

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo. 121126348

RE-CALIBRATING INDIA'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY UNDER TALIBAN 2.0: DRIVERS, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC OPTIONS

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Received: 01/12/2025

Accepted: 02/01/2026

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the recalibration of India's Afghanistan policy in the aftermath of the Taliban's return to power in 2021, commonly referred to as the era of Taliban 2.0. The study argues that India's response reflects a shift from idealistic developmental diplomacy to pragmatic engagement driven by strategic necessity. Through an analysis of historical trajectories, regional realignments, and contemporary challenges, the paper explores how India has sought to safeguard its interests while maintaining ethical distance from the Taliban regime. It highlights the dilemmas of non-recognition, terrorism threats, and regional competition posed by the Pakistan-China nexus, alongside India's humanitarian and connectivity-based initiatives. The discussion identifies cautious diplomatic re-engagement marked by the reopening and eventual upgrading of India's mission in Kabul as evidence of adaptive statecraft. It concludes that India's evolving approach represents neither withdrawal nor endorsement, but a conscious strategy of conditional engagement aimed at preserving influence, stability, and regional relevance. The study contributes to the understanding of how middle powers navigate complex security environments through calibrated diplomacy, demonstrating that India's persistence of presence remains its most effective instrument in a fragmented regional order.

KEYWORDS: India-Afghanistan Relations, Taliban 2.0, Development Diplomacy, Strategic Recalibration, Regional Security.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a profound shift in the regional strategic environment, compelling India to re-examine the assumptions underlying its two-decade engagement in the war-torn country. The collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan Republic and the emergence of what is called as "Taliban 2.0" disrupted the fragile equilibrium that had enabled India to operate as one of Afghanistan's largest development partners. For New Delhi, which had invested over \$3 billion in reconstruction projects, soft-power initiatives, and institutional capacity-building since 2001 (Zabihullah 2024), the regime change represented both a diplomatic setback and a strategic test of its regional adaptability. Unlike 2001, when the Taliban's ouster coincided with international convergence on Afghanistan's reconstruction, the 2021 transition unfolded amidst global disengagement, leaving India to navigate a more uncertain and fragmented regional landscape.

Afghanistan has historically held deep strategic significance for India. Geographically, it acts as a gateway to Central Asia and a buffer against the volatile Af-Pak corridor; politically, it has served as a site for projecting India's developmental diplomacy and countering Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine. Beyond these geostrategic factors, Afghanistan also represents an arena of normative engagement—an opportunity for India to advance its vision of inclusive governance, people-centric development, and regional connectivity. Yet, under Taliban 2.0, these ambitions face new constraints: the absence of formal diplomatic recognition, the rollback of women's rights, and the resurgence of extremist networks have created an environment where India's traditional instruments of influence such as aid, soft power, and political partnerships must be recalibrated without legitimising the regime.

The central research problem of this study lies in understanding how India is adapting its Afghanistan policy to the realities of Taliban 2.0. While New Delhi's initial response was marked by caution such as closure of its embassy, suspension of on-ground projects, and a reliance on humanitarian channels but by 2022 a subtle shift became visible. India reopened a technical mission in Kabul, resumed limited aid delivery via Iran and Pakistan, and began participating in multilateral dialogues such as the Moscow Format and the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue (Grossman 2023). The most significant milestone in India's policy

recalibration came in October 2025, when External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar announced the upgrading of India's technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy following the historic visit of Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to New Delhi, the first such visit by a Taliban official since 2021 (Parashar 2025; Bajpaee 2025). These actions suggest a strategic recalibration rooted in pragmatic engagement rather than ideological rigidity. However, this recalibration remains under-theorised in contemporary scholarship, which often frames India's choices as binary recognition versus isolation rather than as a nuanced continuum of calibrated engagement.

From an analytical perspective, this study situates India's evolving Afghanistan policy within the broader framework of adaptive diplomacy—a foreign-policy behaviour characterised by flexibility, incrementalism, and situational recalibration in response to shifting power dynamics (Hermann, 1990; Kacziba & Hasan, 2022). The study posits that India's policy is guided by three overlapping imperatives: (i) the need to secure national security interests against terrorism and instability; (ii) the desire to maintain regional relevance vis-à-vis Pakistan and China; and (iii) the commitment to sustain developmental and humanitarian linkages with the Afghan people. These imperatives often produce tensions between ethical concerns and strategic necessity, particularly when dealing with an unrecognised regime. Accordingly, the paper advances the hypothesis that India's Afghanistan policy under Taliban 2.0 reflects a form of pragmatic recalibration aimed at safeguarding core interests through limited, conditional engagement, while avoiding direct political recognition of the regime. This middle-path approach, blending realism with strategic restraint, embodies India's effort to preserve influence in a changing regional order without compromising its normative commitments.

The objectives of this study are fourfold and collectively aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's evolving approach toward Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0. First, the study seeks to trace the historical evolution of India's engagement with Afghanistan, identifying the continuities and ruptures that define its transition from the pre-2021 Republic era to the Taliban-led administration. Second, it endeavours to analyse the primary drivers vis-à-vis strategic, geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian that underpin India's policy recalibration in the face of

shifting regional dynamics. Third, the research aims to assess the challenges and constraints shaping India's available policy options, particularly those arising from terrorism, regional competition, and the diplomatic dilemma surrounding recognition of the Taliban regime. Finally, the study intends to outline feasible strategic options for ensuring India's sustained and constructive engagement in Afghanistan, consistent with its broader regional and security objectives.

The research employs a qualitative analytical approach, drawing upon official documents, policy statements, think-tank analyses, and secondary literature. The study also utilises discourse analysis of MEA briefings, UN resolutions, and regional dialogues to map the evolving contours of India's stance. By integrating both descriptive and analytical dimensions, the research seeks to move beyond surface-level policy commentary to offer a structured understanding of India's adaptive strategy toward Taliban 2.0. The paper argues that New Delhi's approach, though cautious, underscores a critical transition from developmental idealism to strategic pragmatism reflecting India's maturation as a regional power capable of balancing normative values with realpolitik considerations. The Taliban's return may have altered the terrain, but not India's underlying strategic calculus: the pursuit of a stable, sovereign, and inclusive Afghanistan remains central to India's vision of a secure and connected Eurasian neighbourhood.

2. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF INDIA-AFGHANISTAN

India and Afghanistan share a civilisational relationship rooted in cultural, linguistic, and commercial exchanges that long predate the modern nation-state system. Historical linkages through Buddhism, trade routes along the Silk Road, and shared artistic traditions established an enduring foundation of people-to-people contact (Singh et al., 2024). During the twentieth century, both countries maintained cordial relations based on mutual respect and non-interference, even as Afghanistan's domestic politics oscillated between monarchy, republic, and intermittent coups. India was among the first non-communist nations to recognise the Republic of Afghanistan in 1973 and maintained a diplomatic presence even after the Soviet invasion in 1979, demonstrating a consistent preference for state-to-state engagement over ideological alignment (Bajoria 2009).

2.1. *The Cold-War Era and the First Taliban Period (1979–2001)*

India's policy during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan remained cautious but principled. Guided by its non-aligned orientation, New Delhi refrained from direct involvement while maintaining limited ties with the Najibullah government until its fall in 1992. The rise of the Taliban in 1996, however, created the first major rupture in bilateral relations. India refused to recognise the Taliban regime, citing its extremist ideology, human-rights violations, and close alignment with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Ganguly and Howenstein 2009). Instead, New Delhi extended political and material support to the Northern Alliance, led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, as part of a broader strategy to counter Pakistan's "strategic depth" in Afghanistan (ibid.). This period marked the securitisation of India's Afghan policy: from developmental cooperation to containment of cross-border terrorism.

2.2. *Post-2001: India as a Development Partner of the Afghan Republic*

The U.S.-led intervention in 2001 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan offered India a renewed opportunity to pursue its objectives through developmental and diplomatic engagement. Under successive governments, India became one of Afghanistan's largest regional donors, committing more than \$3 billion to infrastructure, governance, and capacity-building projects. Flagship initiatives such as the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, the Afghan Parliament building, and the Salma (Afghan-India Friendship) Dam symbolised India's long-term developmental commitment (MEA n.d.). These projects were complemented by educational exchanges, health missions, and scholarship programmes that cemented India's soft-power image among ordinary Afghans. Beyond infrastructure, India's strategy rested on a dual premise: that economic development would underwrite political stability and that a friendly, inclusive Afghanistan was essential for regional connectivity. Programmes like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scheme and ICCR scholarships created a generation of Afghan bureaucrats and professionals trained in Indian institutions. By 2011, the two nations had formalised their partnership through the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), which institutionalised cooperation in security, trade, and cultural

domains. India also became a member of the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process, advocating regional solutions to Afghanistan's internal challenges (Mullen 2013).

India's growing footprint in Afghanistan during the Republic period was not purely altruistic. It was strategically motivated by concerns over Pakistan's influence and the threat of cross-border militancy. Kabul's democratic government offered New Delhi a partner aligned with its counter-terrorism and regional connectivity goals. India sought to connect Afghanistan to Central Asia through the Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor, bypassing Pakistan's blockade ("Chabahar port will" 2016). Yet, these ambitions were constrained by Afghanistan's dependence on Western security guarantees and the fragility of its political institutions. India deliberately avoided any direct military presence, focusing instead on training Afghan security personnel under civilian frameworks. Despite these achievements, India's approach carried structural vulnerabilities. Its heavy reliance on the Afghan Republic government meant that much of its influence was state-centric and urban, with limited outreach in Taliban-controlled rural areas. Moreover, India's reluctance to engage the Taliban in any form stemming from the 1999 Kandahar hijacking trauma and domestic security apprehensions left it diplomatically isolated when the U.S.-Taliban peace talks gained momentum after 2018. When the Doha Agreement was signed in 2020, India's exclusion from the process revealed the limits of its engagement strategy and the need for recalibration (Sareen 2022).

2.3. The 2021 Collapse and the Strategic Shock

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 represented an inflection point. The sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban's swift takeover dismantled two decades of Indian investment and strategic positioning. India's embassy was evacuated in a complex operation that required Taliban escort, with the Indian Ambassador and diplomatic staff flown out on August 17, 2021 ("Complicated Exercise" 2021). Developmental projects were suspended, and thousands of Afghan students and partners faced uncertainty. New Delhi initially adopted a policy of "wait and watch," refraining from formal recognition of the Taliban while expressing concern for the safety of Afghan minorities and women. The Taliban's assurances of moderation did little to assuage fears of Afghanistan reverting to a sanctuary for terrorist groups (Shekhawat 2024). However, India's

complete disengagement was neither feasible nor desirable given its stakes in regional stability and counter-terrorism. In June 2022, New Delhi reopened a technical mission in Kabul to oversee humanitarian assistance and safeguard its limited assets, marking a subtle re-entry into Afghanistan's diplomatic space (Basu 2022; Bajpae 2025). This evolution symbolised a shift from moralistic non-recognition to pragmatic functional engagement, laying the foundation for what could be described as the "recalibration phase" of India's Afghan policy.

In sum, the historical trajectory of India–Afghanistan relations reveal a continuum shaped by civilisational affinity, developmental diplomacy, and evolving strategic imperatives. Each phase from the Cold War ambivalence to post-2001 developmental assertiveness and the post-2021 recalibration reflects India's enduring attempt to balance normative commitments with geopolitical realities. Understanding this trajectory is crucial to analysing India's current posture under Taliban 2.0, where past investments in goodwill and capacity provide both a moral foundation and a strategic rationale for sustained, albeit cautious, engagement.

3. TALIBAN 2.0 AND THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The re-emergence of the Taliban in August 2021 profoundly altered the regional balance of power and redefined the contours of Afghanistan's engagement with the world. The self-styled "Taliban 2.0" projected an image of moderation and administrative capability distinct from its 1996–2001 predecessor, with early statements promising inclusivity, women's education, and international engagement. Yet, as governance patterns unfolded, these assurances proved largely rhetorical. By 2023, the Taliban had issued over 50 decrees directly curtailing women's rights and dignity (UN Women, 2024). Girls were banned from secondary school in March 2022, followed by university suspension in December 2022, and by April 2023, 80 per cent of school-aged girls and young women were out of school (ibid.). The 2024 Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice further entrenched these restrictions, reflecting deep continuities with the earlier emirate (UN Women, 2025).

From a regional standpoint, Taliban 2.0 has compelled neighbouring states to oscillate between cautious engagement and strategic hedging. Pakistan, which initially welcomed the Taliban's

return as a geopolitical victory, quickly faced profound unease as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) intensified cross-border militant activities. The TTP, emboldened by the Afghan Taliban's return, ended its ceasefire with Pakistan in November 2022 and launched a renewed insurgency (Banerjee 2025). The year 2023 marked a deadly resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan, with 645 militant attacks claiming 976 lives, making it the deadliest year for Pakistani security forces in a decade. Violence escalated further in 2024, with the number of attacks rising to 856 (Hussain 2024). The TTP, designated as the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan with an estimated strength of 6,000–6,500 fighters according to a 2024 UN report, has been operating from Afghan sanctuaries and utilising NATO weapons abandoned during the 2021 withdrawal, significantly enhancing their operational capabilities against Pakistani targets ("Taliban-backed TTP" 2024).

The situation reached a critical inflection point in October 2025 when Pakistan conducted airstrikes in Kabul, Khost, and Paktika significantly, during Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's historic visit to India, targeting TTP leadership (Pant & Shekhawat 2025). The Afghan Taliban responded forcefully with attacks on Pakistani border posts, resulting in civilian casualties and territorial gains before a Qatar-Turkey mediated ceasefire. This dramatic deterioration exposed the limits of Islamabad's influence and created unprecedented strategic openings for other regional actors, particularly India (Noack et al. 2025).

China has pursued pragmatic yet guarded engagement shaped by dual imperatives: preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for Uighur militants linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and exploring economic opportunities. In January 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping formally accepted the credentials of Taliban-appointed ambassador Bilal Karimi, making China the first major country to take this step since the Taliban's return to power (Jalazai 2024; Dawi 2024). While Beijing characterised this as normal diplomatic protocol and stopped short of formal recognition, the symbolic significance was unmistakable—what analysts call "de facto recognition without de jure endorsement" (Nan 2025). During Foreign Minister Wang Yi's August 2025 visit to Kabul for the sixth China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogue, he explicitly linked security and development, framing engagement as conditional on credible suppression

of cross-border militant activity (East Asia Forum, 2025). For Beijing, Afghanistan remains primarily a counterterrorism problem and only secondarily an economic opportunity. At the global level, Western disengagement and the freezing of Afghan financial assets triggered a severe humanitarian crisis. By 2024, Afghanistan remained the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with 28 million people, almost two-thirds of the population requiring assistance, and 20 million experiencing crisis-level food insecurity (UN Security Council, 2023). In the absence of sustained international assistance, neighbouring countries, particularly India, Iran, and Uzbekistan, have provided humanitarian relief while attempting to prevent spillover instability.

For India, the Taliban's return presented both strategic dilemmas and calibrated opportunities. The foremost concern stemmed from potential terrorist sanctuaries targeting Indian interests, with intelligence reports indicating the persistence of groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in Afghan territory. Yet the fluid geopolitical environment particularly the Pakistan-Taliban rupture created unprecedented avenues for re-engagement. Unlike in 1996, India opted against total disengagement. In June 2022, New Delhi reopened a technical mission in Kabul to oversee humanitarian operations, signalling a shift from moralistic non-recognition to functional pragmatism and this was accompanied by dispatching over 40,000 metric tonnes of wheat and substantial medical aid via Iran's Chabahar Port ("India and WFP sign" 2023).

India's engagement evolved dramatically through 2024-2025. In October 2025, India hosted Muttaqi for a historic six-day visit, the first by a senior Taliban official since their return to power. During the visit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar announced India's decision to upgrade its technical mission to full embassy status, marking a major diplomatic breakthrough. Muttaqi provided assurances that Afghanistan would not allow any elements to use its territory against India's interests and announced plans to send Afghan diplomats to India (Pant and Shekhawat 2025). India also expanded humanitarian commitments, including support for healthcare centers, upgrading the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital, and gifting 20 ambulances, while continuing assistance across 500 projects in health, food security, education, and counter-narcotics, with scholarships benefiting 2,000 Afghan students, including approximately 600 girls in online mode since 2023 (UN 2024).

The Taliban's second tenure thus reflects a paradoxical coexistence of ideological rigidity and external pragmatism. The deterioration of Pakistan-Taliban relations represents perhaps the most significant geopolitical shift since 2021, transforming Pakistan's envisioned strategic victory into a security nightmare and creating strategic space for India, China, and other regional actors to expand engagement without Pakistani interference. By October 2025, India had successfully navigated this challenge, moving from peripheral engagement to active diplomatic presence while maintaining principled concerns about women's rights and inclusivity. Taliban 2.0 has become both a test and a catalyst for India's strategic maturity in the Eurasian theatre,

compelling a delicate recalibration that blends realism, restraint, and regional collaboration.

4. CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

India's recalibration of its Afghanistan policy under Taliban 2.0, though strategically necessary, is constrained by a complex interplay of political, security, ethical, and institutional factors. The absence of diplomatic recognition, the persistence of terrorism threats, the growing strategic footprint of Pakistan and China, and the human rights crisis within Afghanistan collectively limit India's manoeuvrability. These structural constraints shape the contours of India's engagement, forcing New Delhi to balance between normative principles and geopolitical pragmatism.

Table 1: Key Constraints Shaping India's Afghanistan Policy under Taliban 2.0

Category	Description	Implications for India
Recognition Dilemma	No formal diplomatic recognition	Limits bilateral negotiations on security guarantees, trade, and development frameworks
Terrorism Threat	Presence of LeT, JeM, ISKP	Threatens internal security, particularly in J&K; hampers counter-terrorism cooperation
Pakistan-China Nexus	Strategic alignment on infrastructure/security	Excludes India from regional forums; undermines westward connectivity ambitions
Operational Limitations	Lack of embassy & suspended projects	Inability to monitor investments; loss of developmental influence to regional rivals
Human Rights Dilemma	Taliban's illiberal governance (women's rights, civil liberties)	Risks legitimising authoritarian regime; conflicts with democratic values and domestic narrative
Institutional Fragmentation	Weak inter-agency coordination (MEA, NSCS, defence)	Produces episodic, incoherent policy responses; lacks centralised Afghanistan strategy

While Table 1 provides an overview of these constraints, their real impact lies in how they intersect and reinforce one another, shaping a policy landscape where strategic imperatives often clash with normative commitments.

The recognition dilemma remains India's most immediate challenge. Unlike Pakistan, China, Russia, or Iran, which have maintained semi-official channels with the Taliban, India continues to operate through a technical mission and humanitarian aid networks without granting formal legitimacy. This approach allows India to safeguard its moral credibility and democratic identity while maintaining limited engagement. However, it also constrains India's diplomatic leverage. Without formal recognition, India cannot directly negotiate security guarantees, trade arrangements, or developmental cooperation frameworks with the regime. This ambiguous engagement limits India's influence on the Taliban's internal behaviour or on regional diplomatic outcomes (Shekhawat 2023).

A second and more acute constraint arises from the persistence of terrorism and radicalisation within Afghanistan's borders. Despite the Taliban's

assurances that Afghan soil would not be used against other countries, multiple reports suggest that groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) continue to operate with relative impunity (US Department of State 2022). For India, this represents a direct threat to internal security, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. The Taliban's ideological proximity to Pakistan's extremist networks, coupled with the porous nature of Afghan-Pakistani borders, renders counter-terrorism cooperation both essential and improbable. The absence of robust intelligence coordination mechanisms further amplifies India's vulnerability (Kumar 2012).

The Pakistan-China factor adds another layer of complexity. Pakistan's enduring ties with the Taliban and China's growing economic interests through mineral extraction and potential BRI extensions constrain India's room for manoeuvre. The trilateral coordination between Beijing, Islamabad, and Kabul on infrastructure and security issues has effectively excluded India from key decision-making forums. China's recent appointment of an ambassador to Kabul in 2024, the

first major power to do so has further consolidated its influence (Small, 2015). For India, this dual challenge manifests as a combination of political marginalisation and strategic encirclement, where both adversaries use Afghanistan's geography to reinforce their continental presence and limit India's westward connectivity ambitions (Chia 2024).

India also faces limited operational leverage due to the absence of on-ground diplomatic presence and the fragility of its earlier investments. With most projects suspended since 2021 and personnel withdrawn, New Delhi lacks the logistical capacity to monitor, maintain, or expand developmental initiatives. This void has allowed other regional players to fill the vacuum. Although India upgraded its Technical Mission in Kabul to full Embassy status in October 2025 – signalling a renewed diplomatic outreach – this move still falls short of India's earlier level of engagement and influence ("An Embassy Move" 2025). The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statement in 2022 highlighting the reopening of a technical mission reflected this shift, but the Taliban's opaque administrative mechanisms and the absence of internationally recognised legal frameworks continue to complicate project oversight and financial transfers (ibid.).

Equally significant are the ethical and human-rights considerations that constrain overt engagement. India's foreign policy tradition is deeply embedded in normative values such as democracy, gender equality, and rule of law. The Taliban's systematic suppression of women's education and curtailment of civil liberties sit uneasily with India's global image as a democracy and its domestic political narrative. Balancing humanitarian assistance with moral consistency has thus become a delicate exercise. Direct engagement risks being perceived as legitimising an illiberal regime, while disengagement may erode the goodwill India cultivated among ordinary Afghans (Amnesty International 2024; Hassan 2023).

Table 2: India's Strategic Options under Taliban 2.0

Option	Core Focus	Strategic Objective	Risk Level
Functional Engagement	Embassy-level coordination, aid	Maintain presence without recognition	Medium
Regional Cooperation	SCO, Moscow Format, Delhi Dialogue	Shared security and stability	Low
Connectivity Corridors	Chabahar, INSTC	Strategic autonomy, trade routes	Medium
Soft Power Diplomacy	ITEC, scholarships, aid	Retain goodwill and influence	Low
Strategic Patience	Incremental monitoring	Adaptability and risk hedging	Low

India's foremost strategic option is to pursue a functional and conditional engagement framework

Finally, there exists a bureaucratic and institutional challenge within India's foreign policy apparatus. The lack of an integrated Afghanistan cell combining security, development, and intelligence inputs has led to fragmented policymaking. Coordination between the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), and defence establishments remains episodic. Unlike Iran or Russia, where Afghanistan policy is centrally managed through dedicated structures, India's multi-agency model sometimes dilutes coherence. Institutionalising an inter-departmental mechanism that harmonises strategic and developmental functions would therefore be essential for sustaining long-term engagement.

In essence, the constraints facing India's Afghanistan policy are not purely external; they also stem from the contradictions inherent in India's diplomatic posture. The balancing act between moral restraint and strategic necessity demands constant recalibration. While India has succeeded in maintaining a principled distance from the Taliban regime, the absence of an adaptive institutional framework, coupled with adverse regional dynamics, continues to limit its strategic efficacy in shaping Afghanistan's trajectory.

5. STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR INDIA: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

While the constraints discussed earlier limit India's room for manoeuvre, they do not eliminate strategic agency. India retains a range of policy instruments such as diplomatic, developmental, and infrastructural that can be deployed selectively to preserve influence without compromising normative commitments or security interests. Table 2 outlines five strategic options that span the spectrum from minimal engagement (functional coordination) to long-term positioning (connectivity corridors and soft power diplomacy). Each option carries a different risk-reward calculus and reflects distinct assumptions about the Taliban's durability, regional cooperation, and India's appetite for diplomatic experimentation.

with the Taliban. Rather than according political recognition, New Delhi can institutionalise

dialogue mechanisms focused on humanitarian coordination, trade logistics, and counter-terrorism assurances. The 2025 decision to upgrade India's technical mission in Kabul to full embassy status represents a cautious yet notable step in this direction, reflecting an attempt to restore administrative capacity without formal endorsement of the regime ("An Embassy move" 2025). This functional engagement allows India to protect its developmental assets, re-establish communication channels, and monitor regional security conditions directly. However, such engagement must remain conditional predicated on the Taliban's adherence to counter-terror commitments and its willingness to facilitate humanitarian assistance without interference.

A second pathway involves regional coordination and multilateral diplomacy. In the absence of U.S. or Western leadership, regional mechanisms have become the primary arenas for shaping Afghanistan's future. India can use platforms such as the Moscow Format, SCO, and Heart of Asia Process to align its security interests with those of Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics. These Engagements enable India to advocate for an inclusive political process, prevent the export of terrorism, and sustain humanitarian access. Additionally, India's participation in the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan showcased its potential to convene regional stakeholders under an Indian-led normative agenda (MEA 2023). By positioning itself as a responsible regional actor rather than a distant observer, India can mitigate the perception of strategic marginalisation.

The third strategic vector lies in strengthening connectivity through alternative corridors. The recalibration of the Chabahar Port and its integration with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) remain vital for ensuring India's westward access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without relying on Pakistan (PIB 2023). Enhanced investment in Chabahar's logistics infrastructure, coupled with trilateral cooperation with Iran and Uzbekistan, would provide both economic leverage and strategic autonomy.

Another strategic tool available to India is its soft-power and humanitarian diplomacy. Even in the absence of formal political engagement, India continues to enjoy deep reservoirs of goodwill among ordinary Afghans. Initiatives such as the ITEC training programs, ICCR scholarships, and the ongoing provision of medical and food aid bolster India's image as a people-centric

development partner (MEA Annual Report 2024). Expanding digital education platforms like *e-Vidya Bharati* or telemedicine partnerships can serve dual purposes delivering aid and maintaining social connectivity with Afghan citizens. Humanitarian assistance delivered through multilateral frameworks, such as the UN World Food Programme, ensures transparency while avoiding the perception of direct legitimisation of the Taliban regime (*ibid.*).

A fifth and complementary approach involves strategic patience coupled with watchful engagement. India must recognise that Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0 is a fluid political entity internally fragmented and externally dependent. Direct attempts to influence the Taliban's domestic policies may prove futile, instead, India can adopt an incremental strategy of engagement that prioritises stability, monitors shifts within Taliban factions, and positions itself to respond to potential moderation within the regime. This adaptive posture allows India to hedge against uncertainties while avoiding over-commitment.

Finally, India must invest in building a coordinated institutional mechanism within its own strategic framework to sustain its long-term objectives in Afghanistan. A dedicated Afghanistan and Central Asia Division under the MEA, working in tandem with the National Security Council Secretariat and defence establishments, could provide coherence between security imperatives, economic goals, and humanitarian commitments. Such an integrated structure would not only streamline policy implementation but also institutionalise India's lessons from two decades of engagement shifting from reactive diplomacy to proactive regional strategy.

These strategic options underscore a pragmatic yet forward-looking approach. India's engagement with Taliban 2.0 cannot be ideological or purely transactional; it must be interest-driven, multilateral in orientation, and normatively restrained. Through a calibrated blend of limited functional engagement, humanitarian outreach, and connectivity-led diplomacy, India can retain relevance in Afghanistan's evolving order while safeguarding its long-term strategic interests.

7. CONCLUSION

India's engagement with Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0 reflects the evolution of its foreign policy from idealistic development diplomacy to a more pragmatic and adaptive statecraft. The fall of the Afghan Republic in 2021 compelled New Delhi

to reassess its strategic posture, balancing ethical restraint with geopolitical necessity. Rather than complete disengagement, India has chosen calibrated presence such as reopening its mission, extending humanitarian aid, and cautiously upgrading diplomatic representation. These actions demonstrate a nuanced approach: maintaining channels of communication and safeguarding past investments while refusing to legitimise an illiberal regime. This recalibration underscores India's growing maturity as a regional power capable of pursuing stability amid uncertainty. By combining functional engagement,

regional coordination, and connectivity-driven diplomacy, India continues to assert relevance in Afghanistan without compromising its normative principles. The strategy remains one of measured persistence grounded in the belief that influence in volatile regions is sustained through presence, patience, and principle. In this sense, India's Afghanistan policy under Taliban 2.0 is not a retreat from commitment but an adaptation to new realities, reaffirming that the quiet continuity of engagement can often be a more enduring instrument of power than overt intervention

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