant diplomatic rewards for New Delhi.
 7. Maintaining a diplomatic presence in Kabul, despite numerous challenges, has been advantageous for India. At the time of the Taliban's takeover, India was among the few countries, alongside Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia, to sustain a diplomatic mission in the Afghan capital. Pakistan was distressed by the reopening of the Indian Embassy in Kabul and the substantial flow of humanitarian aid, labeling the increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan as 'highly painful and deplorable.' This policy enabled India to recover lost ground even as the Mujahideen factions became increasingly fragmented.
 8. India's position is largely shaped not by its own actions but by the fundamental contradictions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan's interventionist approach, particularly its focus on India, has limited Afghanistan's capacity to navigate and develop a wider array of foreign relations. As a result, Kabul has consistently viewed New Delhi as a vital connection to the international community, with the Mujahideen even seeking India's assistance in training pilots for the Afghan National Airlines, Ariana, which was essential for Afghanistan's connectivity.
 9. In trying to curtail Indian influence, Pakistan often cultivated heightened suspicion among the non-Pashtun Afghan populace. In the years 1992-93, as the situation evolved, India reinstated its diplomatic presence in Kabul. The encounter between Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Rabbani at the Non-Aligned summit in Jakarta in 1992, coupled with Rabbani's later visit to New Delhi on his way back, notably altered the dynamics of the scenario.

¹² Former Foreign Secretary J.N.Dixit claimed that throughout the Soviet period 1973-1990-91, India maintained contacts with opposition groups, especially with the moderate forces and their leadership, including former King Zahir Shah. The official and non-official contacts were established with Mujaddidi, Rabbani, Hekmatyar, Masood, and Dostum following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. See J.N.Dixit, "My South Block Years", New Delhi, pp.103-111. Also see "The tragedy of Afghanistan" by K.K. Katyal, Hindu, June 2, 1997

10. The Afghan populace has persistently opposed external control and has expressed significant animosity towards Pakistan. Despite the ongoing leadership changes, Kabul has looked to Delhi for political legitimacy and necessary security against its perceived hegemonic threat from Pakistan.
11. The longstanding Afghan irredentist claim over the Pashtun territories in Pakistan, alongside Pakistan's revanchist ambitions in Afghanistan, has perpetuated a climate of mutual distrust and, at times, profound hostility between the two countries. Whether under the leadership of Mujaddedi, Rabbani, Karzai, Ghani, or potentially Mullah Baradar in the future, reaching a consensus regarding the Durand Line appears improbable.
12. Additionally, whenever New Delhi engages with the Taliban, the ISI is quick to spread disinformation and harmful propaganda. Historically, figures such as Rabbani and Masood have been accused of seeking Indian support to devise a strategy against Hekmatyar.
13. To further its interests, India must stop viewing Afghanistan solely through the prism of Pakistan and instead adopt a comprehensive and multifaceted policy approach. A key tenet of India's strategy regarding Afghanistan should be to abandon the notion that any closeness between Afghanistan and Pakistan constitutes a zero-sum scenario. Given the cultural, tribal, and geographical dynamics, Pakistan will naturally possess a relative advantage over India.
14. What is required for India is to re-establish its historical connections with the land and people of Afghanistan, harking back to the era of the Rigveda. The Gandhara kingdom, along with significant cities such as Peshawar (Puruáshapura), Taxila (Takṣaṣhī), Charsadda (Pushkalavati), Swat (Udayana), and Prang (Prayag), served as vital centers of Buddhist and Hindu scholarship. Acharaya Pāṇini referred to Kabul as the Kingdom of Kapisi (Kapiṣhī) or Kapiṣhāyana, which corresponds to the Sanskrit term Kamboja.

This historical heritage has consistently shaped the dynamics of attraction to India. Globally, including among the Afghan populace, individuals, communities, and nations have typically sought their own avenues to engage with India, rather than India continuously seeking external influence.

While India may have strayed from its idealistic middle-path approach, its deeply ingrained realist insights and adaptable strategies can still underpin its diplomatic initiatives. Although this is undoubtedly easier said than done, it is clear that while Afghanistan remains outside

anyone's control, the intricacies of Afghan history are perhaps best understood from the Indian perspective.

Conclusion

While it is undoubtedly easier to articulate than to implement, it is clear that the intricate history of Afghanistan is perhaps best understood by the Indians, especially given the current state of affairs in the region. A robust and forward-thinking policy towards Afghanistan must be deeply rooted in these historical nuances.

Although Pakistan presents a unique historical challenge, India should refrain from employing only a security-oriented strategy akin to that of the Pentagon in its interactions with neighboring Asian countries. As Afghanistan approaches a pivotal moment, New Delhi is once again utilizing its diplomatic skills, or at least reverting to its traditional principled stance of engaging with the Kabul administration, regardless of its ideological position.

India stands to gain if it chooses a cautious approach marked by patience and subtlety, rather than the emotionally charged diplomacy associated with the Gujral Doctrine. The real challenge for India is not the Taliban, but the malign influence of Pakistan and its manipulation of the Pashtun identity, which has historically been a significant concern for Pakistan. To formulate a more insightful geopolitical strategy, India should aim to rejuvenate the Pashtun nationalist sentiment that Pakistan has long sought to suppress in favor of advancing pan-Islamism as a counter to Afghan nationalism.

While Delhi needs to confront the task of addressing all forms of fundamentalism, it should promote the shared principles and values of Pashtunwali, such as honor (namuz), solidarity (nang), and other cultural traditions that predate Islam and are still practiced among the Pashtun tribes.

India ought to contemplate the reunification of over 50 million Pashtuns living on both sides of the Durand Line, with 35 million in Pakistan and 15 million in Afghanistan. It is increasingly becoming vital for India to forge a deeper and clearer relationship with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as well as to revive the ongoing dispute regarding the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Historically, the Hazaras, Shias, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and other ethnic groups have experienced conflicts within Afghanistan; however, India has consistently upheld a positive reputation among these communities.

While the United States will persist in maintaining a pro-Pakistan stance regarding the Pashtunistan issue, India ought to regard the Pashtunistan aspect as a significant factor in its strategic approach towards Afghanistan.

India overlooked the chance when the century-long validity of the Durand Line Treaty (12 November 1893) lapsed in 1993, which had anticipated the return of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Afghanistan, similar to Hong Kong's return to China in 1997. Interestingly, Delhi chose to remain silent on this issue at that time. This matter can be revisited. India's stance should evolve towards the establishment of Baluchistan and Pashtunistan, or any necessary measures to fragment Pakistan within a defined timeframe.

Addressing the Pashtunistan issue could potentially alleviate regional tensions, resulting in the fragmentation of Pakistan, the reintegration of the North-West Frontier Province into Afghanistan, the liberation of Baluchistan, and the return of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan to India. This represents a significant policy direction that New Delhi should prioritize.



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