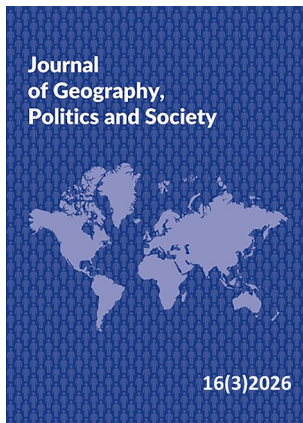




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RECALIBRATING KABUL: INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL POLICY SHIFT TOWARDS TALIBAN 2.0.

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Abstract

India and Afghanistan share deep civilizational, cultural, and historical ties that have long transcended formal diplomacy. Rooted in ancient linkages through the Silk Road, Vedic-Avestan connections, and shared anti-colonial struggles, the bilateral relationship has evolved significantly across different political regimes in Kabul. This paper examines India's geopolitical policy shift towards Taliban 2.0 following the abrupt collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021. Drawing on Kautilya's Rajamandala theory, which views the neighbour's neighbour as a natural ally, the study analyses how geography and strategic imperatives continue to shape India's approach towards Afghanistan. Despite ideological differences and historical mistrust stemming from the Taliban's past linkages with Pakistan-sponsored terrorist groups, India has adopted a pragmatic "engage but do not endorse" policy. This recalibration is marked by incremental diplomatic normalisation, including high-level meetings such as the October 2025 visit of Afghan Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to New Delhi, the upgrade of India's mission in Kabul to a full embassy, and renewed economic cooperation. The paper highlights the convergence of mutual interests in counterterrorism, regional connectivity, and reducing over-dependence on Pakistan and China. Key elements include the operationalisation of the Chabahar Port–International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), revival of bilateral trade (which crossed US\$ 1 billion in FY 2024–25), and India's continued development and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, it critically evaluates the challenges, including normative contradictions related to women's rights and human rights, persistent security threats from anti-India militant groups, great-power competition with China, and Pakistan's efforts to undermine the rapprochement. Through qualitative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and secondary literature, this study argues that India's post-2021 Afghanistan policy reflects a classic geopolitical recalibration rooted in Kautilyan realism—prioritising strategic interests, connectivity, and influence over ideological alignment. The long-term sustainability of this engagement will depend on balancing security concerns with India's democratic values in an uncertain regional environment.

Key words

India–Afghanistan relations, Taliban 2.0, Kautilya's Rajamandala, geopolitical recalibration, Chabahar Port, South Asian geopolitics.

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1. Introduction

India and Afghanistan share a relationship that goes far beyond mere diplomatic formality; it is a bond rooted in civilizational depth, cultural affinity, and historical solidarity that has shaped the bilateral engagement long before the formal structures of modern statecraft came into existence. The two nations share centuries of cultural, linguistic, and trade connections through the ancient Silk Road, and this civilizational foundation has consistently provided the moral and emotional bedrock of their diplomatic relationship even during periods of political turbulence (Paliwal, 2017). The historical and cultural relations between India and Afghanistan trace back to ancient times, reflecting deep civilizational interconnections. The migration of Aryan peoples into the Indian subcontinent and the regions of present-day Afghanistan established early linkages between the two areas. This shared heritage is evident in the Rigveda, which mentions the Kubha (Kabul) River, indicating that parts of Afghanistan fell within the geographical and cultural consciousness of early Vedic civilization. Significant religious and textual parallels between the Rigveda and the Avesta, including references to places such as Balkh, further underscore the close cultural and spiritual ties that existed in the ancient period (Dupree, 1977).

Following the conquests of Alexander the Great, the region came under Seleucid influence. In 305 BCE, the Maurya Empire extended its control over large parts of present-day Afghanistan through a treaty with Seleucus I Nicator (Bosworth, 1996). By the 2nd century BCE, Buddhism had emerged as a major religious force in Afghanistan, coexisting alongside Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, which remained prominent until the advent of Islam. With the arrival and gradual spread of Islam, a significant portion of the local population eventually converted (Alam, 2022).

During India's struggle for independence, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, popularly known as the Frontier Gandhi, played a significant role by mobilizing the Pashtun community through his non-violent Khudai Khidmatgar ("Servants of God") movement. He successfully persuaded over 100,000 followers to renounce violence and commit to non-violent resistance against British colonial rule.

This shared anti-colonial ethos was further reflected in the close bond between the Indian and Afghan leadership. King Amanullah Khan of Afghanistan expressed strong solidarity with the Indian freedom struggle when he told Maharaja

Mahendra Pratap, leader of the Provisional Government of India in exile in Kabul (1915), that "so long as India was not free, Afghanistan was not free in the true sense." Such mutual support, including Afghan sympathy for the Indian independence movement and the establishment of the Provisional Government in Kabul, laid the historical foundation for enduring India–Afghanistan relations.

This legacy of solidarity was later formalized through the Treaty of Friendship signed in 1950 between India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan. The treaty emphasized mutual peace, friendship, and cooperation for the common benefit and development of both nations. Building on this foundation, India maintained cordial and robust diplomatic relations with successive Afghan governments—from the era of King Zahir Shah through various regimes that followed, including those that came to power after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022).

During the Cold War period, India and Afghanistan strengthened their bilateral partnership based on a shared commitment to non-alignment. Both countries were founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 and consistently resisted pressure to align exclusively with either superpower. This ideological convergence helped sustain warm bilateral ties despite intense superpower rivalry in the region. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 marked the first major strain in the relationship. India adopted a policy of strategic realism by maintaining diplomatic and developmental links with the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime in Kabul, while refraining from supporting the US- and Pakistan-backed mujahideen factions. Although this approach protected India's immediate strategic interests, it limited New Delhi's engagement with the resistance groups that eventually rose to power in the 1990s (Pant, 2010). India–Afghanistan relations have also been shaped by their shared geopolitical tensions with Pakistan. Afghanistan's long-standing refusal to recognise the Durand Line as the international border has been a persistent source of friction with Islamabad. This common adversarial dynamic with Pakistan has generally reinforced Indo-Afghan convergence.

The most challenging phase in the bilateral relationship began with the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996. Following the Taliban's seizure of power in Kabul in 1996, India promptly reached out to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the prominent leader of the Northern Alliance resistance. India then forged a trilateral partnership with Iran and Russia, providing the Northern Alliance with military assistance,

medical supplies, and other forms of logistical support (Ramachandran, 2021). The low point of Indo-Afghan came in December 1999, when Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 was hijacked and diverted to Kandahar. India was forced to negotiate directly with the Taliban and release three high-profile militants, including Masood Azhar, the future founder of Jaish-e-Mohammed, in exchange for the hostages (Paliwal, 2017). The episode underscored the serious security risks posed to India by a hostile regime in Kabul.

The US-led intervention in Afghanistan following the September 2001 attacks ushered in a new, highly productive phase in India–Afghanistan relations (2001–2021), widely regarded as one of the most constructive periods in the two countries' diplomatic history (Fair, 2010). India shifted from a largely covert role to becoming one of Afghanistan's foremost development partners. Its engagement was marked by high-visibility, people-centric infrastructure and capacity-building projects designed to build lasting goodwill and institutional linkages. Key initiatives included the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul, the Afghan Parliament building (inaugurated in 2015), the Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam) in Herat province, which generates 42 MW of electricity and supports irrigation across 75,000 hectares, and the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which provides Afghanistan access to Iran's Chabahar Port. India also offered more than 30,000 scholarships to Afghan students and sustained humanitarian assistance in health, education, and food security. By 2019–20, bilateral trade had reached approximately US\$ 1.5 billion, while India's cumulative development assistance exceeded US\$ 3 billion, positioning it as one of Afghanistan's largest donors (MEA, 2019–20; D'Souza, 2016; Hindustan Times, 2016).

This two-decade engagement was institutionalised through the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in October 2011, Afghanistan's first such agreement with any country since the Soviet era. The agreement provided a comprehensive framework for cooperation in development, security sector training, trade, and political consultations (Norfolk, 2011). India's Afghan policy during this period demonstrated that its regional influence is most effectively built through sustained investment in people and institutions rather than military footprints or political interference. The collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021 and the Taliban's return to power represented a profound strategic setback for India, compelling a fundamental reassessment of its approach toward Afghanistan. The subsequent sections analyse India's policy responses and strategic recalibration in the post-2021 landscape.

Objectives:

1. Examine the historical evolution of India–Afghanistan relations, with a focus on the factors driving India's policy recalibration after 2021.
2. Analyze India's "engage but do not endorse" approach toward the Taliban using Kautilya's Rajamandala theory as a conceptual framework.
3. Assess the key opportunities and challenges arising from this policy shift, particularly in relation to counterterrorism, regional connectivity, human rights, and great-power competition.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, narrative review approach paired with thematic analysis to explore how India's geopolitical stance toward Taliban 2.0 has evolved since August 2021. The analysis is grounded in a Kautilyan realist perspective, with Kautilya's Rajamandal theory serving as the main lens for interpretation. The paper draws from secondary sources such as official statements and documents from India's Ministry of External Affairs, along with peer-reviewed academic work, books, and policy reports from well known think tanks such as ORF, MP-IDSA, and RAND. It also incorporates reliable media coverage from outlets like The Hindu, BBC, and Al Jazeera, capturing developments through early 2026.

3. India's Post-2021 Recalibration: Engage but Do Not Endorse

India's latest diplomatic outreach to Afghanistan's Taliban government signals a marked shift in how it sees the geopolitical reality in the region, coming more than three years after India suffered a major strategic and diplomatic blow when Kabul fell to the Taliban (Biswas, 2025). India adopted a cautious "wait-and-watch" approach rooted in deep mistrust of the Taliban's historical ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its links to anti-India militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) (Grossman, 2025; Manhas & Mishra, 2025). India voted in favour of UNSC Resolution 2593, which urged the Taliban to prevent Afghan territory from being used for terrorism, closed its four consulates, and evacuated embassy staff.

Nevertheless, New Delhi kept communication channels open. The first official contact occurred in Doha within weeks of the takeover, when India's Ambassador to Qatar met Taliban representative

Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai. By mid-2022, India had reopened a technical mission in Kabul after a high-level MEA delegation, led by J.P. Singh, secured security assurances from senior Taliban figures, including Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi and Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani (Haidar, 2022).

India's engagement has since followed a calibrated trajectory. Key milestones include the establishment of an air trade corridor (2022), acceptance of a Taliban Consul General in Mumbai, and accreditation of Ikramuddin Kamil as acting envoy in New Delhi in November 2024. The January 2025 Dubai meeting between Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Muttaqi, followed by Afghanistan Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's October 2025 visit to New Delhi, marked progressive normalisation. During the visit, India announced the upgrade of its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy, signalling a policy of pragmatic engagement without formal diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime (MEA, 2025). Jaishankar also appreciated Afghanistan's condemnation of the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, in April 2025. This reset underscores India's continued application of Kautilyan principles. The strategy is also deeply rooted in Kautilya's Rajamandala (circle of states) theory in the Arthashastra conceptualises foreign policy through concentric circles, wherein a state's immediate neighbour is viewed as a natural adversary (*ari*), while the neighbour of that adversary is considered a potential ally (*mitra*). This ancient realist framework finds direct resonance in contemporary South Asia. Pakistan constitutes India's primary strategic adversary, making Afghanistan, sharing a long border with Pakistan—India's natural strategic partner. India's sustained engagement with Afghanistan, even under changing regimes, reflects this Kautilyan logic of leveraging geography to balance adversarial neighbours (Pranay, 2025).

India's policy is best described as "engage but do not endorse"—maintaining functional diplomatic and economic ties with the *de facto* Taliban authorities without conferring formal legitimacy, consistent with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and India's approach toward other *de facto* regimes. In response to clashes between Pakistani and Afghanistan on the Durand line in 2026, India explicitly condemned the actions while reaffirming its support for Afghan sovereignty.

Following Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan territory that reportedly caused civilian casualties during Ramadan, India's Ministry of External Affairs issued a sharp rebuke. "India strongly condemns Pakistan's airstrikes on Afghan territory that have resulted in

civilian casualties, including women and children, during the holy month of Ramadan," stated official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal (Hussain, 2026). Pakistan has also been angered by closer India-Afghanistan ties and New Delhi's hosting of Taliban ministers, accusing the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into an "Indian colony"—a significant reversal from Pakistan's support for the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul in 2021 (The Hindu, 2026).

4. Economic and Connectivity Dimensions

Economic relations have been a cornerstone of India's recalibration. Pre-2021 bilateral trade peaked at approximately \$1.5 billion. Although trade contracted sharply after August 2021, it recovered strongly, crossing \$1 billion in FY 2023–24 and remaining near that level in 2024–25, with Afghanistan enjoying a significant trade surplus driven by exports of dried fruits, saffron, and nuts (MEA data).

India's connectivity strategy centres on Iran's Chabahar Port. In May 2024, India signed a 10-year agreement involving \$120 million investment and a \$250 million credit line. The Taliban has endorsed integration with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and committed resources to the port. The first India-Afghanistan transit train reached Herat via Iranian rail in February 2025, marking a major operational milestone that bypasses Pakistan and reduces dependence on Chinese or Pakistani routes (ORF, 2024; Saraswat, 2025).

5. Mutual Strategic and Economic Interests

Despite ideological differences, India and the Taliban share converging pragmatic interests, primarily in counterterrorism and connectivity. Both sides have a tactical interest in curbing Pakistan-backed militant networks, albeit for different reasons. India seeks to prevent LeT, JeM, and ISIS-K from using Afghan soil, while the Taliban faces threats from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), leading to periodic border clashes with Pakistan along the Durand Line (Grossman, 2025; Shankar, 2026). Economically, India remains one of Afghanistan's most important partners, providing humanitarian assistance, scholarships, and development support. Afghanistan views India as a vital source of foreign currency and an alternative to over-reliance on China, Iran, or Pakistan. For India, a stable Afghanistan serves as a land bridge to Central Asia's markets and resources

while advancing its broader Eurasian connectivity goals. Both countries also share an interest in preventing exclusive Chinese dominance over Afghan minerals and infrastructure.

6. Continuity and Change: Pre- and Post-2021 Relations

Between 2001 and 2021, India–Afghanistan relations experienced a “golden era,” institutionalised through the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2011). India invested over \$3 billion in development projects—including the Salma Dam, Zaranj-Delaram Highway, Afghan Parliament building, and the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health—while offering thousands of scholarships and maintaining robust trade and intelligence cooperation (Subramanian, 2021).

The abrupt collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021 disrupted this framework. Learning from its complete disengagement during the first Taliban regime (1996–2001), India chose calibrated re-engagement after 2021 to preserve influence and avoid a total diplomatic blackout. By 2025, the Taliban will have emerged as a transactional interlocutor rather than a traditional ally. The relationship is now driven by shared calculations against common adversaries and mutual interests in regional connectivity, representing a clear departure from the hostility of the 1990s.

7. Critical Analysis and Challenges

India's incremental normalisation with the Taliban has invited domestic and international criticism, particularly regarding human rights and gender issues. The Taliban's severe restrictions on women's education, employment, and public participation stand in sharp contrast to India's democratic and constitutional values. Incidents such as the barring of women journalists from a press conference during Muttaqi's October 2025 visit highlighted these contradictions and drew criticism from opposition leaders and media bodies (Chowdhury, 2025). On the security front, concerns persist about residual Taliban links with anti-India groups, although operational space for such groups appears to have narrowed due to the Taliban–Pakistan rift rather than Indian diplomatic pressure (Grossman, 2025; Bhattacharya, 2023). India must also navigate great-power competition, as China has pursued deeper economic engagement with the Taliban without similar normative constraints.

Additional challenges include uncertainty over the sustainability of development projects under Taliban administration, reduced Indian aid allocations in recent budgets, and Pakistan's active efforts to undermine Indo-Afghan ties through narrative warfare and potential interference in connectivity routes. The absence of an inclusive political settlement and the presence of hardline factions within the Taliban further add to long-term instability risks.

8. Conclusion

India's post-2021 policy towards Taliban-ruled Afghanistan represents a pragmatic geopolitical recalibration rooted in Kautilya's Rajamandala theory. By treating Pakistan as the primary adversary (*ari*) and Afghanistan as a natural strategic partner (*mitra*), the neighbour's neighbour, New Delhi has gradually shifted from cautious disengagement to structured, albeit limited, engagement with the *de facto* Taliban regime. The upgrade of India's mission in Kabul to a full embassy, the high-level meetings between Indian and Taliban officials, and the revival of trade exceeding US\$ 1 billion annually underscore this strategic pivot.

The outbreak of direct conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan in early 2026 has served as a critical stress test for India's recalibrated policy. As Pakistani airstrikes targeted Afghan territory, including the tragic bombing of the Omid Rehabilitation Facility in Kabul, which killed at least 400 civilians during Ramadan, India responded with unprecedented diplomatic clarity. The Ministry of External Affairs, through spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, strongly condemned Pakistan's “cowardly” targeting of a hospital and rejected Islamabad's denial as a cover-up for a “massacre,” calling for an international inquiry (Hussain, 2026; The Hindu, 2026). This marked a significant departure from India's traditionally restrained posture on Afghanistan–Pakistan hostilities. Furthermore, India explicitly reaffirmed its support for Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, directly challenging Pakistan's cross-border military operations. Pakistan's accusation that the Taliban had turned Afghanistan into an “Indian colony” (The Hindu, 2026) inadvertently confirmed New Delhi's growing influence in Kabul—a strategic gain that would have seemed improbable in August 2021.

The 2026 conflict has also exposed Pakistan's strategic predicament: a two-front situation with India and Afghanistan, compounded by internal TTP

militancy and its perceived alignment with the US-Israel war against Iran. For India, these dynamic offers both relief and opportunity. However, it also carries risks. The humanitarian toll in Afghanistan, particularly on women and children, remains devastating, and India's normative contradictions (engaging the Taliban while criticizing its human rights record) have drawn domestic and international scrutiny.

This recalibration has enabled India to protect its core security interests, revive economic and connectivity linkages, and position Afghanistan as a land bridge to Central Asia while countering Pakistani and Chinese influence in the region. However, the policy rests on a delicate balance between

geopolitical realism and normative concerns. Persistent issues, the Taliban's regressive stance on women's rights, residual links with anti-India terrorist groups, internal factionalism within the Taliban, and Pakistan's continued efforts to destabilize the relationship, pose significant challenges.

Eventually, India's approach demonstrates that its regional influence is best advanced through patient investment in connectivity, trade, and people-centric development rather than ideological alignment or military presence. The success of this recalibration will depend on New Delhi's ability to safeguard its red lines on terrorism while navigating the complex interplay of regional rivalries and great-power competition in an unstable Afghan landscape.

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