

India-Taliban 2.0

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India-Taliban 2.0: Strategic Engagement Amid Uncertainty

Context:

India has recently held **back-to-back high-level meetings** with the Taliban, including **Foreign Secretary-level talks** and a phone call between **External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar** and **Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi**. This outreach comes as **Russia formally recognises the Taliban**, adding momentum to global engagement and influencing India's strategic recalibration.

Introduction:

India's approach to the Taliban has significantly shifted since their earlier regime from **1996 to 2001**, during which India faced **hostility, terrorism, and strategic exclusion**. Post-2021, the Taliban's renewed control over Afghanistan, alongside their **strained ties with Pakistan**, has opened space for **India's cautious engagement**. India is now pursuing a **balanced, interest-driven approach**, focused on **security, connectivity, counterterrorism**, and **regional stability**—without formal recognition of the Taliban regime.

India-Afghanistan Geopolitical Dynamics and Interests

From Past Hostility to Present Opportunity

- India faced threats from **Pakistan-backed terror groups** during the Taliban's first regime.
- The **Taliban 2.0** appears more open to engaging with India, largely due to **deteriorating ties with Pakistan**.

India's Developmental and Humanitarian Contributions

- Over **\$3 billion** invested in Afghan infrastructure: **dams, hospitals, the Parliament building, and schools**.

- India was among the **first countries to provide humanitarian aid** post-U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

Pakistan-Taliban Breakdown Creates Strategic Opening

- Taliban's refusal to act against **Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)** has strained its relationship with Islamabad.
- India uses this opportunity to **enhance its presence and influence** in Afghanistan.

India's Multi-Ring Strategic Framework

- Afghanistan lies in India's '**first strategic ring**', the immediate neighbourhood.
- This region is critical to counter **external powers** such as **China and Pakistan**.

Strategic Objectives Behind Engagement

- **Counterterrorism and border security:** Prevent anti-India activities from Afghan territory.
- **Access to Central Asia:** Afghanistan acts as a **geographic bridge**, especially when Pakistan blocks overland routes.
- **Energy security:** Central Asia's energy reserves are key to **India's diversification strategy**.
- **Counterbalance to the China-Pakistan axis:** Engagement with Taliban can reduce **Pakistan's strategic depth** and challenge **China's BRI influence**.
- **Regional order:** A stable Afghanistan supports **India's South Asia-centric security architecture**, as outlined by **Barry Buzan's theory of insulating buffer states**.

Challenges in Engaging Taliban 2.0

Legitimacy Concerns

- The Taliban remains **unrecognised** internationally and is subject to **UN sanctions**.

- Full diplomatic recognition is **politically sensitive** for democratic countries like India.

Human Rights and Ethical Dilemmas

- Taliban's approach to **women's rights, education, and minority protections** conflicts with **India's democratic values**.

Pakistan's Disruption Strategy

- A stronger Indian role in Afghanistan may provoke **proxy confrontations**, especially from **Pakistan-backed factions**.

China's Expanding Footprint

- China's increasing investments and its **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** raise **economic and strategic concerns** for India.

Internal Divisions within the Taliban

- Factionalism within the Taliban causes **instability and unpredictability**, complicating negotiations and cooperation.

India's Current Strategy Post-2021

Preventing Terror Spillover

- Establishing **security and intelligence cooperation** with Afghan authorities.

Countering Pakistan's Influence

- Using **developmental aid and soft power** to align with Taliban's **anti-TTP stance**.

Improving Access to Central Asia

- Investing in key infrastructure such as **Chabahar Port** and the **Zaranj-Delaram highway**.

Asserting Regional Leadership

- Participating actively in **regional platforms** like the **SCO, Moscow Format**, and other multilateral dialogues.

Protecting Developmental Investments

- Continuing **project-based diplomacy** and **humanitarian support** without formal recognition.
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Way Forward

De Facto Engagement Without Recognition

- Maintain political dialogue and humanitarian assistance while **withholding official recognition** until there is **international consensus**.

Layered and Balanced Diplomacy

- Engage with the Taliban leadership while supporting **civil society, education, and women's rights** through **NGOs and multilateral agencies**.

Strengthen Regional Partnerships

- Collaborate with **Iran, Russia, and Central Asian nations** to **stabilise Afghanistan** and curb the influence of **China and Pakistan**.

Expedite Development Around Chabahar

- Enhance connectivity and trade routes by fast-tracking work on **Chabahar Port infrastructure**.

Prevent Radicalisation Spillover

- Monitor extremist networks through **intelligence-sharing mechanisms** to protect India's internal security.
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Conclusion:

India's engagement with Taliban 2.0 reflects a **deliberate shift from ideological rigidity to strategic pragmatism**. While challenges such as **legitimacy issues, human rights concerns,** and **regional rivalries** persist, India's evolving approach is grounded in the need to **secure national interests, stabilise its neighbourhood,** and assert **regional influence**. As Afghanistan becomes a **geopolitical crossroads**, India must balance its actions with **caution, clarity, and consistency** to shape a secure and multipolar regional order.



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