

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Afghanistan as 'Contiguous Neighbour': India's Reassertion of Its Northern Frontier

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Summary

India's reference to Afghanistan as a 'contiguous neighbour' is a calibrated strategy to underscore the enduring nature of India's historical connections.

Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit to India in October 2025 was a significant bilateral development for several reasons. It marked a critical inflection point in a series of breakthroughs in India's relations with the Taliban 2.0 government. India has been reticent and cautious in engaging with the Taliban in the past. The high-profile visit led to a substantial thaw in the relationship, which had been strained and uncertain at the time of the US exit in 2021. Second, the visit occurred amid heightened tensions in Afghanistan and deteriorating ties with Pakistan. At the time of the US exit, Pakistan was exhilarated, having claimed credit for the Taliban's return on the one hand, and causing India, Afghanistan's steadfast partner, a strategic setback on the other.

Apart from the more direct, simpler geopolitical parameters or circumstances, one of the highlights of the visit was a statement made by India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar, in his opening remarks during the interaction with his Afghan counterpart, where he conspicuously referred to Afghanistan as India's 'contiguous neighbour'.¹

The Wakhan periphery

EAM Jaishankar's statement has once again brought to the fore the 106 km border perimeter shared between Gilgit-Baltistan—part of Pakistan-occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK)—and the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. The corridor is a panhandle-shaped strategic swathe of territory that sits nestled between Pakistan, PoJK, China and Tajikistan. Before disintegrating in 1991, the Soviet Union straddled the Wakhan Corridor. During the Great Game, the Wakhan Corridor was established by the Pamir Boundary Commission (1895–96) as a buffer zone between British India and Russia.² The Emir of Afghanistan nominally ruled it. The arrangement remained in place until British rule ended in 1947.

India's partition and later the seizure of parts of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (1947–48) through Pakistan-abetted raids changed the reality of the Wakhan periphery. India lost what could/should have been its northern frontiers after the British withdrawal. The region has long been of immense strategic importance owing to its central location in Asia. The Durand Line, which has separated British India from Afghanistan since 1893, originates in the Wakhan

¹ “[Contiguous Neighbour': Jaishankar Calls Pakistan 'Shared Threat' for India and Afghanistan; Sends Clear Message on PoK](#)”, *The Times of India*, 11 October 2025.

² “[Report of the Proceedings](#)”, Pamir Boundary Commission, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, India, 1897.

Corridor. For decades since Pakistan’s creation, the colonial demarcation has been the primary source of bilateral friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

India’s expression of Wakhan at its contiguous border with Afghanistan has a direct connection to its existing claim to PoJK. Implicitly, this line of claim of calling the Wakhan as India’s border with Afghanistan was always intermeshed in India’s claim on Gilgit-Baltistan. It is just that, with the EAM’s straightforward enunciation during Muttaqi’s visit, it has become more explicit. Beyond its shared geographic proximity to China, deep contiguity with the Wakhan Corridor has remained an essential factor in the Gilgit-Baltistan region’s often-debated strategic value.

The Contiguity Factor

Interestingly, this was not the first time New Delhi had used the term ‘contiguous neighbour’ in relation to Afghanistan. Before EAM Jaishankar’s pronouncement, there have been multiple occasions when India’s official representatives at the UN have used the same reference. Since January 2022, Indian representatives have consistently used the term in their interventions on Afghanistan, be it in the General Assembly or the Security Council.

In November 2022, deliberating at the UN General Assembly on the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, Deputy Permanent Representative R. Ravindra observed:

As a contiguous neighbour of Afghanistan with strong historical and cultural links, India’s approach to Afghanistan will be guided by our historical friendship and special relationship with the Afghan people.³

In July 2025, India’s Permanent Representative, Parvathaneni Harish, reiterated the same position in his statement during a UNGA resolution on the situation in Afghanistan. This was done while explaining India’s abstention from the resolution that advised Afghanistan on human rights and action against terrorism. He noted: “India, as Afghanistan’s contiguous neighbour, has been guided by our longstanding friendship and special relationship with the Afghan people.”⁴

Before this, Ambassador Harish in March 2025 observed: “As its contiguous neighbour, India and Afghanistan share a special people-to-people relationship

³ [“Concerned at Unfolding Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan: India at UN”](#), *Business Standard*, 11 November 2022.

⁴ [“Explanation of Vote: UNGA Resolution on the Situation in Afghanistan”](#), Statement by Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 7 July 2025.

which has been the foundation of our present-day engagement with the country.⁵ In a subsequent address in December 2025 at the UNSC Meeting on the Situation in Afghanistan, Ambassador Harish categorically observed:

As Afghanistan’s contiguous neighbour, India deeply values its civilizational relationship and centuries-old bonds of friendship, and this history continues to guide our actions in forging deeper ties with the people of Afghanistan.⁶

These aforementioned statements are standard diplomatic formulations. However, two aspects stand out here. First, relates to re-establishing a geographical connection to Afghanistan, thereby indirectly staking India’s claims to the PoK. Second, and more importantly, they signify an effort to reaffirm the connection with the Afghan people, while seeking to maintain contact with the Taliban.

Interestingly, about a decade ago, National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval made headlines for referring to India’s 106 km long border with Afghanistan. Addressing a gathering of the Border Security Force in May 2015, Doval asserted:

We have to plan and prepare for the future. We have seven countries with which we share our border. We have six with which we directly share a contiguous border. But we also have a 106 km long non-contiguous border with Afghanistan that we need to factor in.⁷

Doval’s remarks came amid widespread uncertainty about an imminent US exit from Afghanistan and reflected a strategic concern about how best to use India’s ‘non-contiguous’ border to its advantage.

Notably, the NSA’s reference to India’s periphery with Afghanistan as non-contiguous is because PoJK remained unresolved from India’s perspective. The need to emphasise the contiguous nature of the border stems from India’s reassertion of sovereignty over Gilgit-Baltistan and its borders following the 2019 abrogation of Article 370. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, India made a calibrated decision to regard the Wakhan as contiguous and, since January 2022, has consistently used this reference in its official statements at the UN concerning Afghanistan.

⁵ “[Statement by Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish, Permanent Representative](#)”, UN Security Council Meeting on UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan), Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 10 March 2025.

⁶ “[Statement by Ambassador Harish Parvathaneni, Permanent Representative](#)”, UNAMA Briefing, UNSC Meeting on the Situation in Afghanistan, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 10 December 2025.

⁷ Deependra Tiwary, “[Need to Factor In Our 106 km Border with Afghanistan: NSA](#)”, *The Times of India*, 23 May 2015.

The Pakistan angle to India’s position on Wakhan was reinforced in the wake of the Islamabad–Taliban equilibrium shifting post the US withdrawal. This was the time when India was patiently working to devise a framework for engagement with the incumbent Taliban regime. As part of these efforts, the first positive bilateral contact was made at the end of August 2021, when India’s ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the head of the Taliban’s Political Office in Doha.⁸ In November 2021, India organised the Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan.⁹ Soon after, the India–Central Asia dialogue was hosted by New Delhi in December 2021, pledging “strong support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan while emphasising the respect for sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and non-interference in its internal affairs”.¹⁰

Subsequently, Joint Secretary, PAI (Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran) division, MEA, J.P. Singh, coordinated with the Taliban government, which culminated in Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri’s meeting with the Afghan Foreign Minister in Dubai in January 2025. Therefore, it is important to stress that referring to Afghanistan as a ‘contiguous neighbour’ is not an impromptu policy improvisation. Instead, it is a calibrated decision to highlight India’s historical connection and partnership with Afghanistan and its people, irrespective of the ruling dispensations there.

In the Future

India’s reiteration of its northern frontier through an existing claim to Gilgit-Baltistan has emerged amid regional flux stemming from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. It continues with the India–Pakistan stand-off post the Pahalgam massacre in April 2025.

Broadly, it is both a reassertion and a logical outcome of India’s renewed push in PoJK, especially under the Narendra Modi government. The policy stance complements and is commensurate with New Delhi’s historical claim on PoJK. At the same time, it reinforces warming ties between New Delhi and Taliban 2.0, achieved, of late, as a diplomatic breakthrough. That EAM Jaishankar identified Afghanistan as a contiguous neighbour during high-level talks with the Afghan Foreign Minister, and that the Taliban government did not dispute this, is a positive development.

⁸ Suhasini Haidar, “[Indian Envoy in Doha Meets Taliban Leader](#)”, *The Hindu*, 31 August 2021.

⁹ “[The Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan \(November 10, 2021\)](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 8 November 2021.

¹⁰ “[Joint Statement of the 3rd Meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 19 December 2021.

The specifics of India’s direct proximity to Afghanistan are a lesser-known aspect that warrants further dissemination. Hence, it is essential to scale up public awareness of the strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor in general and of its particular relevance to India. News headlines highlighting India’s assertion of the contiguity factor during Muttaqi’s visit were a progressive move in that direction. Beyond the statement of intent, India also needs to outline specific measures to establish a future presence in Wakhan.

India’s connectivity to Afghanistan has long been constrained by Pakistan’s obstinate whims and its control over the crucial Gilgit-Baltistan region. The closure of the Wagah Border crossing (used for India-Afghanistan trade) following the India-Pakistan crisis in May 2025 is a case in point. There has always been a need to explore alternatives to minimise such Pakistan-borne disruptions. There is some progress in direct cargo transit via the air route and Chabahar Port. Overall, given the contemporary centrality of connectivity in forging interstate relations, underscoring what could potentially have been India’s direct land access to Afghanistan is also a strategic necessity.

Lastly, formally evoking India’s frontier along the Wakhan could also be part of a progressive, diversified approach to addressing challenges in the region, particularly those driven by the Pakistan-China nexus, especially during and after Operation Sindoor. India’s policy approach of calling Afghanistan its next-door neighbour could add armour in India’s diplomatic reserves when it pitches itself against Pakistan, or, for that matter, China, by extension. Lest we forget, China refuses to recognise the India-China border west of the Karakoram pass up to the Wakhan border, precisely because they see this territory as under Pakistan’s control. India’s claims to a contiguous border with Afghanistan also assert this claim along its border with China.

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