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From Disengagement to Pragmatic Engagement: India's Evolving Strategy in Afghanistan (1989–2024)

*Prof. Rabbani Attar**

Abstract

This paper explores how India's foreign policy toward Afghanistan has changed from 1989 to 2024. The main argument is that India's involvement has evolved through three distinct phases, each shaped by different geopolitical factors. The paper states that this strategic shift has been a response to a constantly changing security environment, mainly due to ongoing competition with Pakistan, the interests of major powers, and India's own long-term goals for regional stability and economic cooperation. The analysis starts with Phase I (1989–2001), a time marked by a strategic gap after the Soviet withdrawal and the rise of the first Taliban regime. It discusses how India's initial support for the failing Soviet-backed government and later withdrawal left it without strong political allies in Afghanistan. This situation allowed Pakistan to gain an advantage by leveraging its influence with the Taliban. The Phase II (2001–2021) represents a significant shift toward a proactive, soft power-focused partnership. The present study explores how the U.S.-led removal of the Taliban opened a crucial opportunity for India to re-engage. Over two decades, India became the largest regional donor to Afghanistan, contributing more than \$3 billion to a variety of development projects. The final phase, Phase III (2021–2024), emerges from the shock of the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power. Confronted with the fall of the U.S.-backed government and the comeback of rivals like China and Pakistan, India took a pragmatic and careful approach. This strategy emphasizes engagement without formal recognition, trying to balance the need to safeguard its past investments and address security threats while upholding its democratic values. The paper concludes that India's current policy stems from lessons learned during the strategic failures of the 1990s, recognizing that any strategic void will be filled by rivals. The future of India-Afghanistan relations depends on India's ability to navigate this complicated balancing act and protect its interests amid a shifting regional power landscape.

Key words: India-Afghanistan Relations, Indian Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Taliban, Pakistan, Strategic Engagement, Regional Security.

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Introduction

India's foreign policy goals are closely tied to achieving a stable, secure, and prosperous neighborhood. For decades, Afghanistan has played a crucial role in this strategy (Jain, 2014). It serves not just as a landlocked neighbor but as an important geopolitical hub and a key part of India's "Neighborhood First" policy (Pant, 2024). The ties between India and Afghanistan are grounded in deep historical and cultural connections. These ties have often framed a complex and competitive strategic relationship.

Afghanistan has been a battleground of regional competition and a strategic chessboard for India and its main rival, Pakistan. For both countries, Afghanistan is a crucial entry point to Central Asia, a region rich in energy resources. Therefore, each nation's foreign policy regarding Afghanistan reflects its broader strategic and economic goals (Zahid Shahab Ahmed, 2024). The common view of India's involvement in Afghanistan as a straightforward "my enemy's enemy is my friend" idea is a strong but ultimately simplistic narrative. This perspective does not fully capture India's motivations. This analysis looks beyond that oversimplification, showing that India's policy has stemmed from a long-lasting vision for the region. This vision aims for a stable power balance across the Durand Line and seeks to prevent serious threats to its interests. This paper divides the last three and a half decades of this relationship into three phases, each marked by a major geopolitical shift that changed the strategic landscape.

- Phase - I (1989–2001): The time of disengagement and a strategic void after the Soviet withdrawal and the emergence of the first Taliban regime.
- Phase - II (2001–2021): The period of active re-engagement and strategic partnership after 9/11.
- Phase - III (2021–2024): The current period of strategic shock and practical adjustment after the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power.

The analysis draws on a range of sources, from official government reports to academic studies and news articles, to create a clear picture of a relationship shaped by outside factors and driven by India's internal policy discussions and long-term strategic goals. The following table presents a timeline of key events during this time.

Table 1: Timeline of Key Diplomatic and Political Events (1989-2024)

Year	Event
1989	Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan, having been defeated by the Mujahideen.
1992	The Soviet-backed Najibullah government collapses and a civil war begins. India disengages from the conflict.
1996	The Taliban seize Kabul, establishing the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.
2001	U.S. forces, with NATO allies, intervene in Afghanistan, leading to the overthrow of the Taliban regime. India re-establishes diplomatic ties.
2011	India and Afghanistan sign a Strategic Partnership Agreement to formalize their cooperation in various sectors.
2014-2016	The U.S. announces and begins the process of withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan.
2020	The U.S. and the Taliban sign the Doha Agreement, which sets the stage for a complete U.S. withdrawal.
2021	The U.S. completes its withdrawal, and the Taliban swiftly retakes power, re-establishing the Islamic Emirate.
2021	An Indian delegation quietly visits Doha to meet Taliban leadership, signaling a major policy shift.
2022	India reopens its embassy in Kabul with a "technical team" to oversee humanitarian aid.

2024 High-level meetings between India's Foreign Secretary and the Taliban's Foreign Minister take place.

Phase I: Disengagement, strategic vacuum, and the first Taliban regime (1989–2001)

The time right after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 was a crucial and often difficult period for India-Afghanistan relations (Choudhury, 2019). The Soviet retreat, fueled by strong resistance from the Afghan mujahideen backed by Pakistan, left a power vacuum that soon filled with internal conflict. India's approach during this time was distinct for the region, and its effects were significant. India was the only South Asian nation to recognize the Soviet-supported communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. It continued to provide humanitarian aid to President Mohammad Najibullah's government even after the Soviet pullout.

This policy matched India's longstanding relationship with the Kabul government but created serious obstacles in its ties with the Afghan mujahideen resistance. By supporting the losing side in a conflict that was changing Afghanistan, India turned away from the groups that would later take control. This choice left India without major political allies as the post-Soviet civil war started in the early 1990s. When Najibullah's government fell in 1992 and the country split apart, India stopped its diplomatic contacts and withdrew from the conflict entirely (Paliwal, 2017).

This withdrawal resulted in a strategic gap that India's main rival, Pakistan, quickly took advantage of. With its long-standing connections to the Mujahideen and emerging Taliban, Pakistan was able to strengthen its influence in ways that India could not. The Taliban's rise and capture of Kabul in 1996 ushered in a time of isolation for India in Afghanistan. India had no diplomatic presence in Kabul during this first Taliban rule, which highlighted a deep ideological divide. India's public condemnation of the Taliban's destruction of the historic Buddhas of Bamiyan

monuments made this divide even clearer, showing the stark differences in values and interests between the two (MEA, GoI, 2001).

The most severe outcome of this strategic gap was the emergence of a direct and hostile security threat to India. The Taliban's rule created a safe space for Pakistan-backed militant groups, especially Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), to set up training camps and plan attacks against India. These groups, loyal to the Taliban, were allowed to operate freely, turning Afghanistan into a base for proxy warfare against India (Ali, 2014). Evidence shows that Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) ran eight camps in Nangarhar province, some directly controlled by the Taliban, while Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operated three camps in both Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. This direct connection between the situation in Afghanistan and India's domestic and regional security issues highlighted a painful truth: a "hands-off" approach was not neutral; it was a strategic weakness that allowed for a hostile security environment.

Phase II: Proactive Re-engagement and the Era of Strategic Partnership (2001–2021)

The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, attacks and the subsequent fall of the Taliban gave India a critical chance to re-engage with the country. Unlike its approach in the 1990s, India did not participate directly in the military operations but focused on development and reconstruction (Ashraf, 2007). This marked a clear shift from disengagement to a more active policy that lasted for twenty years. India quickly re-established diplomatic relations with the new democratic government under President Hamid Karzai and upgraded its presence from a liaison office to a full embassy in 2002.

During this time, India focused on using "soft power" to build influence, promote stability, and protect its long-term interests. India's assistance totaled over \$3 billion,

making it the biggest regional donor to Afghanistan and the fifth-largest donor globally. These investments were not just symbolic; they were mainly aimed at development in vital areas like infrastructure, health facilities, education, and human resources.

India's soft power strategy was evident in key infrastructure projects that aimed to counter Pakistan's influence and create alternative trade routes. For example, the Zaranj-Delaram highway provided India with an alternative route to connect with the resource-rich region of Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. Additionally, India invested in expanding the Chabahar Port in Iran to build transportation links that avoided Pakistan and reduce Afghanistan's economic dependence on its neighbor. Beyond these projects, India showed its commitment by constructing the Afghan Parliament building, a clear symbol of its support for Afghanistan's democratic institutions. The Salma Dam, also known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, was another vital project, supplying 42 MW of power and irrigation for 75,000 hectares of farmland (MEA, GoI, 2004).

The large scale of India's aid was not just a goodwill gesture; it was a strategic effort to create a stable balance of power along the Durand Line (Rahi, 2014). Many view India's policy as a Machiavellian move against Pakistan. However, some argue that India's actions were driven more by the need to protect its interests than by geopolitical ambition. By investing in strategic infrastructure and fostering strong ties between people, India used its soft power as a hard strategy, aiming to establish a lasting presence and provide an alternative narrative to Pakistan's influence without direct military involvement. The table below illustrates the scale of this investment.

Table 2: India's Developmental and Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan (2001-2024)

Aid Type	Description
Overall Assistance	Over \$3 billion in assistance, making India the biggest regional donor and fifth largest globally.
Infrastructure	Construction of the Afghan Parliament building (costing \$130 million) and the Salma Dam.
Connectivity	Construction of the Zaranj-Delaram Highway and investment of over \$100 million in Iran's Chabahar Port.
Trade	Established two air corridors to facilitate bilateral trade, bypassing Pakistan.
Humanitarian Aid	Shipments of 500,000 Covid vaccine doses, 2,500 MT of wheat, and other emergency relief.
Education	Sponsorship of scholarships for over 16,000 Afghan students in India and training for Afghan civil servants, diplomats, and police.
Community Projects	Completion of around 433 High Impact Community Development Projects in all 34 provinces.

Phase III: Strategic shock, Pragmatic recalibration, and the "Middle Path" (2021–2024)

The swift U.S. military withdrawal in August 2021 and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan government shocked India strategically. Losing a friendly government and the absence of U.S. and NATO troops, which had acted as a security buffer, created a new power vacuum. This shift reignited India's main concerns, particularly the risk of Afghanistan becoming a base for anti-India terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Reports from the United Nations Security

Council highlighted that terrorism remains a persistent threat, with groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaeda affiliates potentially becoming a “regional threat.”

In response, India quickly and significantly adjusted its policy. Unlike in the 1990s, when India completely disengaged, its post-2021 approach has been defined by a pragmatic and cautious “middle path” (Chawla, 2024). This new strategy is a calculated risk based on several critical factors. The first is a humanitarian imperative. India wants to help the Afghan people during a deepening crisis. The second is to protect its substantial investments from the previous two decades, such as the Salma Dam and the Parliament building. The third, and most important, is the need to prevent rivals—China and Pakistan—from taking advantage of the power vacuum. Ignoring the Taliban would likely increase both anti-India terrorism and the influence of its competitors.

India’s cautious re-engagement has taken shape through specific diplomatic actions (Joshi, 2022). A major policy shift was first reported in mid-2021 when an Indian delegation quietly visited Doha to meet with Taliban leaders, likely with Qatar’s help. While India initially closed its embassy in Kabul after the takeover, it reopened in June 2022 with a “technical team” to provide humanitarian assistance and maintain a diplomatic presence. This engagement has included high-level meetings, including one in January between India’s Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, and the Taliban’s acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi. This marked the first high-level discussion between the two sides. The Taliban have shown a desire to strengthen political and economic ties with India, indicating a willingness to engage with a reliable alternative to Pakistan.

India’s policy shift reflects lessons learned from the strategic failures of the 1990s. The current approach of “engagement without recognition” allows India to balance its

democratic values with practical needs. It acknowledges that staying completely away from Afghanistan’s strategic landscape invites rivals to gain an advantage. The evolving strategic triad between India, the Taliban, and Pakistan is illustrated below.

Table 3: The Taliban-India-Pakistan Strategic Triad (2021-2024)

Actor	Actions and Stated Positions	Strategic Concerns
India	Reopened embassy in Kabul with a technical team; held high-level meetings with Taliban; continued humanitarian aid.	Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a launchpad for anti-India terror; countering China and Pakistan’s influence.
Pakistan	Historically held significant sway with the Taliban; engaging with regional players like China and Iran to counter India.	Eroding strategic leverage in Afghanistan; resurgence of cross-border terrorism, especially from TTP.
Taliban	Open to “balanced and economy-focused” ties with India; welcomed high-level meetings and the reopening of the embassy.	Fissures with Pakistan (e.g., non-recognition of Durand Line); seeking new economic and diplomatic partners.

Cross-Cutting Thematic Analysis

The three phases of India-Afghanistan relations highlight several important themes that shed light on the complexities of India’s foreign policy. The first theme involves a notable debate among scholars about the effectiveness and limitations of India’s use of “soft power.” Avinash Paliwal argues that India’s soft power was a well-planned strategy aimed at creating a “stable balance of power” in the region (Paliwal A. , 2013). In contrast, Harsh V. Pant critiques this approach, suggesting that India’s policy was a “muddle,” relying on its soft power while missing chances to demonstrate “hard power” after the U.S. troop withdrawal from 2014 to 2016 (Pant H. , 2014). The moot point, however, is while India’s soft power efforts were indeed a form of hard strategy, their ultimate success depended on the security provided by

external forces like the U.S. and NATO. Once that security was gone, the flaws in depending only on development aid for strategic interests became clear, adding weight to Pant's critique.

Another important theme is the ongoing issue of aid delivery and the effectiveness of foreign intervention. Reports from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) offer a stark view of the international effort. The final SIGAR report highlights "widespread corruption" and "waste," noting that the Taliban systematically diverted and misappropriated foreign aid (SIGAR, 2025). In some instances, multi-million-dollar projects were found to be empty or used for unintended purposes, like a chicken coop. Although India's projects were generally successful and well-received, the broader SIGAR findings provide a critical context for the entire reconstruction period. They indicate that in an environment lacking governance and transparency, the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of any foreign aid model are significantly limited. This reality highlights the substantial risks tied to India's multi-billion-dollar investment.

Lastly, examining the China-Pakistan alliance offers a vital perspective on India's strategic challenges. Andrew Small describes this partnership as a central force in Asian geopolitics, with China acting as Pakistan's greatest economic hope and trusted military ally (Small, 2015). The competition between this bloc and the India-U.S. partnership shapes the global order. Since the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, this situation has worsened, as China and Pakistan are poised to fill the void left by the U.S. This shift has fundamentally changed India's strategic considerations, forcing it to engage with the Taliban not just out of historical ties, but out of strategic necessity. This move is a direct response to the need to counter the increasing influence of its two main rivals and avoid losing leverage in the region .

Conclusion

Over the past thirty-five years, India's relationship with Afghanistan has changed significantly. The shift from disengagement and isolation in the 1990s to an active partnership focused on development, and more recently, a practical, risk-aware approach shows several important lessons learned. The first lesson highlights the need to avoid creating a strategic vacuum, which directly led to a hostile security situation in the 1990s and now influences India's careful engagement with the Taliban. The second lesson recognizes the limits of relying only on soft power in unstable security settings. This approach often depends on having external security support. The third lesson is the persistent "Pakistan Factor," which continues to shape India's strategy in the region, especially with the rising influence of the China-Pakistan alliance.

From this analysis, we see that India's current "middle path" is a sensible response to its complicated strategic situation. It involves a tough but necessary balance between its democratic values and the need to protect its interests in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape. To achieve long-term goals of a stable and secure neighborhood, India must maintain a multifaceted policy towards Afghanistan. This policy should include ongoing humanitarian aid to build goodwill, a strong and direct diplomatic and security conversation with the Taliban to address security threats and strengthening ties with regional players like Russia and Iran to counter rival influences. By embracing this practical approach, India can navigate the complexities of today's geopolitical environment and avoid Afghanistan becoming a source of strategic vulnerability again.

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