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Abstract

Afghanistan remained at the centre of India's foreign policy owing to its unique geopolitical location. The Afghan jihad of the 1980s, leading to the Taliban's takeover, impacted Afghanistan and India. The former has not recognised the Taliban but instead supported the Northern Alliance against them, which made Indo-Taliban relations shaky. With the collapse of the Taliban in the wake of 9/11, India, the regional ally of the USA, has engaged politically and economically in Afghanistan. The former fully sidelined the Taliban and supported the then-republican government. However, with the re-emergence of Taliban 2.0, India's Afghan politics have changed. Indian officials visited Afghanistan and met the Taliban to address their core concerns and strategic interests. The Taliban called this visit a new chapter in their relations with India. Unlike their previous rule, no country, including India, recognises them. What are the strategic implications of Taliban 2.0 on India? To what extent are India and the Taliban diplomatically engaged? How does the Indian soft power policy help its image-building in Afghanistan? How does Pakistan factor into Taliban-India relations? Moreover, the way forward for future India-Taliban relations are the questions this study tends to answer, underpinned by primary (official sources) and secondary sources. The data is collected from both archival and online resources.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, Taliban, South Asia Security, Terrorism

1. Introduction

Following the control of power by the Afghan *Mujahideen* in 1992, they failed to reach a consensus on a power-sharing agreement that led to civil war in the country and different influence zones, each governed by notorious warlords. It was the darkest period of Afghanistan's history when the people of Afghanistan were used to the lack of a strong central government, corruption, and regulations. As a result, the Taliban emerged to overcome such conditions under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omer, who condemned and waged war against the *Mujahideen* for their perversions and took control of Kabul in 1996 (Mohammad & Conway, 2003). The takeover led to the closure of the Indian embassy in Kabul. The former believed the Taliban seriously threatened its interests and national security, and thus did not recognize the Taliban rule (Ashraf, 2007). It was the first time in history that Afghanistan-India ties became shaky. New Delhi started supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban; therefore, the latter did not try to convince India to resume its diplomatic missions (Baloch & Niazi, 2008). For India, the Taliban was a serious threat due to the former's ties with the insurgent groups in

Kashmir, which challenged New Delhi's security. What was more suspicious for India was the intention of Pakistan to use the Afghan land for militancy in Kashmir because the Taliban-Pakistan had very close ties (Kumar, 2008). However, the Taliban rule did not last long because of the incident of 9/11, which resulted in the invasion of Afghanistan by the US, leading to the collapse of the Taliban's rule (Shepherd, 2006). The collapse opened a new window in the Kabul-New Delhi ties. The former re-established its relations with the then-Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and invested \$3 billion in institution-building and reconstruction of Afghanistan in the last two decades (Aryal & Bharti, 2021).

India has always been cautious regarding peace and stability in Afghanistan. Therefore, the former has always preferred an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led reconciliation. India has never preferred the Taliban to rule Afghanistan or impose their monopoly. Hence, India has taken a rigorous stance toward the Taliban (Hooda, 2019). However, once New Delhi realised that the Taliban were the upcoming political reality of Afghanistan, it started to engage with them (Chaudhuri & Shende, 2020). In September 2020, at an event held in Doha, Qatar, India expressed its willingness to engage with the Taliban to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan (Pandey & Sareen, 2020). However, with the takeover of Taliban 2.0 in August 2021, India's main concern is about its national security, specifically the security of its Kashmir region. Multiple groups are fighting against India, like *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Muhammad* (JeM). The Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K) threat is the most notorious. The latter announced its extension of Khurasan in 2015, which had Kashmir as part of its flag. There have been reports that IS-K has also unveiled the '*Walaya-Al-Hind*' branch in Indian Kashmir (Mir, 2019). That is why it endeavoured to convince the US to undertake a responsible withdrawal, albeit the US had a hasty withdrawal (Singh, 2022).

In the Taliban administration, the Haqqani Network is considered one of the strong wings of the Taliban and is assumed to be antagonistic toward Indian interests (Pandey & Sareen, 2020). Though Sirajuddin Haqqani, the current Interior Minister of Afghanistan, repeatedly called the Taliban's policy toward other countries friendly, India is still sceptical and cautious about its interests in Afghanistan. The collapse of the former republic government has paved the way for more space and interference for some countries notorious to India, like Pakistan. This has deterred the superiority New Delhi was enjoying during the republic government and provided Pakistan with an overwhelming presence (Chaudhuri & Shende, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to answer the following questions: What are the strategic implications of Taliban 2.0 on India? To what extent are India and the Taliban diplomatically engaged? How does the Indian soft power policy help in image-building in Afghanistan? How does Pakistan factor into Taliban-India relations? Moreover, the way forward for future India-Taliban relations is one of the questions this study tends to answer, underpinned by primary (official sources) and secondary sources. The data is collected from both archival and online resources. However, before addressing the posed questions, it seems pertinent to briefly but critically review key studies on the subject matter.

To start with, Smruti Pattanaik, in the article "India's Afghan Policy: Beyond Bilateralism", explains India-Afghanistan relations from a broader perspective, not limited to bilateral engagement. For example, India-Pakistan troubled relations, land access to Central Asian states and the use of Afghan soil by Pakistan against Indian interests. In addition, the author explained various factors that limit India's role in

Afghanistan, such as whether the former is willing to engage with the Taliban, the fragmentation of the Northern Alliance and its inability to be an effective counterforce against the Taliban and the Doha office as a potential contender for power in Kabul. Therefore, the paper stresses the unlikelihood of India leaving Afghanistan behind (Pattanaik, 2022). Analyzing the "US-Taliban peace deal and India's strategic options", Raj Verma explains that the withdrawal of foreign forces is a grave concern for India, as the former believes that the Taliban would pose security threats to New Delhi's strategic interests. This study explains that India has three goals in Afghanistan. First, the formation of a democratic and inclusive Afghan government, balancing Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, and the non-use of Afghan territory for militancy. The study concludes that India has limited options regarding Afghanistan; hence, it might forge an understanding with the Taliban administration (Verma, 2021). In another study about Indian engagement with the Taliban post-2021, Muhammad Farooq evaluated how India could fit into Afghanistan's newly structured political environment. He analyzed different stages of India-Afghanistan relations and the implications of the re-engagement of India-Taliban for Pakistan. The study explains that despite the divergence of interests with the Taliban, think tanks in India supported engagement with the Taliban to secure New Delhi's interests and gain the Taliban's favour. It is also engaging with the Taliban to counter Pakistan's influence; hence, abandoning the former would be a strategic mistake of New Delhi, considering its Afghan policy. The study explains that the Taliban faces a scarcity of funds to run their government and public projects. Pakistan is also unable to support or address the Taliban government's needs unilaterally; therefore, it makes the former rely on some other regional states, for which India is one of the feasible options (Farooq, 2022).

Last, Natish Kumar and Amit Kumar, in their study on the re-emergence of Taliban 2.0 and challenges for Indian multilateralism policy, explained the different challenges to New Delhi's policy of multilateralism, which includes the former's economic and political policies regarding Afghanistan and the region. The study emphasizes multiple aspects. First, regional cooperation is mandatory for the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan and for eradicating the threat of terrorism in the region. Second, regional actors and their interests in Afghanistan. This part emphasizes Pakistan and China's role in Afghanistan, which is considered a rising threat to be countered by India as part of its animosity with both states. Iran and Russia are not considered a major challenge to New Delhi's interests in Afghanistan. Last, the study concludes that the major challenge to India's policy of multilateralism and future prospects in Afghanistan is Pakistan; nevertheless, it emphasizes that India needs to engage in Afghanistan because the policy of isolation would not serve New Delhi's interests (Kumar & Kumar, 2022).

Hence, the existing literature, as analyzed above, varies in focus. Some have delved into the strategic implications of Taliban 2.0 on India-Pakistan relations and the security threats posed to New Delhi, while others are more into the land access to Central Asian states and the use of Afghan soil by Pakistan and the fragmentation of the Northern Alliance, which was an effective counterforce against the Taliban. Thus, the studies have not looked specifically into questions that this tends to answer.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses the constructivist theory. Constructivism views international relations from different perspectives regarding power, the balance of power, and the nature of state politics. In the post-Cold War era, constructivists have considerably challenged

rationalist theories, mainly neo-realist and neo-liberalist theories (Hopf, 1998, p. 3). Onuf is regarded as the founding father of this theory, who introduced it in 1989. It was further expanded by other constructivists, like Alexander Wendt, who played a prominent role in improving this theory (Zubfuss, 2004, p. 20). Some of the major assumptions Constructivism promotes are: norms, values, and ideas play essential roles in international relations, which humans themselves hold and are subject to change (Finnemore & Sikkink: 5); states are the main actors, and they are responsible for the nature of politics because they have made it; constructivists also believe that the norms, values, and ideas humans have created are not constant and it is subject to change, hence states/actors can find alternatives or change their behaviour while dealing with matters of international politics (Guzzini & Leander, 2006).

In contrast to the rationalist and positivist theories, Constructivism has its rationale for analyzing international relations (Roberts, 2007, p. 188). Realists believe that states' behaviour in international relations is conflictual, and liberals believe states need to behave more cooperatively because anarchy could lead to conflict. In contrast, constructivists are a bridge between these two extremes. Constructivists accept that the state is an essential actor in international relations, but the way they look at international relations from the perspective of anarchy is different. According to Wendt, the roots of international politics are not anarchic, but states make it, and it depends on how states deal with matters of international relations. In one of his famous essays, "Anarchy is what states made," he explained that the (in)stability of the international environment relates to the behaviour of states; they are the main actors, hence their dealing with other states would decide the nature of the international environment (Stanton, 2002, p. 8).

Before explaining the nature of Taliban-Indian relations in view of the above theory, the study presents an essential real-time example in the arena of state-state relations. Wendt has explained the nature of relations between North Korea and the US. He compared threats arising to the United States from British and North Korean nuclear weapons. He argues that 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening than 5 nuclear weapons owned by North Korea. From a constructivist perspective, the threat from North Korea is not caused by nuclear weapons but by the meaning given to it (Wendt, 1995). Since the nature of relations between the US and North Korea is conflictual, any move in building the military capacity of North Korea is regarded as a threat to the US because the weapons themselves are not a threat until we understand their political and social context. If nuclear weapons were a threat, then the British weapons would also threaten the US. As constructivists believe ideas and beliefs affect states' relations, the US and North Korea consider each other enemies. Moreover, Constructivists argue that reality is interpreted differently and is always under construction, depending on the meaning states/actors add to it (Wendt, 1992). Hence, the US and North Korea can change the status quo and reinforce a structure of friendly relations, which ultimately depends upon the will and change of traditional ideas or beliefs of both countries.

In the case of Taliban-India relations, India seemingly believes the Taliban conflict with Indian interests. The latter is considered a proxy of Pakistan that could be used against Indian security, specifically in Kashmir and its presence in Afghanistan. According to the Constructivism theory, the notion that the Taliban are not Indian-centric, or in other words, Taliban are anti-Indian presence in Afghanistan, is a belief that was built on the Indian side during the Taliban's previous rule, as they allegedly played a dubious role in the hijacking of an Indian airplane in the 1990s, and did not have friendly relations due

to Indian support to the Northern Alliance (Kantha, 2000). However, the relations between Taliban-India could change depending on how both sides restructure their traditional beliefs, as the theory suggests the same that the reality, norm, or belief is always under construction and subject to change in international relations. Both sides could change the status quo and reinforce a structure of friendly relations; nevertheless, it depends on the will to change from both sides. For instance, close diplomatic relations, negotiations, and high-level visits could change how both sides perceive each other. It could change the nature of their relations from conflict to friendship. Put differently, per the theoretical framework, if the Taliban and India decide to cooperate or negotiate on their issues or the cynicism built, their relations could be peaceful. If they behave oppositely, their bilateral relations will remain the same. Therefore, it is suggested that both sides must come out of their traditional mindset, change the previous norms, and build friendly relations.

3. Taliban 2.0: Strategic Implications for India

The re-emergence of the Taliban and the recent political upheaval in Afghanistan pose serious challenges and implications for India. In this situation, some significant implications could be addressed. First, Afghanistan plays a strategic role for New Delhi due to the former's historical enmity with Pakistan. From an Indian perspective, the Taliban would not have taken over Kabul without Pakistan's support. The former has more leverage over Afghanistan than India, making the future India-Pakistan proxy war more complicated and dangerous (Aryal & Bharti, 2021). Besides this, the hasty US withdrawal and the fact that India was not well-prepared for the US exit further raised Indian concerns. Even in the post-withdrawal scenario, the US is leaning toward Pakistan to address Afghanistan. India seems cautious about such developments because they will lead to more Pakistani influence on Kabul (Patil, 2022). Though Pakistan's security establishment endeavours to frustrate the New Delhi-led initiative for Afghanistan, the Taliban seems responsive toward normalising its relations with India (Kaura, 2021).

Second, the development projects India has launched recently have been delayed. India has completed many projects in Afghanistan that seem to be a game-changer in regional connectivity. However, the future of those projects is in jeopardy due to recent political developments in Afghanistan. For instance, Chabahar port connects India with Afghanistan via Iran for trade and connectivity (Gupta, 2022). The *Zaranj-Delaram* highway is another major project in which New Delhi invested \$150 million. It connects Afghanistan to the Chabahar Port. It is a 218 km long road that also links 16 provinces of Afghanistan through the Ring Road with Tajikistan. They include some of Afghanistan's central provinces, like Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar (Wani, 2022).

Third, apart from Pakistan's intense involvement, China's involvement in Afghanistan also has dire consequences for India's strategic position in Afghanistan. China has already started engaging with the Taliban and is investing in different projects (Anbarasan, 2021). If China successfully integrated Afghanistan into one of its biggest economic projects, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it would further harm Indian leverage in Afghanistan and the Chabahar economic ecology (Aryal & Bharti, 2021). The Taliban has already endorsed Chinese investment in Afghanistan and welcomed Beijing's investment in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Khaliq, 2021). The Taliban's alliance with China and Pakistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would have countless consequences for India's economic interests. The BRI of China is a long-term goal to integrate South Asia countries. Looking at the blooming

future of China in Afghanistan, the former could easily motivate the Taliban to be part of the CPEC. On this account, if China succeeds in integrating Afghanistan into the CPEC model, it would be a devastating blow to India's economic interests in the region and the future of the Chabahar Port. China could challenge India's external power equation and influence, primarily diplomatic and economic, in Afghanistan, as China is heavily engaged with the Taliban. India follows the 'wait and watch' policy, eyeing its US and Western partners (Kubbar & Seren, 2022). If India does not actively engage with the Taliban, it will lose both its political and economic influence in Afghanistan.

The fourth and foremost implication is the new surge of militancy and challenge to India's security in general and Kashmir in particular. The India-centric insurgent groups like *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Muhammad* (JeM) may likely regroup for a new wave of militancy in Kashmir (Saxena, 2021). The former believe Pakistan could use Afghan soil to train and equip India-centric insurgent groups for instability in Kashmir (Joshi, 2022). Therefore, New Delhi's core focus is to ensure that Afghanistan's soil is not used against its interests. As a result, India has adopted a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban by engaging with them to address security and threats arising from Afghanistan, humanitarian crises, people-to-people contact, and other mutual interests, including Pakistan's growing leverage inside Afghanistan (Patil, 2022).

Nevertheless, India is observing the developments in Afghanistan and endeavouring to secure its interests. India does not prefer the monopoly of the Taliban in Afghan politics; therefore, it came late to open ties with them to secure its regional strategic interests. Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval hosted a regional security dialogue in New Delhi on the impacts of the Taliban takeover and possible ways of engagement. The former invited the NSA's of Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics. Following the dialogues, the joint declaration emphasized an inclusive Afghan government, terrorism, and militancy emanating from Afghanistan (Boni, 2022). In response, the Taliban appreciated the dialogue and expressed their will to engage with India to promote bilateral cooperation (Jain, 2021).

4. India-Taliban Diplomatic Engagements

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was a significant setback and a strategic failure for India in Afghanistan and the region. It was considered an Indian fallout from Afghanistan. Following the Taliban takeover, India observed the developments but did not publicly engage with them. However, after some time, India returned to negotiate with the Taliban for its interests in Afghanistan. New Delhi's relations with the Taliban largely depend on Taliban-Pakistan relations. The former fears that Afghanistan's land would be used against it by Pakistan and militant groups active in Indian Kashmir. Despite all these claims, the Taliban officials assured that Afghan land would not be used against any country and that such claims would be addressed positively (Shabbir et al., 2022). There had been backdoor diplomacy between the Indian-Taliban officials; however, after the takeover, the officials of both countries met for the first time when New Delhi sent a delegation of the Foreign Ministry to Afghanistan in June 2022. This meeting was headed by J.P. Singh, the Joint Secretary of India's foreign ministry, and hosted by the Taliban's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi. Both sides have discussed trade and economics, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic relations. Muttaqi has urged the Indian authorities to resume their development projects and reopen their diplomatic missions. This visit changed New Delhi's policy towards the

Taliban and is a green signal for the resumption of diplomatic engagement with them (Pasricha, 2022).

Although it was the first open diplomatic engagement, before that, India had dispatched many aid packages to Afghanistan despite closing its embassy in Kabul. The aid packages included 13 tons of medical assistance, winter clothing, 20,000 MTs of wheat delivery through Pakistan, and around 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Being the fifth largest donor to Afghanistan (Saxena, 2022), India has also declared that it will assist Afghanistan with \$27 million in aid in its 2022-2023 budget (Laskar, 2022). Moreover, in the backdrop of the most devastating earthquake in the Paktika and Khost provinces of Afghanistan, India sent a technical team to its embassy for assistance (Haidar, 2022). However, New Delhi announced it does not amount to granting diplomatic recognition to the Taliban administration; instead, the team has been sent to monitor the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Roy, 2022). The former has provided humanitarian assistance, including family ridge tents, sleeping bags, blankets, and mats (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

Moreover, in his speech at the 4th regional security dialogue at Dushanbe, Tajikistan, held in May 2022, the India National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval stated that India was and still is an essential stakeholder in Afghanistan. Expressing his country's approach, he said India-Afghanistan historical relations over the centuries would dictate its approach towards Afghanistan. NSAs of Tajikistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and China also attended the regional security dialogue. Doval called upon his counterparts to enhance the capability of Afghanistan to counter the militant groups that threaten the region (PTI, 2022).

Despite India's ideological and security concerns, the former would get closer and engage with the Taliban by filling the gap created due to the distance and differences between the Taliban and Pakistan. The gap was created over the uneasiness and skirmishes going on the Durand Line, the rise in militancy in Pakistan, and the lack of constructive negotiations and headway in the peace talks between *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) and the Pakistan government, hosted by the Taliban in Afghanistan. In such a case, the Afghan Taliban may seek a new regional partner to fill this gap. However, their engagement largely depends on the Taliban's reciprocity in addressing New Delhi's security concerns (Patil, 2022). The current Taliban administration is also not willing to rely solely on Pakistan. Hence, they are searching to open new windows of cooperation in the regional context, for which India is a suitable alternative due to its soft image in Afghan society (Ahmad, 2022). In a recent interview with an Indian TV channel, CNN News 18, the Taliban's acting Defence Minister, Mr. Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, demonstrated his desire for friendly relations with India. He said his government is interested in sending Afghan army cadets to India for training. Regarding the defence relations between India and Afghanistan, Yaqoob stated that friendly political and diplomatic relations could result from closer defence relations (Desk, 2022). This embarks a new phase of India-Taliban relations since the re-emergence of the Taliban.

As part of its strategic interest, India is engaging with the Taliban to balance the challenging environment created by the Taliban takeover. Such an environment allows India to accomplish its incomplete development projects, which could help it regain its foothold in Afghanistan and soften the Taliban's position toward it. India allowed the commercial operations of the airlines to facilitate Afghan citizens. These operations

provided Afghans access to Indian markets for commercial activities that could promote bilateral trade between both countries (ANI, 2021). Similarly, during a virtual address to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)-Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) outreach summit on Afghanistan in September 2021, Indian PM Narendra Modi pledged to provide Afghanistan with humanitarian and development assistance in terms of education, health, food, and infrastructure. However, Modi has opposed recognizing the Taliban rule until a global consensus emerges for recognition. He called the current Taliban administration non-inclusive, lacking the representation of the Afghan society, including women and minorities (News Updates, 2021). Following this, India hosted a third regional security dialogue on Afghanistan in November 2021, attended by Russia, Iran, and the five Central Asian states. However, the Taliban were not invited to the summit. Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, Pakistan and China, were also invited but stayed away (Indian Council of World Affairs, 2021). What can be deduced from the above discussion is that India can only recognize the Taliban rule if global powers such as the US and EU states reach a consensus. However, India's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban is a strategic requirement to maintain its presence, restrain Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, and accept the Taliban as a reality in the future discourse of the country. Hence, abandoning them would be a strategic mistake for India that could have unbearable consequences for future Afghanistan-India relations (Farooq, 2022).

5. India's Soft Power Policy in Afghanistan

Afghanistan does not share any physical border with India, but it plays a strategic role in its foreign policy primarily due to Pakistan. The Indian approach towards Afghanistan for the last two decades has been based on a soft power policy in Afghanistan, making it win hearts and minds and generate goodwill among the Afghan population (Ahmad, 2021). The fact behind its soft power policy was its belief that issues like terrorism, threats from neighbours, specifically China and Pakistan, poverty, and fundamentalist tendencies need cooperation and assistance. To get cooperation, one needs to be attractive, for which a prerequisite is soft power (Jr, 2005). New Delhi, with this approach, has invested heavily in Afghanistan. Its investment was mainly in infrastructural development, irrigation, and electricity transmission (Kumar & Sharma, 2015). Some of its giant development projects include Chabahar Port, *Zaranj-Deleram Highway*, and the Afghanistan-India friendship dam called *Salma Dam* (D'Souza, 2013). Chabahar Port and *Zaranj-Deleram Highway* have been one of the success stories of India's economic strategies for regional connectivity. The completion of this highway not only provided Afghanistan with the nearest route to the sea, but it is also an alternative to Pakistan's Karachi port. Secondly, it provided India with access via sea to Afghanistan. If Pakistan refuses to trade and transit goods from India to Afghanistan, the former could ship them from Mumbai to Chabahar Port via the *Zaranj-Deleram Highway* inside Afghanistan (Scott, 2011).

Though Afghanistan seems more secure than before, the future of this initiative seems blurred (Flayer, 2021). In the last two decades, India has spent \$3 billion on infrastructural and institutional development in Afghanistan. The construction of the Afghan parliament building, which cost \$90 million, is another major project India has accomplished. This building was constructed with Rajasthan Marble. It was considered an infrastructural project and a unique bond described by President Narendra Modi and then Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani as 'connected by a thousand links' (Flayer, 2021). India also helped rebuild its institutional capacity by training Afghan diplomats,

teachers, judges, doctors, paramedics, and lawyers and promoting women entrepreneurs (Pant, 2010). It established the Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU) in Kandahar in 2010 (Kumar & Palkar, 2014). Last but not least, during the last 2 decades, the Indian Technical and Educational Cooperation (ITEC) has trained government and semi-government officials to enhance their capacity (D'Souza, 2016).

6. Lessons from the Past: Revisiting the Future

History repeats itself, but each time the price goes up. Therefore, countries learn from the past and formulate their policies and strategic goals. During the Taliban rule in 1996, Indo-Taliban relations were not friendly (Baloch & Niazi, 2008). At that time, the Indian approach towards the Taliban was aligned with some regional countries like Russia and Iran. The three countries supported the Northern Alliance in defeating the Taliban. This made India not engage directly in the Afghan conflict, and it was an acceptable choice at that time because those regional countries were in line with the Indian approach due to their objectives. Moscow was concerned due to the Taliban's support for Al-Qaeda, which could strengthen the insurgency in Central Asia. New Delhi considered the Taliban as puppets of Pakistan (Paliwal, 2017), and Iran avoided the Taliban because it feared a Saudi-supported government would destabilize its security (Milani, 2010). This policy was also endorsed by Lalit Mansingh, the former Foreign Secretary of India (1999- 2000); he said: *"We [India] discovered that we could play a security role during the Taliban period when the Northern Alliance was formed. Moreover, since Russia and Iran were on the same page, we were comfortable giving military assistance. However, then we did not have to worry about the routes because we had the active support of the Iranians. Therefore, getting military supplies across to the Northern Alliance was not a big problem... But the fact is that it also acknowledges that India cannot work alone. India by itself cannot play a major role in the security situation of Afghanistan"* (Paliwal, 2017).

However, today the scenario is much different. The re-emergence of Taliban 2.0 has occurred at a time when regional politics have some significant changes. Currently, there is no regional alliance against the Taliban as it was against their previous rule. Iran and Russia supported the Taliban in ousting the American-led NATO forces (Sullivan, 2021). Their support of the Taliban against foreign forces has been rooted in Russia's Cold War politics and Iran's political and religious reasons. No doubt, Pakistan has always been a strong supporter of the Taliban, both in their previous and current administration (Hussain, 2021). China, a major regional rival of India, supports the Taliban for its regional and inter-regional connectivity to extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Westcott, 2022). The Central Asian states do not perceive the Taliban as an immediate threat to their security, excluding Tajikistan, which has stressed the possible threats from the Taliban. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have economic interests in Afghanistan (Analytica, 2021). Hence, New Delhi would be diplomatically isolated in the region if it did not engage with the Taliban.

What can be deduced from the foregoing discussions is that the Taliban feels India is a regional player and partner in the development of Afghanistan. Following the Indian officials' visit to Kabul in June 2022, the Taliban's Foreign Ministry, in a statement, called the visit a good beginning in the Indo-Taliban bilateral ties (Reuters, 2022). Moreover, following the Indian decision to send back a batch of its technical team to oversee humanitarian assistance and development projects, the Taliban welcomed this move and assured security for the Indian embassy staff. The former believed it would strengthen

the Afghanistan-India ties and lead to the completion of unfinished projects that are delayed due to the transition and the initiation of new development projects (Islami, 2022). To sustain the friendly image India has established in the last two decades, the former needs to withstand and reap the dividends by continuing its soft power and completing incomplete projects. For instance, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline project (TAPI). It is one of the largest gas pipeline projects, aiming to export 33 billion cubic meters of gas annually from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. It is a 1,824-kilometre-long pipeline project (Bibi et al., 2022). The *Shahitoot Dam* of Kabul is another major project left behind. The agreement was signed by the Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and his Afghan counterpart in a virtual summit held in February 2021 in the presence of Afghanistan and Indian heads of state (ANI, 2021). If completed, it would irrigate an estimated 4,000 hectares of land in Kabul's *Charasiab* and *Khairabad* districts and provide about 146 million cubic meters of clean water (ANI, 2021).

Before August 2021, India preferred the Taliban to become part of the then-existing political system as a mainstream political party (Constantino, 2020), which did not happen. In the current scenario, India has three options to follow. First, to recognize the Taliban administration and continue its diplomatic operations. It could be unilaterally or in coordination with its allies, like the US. Second, India refuses to recognize the Taliban's rule because India strongly supports a democratic government in Afghanistan. Third, adopt a 'wait and watch' policy by observing the ground situation and acting accordingly while maintaining diplomatic cordiality (Chowdhury, 2022).

Meanwhile, the first scenario is not feasible, and the second scenario, even if implemented, could further harm India-Taliban relations if lost for long. Therefore, a wiser policy approach could be maintaining diplomatic cordiality and engaging with the Taliban, which does not imply the official embassy reopening and formal recognition. Diplomatic engagement would heavily benefit India on its diplomatic and regional fronts. In the current scenario, it seems some mishaps in Taliban-Pakistan relations need to be addressed by both sides. Islamabad's long-standing strategic objective to have a Pakistani-dependent or friendly government in Kabul and to counterbalance India has yet to be as realistic as expected following the re-emergence of the Taliban. Unlike their previous rule, the Taliban, instead of providing larger strategic benefits, are now regarded as a worrisome thorn in Islamabad (Qazi, 2022).

As the above reflects, some of the high-level officials on the Pakistan side critically raised their concerns about the Taliban government. Speaking to the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, on the one hand, called on the international community to engage with the Taliban government; on the other hand, he accused Afghanistan of the presence of militant organizations there. He particularly mentioned the presence of TTP, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Yousaf, 2022). The tense relationship could be more evident from the speech by Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari at the 59th Munich Security Conference in Germany, where he added that security threats emanated from Afghanistan. Moreover, he further added that even if the Afghan Taliban have the will to counter terrorism, they cannot do so (Dawn, 2023). Hence, it is a major development in the Taliban-Pakistan ties that New Delhi could utilize. However, it needs New Delhi's will and strong diplomatic engagement to turn the game on its side. A stable

and secure Afghanistan is a gateway for India to reach Central Asian countries with plenty of energy resources. Moreover, being engaged in Afghanistan, New Delhi could monitor two of its regional competitors, Islamabad and Beijing (Chand & Ahmad, 2020). Complete isolation and absence on the ground, as done during the previous Taliban rule, could cost New Delhi heavily. Taliban also does not seem opposed to or antagonistic to Indian interests in Afghanistan (Ahlawat & Izarali, 2022). They have professed their interest in having cordial relations with India (Mukul, 2021).

As a result, the study argues that even if the Taliban are in power, India needs to engage in Afghanistan and harness the positive image it has built in the last two decades. Otherwise, the former could lose its positive image due to passive diplomacy. Its absence would give the impression to the Afghan people that they are abandoned by a country that supported them and helped in the development of Afghanistan by investing \$3 billion. In this case, it would negatively impact India's image in Afghanistan. Secondly, if India continues a weaker diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, the former would react differently. It may accuse India of adopting a non-friendly approach toward the Taliban, as in the 1990s. Therefore, India must maintain diplomatic engagement with the Taliban and avoid being a non-active player in Afghanistan.

7. Conclusion

India and Afghanistan have long-standing cultural, historical, and economic relations. The former is perceived as favourable in Afghan society due to their substantial efforts and role in Afghanistan's development, specifically in the last two decades. In the post-Bonn period, Indian policy was primarily driven by economic and political aspects. The former was interested in Afghanistan's rich natural resources and wanted to have a robust economic foothold in Afghanistan. It also aimed to reach the energy-rich Central Asian states, using Afghanistan as a gateway. On the political aspect, New Delhi wanted to minimise and undermine Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. Therefore, it was fully engaged and supported the then-republican government. Both of these policies have been successful till the takeover of the Taliban. However, the political upheaval and the re-emergence of the Taliban are a setback for India and its economic and political interests. It closed its diplomatic missions but continues to support the people of Afghanistan. It has been a concrete fact that governments contradict when it comes to their national interests, or they may oppose certain government types. India does not favour the Taliban rule and the type of government they have imposed; however, India understands that isolating the Taliban would not address its concerns. Hence, it has started diplomatically engaging with them by sending a technical team to its mission and foreign ministry officials to assure the Taliban are not a threat to their security and national and regional interests.

On the other hand, the Taliban also seems open to India's concerns and has assured New Delhi not to feel threatened. This argument aligns with the theoretical framework used in the study, which focuses on structuring and restructuring ideas and beliefs. It is prudent to mention that the perceptions present among the Taliban and India would address and predict the future course of their relations. The direction of their bilateral relations could change due to their ideas and perceptions. The way forward is diplomatic engagement, revival of visa's, track II diplomacy and completing the unaccomplished Indian projects in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the vacuum created between the Taliban and Pakistan due to skirmishes on the Durand Line and no headway in the TTP

negotiations with Islamabad, hosted by the Afghan Taliban, has provided India with a timely opportunity that needs to be capitalised.

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