

The Unexpected Pivot: How Pakistan's Misadventures Opened Kabul's Door to India

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Key Takeaways

1. Pakistan's recent aerial attacks inside Afghanistan have escalated from border skirmishes to full-blown bilateral conflict. They have unified the Taliban ranks as well as ordinary Afghans, evident in public demonstrations, protests and media reports.
2. Emirate's Foreign minister Amir Muttaqi's visit earlier this month followed by opening of India's embassy in Kabul marks Delhi's de facto recognition of Afghanistan. Many countries in the region, who were previously reluctant to engage with the Taliban, may explore this route of "Engaging without Recognizing".
3. Afghan Taliban's neutrality and silence on Kashmir issue and support to India on Pahalgam attacks has reassured India, signaling a shift in Emirate's foreign policy from ideological to transactional.
4. With Kabul showing interest in future defense cooperation, Will Delhi move from its cooperation portfolio from soft power to hard power?

Introduction

On October 9, Taliban's foreign minister Amir Muttaqi landed in India's capital for a week-long visit. His first official visit was more than a simple diplomatic gesture, and symbolised a major recalibration of India's ties with the Afghan Taliban, who now rule Afghanistan. In aftermath of his visit, Delhi decided to upgrade India's technical mission to a full-fledged embassy in Kabul on October 22, albeit without formal recognition.

In mid-August 2021, when US-led NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan after nearly two decades, Pakistan tried to position itself as a primary patron and supporter of the Afghan Taliban. Former PM Imran Khan was quick to endorse and praise the Taliban. On September 5, then ISI Chief Faiz Hameed led a high-level delegation to Kabul. His viral photo, holding a cup of tea in Afghanistan also displayed Pakistan's (over) confidence and arrogance, while Delhi was unnerved. Four years later, the situation has totally reversed. Both the men are now behind bars, and Pakistan and Afghanistan stand on the brink of a full-fledged war!

The fall of Af-Pak ties

After years of support, Islamabad was hoping to co-opt Afghan Taliban and manage anti-Pakistan elements operating on Afghan soil. However, both sides were quick to fall out and have been on loggerheads since 2022. The 2,640-km Durand Line has been the epicentre of conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan for decades, mainly because latter never accepted the line as a legitimate international border between the two countries. Moreover, Pakistan has been accusing Afghan Taliban of sheltering TTP members; a group which has been responsible for many deadly attacks inside the country.

Pakistan's recent unilateral airstrikes on Kabul, Khost, Jalalabad, and Paktika were a sharp escalation, violating Afghan sovereignty. The Ministry of Defense of the Islamic Emirate called them "unprecedented and violent" in the history of bilateral relations¹. Former leaders such as Abdullah Abdullah and Hamid Karzai condemned them as blatant violations of international law.² As reported in Dari and Pashto media, many ordinary Afghans held public rallies and demonstrations, vowing that if Pakistan continued such incursions, they would rise against it just

¹ د افغانستان اسلامي امارت د دفاع وزارت، یوځل بیا پاکستان د افغانستان هوایي حریم نقض کړ، د نشر نېټه، ۲۰/۷/۱۴۰۴، د لاس رسي لینک: یوځل بیا پاکستان د افغانستان هوایي حریم نقض کړ MOD -

² خامه پرس، واکنش ها به حملات هوایی پاکستان بر خاک افغانستان، تاریخ نشر: اکتوبر/۱۰/۲۰۲۵، دسترسی آنلاین: واکنش ها به حملات هوایی پاکستان بر خاک افغانستان | خبرگزاری خامه پرس - فارسی

as they resisted the “Soviet invasion and the U.S. intervention.”³ A press release by the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Islamic Emirate thanked the country’s “heroic mujahideen”, people and media figures for a united front against Pakistan.⁴

India-Afghanistan ties: Attacks, Economics and Kashmir

The ongoing tensions between Afghan Taliban and Pakistan have opened a window of strategic opportunity for Delhi. In the pre-2021 period, Delhi has invested heavily in Afghanistan’s infrastructure development. People-to-people ties and commerce flourished. Delhi had built a notable good-will inside Afghanistan guided by its soft-power approach. However, the rise of Afghan Taliban initially threatened to erode India’s influence. In the 1990s, Pakistan used Afghanistan’s territory to train and push militants inside Kashmir. India has also not forgotten Afghan Taliban’s compliance in hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814 in 1999 to Kandahar. India cannot afford to a repeat of these events, thus Afghan Taliban’s olive branch to India is a rare strategic opportunity for Delhi.

During the republic period (2004–2021), India trained a new generation of Afghan students through thousands of scholarships, deepening its cultural and educational influence. During the recent diplomatic visit, New Delhi opened the doors of Darul Uloom Deoband to Afghan Taliban leaders, a space that was long monopolised by Pakistan. This symbolic gesture allows Delhi to not only retain its civilisational and cultural linkages in Taliban-led Afghanistan but also to exert a quiet influence over radical currents in the region.

The new Afghanistan under the Taliban 2.0 seeks economic normalisation over ideological alignment. Years of sanctions, aid withdrawal, and frozen reserves have crippled its economy. Afghanistan’s battered economy needs new investments, and alternate trade partners and routes.

So far, Pakistan is the largest trading partner of Afghanistan, managing most of its exports and controlling its major transit routes. On many occasions, Pakistan has closed borders to disrupt trade flow and block imports and exports, causing heavy losses to traders and fueling food inflation due to market shortages. Current tensions have led to closing of all borders with Pakistan, furthering Afghanistan’s economic crisis. As Afghanistan explores new corridors to regional and

³ اژانس خبری پژواک، واکنش تند مردم به حملات پاکستان بر کابل و پکتیکا، تاریخ نشر: ۱۰/اکتوبر/۲۰۲۵، دسترسی آنلاین: واکنش تند مردم به حملات پاکستان بر کابل و پکتیکا – Pajhwok Afghan News

⁴ وزارت اطلاعات و فرهنگ، اعلامیه وزارت اطلاعات و فرهنگ درباره رویدادهای اخیر، تاریخ نشر: ۱۴۰۴/۷/۲۳، دسترسی آنلاین: اعلامیه وزارت اطلاعات و فرهنگ درباره رویدادهای اخیر | Ministry of

global markets, India can play a major role in developing its road and rail infrastructure, tunnels and highways, in the North and East. Highways Such as Kabul-Jalalabad and Kabul-Herat roads, which are vital for the country's trade, are still under construction and need engineering support and funds.

Against this backdrop, India's emphasis on trade, connectivity, and human capital development carries special appeal. Initiatives such as visa facilitation for Afghan students and patients, reopening of educational exchanges, and potential collaboration in mining and energy sectors represent a soft-power extension of India's strategic engagement.

Besides trade, commerce and infrastructure, there are many gaps which Delhi can fill. The question is: Will Delhi move from its cooperation portfolio from soft power to hard power? Pakistan's recent misadventures exposed serious gaps in Afghanistan's aerial defence and airspace control.⁵ Meanwhile, the acting Defence Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid has indicated that, once diplomatic and political ties are well-established, Kabul would be keen to explore defence and military cooperation with India. Before 2021, India had military cooperation with Afghan National Security Forces which included training, intelligence sharing and supply of defence equipment. But similar cooperation with the Emirates is not an easy decision to take.

Kashmir factor and US influence

Both India and Afghanistan are facing a common adversary. The recent Taliban-Pakistan border tensions and Pakistan's aerial strikes coincided with a spike in militancy in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, including the Pak-sponsored Pahalgam attack which the Islamic Emirate formally condemned. The Taliban's formal condemnation earned open appreciation in New Delhi. It is important to highlight that Emirate has been neutral on the Kashmir issue, even though Pakistan was hoping to (mis)use Afghanistan's territory to destabilize India, especially the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.⁶ By affirming that Afghan Taliban's cause is confined to its own

⁵ طلوع نیوز، سخنان ملا محمد یعقوب مجاهد درباره روابط با هند، تاریخ نشر: ۱۴۰۱/۳/۱۳، دسترسی آنلاین: سخنان ملا محمد یعقوب مجاهد درباره روابط با هند | طلوع نیوز

⁶ In sept 2021, a spokesman for the group had told the BBC that it plans to support Muslims in Indian-administered Kashmir. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58419719>. However, Mr Ziaulhaq Zia, head of the 'India and Pakistan Studies Institute' in Kabul-based *Regional Studies Center* in a personal interaction with the co-author (Mr Ferdaus) earlier this month, shared that the Emirate has been neutral on the Kashmir issue and has never issued any anti-India statements w.r.t Kashmir issue. He also mentioned that Anas Haqqani, a senior member of the Islamic Emirate (and the brother of

borders, the Emirate has projected a form of pragmatic nationalism, one that unsettles Islamabad even as it reassures India.

It is also important to note that the United States has a reason to support Pakistan in its ongoing misadventure in Pakistan, in order to arm-twist the Taliban into granting access to strategic assets such as the Bagram Airbase. Washington's interest in re-establishing a limited security footprint in the region has coincided with Islamabad's renewed assertiveness toward Kabul. Yet, Afghans, tempered by decades of resistance, are a proud people with little appetite for transactional coercion. What appears on the surface as a Pakistan-Taliban confrontation is, in part, a shadow contest between the Taliban and Washington, with Islamabad acting as an intermediary. Ironically, in serving as a proxy for American pressure, Pakistan has opened the diplomatic space for India to test the waters with Kabul and re-enter the Afghan theatre.

Conclusion

Despite Afghanistan's strategic value for India, Delhi remains wary of the Taliban's governance model. On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban (which is looking to diversify diplomatic ties and securing legitimacy within the international community) view India primarily through the lens of strategic utility. In their attempt to counter and limit Pakistan's influence in the region, both seem to have found a middle-ground.

Delhi's de facto recognition of Afghan Taliban by opening an embassy in Kabul without formal recognition has given it some degree of legitimacy and offered a new template of engagement. Many countries in the region, that have been hesitant to recognise or engage with Taliban, may follow a similar approach!

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All URL links given in footnotes with local media sources in Pashto and Dari have been provided by Mr Ferdaus. His insights and analysis are based on these sources, besides interactions with researchers based in Afghanistan.

the Minister of Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani) had made it clear that "Kashmir is not Afghanistan's concern," signaling a clear non-interference posture.



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