



SOFT POWER IN HARD TIMES: INDIA'S CAUTIOUS RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH TALIBAN RULE AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract:

This article analyses India's soft power strategy in Afghanistan across three phases: its consolidation (2001–2021), abrupt disruption following the Taliban's return, and cautious recalibration thereafter. It contends that, despite the inherent limits of soft power in coercive environments, humanitarian and development assistance has functioned as the primary vehicle for New Delhi's pragmatic re-engagement with the Taliban regime after 2021. Drawing on two decades of Indian aid diplomacy and post-2021 policy shifts, the study examines how India has balanced principled commitment to inclusive governance with strategic imperatives of maintaining relevance and countering rival influence. The analysis illuminates the tension between values and realpolitik in India's evolving Afghanistan policy and evaluates the opportunities and constraints of its current "humanitarian-plus" approach within a broader quest for regional stability and strategic autonomy.

Keywords: India -Afghanistan relations, Taliban, soft power, humanitarian diplomacy, aid as statecraft, principles versus pragmatism, strategic recalibration.

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Resumen:

Este artículo analiza la estrategia de poder blando de la India en Afganistán a lo largo de tres fases: su consolidación (2001-2021), la interrupción abrupta tras el regreso de los talibanes y el cauteloso reajuste posterior. Sostiene que, a pesar de las limitaciones inherentes al poder blando en entornos coercitivos, la ayuda humanitaria y para el desarrollo ha funcionado como el principal vehículo para el reencuentro pragmático de Nueva Delhi con el régimen talibán después de 2021. Basándose en dos décadas de diplomacia de ayuda india y en los cambios políticos posteriores a 2021, el estudio examina cómo la India ha equilibrado su compromiso de principios con la gobernanza inclusiva con los imperativos estratégicos de mantener su relevancia y contrarrestar la influencia de sus rivales. El análisis pone de relieve la tensión entre los valores y la realpolitik en la evolución de la política de la India hacia Afganistán y evalúa las oportunidades y limitaciones de su actual enfoque «humanitario plus» dentro de una búsqueda más amplia de la estabilidad regional y la autonomía estratégica.

Palabras Clave. *Relaciones entre India y Afganistán, talibanes, poder blando, diplomacia humanitaria, la ayuda como política de Estado, principios frente a pragmatismo, reajuste estratégico.*

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1. Introduction

August 2021. The withdrawal of Western forces left the country - already devastated by over four decades of conflict and instability - “turned upside down and inside out,” as BBC journalist Lyse Doucet poignantly observed.² During this tumultuous period, India was compelled to evacuate its diplomatic personnel, citizens, and several Afghan nationals from Kabul. The collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021 marked a major setback for India’s two-decade-long development partnership with Afghanistan. New Delhi’s non-coercive and co-optive soft power diplomacy; anchored in economic assistance, humanitarian aid, capacity building, and institutional linkages worth nearly US \$3 billion - had earned it considerable goodwill among both the Afghan government (prior to August 2021) and the Afghan people. This development-oriented engagement had, since 2001, formed the cornerstone of India’s strategic approach toward Afghanistan.

Having had no diplomatic presence in Afghanistan during the Taliban’s earlier rule (1996–2001), aligning instead with the rival Northern Alliance alongside Russia and Iran, and having largely avoided engagement with the Taliban prior to their return to power - unlike several other regional actors - India entered the post-2021 landscape on inherently fragile footing. Thus, the return of the Taliban brought an end to a two-decade-long phase of engagement defined by India’s soft-power diplomacy. In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban’s takeover, and for several months thereafter, the prospects of India re-establishing its presence in Afghanistan and regaining even a fraction of its lost influence - appeared highly uncertain, if not impossible. New Delhi’s initial response further complicated matters. Citing security concerns, India suspended regular visa services for Afghan nationals, including hundreds of Afghan students who had been pursuing degrees in Indian universities³, and failed to operationalise the e-visa facility it had earlier promised. These measures, though rooted in legitimate security apprehensions, were perceived by many Afghans as indifference at a time of acute crisis. Consequently, India’s long-nurtured goodwill, built painstakingly through development cooperation and people-to-people ties; suffered a perceptible setback, adding another layer of complexity to New Delhi’s efforts to recalibrate its approach toward a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

And yet, less than a year later, on 23 June 2022, India re-opened its Embassy in Kabul and deployed a ‘technical team’ to oversee the delivery of humanitarian assistance, particularly for those affected by the devastating earthquake in Paktika province.⁴ The move - officially framed as a humanitarian gesture - nonetheless provided New Delhi with a valuable opportunity to establish working-level contact with the Taliban, who for their part, sought engagement with a regional power long regarded favourably within Afghan society. India’s traditional reliance on soft power and development diplomacy thus once again served as the conduit for its cautious re-entry into the Afghan theatre. This pragmatic engagement gradually paved the way for more substantive political exchanges in subsequent years, culminating in the historic visit of the Taliban’s Acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to New Delhi in October 2025 - an event that underscored a significant recalibration in India’s Afghanistan policy.⁵

² Doucet, Lyse, “Will there be women in the Taliban's new government?”, *BBC News*, 1 September, 2021, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMgr7nkFLjo>

³ Haidar, Suhasini, and Pandey Devesh K.: “Afghans can enter India now only on e-visas”, *The Hindu*, 25 August 2021, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/e-visa-must-for-afghan-nationals-travelling-to-india-home-ministry/article36094016.ece>

⁴ “Deployment of Technical team in Embassy of India”, Press Release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 23 June, 2022, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press->

⁵ *Ibid*



Joseph S. Nye, who introduced the concept of *soft power* in the 1980s, defined it as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (“sticks”) or inducements (“carrots”).⁶ He argued that when others are persuaded to move in our direction willingly, the need to rely on force or material incentives diminishes.⁷ This paper argues that while soft-power diplomacy – largely anchored in development assistance, education, and humanitarian outreach – particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings, may have had inherent limitations, however, in the context of India’s re-engagement with the Taliban regime after 2021, ‘humanitarian outreach’ emerged as a crucial enabler that facilitated New Delhi’s gradual return as a key regional stakeholder in Afghanistan’s stability. India’s developmental legacy and the reservoir of goodwill it built over two decades of partnership created a unique, albeit constrained, foundation for renewed engagement under radically altered political circumstances. By examining the evolving contours of India’s soft-power diplomacy, this paper seeks to illuminate how instruments of aid, education, and humanitarian outreach can function as subtle yet significant tools of foreign policy adaptation in complex political environments. Organised into three main sections, the paper adopts a historical, analytical, and contemporary approach to: (i) trace the evolution of India’s soft-power diplomacy in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021; (ii) assess its policy recalibration and outreach in the aftermath of the Taliban’s return to power; and (iii) explore the possible trajectories and constraints shaping India’s future engagement with the Taliban in pursuit of its broader strategic and developmental objectives.

2. Can India’s Afghanistan Policy Be Understood through a Soft Power Lens?

A review of the scholarship on India’s Afghanistan policy after 2001 reveals that most scholars have interpreted New Delhi’s engagement primarily through the prism of *soft power* diplomacy. Pant⁸ noted that India’s post-2001 involvement centred on reconstruction, development projects, humanitarian aid, capacity building, and nation-building efforts – all reflecting a soft power approach. D’Souza⁹ similarly argues that India’s reconstruction strategy in war-ravaged Afghanistan has been guided by soft power principles. Ghosh¹⁰, focusing on education and capacity building, underscored India’s emphasis on strengthening Afghan institutions and indigenous capacities across sectors was a soft power outreach. Yadav and Barwa¹¹ described India’s role in Afghanistan’s reconstruction and stabilisation as one grounded in co-optive means, while Ved¹² contrasted India’s positive image in Afghanistan with Pakistan’s, attributing this goodwill to New Delhi’s sustained reliance on soft power.

Since 2001, India’s Afghanistan policy has been driven by two interrelated objectives. From a security standpoint, New Delhi sought to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups operating against India. From an economic perspective, it aimed to strengthen connectivity with the resource-rich Central Asian economies. The question that arises, therefore, is whether the strategy adopted to pursue these

⁶ Nye J. S. Jr (2004): *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics*, New York, Public Affairs.

⁷ Nye J. S. Jr. (2004): “Soft power and American foreign policy”. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 119, n°2 (2004), pp.255–270, at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.2307/20202345>

⁸ Pant Hars V.:” India in Afghanistan: A test case for a rising power”, *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol.18, n° 2 (2013), pp.133–153.

⁹ D’Souza, Shanthie Mariet: “Can India Stay the Course in Post-2014 Afghanistan?”, ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defence and International Security, n° 269, April 2014, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/179066/269_D'Souza.pdf.

¹⁰ Ghosh, Anwasha (2013): *A Leap Forward: Capacity Building, Education and India-Afghanistan Cooperation*. New Delhi, Knowledge World Publishers.

¹¹ Yadav Vikash, & Barwa Conrad.: “Relational control: India’s grand strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, *India Review*, Vol. 10, n° 2 (2011), pp.93–125.

¹² Ved Mahendra: “Af-Pak and India’s options in Afghanistan”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 34, n° 5 (September2010) pp. 683–689.



goals can be characterised as a *soft power* approach. Since the introduction of the concept, the notion of soft power has evolved to include a broad spectrum of non-coercive instruments of influence - ranging from foreign aid, educational and cultural exchanges, and humanitarian assistance, to various forms of economic engagement that foster goodwill and enduring partnerships. Within this expanded understanding, India's post-2001 engagement with Afghanistan can be viewed as a distinct expression of soft power diplomacy. The following section revisits India's soft power diplomacy in Afghanistan since 2001.

3. India's Developmental Footprint in Afghanistan (2001-2021)

With pledges exceeding US\$3 billion in development assistance since 2001, India emerged as the fifth-largest donor and the largest regional contributor to Afghanistan's reconstruction and development efforts.¹³ Five pillars – humanitarian assistance, infrastructure development, economic development, connectivity and capacity building – defines India's engagement with the country. India had undertaken several large-scale, high-visibility development projects in Afghanistan, focusing on infrastructure, energy, and institution building to enhance the country's connectivity, trade, and overall development. Major infrastructural initiatives include the Zaranj–Delaram Highway, which provides Afghanistan access to the Iranian port of Chabahar and facilitates regional trade; the Salma (Afghan-India Friendship) Dam, which supplies electricity and irrigation to western Afghanistan; and the new Afghan Parliament building, symbolizing India's support for democratic governance. I.P Khosla, former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan observed that these flagship projects significantly enhanced India's "wow factor" and visibility in the country.¹⁴ Other projects, such as the construction of power substations, expansion of communication networks, and plans for the Bamiyan–Herat rail link, further underscored India's long-term commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction and regional integration. Development partnership between the two countries accelerated noticeably following the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement. India also implemented a large number of Small Development Projects (SDPs) in insecure areas. Nearly 1000 scholarships were provided per annum to Afghan students under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).¹⁵ Reports from the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi indicated that more than 60,000 Afghan nationals (both male and female) completed their studies in India in the approximately 16 years leading up to early 2022.¹⁶

India's support for the development of Afghan cricket stood out as a notable dimension of its soft power engagement with Afghanistan during the Republic period. Recognising cricket's growing popularity as a unifying national sport, India extended training facilities, coaching support, and infrastructure assistance to the Afghan Cricket Board. The Board was allowed to use stadiums in Greater Noida and later in Dehradun as the Afghan national team's "home grounds," enabling it to host international matches and gain global exposure. By promoting people-to-people contact through sports diplomacy, India not only nurtured Afghanistan's cricketing success story but also deepened cultural and societal goodwill - key pillars of its soft power strategy.

Bilateral Trade between India and Afghanistan was US\$ 1.53 billion in the 2019-2020 financial year while India's export to Afghanistan constituted US\$ 997.58 million and import

¹³ "EAM's Remarks at Afghanistan 2020 Conference on 24 November 2020", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 24 November 2020, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33235>

¹⁴ Interview of the author with Amb. I.P Khosla, Former Indian Envoy to Afghanistan (1989-90) for the book "*A Leap Forward: Capacity Building, Education and India-Afghanistan Cooperation*" in 2011 at New Delhi.

¹⁵ See Ghosh. Anwesha: *A Leap Forward: Capacity Building, Education and India-Afghanistan Cooperation*, *op.cit*

¹⁶ Adeli Ghazanfar: "Why India Is No Longer a Destination for Afghan Students", *Duetsche Welle*, 23 March 2022.



from Afghanistan US\$ 530 million.¹⁷ However, the absence of Pakistani cooperation - specifically its refusal to permit land-based trade between the two countries - kept the overall trade volume constrained. To overcome this limitation, both sides had, since 2017, developed air-freight corridors linking Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat with New Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai. Additionally, the Chabahar Port in Iran offered a vital alternative route, reducing Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for access to Indian and global markets.

India refrained from taking a direct role in Afghanistan's externally supported security sector but continued to contribute through capacity-building initiatives.¹⁸ It regularly trained Afghan police officers in India, army cadets, special forces, and women officers, thereby strengthening Afghanistan's indigenous security capabilities.¹⁹ In response to repeated requests from Kabul, India also supplied limited military equipment, including four retrofitted Mi-25 attack helicopters and three Cheetah light utility helicopters delivered in two phases to the Afghan Air Force.²⁰ India's developmental presence, however, came under repeated threat, with several attacks on Indian personnel working on reconstruction projects - most notably the Indian Embassy in Kabul in 2008²¹ - allegedly orchestrated by the Haqqani, widely regarded as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Agency. These attacks only strengthened New Delhi's resolve to support the Afghan government in its struggle against the Taliban and their affiliated networks. Similarly, India's training of police and judicial officials was critical at a time when weak institutional capacities in remote provinces often drove people to turn to the Taliban for justice and security. Till a few days before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, India continued to offer services such as maintenance of equipment, training, and supply of spare parts.²²

India's engagement with Afghanistan's political sphere remained complex and constrained by multiple factors - the entrenched tribal and factional divisions, resistance within the Afghan elite to meaningful reforms, and the persistent threat posed by the Taliban insurgency. Although India contributed symbolically to Afghanistan's democratic evolution by constructing the new Parliament building, its ability to shape or intervene during critical political junctures - such as the contentious presidential elections or the signing of the US - Taliban Peace Agreement in February 2020 - was limited. Consistent with its stated policy, New Delhi maintained support for the government in Kabul and refrained from direct engagement with the Taliban, even as most regional and global actors, including Iran and Russia, opened channels of dialogue with the group despite their previously fraught relations. Consequently, when the Republic collapsed and the Taliban regained power in August 2021, India found itself in a diplomatically constrained and uncomfortable position.

4. Soft Power as an Enabler: India's cautious Re-engagement with the Taliban Regime Post-2021

The Taliban's rapid seizure of Kabul in August 2021 and their unilateral declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan - an entity that India has consistently refused to recognise -

¹⁷ D'Souza, Shanthie Mariet: "India's Soft Power Diplomacy in Afghanistan: Need for a Policy Rethink?", N Mahawar Nutan Kapoor, Bhattacharjee Dhrubajyoti (eds.) (2024): *India's Development Partnership: Expanding Vistas*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp.124-138.

¹⁸ "No Indian Boots on Ground in Afghanistan", India Tells US", *NDTV*, 26 September 2017.

¹⁹ "India's Military Diplomacy: Indian Army trains Afghan Army women officers in Chennai", *Daily New & Analysis*, 19 February 2021.

²⁰ "India gives 2 attack helicopters to Afghanistan", *The Hindu*, 16 May 2019, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-gives-2-attack-helicopters-to-afghanistan/article27152979.ece>

²¹ "Statement by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on the terrorist attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul." Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India, 7 July 2008.

²² D'Souza Shanthie Mariet: "India's Soft power Diplomacy in Afghanistan: Need for a Policy Rethink?", *op.cit.*, p.129.



dramatically heightened the long-standing security apprehensions New Delhi had harboured regarding Afghanistan. The collapse of the internationally recognised Islamic Republic, the dissolution of its civilian institutions (including the National Directorate of Security), and the abrupt end of the two-decade-long U.S. and NATO security umbrella left a dangerous strategic vacuum on India's northwestern flank. With India not extending diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime, the subsequent closure of its embassy in Kabul and consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar, and Jalalabad transformed Afghanistan into a near-total intelligence black hole, severely impairing India's real-time situational awareness and its ability to formulate effective policy responses.

The announcement of the Taliban's, entirely male, interim administration in September 2021 further complicated India's position.²³ Several key portfolios were allocated to members of the Haqqani Network - the group held responsible for the 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul - which reinforced New Delhi's security apprehensions. The prominence of such figures within the new power structure deepened India's dilemma over re-engagement, as it underscored the continuing influence of elements historically hostile to Indian interests. Additionally, a new set of actors gained prominence in Afghanistan. Foremost, Pakistan, whose active support had enabled the Taliban's survival through nearly two decades of military onslaught - perceived the change in Kabul's power calculus as the realization of its long-standing quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan - so much so, that then Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan was the first world leader to wholeheartedly welcome the Taliban takeover and said that Afghanistan has broken the "shackles of slavery."²⁴ The withdrawal of US and NATO forces was, however, seen favourably by several regional powers, including China, Iran, and Russia, which interpreted the exit as a symbolic retreat of Western influence from their extended neighbourhood. China, whose Afghanistan policy remained closely aligned with that of Islamabad, welcomed the establishment of the interim government as a "necessary step" and "an end of anarchy."²⁵ Iran and the Central Asian Republics (barring Tajikistan) adopted a more balanced yet cautiously positive approach - engaging the Taliban pragmatically while expressing concern over cross-border militancy, refugee flows, and the protection of minority rights.

Moreover, the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 triggered an acute humanitarian and economic collapse. The United Nations estimated that over 18 million Afghans - nearly half the population - faced severe food insecurity, with children under five comprising 40 percent of the most vulnerable.²⁶ The suspension of international aid, enforcement of sanctions, and collapse of the banking system led to massive income losses and unemployment, deepening poverty across the country. Natural disasters and the lingering impact of COVID-19 further compounded the crisis, while the Taliban's attempts to control aid distribution undermined relief efforts. Economically, the freezing of \$7 billion in Afghan assets in the United States and the liquidity shortage crippled markets and private enterprise.²⁷ Although the UN and donors injected funds and proposed mechanisms such as the Humanitarian Exchange Facility, cash shortages persisted amid Taliban resistance. The security situation deteriorated as groups such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) regained footholds. The killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul confirmed

²³ "Hardliners Get Key Posts in New Taliban Government", *BBC News*, 8 September 2021,

²⁴ "Afghans have broken 'shackles of slavery': Pakistan PM Imran Khan", *The Hindu*, 16 August 2021.

²⁵ Krishnan, Ananth: "China welcomes Taliban govt. as 'end of anarchy'", *The Hindu*, 8 September 2021.

²⁶ "Half of Afghanistan's under-5s expected to suffer acute malnutrition", *United Nations News, Global Perspective on Human Stories*. 5 October 2021.

²⁷ Mohsin Saleha and Bloomberg: "US Freezes Afghan Central Bank's Assets of \$9.5bn", *Al Jazeera*, 18 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/8/18/us-freezes-afghan-central-banks-assets-of-9-5bn>



continuing militant presence.²⁸ ISKP intensified attacks on Shia Hazaras and expanded cross-border operations, while the dominance of the Haqqani Network in the Taliban's security apparatus and re-energized Pakistan-based groups heightened regional anxieties, particularly for India. Reports that weapons and military equipment left behind by US and NATO forces during their withdrawal were finding their way to Kashmir²⁹ through Pakistan-based terrorist networks further intensified India's urgency to engage with the Taliban regime in control. Over the subsequent three years, India adopted a policy of cautious, calibrated engagement, primarily channelled through humanitarian assistance.

4.1 India's humanitarian outreach to Taliban ruled Afghanistan

The 31 August 2021 meeting between Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, head of the Taliban's political office in Doha, and the Indian Ambassador in Qatar, Deepak Mittal - convened at the Taliban's request - marked the first publicly acknowledged official interaction between the two sides. The discussion centred on the safety and return of Indian nationals stranded in Afghanistan, the travel of Afghan nationals - particularly minorities - to India, and India's concerns about Afghanistan's territory being used for anti-India activities or terrorism. The Taliban representative assured that these concerns would be addressed positively.³⁰ In the initial months of the Taliban rule, India adopted a cautious "wait-and-watch" approach while continuing to support the Afghan people through humanitarian aid delivered via UN agencies and the Red Crescent rather than the Taliban authorities. In December 2021, India provided 1.6 tonnes of essential medicines and contributed to a broader supply of over 330 metric tonnes of medicines and vaccines, including 500,000 COVID-19 doses. It also committed 50,000 MT of wheat in coordination with the WFP - despite transit challenges—and supplied other essential items such as 40,000 litres of Malathion, hygiene kits, and winter clothing.³¹ Humanitarian outreach emerged as a critical pathway for India's early engagement with the Taliban, allowing New Delhi to maintain contact without conferring political legitimacy. On 2 June 2022, a team led by J.P. Singh, Joint Secretary of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran (PAI) Division of the Ministry of External Affairs visited Kabul "to oversee the delivery operations of our humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan."³² During this visit—the first by an official Indian delegation since the Taliban takeover—the team met senior Taliban officials and evaluated the security situation on the ground. This humanitarian-focused agenda thus provided India with a pragmatic, non-political channel to re-establish a presence in Afghanistan and manage key concerns while signalling continued support for the Afghan people.

Subsequently, India's 24 June 2022 decision to re-establish a diplomatic foothold in Kabul by deploying a technical team to its embassy, officially mandated to coordinate humanitarian assistance; came as a disappointment to many Afghans who had expected New Delhi to maintain its earlier stance of refraining from engagement with the Taliban.³³ As

²⁸ Haider, Syed-E: "Killing of the Al Qaeda Chief leaves endless Question", The Lowy Institute, 2 August 2022, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/killing-al-qaeda-chief-leaves-endless-questions>

²⁹ Kathju Junaid: "US Arms left in Afghanistan are turning up in a different conflict". *NBC News*, 30 January 2023 at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/us-weapons-afghanistan-taliban-kashmir-rca67134>

³⁰ "Meeting in Doha", Press Release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 31 August 2021, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34208/Meeting_in_Doha

³¹ "India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan", Press Release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2 June, 2022, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35381/Indias+humanitarian+assistance+to+Afghanistan#:~:text=June%2002%2C%202022,to%20Afghan%20refugees%20in%20Iran.>

³² *Ibid*

³³ Viswapramod, C.: "India's Diplomatic Comeback in Afghanistan; a Strategic Overview", Indian Strategic Studies Forum, July 2022, at <https://issf.org.in/2022/07/indias-diplomatic-comeback-in-afghanistan-a-strategic-overview/>



regional countries steadily increased their engagement with the Taliban regime; reopening embassies, hosting Taliban delegations, and expanding security, political, and economic exchanges - New Delhi likely recognised that its “wait-and-watch” approach was becoming increasingly untenable. Pakistan and China had already moved quickly to consolidate influence, while Iran, Russia, Qatar, and the Central Asian states were establishing structured channels of communication, raising the risk that India could be sidelined in a theatre central to its long-term strategic interests. At the same time, rising concerns over cross-border terrorism, reports of US-NATO weapons reaching Jammu & Kashmir through Pakistan-based networks, and the resurgence of anti-India militant groups underscored the need for direct communication with the authorities in Kabul. India’s substantial humanitarian commitments - ranging from major wheat consignments to medicines, vaccines, and winter relief - also required on-ground coordination to ensure effective delivery and to preserve New Delhi’s hard-earned goodwill among Afghans. Taken together, these factors made prolonged disengagement strategically costly and diplomatically imprudent, prompting a gradual shift toward a calibrated approach best described as “engage, but do not endorse.” This decision also signalled New Delhi’s willingness to enter into a more transactional, interest-driven relationship with the Taliban, one rooted in pragmatism rather than political endorsement. Such calibrated engagement, undertaken without extending formal recognition, reflects a bold yet cautious strategy that allows India to safeguard its core security and humanitarian interests while retaining the flexibility to recalibrate or even reverse its approach should developments in Afghanistan evolve in ways that do not align with New Delhi’s expectations or strategic comfort.

Post-2022, India’s humanitarian outreach expanded significantly both in scale and scope. To avert Afghanistan’s deepening humanitarian crisis, New Delhi sent 40,000 MT of wheat overland via Pakistan in February 2022 and an additional 20,000 MT through Iran’s Chabahar port in March 2023³⁴, both distributed through the WFP.³⁵ Further assistance included 45 tonnes of medical supplies in October 2022, comprising life-saving drugs, anti-TB medicines, 500,000 COVID-19 vaccines, winter clothing³⁶, and large consignments of disaster-relief material. India’s Union Budget for 2023–24 and 2024–25 earmarked a dedicated US\$25 million development assistance package for Afghanistan, a commitment welcomed by the Taliban.³⁷ In parallel, the Taliban requested India’s support to complete nearly 20 unfinished infrastructure projects across the country, recognising that India’s developmental footprint could not be easily replaced.³⁸ New Delhi, however, remained cautious on visa-related decisions due to security considerations.³⁹

Historically rooted people-to-people ties also shaped India’s humanitarian engagement. After the Indian technical team’s visit to Kabul in 2022, reports indicated Taliban interest in

³⁴ “In a first since Taliban takeover, India to deliver aid to Afghanistan via Chabahar port”, *Wion*, 7 March 2023 at <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/in-a-first-since-taliban-takeover-india-to-deliver-aid-to-afghanistan-via-chabahar-port-569704>

³⁵ “India Makes New Commitment to Supply 20,000 MT of Wheat to Afghanistan”, *The Wire*, 7 March 2023, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-afghanistan-wheat-supply-new-commitment>

³⁶ “India Delivers fresh Batch of medical supplies to Afghanistan”, *Mint.com*, 11 October 2022, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-delivers-fresh-batch-of-medical-supplies-to-afghanistan-11665476982780.html>

³⁷ “Afghan Taliban Government welcomes budget”, *The Economic Times*, 3 February 2023, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/afghan-taliban-government-welcomes-budget/articleshow/97561107.cms>

³⁸ “India May Restart 20 Stalled Projects In Afghanistan, Says Taliban: Report”, *NDTV*, 1 December 2022, at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-may-restart-20-projects-in-afghanistan-taliban-3567520>

³⁹ Agrawal Soniya: “Can’t return to Taliban, can’t stay in uncertainty in India—Afghan students’ woes only rise”, *The Print*, 18 August 2022, at <https://theprint.in/feature/cant-return-to-taliban-cant-stay-in-uncertainty-in-india-afghan-students-woes-only-rise/1087581/>



securing training opportunities for their security personnel in India.⁴⁰ While India refrained from any military-related cooperation, it broadened academic and technical avenues by offering 1,000 ICCR scholarships annually for online undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for Afghan citizens beginning in 2023-24.⁴¹ Under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, Afghan officials participated in virtual capacity-building courses - including a 2023 programme at IIM Kozhikode on Indian legislation and the business climate.⁴² These initiatives reflect both India's enduring commitment to Afghan human capital and the Taliban's recognition that engagement with New Delhi offers tangible developmental benefits. For a diplomatically isolated regime facing severe financial constraints, India's developmental experience, humanitarian capability, and geopolitical relevance presented a strategically valuable partnership.

India's humanitarian outreach to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has been complemented by a cautious diplomatic re-engagement. A notable early step occurred in November 2024, when J. P. Singh reportedly met Mohammad Yaqoob, the Taliban's acting Defence Minister and son of the movement's founder, Mullah Omar.⁴³ Diplomatic contacts intensified in 2025. In January, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai⁴⁴ to discuss bilateral relations and regional developments - an interaction that came just two weeks after Pakistan conducted airstrikes in Afghanistan targeting Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan hideouts. This was followed by a major breakthrough on 15 May 2025, when External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar held a telephone conversation with Muttaqi, marking the first ministerial-level contact since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.⁴⁵ The call occurred shortly after India and Pakistan agreed to suspend their strikes in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, launched following the Pahalgam terror attack of 22 April - which the Taliban condemned. The most consequential development, however, was Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit to India from 9 to 15 October 2025.⁴⁶ The visit occurred against the backdrop of sharply escalating Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions, triggered by Pakistan's 9 October airstrikes on alleged militant sanctuaries inside Afghan territory - the most serious flare-up in months. This regional volatility amplified the strategic significance of the Afghan Foreign Minister's trip to New Delhi. His arrival at the head of a high-level delegation from Kabul's Ministry of Foreign Affairs marked a pivotal moment in the quiet but steady normalisation of India-Taliban ties.

4.2 Consolidating the Reset: New Trajectories in India-Taliban Engagement post Muttaqi's Visit to India

To fully grasp the significance of Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's 2025 visit to New Delhi, one must situate it within the fraught, episodic history of India-Taliban relations.

⁴⁰ "Taliban want army training in India", *The Indian Express*, 11 June 2022, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/Jun/11/taliban-want-army-training-in-india-2464223.html>

⁴¹ "Scholarships for Afghan Nationals 2023-2024", Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Govt. of India, at <https://iccr.gov.in/scholarships-afghan-nationals-online-courses-ay-2023-24>.

⁴² Dharma Niharika: "India is teaching the Taliban how to run an economy", *Quartz*, 15 March 2023, at <https://qz.com/india-is-teaching-the-taliban-how-to-run-an-economy-1850227155>

⁴³ Laskar Rezaul H.: "In a First, India's Point Person for Afghanistan Meets Taliban Defence Minister", *Hindustan Times*, 6 November 2024, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-a-first-india-s-point-person-for-afghanistan-meets-taliban-defence-minister-101730912792150.html>

⁴⁴ Ghosh, Anwasha: "India's Foreign Secretary Meets the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan to Discuss Bilateral Relations", ICWA Viewpoint, 16 January 2025 at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=12253&lid=7474

⁴⁵ "In a first, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar talks to Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi", *The Hindu*, 16 May 2025, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/in-a-first-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar-talks-to-talibans-acting-foreign-minister-muttaqi/article69580713.ece>

⁴⁶ Ghosh, Anwasha: "Recalibrating Ties: India and the Taliban after the Taliban Acting FM's Visit.", ICWA Issue Brief, 24 October 2025, at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=13757&lid=8365



Prior to this milestone, the sole ministerial-level engagement dated back to the IC 814 hijacking crisis of December 1999, when Indian officials negotiated under duress with Taliban authorities in Kandahar. Among those interlocutors was a then-youthful Muttaqi, serving as Director General of Administrative Affairs - a striking personal continuity now re-emerging over two decades later amid the Taliban's consolidated rule and India's pragmatic policy pivot. This convergence underscored the seismic shifts in the regional geopolitical order. Muttaqi's itinerary extended symbolically to Darul Uloom Deoband in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, the ideological cradle of the Taliban's Deobandi roots. There, he engaged scholars and students in a Hadith study session under rector Maulana Mufti Abul Qasim Nomani, earning an honorary "Qasmi" title⁴⁷—signifying academic affiliation with the seminary—and a *sanad* (certificate) authorizing him to teach Hadith. In the presence of luminaries like Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind president, Muttaqi hailed Deoband as a "major centre for the Islamic world," invoked enduring Afghan-Deobandi ties, and pledged educational visas for Afghan spiritual students—gestures laced with cultural resonance and aimed at bolstering bilateral goodwill amid shared regional frictions.⁴⁸

The centrepiece of the October 2025 visit, however, was the meeting between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi on 10 October, marking the first formal, in-person ministerial engagement between India and the Taliban since August 2021.⁴⁹ Discussions covered a broad spectrum of issues: India's ongoing development cooperation, the future of trade and transit linkages, public health partnerships, and concerns relating to the safety and welfare of Afghan minorities residing in India.⁵⁰ Regional stability and counterterrorism, long-standing pillars of India's Afghan policy; featured prominently, especially in light of heightened insecurity along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier and the resurgence of transnational militant networks.

India used the opportunity to unveil several concrete measures aimed at strengthening people-centric cooperation.⁵¹ These included six new development projects focused on healthcare delivery, public infrastructure, and institutional capacity-building. The symbolic handover of 20 ambulances by the Indian Foreign Minister underscored India's intent to maintain a humanitarian footprint irrespective of political complexities. New Delhi also expanded educational assistance by offering scholarships under the e-ICCR scheme and considering additional opportunities for Afghan students, while extending support for reconstructing residential infrastructure in earthquake-affected provinces. Perhaps the most consequential outcome was India's decision to upgrade its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy - an institutional shift that marked a notable departure from its earlier strategy of political distancing. India reiterated its commitment to the welfare of the Afghan people and to broader regional security, while Muttaqi sought to reassure New Delhi by affirming that Afghan territory would not be used to threaten or undermine the security of any state, an assurance aimed at addressing India's persistent counterterrorism concerns. Overall, the visit reflected a mutual recognition that sustained dialogue, even if calibrated and cautious, is

⁴⁷ "Afghan foreign minister visits Darul Uloom, gets right to use title 'Qasmi'", *The New Indian Express*, 11 October 2025, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Oct/11/afghan-foreign-minister-visits-darul-uloom-gets-right-to-use-title-qasmi>.

⁴⁸ "Taliban Foreign Minister Visits UP's Deoband, Hopes For "Stronger" Ties with India", *NDTV*, 11 October 2025, at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/taliban-foreign-minister-visits-ups-deoband-hopes-for-stronger-ties-with-india-9436860>.

⁴⁹ "India - Afghanistan Joint Statement", MEA Press Briefing, 10 October 2025, at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40193/India__Afghanistan_Joint_Statement_October_10_2025.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*



essential for protecting strategic equities on both sides. While India refrained from extending formal political legitimacy to the Taliban, its willingness to engage at the ministerial level signalled an incremental but significant shift from isolation to pragmatic, interest-driven diplomacy.

5. Contours of the Road Ahead: Opportunities and Limits in India -Taliban Relations

Even as India cautiously expands its engagement with the Taliban, the road ahead is shaped by a mix of emerging opportunities and persistent structural constraints. In the months to come, New Delhi may find it necessary to deepen its on-ground presence in Afghanistan if it wishes to maintain and broaden its outreach to the Afghan population. Yet such an endeavour will require navigating a political environment marked by the Taliban's intricate and often opaque internal dynamics, shifting regional alignments, and the severe humanitarian and economic crises that continue to afflict the country.

A central challenge stems from the Taliban's internal heterogeneity. The movement is far from a monolithic entity; it comprises networks with varying ideological orientations, tribal affiliations, and external linkages. Certain factions—retain close ties with Pakistan's security establishment, while others may espouse greater autonomy in foreign policy. For India, this internal fragmentation complicates the task of identifying reliable interlocutors and ensuring continuity in commitments. Moreover, the current strains in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations should not be interpreted by New Delhi as a durable geopolitical gain. The Taliban have demonstrated a capacity to recalibrate their external alignments swiftly, and recent years have shown their willingness to court both India and Pakistan when it suits their strategic calculus. Any attempt by India to expand its footprint must therefore account for the fluidity of these regional dynamics.

A further constraint arises from the Taliban's repressive policies toward women and minorities; an issue that carries deep political and moral implications for India. With nearly half of Afghanistan's population excluded from public life, education, and employment, India's engagement with the Taliban will inevitably be viewed with anger and distrust by many Afghan women. While this sentiment may not directly alter India's realpolitik considerations, it does pose challenges for a country that has traditionally sought to cultivate goodwill among ordinary Afghans through development partnerships, cultural ties, and soft-power diplomacy. Sustaining that reservoir of trust will require India to articulate, at minimum, a principled concern for the rights and welfare of Afghan women and marginalized communities, even as it continues to engage the current authorities.

Finally, India must guard against limiting its outreach solely to the Taliban leadership. New Delhi has historically enjoyed strong ties with political groups, civil society actors, and minority communities that today find themselves marginalized or exiled. Afghanistan's political landscape has repeatedly undergone abrupt transformations, and the volatility of its internal dynamics suggests that today's rulers may not remain uncontested tomorrow. Maintaining diversified channels of communication - with former partners, local leaders, and emerging constituencies - will therefore be essential to ensuring that India's long-term equities are not tied exclusively to a regime whose domestic legitimacy and external relations remain uncertain.

Equally important, India must remain cautious that its re-engagement; whether, humanitarian, diplomatic, or developmental, does not inadvertently confer political legitimacy on the Taliban's forceful capture of power in August 2021. While calibrated contact may be necessary for safeguarding India's interests, any perception that New Delhi has endorsed the Taliban's authoritarian consolidation could undermine its credibility among Afghan communities and weaken its normative standing internationally. Balancing pragmatic



engagement with a clear distinction between dialogue and recognition will thus remain a critical component of India's Afghanistan policy. Taken together, these factors illustrate that while opportunities exist for India to protect and advance its interests in Afghanistan, they coexist with serious structural constraints. The challenge for New Delhi will be to align pragmatic engagement with principled diplomacy, while retaining the strategic flexibility required to navigate Afghanistan's continually shifting political terrain.

6. Conclusion

In his 2022 writing, Joseph Nye noted that a nation's soft power rests on three main pillars: its culture (where it is attractive to others), its political values (such as democracy and human rights, when it lives up to them), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and attentive to others' concerns).⁵² Nye's triad provides a valuable lens for understanding India's carefully calibrated re-engagement with Afghanistan after the Taliban's 2021 return to power and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate - an entity India continues to withhold diplomatic recognition from.

India's post-2021 approach has been quintessentially shaped by the guiding doctrines of "strategic autonomy," an "India First" outlook, and pragmatic, issue-based alignments that prioritise national interest over ideological litmus tests. Rather than remaining in self-imposed isolation after evacuating its embassy in Kabul, New Delhi adopted a pragmatic, low-political-risk pathway back into Afghanistan centred primarily on humanitarian assistance. By channeling large-scale deliveries of wheat, medicines, COVID-19 vaccines, and winter supplies through the United Nations, the World Food Programme, and negotiated land corridors via Pakistan and Iran, India created a neutral, people-centric channel of engagement. This framing - explicitly focused on the welfare of ordinary Afghans rather than any endorsement of the Taliban regime - has enabled India to restore a quiet but effective on-the-ground presence, protect its multi-billion-dollar legacy investments, and keep communication lines open with the *de facto* authorities, all while preserving its principled non-recognition of the Taliban regime. In Nye's terms, this blend of culturally resonant goodwill, values-based humanitarianism, and policy pragmatism has allowed India to rebuild a degree of soft power in Afghanistan despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations.

To conclude, India's "humanitarian-plus" strategy has skilfully served dual objectives: it has cemented New Delhi's image as a compassionate, reliable development partner deeply committed to the Afghan people - thereby strengthening its soft-power credentials - while quietly reopening practical working-level channels with the Taliban authorities. This carefully crafted approach fully embodies Joseph Nye's criterion of policy legitimacy: India's assistance has been widely seen as genuinely responsive to acute Afghan suffering and mindful of broader regional stability, rather than as a partisan political gesture. By neither granting formal recognition to the Islamic Emirate nor retreating into total disengagement, New Delhi has pioneered a pragmatic, transactional middle path. It illustrates how soft-power instruments - rooted in goodwill and people-centric initiatives - are increasingly merging with realpolitik diplomacy to define India's post-2021 Afghanistan policy: principled yet flexible, values-driven yet interest-oriented.

⁵² Nye Joseph S. Jr.: "Whatever Happened to Soft Power?", 11 January 2022, at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/whatever-happened-to-soft-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2022-01>



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