

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Change and Continuity: India's Growing Engagement with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan

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Summary

Even as India normalises diplomatic ties with the Taliban, its long-term Afghanistan strategy remains focused on developmental efforts.

Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, visited India from 9 October to 16 October 2025, marking the first political-level engagement between the countries since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, during formal talks with Muttaqi, announced that India would upgrade its technical mission in Kabul to the level of an embassy. Most of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, including Iran and Uzbekistan, as well as Russia and China, established channels with the Taliban during the insurgency period, kept their embassies open through the transition in Kabul and accepted Taliban-nominated ambassadors. India, however, maintained a position of not engaging the Afghan Taliban in any way and made its first outreach in June 2021 in the run-up to the US troop withdrawal, following a 'peace deal' with the Taliban.

India has long regarded the Taliban as a radical Islamist militant group with close ties to Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment and to global terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, which has targeted Indians in Afghanistan. However, as the differences between the Taliban and Pakistan have turned into frequent military confrontations, engaging India has become a strategic imperative for the Taliban. In its quest for international diplomatic recognition and economic relations, the Taliban is also adopting the time-tested principle of balancing between rival powers. India, on its part, seeks to address security concerns, maintain its humanitarian assistance, and resume its role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, having been a significant development partner over the past two decades. Additionally, India aims to utilise Afghanistan's potential as a bridge to expand its economic outreach to Central Asian nations.

Afghanistan–Pakistan Dynamics

Since March 2024, Afghanistan and Pakistan have been involved in a series of tit-for-tat cross-border strikes. Pakistan alleges that militants from the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) are using Afghanistan as a base for attacks on Pakistani security forces. The Pakistan Air Force has responded to such attacks by conducting airstrikes in Afghanistan's eastern border provinces, such as Khost and Paktika. Taliban forces have responded by attacking Pakistani border posts.

Historically, no Afghan government has recognised the Durand Line, which cuts through the Pashtun tribal lands and marks the border with Pakistan. The adjoining Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, which, until a 2018 constitutional amendment, had a semi-autonomous status with prevalence of tribal laws and customs, served as the springboard for the Pakistani strategic elite to run interference in Afghanistan's politics. The Pakistani Taliban, formed in December

2007 as a conglomerate of radical Islamist groups in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland, has survived waves of counter-terrorism operations conducted by Pakistani security forces over the years. The Taliban's return to power has only empowered them further, as seen in the uptick of attacks targeting the Pakistani military in the border provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Amid deadly cross-border strikes from Pakistan, the Taliban, an ethnic Pashtun movement, has labelled the Durand Line as the "hypothetical line" in their official statements.¹ Amid border clashes, Pakistan has also carried out a systematic deportation campaign targeting both undocumented and registered Afghan refugees.² According to the UNHCR, more than 1.5 million Afghans have been forced out between the start of the campaign in 2023 and mid-October 2025.³

India's Developmental Assistance

The first high-level engagement between India and the Taliban, involving Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Muttaqi, took place in Dubai only days after clashes between Taliban forces and Pakistani border guards. India's Ministry of External Affairs, in a statement, “unequivocally condemned” the Pakistani airstrike on targets inside Afghanistan.⁴ During the meeting, Muttaqi requested Delhi's humanitarian assistance, including support for the rehabilitation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, and urged India to “consider engaging in development projects in the near future.” He also underlined Afghanistan's sensitivities regarding India's security concerns, specifically, not allowing anti-India terror groups to operate on Afghan territory. India, for its part, agreed to Afghanistan's request for material support in the health sector and for the rehabilitation of refugees deported from other countries.⁵

After the Taliban regained power in 2021, India, distinguishing between the Afghan population and the Taliban government, continued to provide humanitarian aid to the country. In partnership with the United Nations World Food Program, it supplied more than 50,000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan. During the Western-backed republican government in Afghanistan, India's reconstruction efforts in the civilian sector helped it gain soft power among ordinary Afghans.

¹ [“Afghanistan Taliban Targets ‘several points’ in Pakistan, Tensions Increase”](#), *The Print*, 28 December 2024.

² [“Pakistan to Start Second Phase of Afghan Deportations”](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 30 June 2024.

³ Abid Hussain, [“Illegal in Own Homes’: Afghan Refugees Caught in Pakistan-Taliban Tensions”](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 22 October 2025.

⁴ [“MEA ‘unequivocally condemns’ Pak’s Attack on Afghans”](#), *The Economic Times*, 7 January 2025.

⁵ [“Foreign Secretary’s Meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 8 January 2025.

India's US\$ 3 billion in development aid over 20 years was allocated to more than 400 projects across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. This included high-visibility projects such as the crucial 218 km Zaranj-Delaram Road, which provides an alternative route to Iran's Chabahar port, thereby reducing Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistani ports, the 42MW hydropower and irrigation project of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam in Herat province, and the 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri, the capital of Baghlan province, to north of Kabul, enhancing power supply to Afghanistan's capital.

After the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2011, Indian assistance also flowed into small and community development projects in rural Afghanistan, as well as into sectors such as education, healthcare, and capacity-building through vocational training institutes, scholarships for Afghan students, and mentoring programmes in the civil service. During Muttaqi's visit, India agreed to expand its healthcare cooperation with Afghanistan, committing to establishing specialised medical facilities in Kabul and opening five Maternity Health Clinics in the border provinces of Paktika, Khost and Paktia, which have been targeted in Pakistani air strikes.⁶

Afghanistan's Connectivity Potential

Afghanistan, a landlocked country that shares long borders with Pakistan, Iran, and three Central Asian countries—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—has been viewed as a land bridge connecting Central Asia with South Asia. In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war and Western sanctions on Russia that have impacted east-west transit corridors traversing Russian territory, Uzbekistan, as a doubly landlocked but dynamic economy, has put renewed focus on diversifying its connectivity through southern transit corridors to the Indian Ocean.

Following the Taliban's return to power, Tashkent continued to support the reconstruction and regional integration of Afghanistan. It has been a leading advocate of the 600 km Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar trans-Afghan railroad, which remains in the planning stage due to uncertainties about securing the estimated US\$ 5 billion in funding and tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Since 2020, India, Iran and Uzbekistan have engaged in working-group-level dialogue on using the Chabahar port for regional connectivity. In September 2025,

⁶ “[India - Afghanistan Joint Statement](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 October 2025.

the three countries held a trilateral meeting in Tehran at the level of Director Generals from their Foreign Ministries. The focus was on connectivity, the strategic use of ports, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

While Uzbekistan Railway built a 75 km railway line from Hairatan on the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border to Mazar-e-Sharif in 2011, the Iranian-built 220 km Khaf-Herat railway has been operational since 2023, when repair works were completed with the Taliban's agreement. The Taliban is engaging both Iran and Uzbekistan in connecting Mazar-e-Sharif to Herat, 730 km apart, with Afghanistan serving as a key hub for connectivity and trade between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.⁷

In February 2025, the first India-Afghanistan transit train arrived at Rozanak station in Herat after a maritime journey from India to Bandar Abbas, followed by a rail journey through the Iranian railway network. Once the Chabahar-Zahedan railway is completed, it will link with the Khaf-Herat railway via Mashhad, as a key artery in the north-south corridor.

India is keen to connect Chabahar Port to the INSTC and to Central Asian nations, especially Uzbekistan. In September 2025, the United States revoked the sanctions waiver for Chabahar Port.⁸ India, engaged in trade talks with Washington, secured an extension of the waiver until early next year. During intense diplomatic engagement with Washington, New Delhi argued that the continued operation of the port was vital for the effectiveness of its regional connectivity strategy, especially as an alternative trade route bypassing Pakistan. During his interaction at FICCI, Muttaqi also stated that he wants "optimum utilisation" of Chabahar and wants India to raise the matter with the US.⁹ He also noted that "both countries (India and the US) should make efforts to lift restrictions".

Renewed Economic Engagements

During the meeting between the ministers, it was decided to reopen the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor to boost Afghan exports to India, traditionally comprising agricultural products, especially fresh and dry fruits, and carpets. The corridor will connect Delhi, Mumbai and Amritsar with Kabul and Kandahar. India

⁷ [**“Afghanistan Eyes Extension of Khaf-Herat Railroad to Mazar-i-Sharif”**](#), *Keyhan*, 31 October 2025.

⁸ [**“US has Granted India a Six-month Exemption from Sanctions on Chabahar Port, Confirms MEA”**](#), *The Economic Times*, 30 October 2025.

⁹ [**“India Should Engage with US for Lifting of Sanctions on Chabahar Port: Afghan Foreign Min”**](#), *The Economic Times*, 13 October 2025.

has used the corridor to supply pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, textiles and dairy products.

The two countries established their first direct air freight corridor in June 2017, connecting Kabul and Herat with New Delhi. Another corridor was opened in 2019 between New Delhi and Kandahar. These air freight corridors, together with the trade and transit route via Chabahar Port, which became operational in February 2019, played a key role in reducing Afghanistan’s economic dependency on Pakistan. Bilateral trade between India and Afghanistan exceeded US\$ 1.5 billion in 2019–2020, with India’s trade nearing US\$ 1 billion (US\$ 997.58 million) and imports from Afghanistan around US\$ 530 million.¹⁰

During a roundtable discussion at FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry), Muttaqi called for greater connectivity and the liberalisation of the visa regime to enhance people-to-people contact and bilateral trade. He invited Indian investment in the mining sector and set up pharmaceutical manufacturing units in Afghanistan. Notably, China has signed several mining contracts and investment deals in oil projects in Afghanistan. But progress has been hampered by several factors, such as local pushback and differing priorities. Recently, the Taliban terminated a contract with a Chinese company to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin that was signed in 2023.¹¹

The changing Afghanistan–Pakistan dynamics have played a role in shaping India’s incremental and cautious diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. At the same time, friendly countries like the UAE and Uzbekistan have also supported this process. India’s approach to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan increasingly mirrors that of Afghanistan’s neighbours, such as Uzbekistan, in viewing the Taliban as a transaction-minded entity that is now integral to the country’s political landscape. Even as India normalises diplomatic ties with the Taliban, its long-term Afghanistan strategy remains focused on development efforts and supporting the people of Afghanistan.

¹⁰ “[India-Afghanistan Bilateral Brief](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, August 2020.

¹¹ “[Taliban Terminates Major Oil Extraction Deal with Chinese Firm](#)”, *Kabul Now*, 17 June 2025.

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