

# THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN: NAVIGATING DIPLOMACY WITH CHINA AND INDIA

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## Abstract

*This research paper explores the international relations of Taliban-led Afghanistan, with a specific focus on its diplomatic engagement with China and India. The Taliban, facing the dual challenges of seeking international legitimacy and navigating complex regional dynamics, has adopted a strategic approach to balance its ties with these two influential powers. China's economic and political engagement with Afghanistan is underpinned by its interest in integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), securing its western borders, and accessing the country's abundant natural resources. Conversely, India's historical developmental contributions and regional strategic goals shape its cautious yet critical engagement with the Taliban-led government. The paper examines the political, economic, and security interests of China and India in Afghanistan, highlighting the tensions and overlapping priorities that influence their interactions. It further analyzes how Afghanistan attempts to leverage its relations with both nations to maximize economic benefits while maintaining diplomatic flexibility. The study also delves into the broader implications of these relations, emphasizing their impact on regional stability, including counterterrorism efforts, economic connectivity, and the balance of power in South and Central Asia. Ultimately, this paper underscores Afghanistan's pivotal role in shaping the geopolitics of the region and the challenges inherent in balancing the competing interests of China and India in its foreign policy strategy.*

**Keywords:** Taliban, Afghanistan, China-India rivalry, BRI, Regional stability, Geopolitics.

## INTRODUCTION

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has reshaped the country's foreign policy landscape, requiring a strategic approach to navigate complex regional and global dynamics. The Taliban-led government in Afghanistan faces a challenging task in crafting its foreign policy amidst regional and global scrutiny. Unlike its previous tenure in the 1990s, the Taliban now seeks international legitimacy and recognition, requiring a more nuanced diplomatic strategy (Zelin, 2022).

Central to this challenge are Afghanistan's relations with China and India, two major regional powers with distinct interests and priorities. Balancing relations with two regional powers—China and India—plays a pivotal role in this approach. Both China and India prioritize stability in Afghanistan but for different reasons. While China's focus is on safeguarding its western borders and investments (Felbab-Brown, 2020), India is primarily concerned with preventing the spread of extremism into its territory (Gupta, 2012).

China and India share long-standing historical ties with Afghanistan. The historical ties between India and Afghanistan stretch back several millennia with strong people-to-people contact, trade and cultural exchanges forming the bedrock of these ties (Gupta, 2012). Afghanistan, strategically located, has been central to India's regional policy. Since 1947, relations have been friendly, bolstered by the 1950 Friendship Treaty (Reeta, 2017).

In 1996, as the Taliban advanced on Kabul, India shut down its embassy and, alongside Iran and Russia, extended support to the Northern Alliance, a resistance group opposing the Taliban (Sood, 2021). During the Taliban regime, rising militancy in Kashmir prompted India to support the US-led war on terror through intelligence. Post-Taliban, India engaged in Afghanistan's reconstruction, fostering development, and over 100 Indian companies invested in Afghanistan's economy since 2001 (Nath, 2019). Moreover,

the Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed in 2011, marked a significant milestone in strengthening the collaboration between the two nations (Reeta, 2017).

When the Taliban regained power in mid-August 2021, India emerged as one of the most affected countries. Its strategy of backing Afghanistan's elected government proved short-sighted, reducing New Delhi to a marginal role in the region (Boni, 2021).

On the other hand, the Sino-Afghan relationship traces back to the 7th century when Chinese monks traversed Afghanistan along the Silk Road, facilitating trade between Asia and Europe (R. M. Khan, 2015). Afghanistan and China officially established diplomatic relations on August 30, 1922, with Afghanistan appointing its first envoy to China. A friendship treaty was signed in 1944, and in 1955, both countries formalized modern diplomatic ties by appointing ambassadors to each other's capitals with Afghanistan becoming one of the first countries to recognize the new Communist-led government in Beijing (Aria et al., 2023; Zhang, 2022).

China maintained ties with the first Taliban regime (1996–2001) mainly to obtain guarantees against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which aimed to create an independent Uyghur state in western China (Zhou et al., 2022). Post-9/11, China took a low-profile stance on Afghanistan, considering it a less significant neighbor. As the U.S. and Europe became heavily involved in the "War on Terror," China quietly supported the U.S. while reportedly maintaining covert links with the Taliban via Pakistan to safeguard its economic and Xinjiang stability (Ghosh, 2022).

Since August 2021, China has acknowledged Taliban rule and taken on the role of a supporter in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Advocating moderation, inclusivity, and anti-terrorism, China prioritizes its Xinjiang security interests while respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty, avoiding interference, and rejecting claims of seeking to replace U.S. influence in the region (Zhang, 2022).

The Taliban's diplomatic strategy of balancing relations with China and India offers opportunities to advance Afghanistan's economic recovery and political legitimacy while navigating the complexities of regional geopolitics. China's interest in Afghanistan is driven by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), resource exploitation, and security concerns tied to its western borders. Conversely, India seeks to protect its strategic interests through developmental projects, countering extremism, and maintaining regional stability (Kotokey, 2024).

This paper examines the evolving diplomatic relationships of Taliban-led Afghanistan with China and India, analyzing their respective economic, political, and strategic interests. It also explores the implications of this balancing strategy for Afghanistan and regional stability.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA AND CHINA'S INTERESTS

China has emerged as a critical partner for Afghanistan due to its economic strength, political influence, and geographic proximity. The Taliban sees China as a potential ally for several reasons. China is viewed as a key partner for rebuilding Afghanistan and accessing global markets by Taliban. While China supports the Taliban at the UN and emphasizes sovereignty, it avoids formal recognition and intervention, maintaining goodwill and urging governance reforms (Zhou et al., 2022).

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi praised the Taliban for their efforts in stabilizing Afghanistan and delivering public services, highlighting some positive progress. He reaffirmed China's backing for international recognition of the Taliban government. In April 2022, the reopening of the Afghan Embassy in Beijing further strengthened diplomatic relations between the two nations (Aliyev, 2022).

On September 13, 2023, the Taliban received China's new ambassador to Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi emphasized the importance of Zhao Sheng's appointment, calling it a "significant step with an important message" (Taliban Gives a Warm Welcome to China's New Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2023). Likewise, on December 1, 2023, the Taliban government announced China's formal acceptance of its ambassador, Asadullah Bilal Karimi, highlighting it as a significant milestone in their deepening bilateral relations. Hong Lie, China's Foreign Ministry protocol director, underscored Karimi's appointment as a crucial move to enhance Beijing-Kabul ties (Gul, 2023).

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, China was the first country to pledge \$31 million in emergency aid. The Taliban, facing a severe humanitarian crisis and economic collapse, welcomed China's prompt delivery of food and medical supplies, fostering the foundation for closer political and economic ties (Ghosh, 2022).

Amid sanctions and financial challenges, the Taliban has collaborated with China and Pakistan to expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, with substantial infrastructure investment expected (Ramachandran & Kumar, 2024). China advocates for Afghanistan's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, promoting its integration into regional economic cooperation and

connectivity. The goal is to transition Afghanistan from being "land-locked" to becoming a "land-linked" nation ("China's Position on the Afghan Issue," 2023).

Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) attracts the Taliban, particularly after Afghanistan's economic downturn and humanitarian crisis post-U.S. withdrawal. Afghanistan's strategic position is vital for BRI projects. While China's investment model may create long-term debt, the Taliban prioritize immediate funding and improving their image over sustainable economic development (Raz, 2023).

China prioritizes security in its ties with the Taliban, focusing on Xinjiang's stability. At the 2021 Tianjin meeting, China obtained Taliban assurances against anti-China activities in Afghanistan, echoing earlier promises from the 1990s. Security remains the cornerstone of their bilateral discussions post-Taliban takeover (Zhou et al., 2022). Peace in Afghanistan is crucial for regional security and China's Belt and Road Initiative. China sees the U.S. withdrawal without peace as a civil war risk, endangering its investments. Threats from groups like ISKP and ETIM drive China's efforts to ensure Afghan stability and safeguard its interests (H. U. Khan et al., 2023).

China's interests in Afghanistan encompass eliminating Western military presence, particularly that of the U.S.; countering extremism and terrorism, especially groups supporting Uyghurs in Xinjiang; bolstering Pakistan while insulating it from Afghan instability; limiting Russian and Indian influence in Central Asia; accessing Afghanistan's natural resources; and strengthening the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) role in the region (Ghosh, 2022).

Likewise, China's economic interests in Afghanistan focus on significant investments in the Mes Aynak copper mine and oil extraction projects in Faryab and Sar-e-Pol provinces. Recently, several Chinese mining firms have entered Kabul, pursuing contracts for additional mining ventures as conditions change (Ghosh, 2022). China is keenly interested in Afghanistan's economic prospects, viewing it as a repository of essential minerals such as copper, lithium, and rare earth elements vital for its industries. Chinese firms have shown strong enthusiasm for Afghanistan's mining sector and are eager to secure access to these resources (Raz, 2023).

## RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIA AND INDIA'S INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

India's pragmatic foreign policy fosters ties with Taliban-led Afghanistan through diplomacy and aid, deterring terrorism exports. The Taliban, despite domestic rigidity, seek India's help for development and avoid criticizing its Kashmir policy. Diplomatic relations appeal to the Taliban due to India's geopolitical influence and interest in Central Asian market access via Afghanistan (Kaura, 2023).

India has not formally recognized the Taliban regime but acknowledges the political reality in Afghanistan. While emphasizing the importance of reforms in gender and ethnic inclusivity, India's focus remains on regional stability. These normative concerns are unlikely to affect the substance of India-Taliban relations as long as they don't impact stability (Kaura, 2023). India fears that diplomatic disengagement will push Afghanistan toward regional powers like Pakistan, Iran, and China. To prevent losing strategic influence, India is engaging with the new Taliban, moving beyond past experiences with the group during its 1996-2001 rule to secure its position in Afghanistan (Kotokey, 2024).

In February 2024, India's Ministry of External Affairs reaffirmed its commitment to the Afghan people and confirmed that Indian diplomats have been engaging with the Taliban through "various formats". India maintains cautious engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan, focusing on humanitarian aid. Indian diplomats participate in regional meetings, emphasizing long-standing ties with Afghans. India's technical team in Kabul symbolizes its measured approach, balancing regional cooperation and limited direct involvement (Bhattacharjee, 2024).

In January 2024, the Taliban stated that Afghanistan no longer poses a threat to any nation. Following a meeting between Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and the Taliban's 'Foreign Minister', the Taliban expressed gratitude for India's humanitarian aid and mentioned that the Iranian port of Chabahar was discussed during the talks (Bhattacharjee, 2025).

India is one of the largest economic contributors to Afghanistan, having committed \$1.3 billion in aid, including \$750 million in recent years and a further \$450 million pledge. India built the 215km Zeranji-Delaram highway linking Afghanistan's Ring Road to the Iranian Chabahar port, facilitating trade. India also supports the TAPI gas pipeline project (Qadri & Nabi, 2019).

For India to engage with the Taliban on regional security and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for non-state actors, it is crucial for the Taliban to become self-sufficient and sovereign with an independent foreign policy. At this transitional stage, India's role is limited to assisting the Taliban in achieving political and economic self-sufficiency through increased bilateral engagement (Kotokey, 2024).

Afghanistan's geo-strategic importance makes it a key neighbor for India. India seeks a self-sufficient, independent Afghan government to avoid chaos, protect human rights, and strengthen counterterrorism efforts. Concerns over the Taliban's past ties to radical groups and their impact on India's security have heightened since the Taliban regained power in 2021 (Kotokey, 2024).

According to Kotokey (2024), India's growing interest in Afghanistan and the surrounding region has two key aspects. The primary concern is Afghanistan's security and stability, which directly affects India's domestic security, particularly in relation to Pakistan and its Central Asian policy. India faces terrorism sponsored by Pakistan, which seeks influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia through radical groups.

India's Afghanistan policy is closely tied to its Pakistan strategy, aiming to limit Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. Historically, India has sought to counter Pakistan's dominance, as strong India-Afghanistan ties are viewed by Pakistan as a threat to its national security, given their shared borders with Pakistan (Pant, 2010). Furthermore, Afghanistan serves as India's gateway to Central Asia, a region vital for energy security and influence. With its rich oil and gas reserves, Central Asia attracts global powers like the U.S., Russia, and China. Geopolitical rivalries and Afghanistan's instability further complicate regional dynamics (Rashid, 2001).

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, an Afghanistan expert, observed that engaging with the Taliban marks a pivotal step. At the heart of India's policy is the goal of regaining its lost influence and reestablishing its connections in Kabul. Additionally, India seeks to reclaim its influence in a region where China has significantly increased its presence since August 2021 (M. Krishnan, 2025). Likewise, Afghanistan's closeness to Pakistan and Central Asia makes it vital to China's strategic interests. Strengthened India-Afghanistan ties could disrupt China's regional projects, including infrastructure investments and economic links through Pakistan. Such a shift could favor India, challenging China's strategic ambitions and altering the balance of influence in Central and South Asia (A. Mishra, 2025).

India's proactive Afghanistan policy reflects its aspiration for a larger regional role aligned with its growing economic and military stature. By providing substantial aid and ensuring stability, India aims to showcase itself as a responsible power, with its great power ambitions measured by its ability to manage regional instability effectively (Pant, 2010). Moreover, India's interests in Afghanistan are also driven by its desire to access natural resources and tap into the growing market in Central Asia. Additionally, India has specific commercial interests in Afghanistan's market and aims to enhance bilateral trade between the two countries (M. K. Mishra, 2012).

## BALANCING CHINA AND INDIA

The Taliban-led government in Afghanistan has sought to maintain a neutral stance between China and India to maximize its diplomatic flexibility and economic opportunities. This approach enables Afghanistan to avoid overdependence on either power while extracting strategic and economic benefits from both.

The Taliban has positioned itself as a partner for China. The Taliban has referred to Beijing as a "trustworthy friend" and pledged that they will not allow "anyone to use" Afghanistan's territory against China (A. Krishnan, 2021). The Taliban values China's support for its political, economic, and strategic advantages, including potential Chinese investments and reliance on China's veto power at the UN Security Council to prevent sanctions or unfavorable resolutions (Seerat, 2024).

Despite historical tensions, the Taliban acknowledges India's significant contributions to Afghanistan's development through infrastructure projects, including schools, dams, roads, and healthcare facilities. These initiatives have fostered goodwill and demonstrated India's long-term commitment to rebuilding and stabilizing Afghanistan (Kaura Vinay, 2023). Moreover, Afghanistan has guaranteed that its soil will not be used for anti-India activities and has expressed a strong desire to deepen its humanitarian and development collaboration with New Delhi (Roy Chaudhury, 2024).

Balancing relations with China and India offers Afghanistan a strategic opportunity to foster economic growth, enhance stability, and strengthen its regional role. By engaging with China, Afghanistan can benefit from infrastructure development through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and secure investments in its rich natural resources, which are crucial for economic recovery. Simultaneously, maintaining ties with India ensures continued developmental aid, educational programs, and healthcare initiatives that directly improve the lives of Afghan citizens.

This balanced approach allows Afghanistan to leverage the strengths of both powers while avoiding overdependence on either. For the region, such a strategy reduces the risk of Afghanistan becoming a proxy battleground for Sino-Indian rivalry, instead positioning it as a bridge for regional trade and connectivity. This fosters economic integration, counters terrorism, and contributes to broader stability in South and Central Asia.

## CONCLUSION

The Taliban-led government's neutral stance between China and India demonstrates a pragmatic approach to Afghanistan's foreign policy, addressing its economic, political, and security needs. By engaging China, Afghanistan secures investments in its infrastructure and resource sectors, including critical projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while ensuring support at international forums. Similarly, maintaining ties with India enables Afghanistan to benefit from developmental aid, educational programs, and infrastructure projects, such as the Zeran-j-Delaram highway, which have fostered goodwill and directly improved Afghan livelihoods.

This balanced diplomacy allows Afghanistan to leverage the distinct strengths of both nations, avoiding overdependence on either and maximizing economic and strategic opportunities. For the broader region, such an approach minimizes the risk of Afghanistan becoming a proxy battleground for Sino-Indian rivalry. Instead, it positions Afghanistan as a bridge for regional trade and connectivity, fostering economic integration and contributing to stability in South and Central Asia.

Moreover, China's role extends beyond economic engagement to ensuring security along its western borders. By obtaining the Taliban's commitment to prevent anti-China activities, Beijing has reinforced its priorities of stability and counterterrorism. India, on the other hand, has adopted a cautious yet proactive approach, providing humanitarian aid and emphasizing developmental cooperation while navigating its concerns over regional security and Pakistan's influence.

The sustainability of this strategy hinges on the Taliban's ability to deliver good governance, maintain internal security, and uphold commitments to both nations. Afghanistan's success in balancing these relationships will not only shape its economic recovery and political legitimacy but also influence regional dynamics. With effective management, Afghanistan has the potential to emerge as a stabilizing force, fostering cooperation and reshaping geopolitics in South and Central Asia.

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