



# Assessing India's Cautious Engagement in Afghanistan



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India reopened its embassy in Kabul in June 2022 with the objective of facilitating humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs' press release stated that India has deployed a technical team in Kabul "to closely monitor and coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders for the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance". However, revival of India's presence in Afghanistan does not symbolise India's official recognition or endorsement of the Taliban regime. The gesture is a result of patient pondering and facilitates India's engagement and commitment to sending 50,000 metric tons of wheat, medicines, and COVID vaccines to Afghanistan.

In 2021, while the hasty US exit from Afghanistan was underway, it was increasingly clear that the Taliban would dominate the political and strategic space in Afghanistan and the group had no intentions to accommodate the erstwhile Afghan political leadership post US withdrawal. The so-called 'peace talks' facilitated by Islamabad did pave the way for the US exit but did not ensure the Taliban's commitment to an 'inclusive government'.

India has been actively engaged in Afghanistan with successive political regimes and has been cautiously waiting and watching as the events in Kabul unfolded. Pakistan on the other hand cherished the defeat of the Afghan democratic institutions and rejoiced in the victory of the Taliban, which they considered their strategic assets. Islamabad's critical objective of countering India's engagement in Afghanistan finally came true in its own mind. Pakistan has been very uncomfortable with India's presence, its soft power and goodwill amongst the Afghans. Pakistan has never shared a stress-free relationship with Kabul and the majority of Afghans view Pakistan as a major cause of instability in Afghanistan. Pakistan (before the Taliban takeover in August 2021) was relentlessly disrupting the Afghan political set-up, catering to its strategic objectives, and failed to offer any developmental assistance that could have impacted the Afghan lives positively.

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The Taliban received all-out political, diplomatic, and military support from Pakistan during the US exit, and the former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan seemed to be confident that the Taliban would get international recognition. Also, Pakistan was estimating the instability in Afghanistan (post US withdrawal) and was gearing up to minimize the Afghan migration into its territory by physically fencing the Durand Line, much to the Taliban's displeasure. Islamabad miscalculated the international response to the Taliban takeover and overestimated its ability to fetch international recognition for the Taliban when Pakistan was itself going through a tough phase of struggling to prove its credibility on the global platform. None of the countries, including the Taliban's 'friends' – China, extended official recognition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, despite Beijing maintaining a strong projection of support for the Taliban. Afghanistan, which has always been highly dependent on international aid, slipped into a deep economic crisis. In the pre-Taliban period, approximately 75 per cent of the Afghan government's budget was funded by the international community. Without the formal recognition of the Taliban regime, the movement of major funds is hardly possible.

India has been engaged in developmental assistance in Afghanistan and has invested close to US\$ 3 billion in various developmental projects. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, New Delhi has made serious efforts to adopt a regional approach to address the Afghan challenges. In November 2021, India hosted the "Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan". The meeting was held at the level of National Security Advisors and the invitees included the key regional players. Pakistan refused to be part of the meeting, stating India was a spoiler, while China skipped the meeting. The first-ever summit between India and Central Asian Republics, held in January 2022, highlighted the importance of cooperation between India and Central Asian countries to deal with the situation in Afghanistan. New Delhi has been considering various options of engagement in Afghanistan before direct contact was established with the Taliban. India's outreach to the Taliban has been welcomed by the Taliban owing to the following factors:

1. India has remained consistent in its commitment to humanitarian assistance.
2. The Taliban have been hungry for international recognition and the harsh realities of the challenges of running a country without external assistance or support have sunk in.
3. Engagement with India is likely to open up further channels of engagement for Afghanistan. The Taliban's security assurances to India and its commitment that Afghan soil will not be used by anti-India militant groups enhance the Taliban's credibility to some extent.

4. The Taliban's tensions with Pakistan have not settled and there have been serious disagreements/conflicts on the fencing along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the Taliban's dealings with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Taliban's engagement with India is likely to reduce the Taliban's dependence on Pakistan and also allow the group to have a pressure point for Islamabad.

5. India has remained committed to Afghan development, and it looks like the Taliban always had a hope of reengaging with India. To New Delhi's surprise, the Indian MEA delegation found the Indian embassy property in Kabul in good condition, unlike some of the other consulates, which were damaged badly by the Taliban fighters.

For New Delhi, the revival of its physical engagement with Afghanistan has been due to multiple factors. India remains committed to the well-being of the Afghans and would want to continue its humanitarian assistance. New Delhi has invested ample resources and energy in Afghanistan, and it would not be prudent to let all of it go in vain.

Instability in Afghanistan has severe security implications for India. The growing strength of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Pakistan's history of using the Afghan soil to train and nurture anti-India terror groups can be contained only if India is present in Afghanistan. India holds a much stronger position with its presence in Kabul.

It goes without saying that, as a rising power, India needs to have a wider engagement in its neighbourhood. China has been strategically engaged in Afghanistan for more than a decade now. China's expansionist agenda and its ability to use the strategic vacuum need to be seriously considered in India's Afghan policy.

India cherishes the soft power it has invested in Afghanistan and would want the Afghans to have basic rights. Although the Taliban have shown little flexibility in their approach towards women, minorities, and political inclusivity, these issues can be addressed in some form only if India is engaged with the Taliban.

And finally, India's engagement could potentially pave the way for a regional engagement addressing critical challenges emanating from instability in Afghanistan. Regional actors like Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran, and the Central Asian countries share common threats of terrorism, Islamic radicalization, and illicit drug trade spilling from instability in Kabul. Even though historical evidence suggests that nations are driven primarily by their strategic and economic requirements and regional

collaborations have not been successful in our region, it cannot be denied that the Afghan crisis demands a regional approach. An integrated regional approach would not only address the crisis and security challenges more effectively, it would also enhance the stakes for the Taliban. The approach may potentially coerce the Taliban to rethink their position on women and inclusive government.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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