



India's Afghanistan Policy: A Post-US Exit Search for Strategic Space

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the period after the September 11 attacks. The 9/11 attacks initiated a new era in global politics, and the subsequent military involvement in Afghanistan headed by the United States provided India with a valuable chance to restore diplomatic relations with Kabul. Subsequently, India has adopted a prudent position in its dealings with Afghanistan, prioritizing assistance-based foreign policy strategies instead of direct military involvement in the conflict-ridden nation. Nevertheless, it is still uncertain to what degree India has successfully established a strategic presence in Afghanistan, considering the circumstances that led to the closure of its embassy and consulates in August 2021 due to the Taliban's recapture of the nation. Has India's strategy been too dependent on soft power, resulting in India's failure to seize the chance presented by the collapse of the Taliban administration in late 2001?

Keywords: *India's Afghanistan policy: Post-US exit, Strategic recalibration*

1. Introduction

1.1 The conflict in Afghanistan: A Historical Overview

Afghanistan has endured prolonged strife for over forty years. The reasons of the war in Afghanistan have fundamentally changed during this time. At the beginning of the conflict, the Afghan people were in conflict with the Soviet Union, which was seeking to expand its territory. The current period of violence has mostly been linked to the emergence of Islamic militancy, which has had consequences beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan. Located at the intersection of South, Southwest, and Central Asia, the war in Afghanistan has had far-reaching consequences across the area. However, the most significant and crucial consequence among these results has been the increase of religious extremism in and around Afghanistan, posing a danger to peace and security in the whole area. An outstanding characteristic of the war in Afghanistan is its tendency to disseminate Islamic extremism to neighboring regions in South Asia (Pakistan and Xinjiang in China) and Central Asia (Uzbekistan).

The neighboring countries of Afghanistan have contributed to the instability and turbulence in the nation, and their conflicting interests with Afghanistan have surely hindered the establishment of lasting peace in the area. Afghanistan has been caught in the crossfire of conflicts between its neighboring countries, and has also historically endured the power struggles between major colonial powers such as the British and Tsarist Russia. The combination of these circumstances has made it difficult for Afghanistan to independently determine its contemporary history without influence from regional countries or global superpowers. The Afghan political and ethnic factions had a patron-client relationship with foreign powers, which always added an international aspect to the Afghan quandary. Foreign meddling always resulted in an increase in the violence in Afghanistan. An analysis of the current situation in Afghanistan may be approached by examining the 9/11 attacks carried out by al-Qaeda on the United States. The attacks escalated the domestic unrest in Afghanistan into a significant global security issue, particularly for the United States-led Western countries. The al-Qaeda leadership clearly identified these nations as its primary adversary. Prior to 9/11, the emergence of the Taliban had caused apprehension in the Western

world. However, its strict ideology and abhorrent treatment of women were problems that were mostly limited to Afghanistan. The Taliban rule became an outcast for the Western countries because to their growing association with al-Qaeda, whose acts of terrorism extended beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan. This was seen via the horrific September 11 attacks. The bombings had a significant impact as Afghanistan became the focal point of the ongoing US-led Global War on Terror (GWOt). This is the exact moment when Pakistan's position became more important in relation to Afghanistan. Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan's domestic politics dates back to the time of a popular uprising against Soviet-sponsored communist regimes. However, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks compelled Pakistan to become a frontline state and a significant non-NATO ally of the United States in Afghanistan. At that time, it was widely believed that it was absolutely necessary to get Pakistan's cooperation in order to protect Afghanistan from the control of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance. Pakistan's stated policy stance indicated that it had renounced its support for the Taliban and would assist the United States in facilitating Afghanistan's transition to a period characterized by democracy and progress. In retrospect, it is evident that Pakistan has contributed both to the issue and the solution. Pakistan's strategy of aiding the United States in eradicating the terrorist menace originating from The Af-Pak area exhibited a discerning approach, at most. Pakistan's resistance to adopting a comprehensive and consistent anti-terrorist strategy led to the prolonged continuation of the war in Afghanistan. Pakistan's reluctance to counter the Taliban-led insurgency was the primary reason for the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Consequently, this made the US-led effort in Afghanistan seem inefficient and pointless. Pakistan's security apparatus, seeing Afghanistan as its strategic backyard, hindered the success of the Afghan operation by regarding the Taliban as a suitable tool to gain control over it. Pakistan's unwavering support for the Taliban forced the United States and its NATO allies to announce a withdrawal timetable. It became clear to them that trying to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda without Pakistan's support was futile. Their efforts were focused on treating the symptoms of terrorism in Afghanistan while leaving the root cause in Pakistan untouched. The war in Afghanistan has, however, remained unresolved. Despite the United States and its western allies effectively abandoning Afghanistan in 2021, the nation continues to face a wide range of significant issues. These factors consist of a fragile security situation, excessive reliance on foreign aid, unsatisfactory economic growth, increasing social and ethnic disparities, and, crucially, a fundamentalist government now in power. These problems indicate that Afghanistan has a difficult job in maintaining stability and peace as a state. It is undeniable that Afghanistan made significant and measurable advancements during the period while a mission commanded by the United States was there. However, there is concern that the resurgence of the Taliban as the de facto government might lead to the undoing of these achievements. If such a circumstance were to occur, Afghanistan has the potential to regress into a dire state reminiscent of the anarchy and turmoil seen under the former Taliban administration and the preceding years of civil war.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework

This article utilizes a qualitative methodology to examine the course of India's foreign policy development towards Afghanistan. This text aims to analyze the transformation of India's Afghan policy and identify the many reasons, including domestic, institutional, and individual influences, that contributed to this development. The research utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data to elucidate the development of India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Primary sources include the authoritative statements released by governments, the written content of signed treaties, and the opinions and statements expressed by members of governing regimes in both of these nations. Secondary materials, such as academic papers, comments, and news items, mostly focus on the topic of Indo-Afghan ties. The analysis of India-Afghanistan relations has been conducted using the theoretical framework of neo-realism in the field of International Relations. Neo-realists, particularly Kenneth Waltz, contend that states, acting as rational agents, exhibit a certain behaviour only after evaluating their own capacities and those of other states. Neo-realism argues that in a condition of anarchy, governments are responsible for their protection and pursuit of national interests, relying only on self-help as a means to ensure their existence. Placing this paper within the neo-realist framework aids in comprehending the underlying reasons behind India's pursuit of influence in Afghanistan. New Delhi has consistently viewed

maintaining friendly relations with Kabul as a strategy to thwart Pakistan from utilizing Afghan territory to further its anti-India objectives. Neo-realism, similar to classical realism, posits that conflict is a fundamental aspect of international politics. Therefore, understanding the origins of the Indo-Pak conflict is crucial. The competition in Afghanistan becomes more evident. Due to the hostile relationship between India and Pakistan since their establishment, this rivalry has also extended to Afghanistan.

3. Salvaging lost space: India's Afghanistan Policy since 9/11

India-Afghanistan connections are often believed to have existed before India became an independent nation-state. Over several centuries, India (or, more specifically, the regions that now constitute India) and Afghanistan have established extensive economic and cultural connections. Shortly after achieving independence, India proactively sought to maintain its connection with Afghanistan. The signing of the Friendship Treaty between the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan took place on January 4, 1950. This treaty is officially known as the Treaty of Friendship Between The Government of India and The Royal Government of Afghanistan, 1950. The treaty aimed to establish a long-lasting commitment to peace and friendship between the two nations, to benefit their people and promote the development of their respective countries (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015). The pact established a robust basis for robust and amicable relations between the two states. India has maintained strong diplomatic relations with all Afghan governments, from King Zahir Shah to the subsequent administrations, including those who came to power after the Soviet invasion in December 1979.

A further intriguing aspect that contributed to the early consolidation of India-Afghanistan ties is worth mentioning. As soon as Pakistan was established, the relationship between New Delhi and Kabul became more active since both nations had territorial disputes with Islamabad. In addition, Kabul's resistance to Pakistan's position on the Kashmir conflict bolstered the ties between India and Afghanistan. India provided ongoing support to Afghanistan even though India devised a distinct, if unprincipled, approach to maintain its ties with Afghanistan by exerting direct influence on the Mujahideen, who had strong connections with Pakistan's security and intelligence agency. India's former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao established the fundamental principles of this strategy, which served as the foundation of India's Afghanistan policy until the Taliban administration emerged in 1996. This policy was based on five essential components: India should address all Mujahideen organizations without hesitation or bias and should create communication with everyone who is prepared to engage with India, regardless of the militant nature of their Islamic ideology. India is prepared to engage with whoever has power in Kabul. The main objective for New Delhi is to establish a friendly administration that is attentive to India's crucial interests and concerns. India will engage in diplomatic relations with the administration in Kabul, regardless of its closeness to Pakistan or its security agencies. India categorically said that it would not provide weapons to any Mujahideen faction, and it would also not isolate any such outfit. India's primary objective is to enhance Afghanistan's economic well-being to the best of its ability and available resources (Bhadrakumar, 2011). Although this policy was intended to address the chaos and uncertainty in Afghanistan at that time, it hurt India's interests. The violence and internal conflicts among the different Mujahideen factions made it difficult for New Delhi and Kabul to have meaningful interactions. India was had to temporarily shut down its mission many times due to intense bombardment in and around Kabul. Relations completely ceased with the emergence of the Taliban in 1996.

The rapid and triumphant rise of the Taliban demonstrated Pakistan's discomfort with the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Pakistan sought to resolve the protracted battle among different Mujahideen groups via the Taliban, to establish stability in Afghanistan and use its strategic location to gain access to the resource-abundant Central Asian republics. During the Taliban administration, India's influence significantly diminished, eroding whatever little power it had managed to maintain in the years leading up to the civil war. The Taliban era was a period of severe diplomatic isolation in the history of India-Afghanistan ties (Paliwal, 2015). After the Taliban was removed from power in late 2001 by the coalition headed by the United States in response to the 9/11 Attacks, India quickly reestablished its diplomatic

relations with Afghanistan. Shortly after Karzai assumed leadership in Afghanistan, Jaswant Singh, India's Minister for External Affairs, travelled to Kabul to attend the inauguration of the Interim Government and to restore the Indian embassy. The embassy had been shuttered in 1996 when the Taliban gained control of Kabul. Subsequently, India's diplomatic relations with Afghanistan saw significant improvement, with many reasons contributing to the restoration and revitalization of bilateral ties. Initially, India maintained strict adherence to the principles outlined in the Bonn Agreement of 2001 on its Afghan strategy after the 9/11 attacks. Three Furthermore, in contrast to Pakistan, the Indo-Afghan ties were not hindered by the presence of a shared and disputed border. Furthermore, India was successful in obtaining formal endorsement from the Kabul administration because several individuals from the Northern Alliance, whom India had previously sponsored in the mid-1990s, assumed positions inside the Interim administration or occupied significant roles at the province level (Pant, 2011). India chose to pursue a "Soft Power Approach" towards Afghanistan, prioritizing civilian affairs above military involvement and avoiding any kind of military participation. Upon the establishment of the Interim Government under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee promptly declared a financial contribution of US\$100 million. throughout the turbulent period of the anti-Soviet conflict. India exerted its influence in Afghanistan by making strategic investments in developmental initiatives such as irrigation, agriculture, and hydroelectric projects. However, throughout the decade of Soviet participation, India's Afghan policy fluctuated between the ideals of non-alignment and the desire to achieve geopolitical advantage. India first expressed opposition to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and demanded the removal of Soviet soldiers from the country. However, India made the strategic decision to refrain from supporting important UN resolutions that called for the total departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. This decision was based on the understanding that the removal of the Soviets would benefit Pakistan since it would lead to the rise of Mujahideen groups supported by Pakistan in Afghanistan. India deliberately ignored the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan because it was concerned that a Mujahideen triumph in Afghanistan would give Pakistan more influence in the area, which India wanted to avoid (Sharma, 2011). Moreover, the amount of military aid that Pakistan received from the United States, along with the US's deliberate ignorance of Islamabad's covert nuclear weapons development, influenced India's approach towards Afghanistan at that period. India's primary worry was the reinvigoration of the United States' security connections with Pakistan, a move that India said might potentially disrupt the existing power equilibrium in the region in favour of Islamabad. India was the only nation outside of the Warsaw Pact bloc that maintained friendly relations with the Soviet-supported governments in Afghanistan (Rais, 1993). India's Afghan policy during that decade was governed by geopolitical reality rather than the rhetoric of Non-Alignment. Despite the Soviet forces leaving Afghanistan and the consequent collapse of the Najibullah administration, which was the final government imposed by the Soviets, India was able to maintain its influence by establishing a positive relationship with the new Mujahideen-led government in Kabul. Because Afghanistan is now under the in assisting in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. India has committed about \$3 billion to different initiatives in Afghanistan since 2001, making it the fifth biggest bilateral contributor to the country (Business Standard, 2018). India primarily focused its help on education, health, and infrastructure-related endeavor's. This approach, which focused on civilians, contributed to strengthening the mutual trust between New Delhi and Kabul. An examination of public opinion surveys in Afghanistan demonstrates the favorable perception that India has acquired among the general Afghan population. India's provision of aid and investment in the development of essential infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and transportation has garnered admiration among the local Afghan population. Consequently, India is seen favorably throughout Afghanistan. India has effectively built a 218-km long roadway connecting the village of Zaranj near the Iranian border to Delaram in northeast Afghanistan while facing occasional assaults on Border Roads Organization (BRO) troops. India has made a noteworthy and praiseworthy contribution in building highways that have enhanced Afghanistan's connection with important ports, therefore decreasing Kabul's reliance on Pakistan. India has facilitated the enhancement of Afghanistan's connection with the Iranian port of Chabahar, resulting in a reduction in Afghanistan's reliance on the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. India's development of the Chabahar Port in Iran is motivated by the fact that it offers the most practical means for India to gain access to Afghanistan. This is because

Pakistan has repeatedly denied India the use of its land for transporting goods to Afghanistan (Bhatnagar and John, 2013). In July 2013, Amar Sinha, the Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, expressed India's unwavering dedication to the growth of Chabahar Port, as it offers the most advantageous means for transporting Indian commodities to Afghanistan. In 2012, India used the port to transport humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, so illustrating that India has other options for accessing Afghanistan besides relying only on the sea route via Pakistan (Mullen and Ganguly, 2012). In addition, India completed the construction of Afghanistan's new parliament building and the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly known as Salma Dam) project near Herat. Furthermore, a power transmission line from the dam to Kabul has been established. In addition, India effectively restored the damaged Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health and consistently sent teams of physicians to Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar to address the extensive medical requirements of Afghanistan. India also provides 500 scholarships every year to Afghan students via the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). India's policies that prioritize the needs and interests of civilians have been widely recognized and appreciated by both government officials and the local population.

Since 2001, many visits by high-ranking officials from both countries have provided strong support for increased and improved collaboration between the two nations. In 2003, India and Afghanistan entered into a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with the goal of eliminating any barriers that hinder the growth of bilateral trade and commerce. This arrangement established India as a significant commercial partner in Afghanistan and as the country's fifth-largest supplier of imports. In 2005, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghan President Hamid Karzai met in Kabul and reached an agreement to enhance bilateral cooperation in various areas such as development, defence, education, energy, trade, counterterrorism, and promoting greater economic and cultural integration in South Asia. The visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, strategically scheduled only three weeks before the September 2005 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, indicated India's intention to establish a substantial and enduring involvement in Afghanistan. The Indian Prime Minister reiterated India's commitment to the Afghan rebuilding project and promised to provide an extra \$50 million in financial aid to Afghanistan. In addition to making an announcement, India has offered 500 scholarships to Afghan students for higher education. Additionally, India has pledged to adopt 100 villages in Afghanistan to support integrated rural development. This will involve implementing successful Indian technologies such as solar electrification and rainwater harvesting. India has expressed its support for Afghanistan's inclusion in SAARC as a fully recognized member (Chandra, 2007). India and Afghanistan signed a significant agreement on October 4, 2011, called the "Strategic Partnership." This agreement covered various aspects such as security and economic cooperation, training and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces, providing economic aid and assistance, developing mining and energy production, and establishing a "strategic dialogue" between their national security advisers to facilitate cooperation in national security matters (Wright and Stancati, 2011). The signing of a comprehensive agreement by Afghanistan, a first in the area, highlights the increasingly close and strong relationship between Afghanistan and India. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh emphasized the significance of India's renewed involvement with Afghanistan and India's willingness to support Afghanistan in the future. He said that the collaboration between India and Afghanistan is transparent and well-documented. We possess enduring civilizational connections and we are both firmly established in this place. India would support the people of Afghanistan as they take on the duty of governing and ensuring their security after the departure of foreign troops in 2014 (Lakshmi, 2011). India has played a significant role in enhancing institutional capacity via the provision of training to Afghan diplomats, physicians, paramedics, entrepreneurs, attorneys, judges, and government officials. The November 2012 meeting in New Delhi between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghan President Hamid Karzai strengthened the bilateral cooperation. Both presidents agreed on the need to enhance economic collaboration in several sectors, including agriculture, small business, mining, and infrastructure. President Karzai also attended the inauguration ceremony of Narendra Modi as the new Prime Minister of India in 2014. The transition of power in both New Delhi and Kabul does not hinder the continuation of the positive and friendly relationship established since 2001. In April 2015, President Ashraf Ghani paid a visit to India and

engaged in in-depth discussions with Indian officials. Both parties expressed a strong commitment to collaborate, along with the global community, to combat and overcome the problem of terrorism in all its various forms. They also urged the international community to take decisive action against the safe havens that provide refuge to terrorists, which pose a continuous threat to regional and global security. In December 2015, Prime Minister Modi made a surprise visit to Kabul. Two significant occurrences garnered media attention during his stay. Initially, Modi officially opened the Afghan parliament building, which was seen as a significant representation of India's endorsement of Afghanistan's democratic system and assistance in civic rebuilding efforts (Haider, 2015). Furthermore, India sent four Mi-25 assault helicopters to the Afghan Army, which is of utmost significance. This was seen as a significant deviation from India's previous position since New Delhi was suddenly embracing the notion of providing Afghanistan with offensive military weaponry. India-Afghanistan relations saw a significant shift in dynamics when the Taliban was removed from power in late 2001, till they reclaimed control of the country in August 2021.

4. The resurgence of the Taliban: A sense of déjà vu once again

The US-led endeavour to construct and establish a stable state and country in Afghanistan, which lasted for over two decades, ultimately proved futile on August 15, 2021. On this day, the Taliban seized control of the capital city of Kabul and removed the previous governing authority. The administration is headed by Ashraf Ghani, which consists of non-military individuals. A feeling of déjà vu permeated Afghanistan when the Taliban once again attempted and accomplished the conquest of the whole nation, mirroring their previous seizure of power in 1996. In this instance, their campaign was distinguished by speed and little violence. Several observers have consistently voiced scepticism about the capacity of the Afghan security forces to effectively manage the Taliban threat without international military backing. On August 15, 2021, Afghanistan specialists struggled to comprehend and articulate the reasons for the complete chaos and lack of resistance shown by the Afghan security forces. Consequently, the Taliban were able to acquire significant amounts of land without encountering any significant opposition. The Taliban's rapid and overwhelming assault was made possible by the departure of US soldiers from Afghanistan. President Biden's declaration on July 8, 2021, about the complete withdrawal of American forces by August 31, 2021, bolstered the confidence of the Taliban, leading them to start their drive for conquest. In April 2021, President Biden established September 11, 2021, as the timetable for the evacuation of US forces, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 Attacks. Due to the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, the Biden administration was compelled to expedite the date for the evacuation of American forces. On August 30, 2021, the United States finalized the removal of its military forces, concluding a two-decade-long conflict that resulted in the entire occupation of the nation by the opposing forces the US military had been fighting. President Biden, in his explanation for the departure of US forces from Afghanistan, said that there was no longer any valid reason to assume that the presence of the United States military could transform Afghanistan into a stable democracy. The US, together with other ally countries, spent 20 years in Afghanistan. However, its presence failed to achieve two objectives: establishing a robust, democratic state and defeating an insurgency that was believed to be defeated and outdated shortly after the US involvement began in late 2001. Consequently, Afghanistan remains under a government that the US operation in Afghanistan aimed to remove, resulting in ongoing suffering. In 1996, after fierce conflict with the former Northern Alliance, the Taliban seized control of the capital of Kabul. India, at that time, desired to maintain its sphere of influence in Afghanistan but faced limitations in doing so. India's collaboration with the Northern Alliance, which consisted mostly of non-Pashtun groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, during the previous civil war, made the rise of the Pashtun-dominated Taliban rule a disastrous situation for New Delhi. The Taliban expressed unambiguous hostility towards India due to the evident support provided by New Delhi to anti-Taliban groups during the civil war. This support, which primarily benefited non-Pashtun factions, involved the provision of financial resources and weapons to prevent the Taliban from seizing control of Kabul. India formed connections with the anti-Pashtun Northern Alliance to prevent Afghanistan from falling under Taliban rule, which India saw as being influenced by the Pakistani security apparatus. India had to close its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan when the Taliban seized control in 1996. throughout the

Taliban administration, India's influence significantly diminished, eroding whatever little power it had managed to maintain throughout the previous years of civil conflict. The Taliban era was a significant period of diplomatic stagnation in the history of India-Afghanistan ties (Paliwal, 2015). Following their removal in late 2001, India, similar to the US-led Western countries, saw the Taliban as a weakened entity that was not deserving of involvement, even when the organization started to show indications of resurgence around 2005-06. India promptly reestablished its diplomatic relations with Afghanistan after the departure of the Taliban, demonstrating its satisfaction with their departure. Right after Hamid Karzai assumed leadership Jaswant Singh, the former Minister for External Affairs of India, traveled to Kabul to attend the inauguration of the Interim Government and to restore the Indian embassy. The embassy had been shuttered in 1996 when the Taliban took control of Kabul. India became the primary regional provider of help to Afghanistan after the events of 9/11. India has allocated over \$3 billion for several economic and rebuilding initiatives in Afghanistan till late 2021. To establish a distinct position in the evolving Afghanistan, New Delhi adopted the winning hearts and minds (WHAM) policy and strategically distanced itself from military engagements. India has developed strong diplomatic relationships with both the Karzai and Ashraf Ghani-led civilian administrations in Afghanistan. Due to its policies that prioritize the well-being of civilians, India has established a unique position as a good neighbour in the eyes of ordinary Afghans. India is dedicated to promoting peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. New Delhi's use of soft power about Afghanistan was attractive, but lacked long-term strategic foresight. While the US-led international community maintained its military presence in Afghanistan and provided financial aid, democracy seemed to be establishing itself and the Afghan state looked ready to develop into a more advanced form. As soon as the US-led West started its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the fragility of the newly formed Afghan government became apparent to all observers. Over the last twenty years, New Delhi has consistently relied only on the Afghan state. India failed to provide sufficient diplomatic resources towards interacting with the Taliban, despite the apparent need to do so. The Taliban's longstanding animosity against India and the many assaults on Indian security and civilian personnel in Afghanistan after 2001 have caused a reluctance to engage with them. One reason for this anti-Taliban stance was that the administration in New Delhi did not want to be seen as being kind towards an Islamist extremist organization that had a reputation for disregarding human rights, especially women's rights. India's failure to establish a relationship with the Taliban in the last decade resulted in a situation where the Afghan state collapsed due to the Taliban's widespread military campaign from May to July 2021. This situation reminded India of its previous experience in Afghanistan in 1996. India was forced to shut down its embassy in Kabul and consulates in other parts of the nation due to the rise of the Taliban.⁵ Experts and experts have consistently emphasized the need to establish communication and collaboration with the Taliban, particularly in light of their renewed influence in 2005-06. The security and foreign policy establishment in New Delhi prioritized developing bilateral relations exclusively with the Kabul government, disregarding the fact that the United States, starting in 2012, increasingly emphasized negotiations rather than military actions as a more pragmatic approach to achieving peace in Afghanistan (Ganaie, 2013). Due to the Taliban's rapid and overwhelming military assault in August 2021, followed by the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani administration, India lost its physical and symbolic influence in Afghanistan. Given the current rule of the nation by the Taliban, India has no other option than to establish a strategic presence in Afghanistan by engaging with the Taliban. New Delhi has launched innovative initiatives that might perhaps establish formal and official avenues of contact between the Taliban and the Indian government. "One's neighbours or region cannot be altered," said Suhail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban, during an interview. "We must acknowledge and embrace this reality, fostering peaceful coexistence," Shaheen further said (Subramanian, 2021). The Taliban spokesman made these comments in answer to an inquiry on India's perspective on the Taliban. Considering the current strength of the Taliban movement, India It would be prudent to use the same reasoning as expressed by the Taliban spokesman and attempt to establish communication with the neighbouring country, Afghanistan in this instance, even if it implies an implicit approval of the Taliban government.

5. India's strategy in response to the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan

The Taliban's resurgence as the de facto governing power in Afghanistan posed a grave threat to India. Considering that India's approach towards Afghanistan has traditionally been seen as a situation where any gain for one side results in a loss for the other, the return of the Taliban suggests that India has completely lost the game to Pakistan, who is now poised to benefit from the change in regime in Kabul. As India faced the challenging process of withdrawing its diplomatic mission and residents from Afghanistan, Pakistan's security and foreign policy sectors experienced a feeling of excitement and optimism. Islamabad's response to the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan differed from the despondency shown in Western capitals. Prime Minister Imran Khan remarked that the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan symbolized the liberation of Afghans from oppression and servitude. Pakistan's show of triumphalism was evident once again when Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, the chief of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), visited Kabul to meet with the top leadership of the Taliban before the establishment of the temporary government in Kabul. India was understandably disturbed by the unfolding events in Afghanistan. If India had pursued a more far-sighted Afghan strategy and established communication lines with the Taliban, as the West was doing in its peace negotiations, India would not have had a feeling of strategic failure in August 2021. Nevertheless, all of this is contemplation in hindsight. The primary concern that persists is: How can India readjust its Afghan strategy to maintain a certain level of strategic influence in Afghanistan, even with the Taliban in control? The solution is straightforward: New Delhi must establish communication and interaction with the Taliban. In pursuit of this objective, New Delhi has implemented many significant measures. As the United States was nearing the end of its army pullout from Kabul, the United Nations Security Council, led by India's leadership, passed a resolution acknowledging the Taliban as a legitimate participant on the global stage (Roy, 2021). If the motion had received a negative vote, it would have decreased New Delhi's likelihood of gaining favour with the Taliban. The abrupt departure of foreign military forces and the subsequent closing of Western diplomatic missions in Kabul marked a challenging period for Afghanistan, which had previously been receiving substantial financial assistance from Western countries. Due to the lack of assistance from Western countries and a bad harvest season, the Afghan economy started to deteriorate. This led to a significant problem for the Taliban administration in the form of food scarcity. India promptly announced food assistance to Afghanistan, in line with its longstanding focus on civilian welfare. India announced its commitment to provide Afghanistan with 50,000 metric tons of wheat. India and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to facilitate the distribution of wheat in Afghanistan. India has already sent three shipments of wheat, totalling around 6500 metric tons.

The World Food Programme (WFP), with its headquarters in Rome, has described India's assistance as a significant achievement. They expressed gratitude to New Delhi for their substantial supply of wheat, which would help alleviate the terrible food shortages faced by the people of Afghanistan. In addition to its humanitarian nature, India's provision of food assistance was also intended to facilitate New Delhi's direct involvement with the Taliban administration. India's wheat supply was highly praised in Afghanistan, even by the Taliban. In a gesture of reciprocity and reconciliation, the Taliban committed to ensure the safety and security of the Indian embassy in Kabul. The Taliban regards the establishment of India's embassy in Afghanistan would signify progress towards being recognized as the legitimate government in the country. As governments increase their involvement with the Taliban, the group's credibility grows. Despite India's embassies and consulates in Afghanistan not being completely reopened, New Delhi has decided to continue the practice of providing financial assistance to Afghanistan. In its fiscal budget for 2022-23, New Delhi committed Rs. 200 crores (about US\$ 27 million) to provide aid to Afghanistan. The funds would be used to finance ongoing Indian initiatives in Afghanistan, provide scholarships for Afghan students, and provide assistance to the Afghan population. Farid Mamundzay, Afghanistan's ambassador to India, expressed gratitude for India's monetary assistance package. Mamundzay commended India's ongoing financial support to Afghanistan, even after the Taliban seized power. He said that India's humanitarian assistance is indicative of its unwavering commitment.

India consistently offers sustenance, pharmaceuticals, and monetary assistance to Afghanistan. While this may assist India in maintaining the positive reputation it has built in Afghanistan over the last twenty years, New Delhi must go beyond providing aid and strive to establish a distinct strategic position in Afghanistan. To achieve this goal, Afghanistan's worsening relations with Pakistan might serve as a strong starting point. Pakistan conducted aerial bombardments on April 16, 2022, targeting the provinces of Khost and Kunar in eastern Afghanistan. The attacks resulted in the fatalities of a minimum of 47 individuals, including women and children. The Taliban issued a warning to Pakistan on the initiation of similar strikes inside Afghanistan. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan strongly condemns the bombardment and attack carried out by Pakistan on Afghan soil," said Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson, after the airstrikes (Aljazeera, 2022). "This behaviour is an act of cruelty and it is contributing to the development of hostility between Afghanistan and Pakistan...We are using every available measure to avoid the recurrence of such assaults and demanding that our autonomy be acknowledged and upheld. Pakistan, for its side, defended the airstrikes by stating that they were specifically aimed at Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists. Analysts assert that the current tensions between Islamabad and Kabul are mostly caused by the Taliban's refusal to take decisive action against the TTP, which is both an ideological and organizational partner. (Siddique, 2022). In June 2022, a team from India, led by J.P. Singh, the Joint Secretary of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran division of the Ministry of External Affairs, had a meeting with top leaders of the Taliban. The mission primarily focused on the logistical aspects of India's humanitarian aid delivery and matters relating to commerce. The delegation also inspected developmental projects funded by India. The Taliban once again urged the Indian side to restore diplomatic relations and consular services in Afghanistan. After the conference, Pakistan reiterated its belief that India continues to act as a disruptive force in Afghanistan (Hussain, 2022). Despite Pakistan's charges, the relationship between Kabul and Islamabad has deteriorated. Considering Afghanistan's ongoing challenges in managing the scarcity of food, medicines, and healthcare facilities, India has the opportunity to actively intervene and establish a new strategic position with the support of the Taliban administration. Avoiding involvement with Afghanistan and the Taliban would not result in any noticeable advantages for India. India may strategically use the Taliban's disillusionment with Pakistan and gain an advantage by establishing a productive relationship with them.

6. Conclusion

India has dedicated significant diplomatic efforts and financial investments to cultivate friendly relations with Afghanistan in recent years. Several decades. Following the downfall of the Taliban rule in late 2001, India has emerged as a strong and influential contributor of financial and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. If New Delhi fails to promptly engage with the Taliban, India's accumulated goodwill in Afghanistan over the last two decades is in danger of being forfeited. Thousands of Afghan people, who were granted scholarships by the Indian government to pursue education in India, nonetheless harbor dissatisfaction with the Indian government's approach towards Afghanistan. These students are unable to return to India due to their inability to get a visa. If the Indian embassy had been reopened, even with a reduced capacity, these students would have come back to India to finish their education.⁹ Furthermore, interacting with the Taliban does not imply a validation of their ideology. Instead, by actively engaging with Afghanistan, India, along with other nations, can contribute to revitalizing the development processes in the country. Engaging with the Taliban may be crucial in laying the foundation for a diverse administration, which is seen by the global world as an acceptable way to include different ethnic groups in the decision-making processes in Afghanistan. India, along with Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, should endeavour to establish a rapport with the Taliban to persuade them to embrace the establishment of an all-encompassing government, therefore securing international acknowledgement. Moreover, India should actively engage in diplomatic efforts, both independently and through regional alliances such as SAARC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to initiate dialogue with the Taliban. This will enable India to exert sufficient influence on the Taliban to ensure the inclusion of representatives from minority ethnic groups in the Afghan government. An integral component of the joint statement made after the SCO summit in Uzbekistan on September 15–16, 2022 is the establishment of a comprehensive and all-encompassing administration in Afghanistan. India should collaborate with

other like-minded nations to establish a regional framework for dealing with the Taliban government. This would help ensure the stability and security of Afghanistan, preventing it from descending into another period of violence and chaos.

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