

Why India Is Deepening Its Engagement with the Taliban

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India Taliban Engagement Latest News

- Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi is on an official visit to India. This is his first official trip since the Taliban's return to power.
- The visit marks a significant shift in India's foreign policy, as **New Delhi engages with the Taliban despite not officially recognising their government.**
- Driven by regional security and geopolitical considerations, India's outreach reflects a strategic recalibration, though it must tread carefully given the Taliban's stance on women's rights and governance.

India's Early Encounters with the Taliban: A Diplomatic Dead End

- India's first significant engagement with the Taliban occurred during the **1999 IC-814 hijacking**, when then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh communicated with Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil.

- However, India and the Taliban lacked real common ground, as the Taliban remained deeply influenced by Pakistan, making any meaningful diplomatic connection difficult.

India's Cautious Engagement with the Taliban: Step-by-Step Diplomacy

- After the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, India adopted a strategy of “cautious engagement”, choosing **incremental diplomatic contact without granting formal recognition to the regime**.
- The first official interaction occurred on August 31, 2021, when India's Ambassador to Qatar met Stanekzai, head of the Taliban's political office in Doha.
- The meeting, initiated at the Taliban's request, marked India's re-entry into Afghan diplomacy.

India's Call for Inclusivity

- Soon after, India urged the Taliban to form an “inclusive government” that represented all ethnic groups and included women.
- In September 2021, India officially acknowledged the Taliban as “those in positions of power and authority across Afghanistan,” signalling pragmatic recognition of ground realities without formal endorsement.

Humanitarian Outreach and Reopening Channels

- In December 2021, India sent 1.6 tons of essential medicines to Afghanistan, distinguishing between the Taliban regime and the Afghan people while resuming humanitarian engagement.
- By June 2022, India deepened ties with a visit by a delegation led by MEA Joint Secretary, followed by the **deployment of a “technical team” at the Indian Embassy in Kabul**.
 - During the current visit, India decided to upgrade its technical mission in Kabul to an embassy.
- This marked the first official Indian presence since the Taliban takeover.

Responding to Human Rights Concerns

- In December 2022, India publicly expressed concern over the Taliban's ban on women attending universities, reinforcing its stance on women's rights and inclusive governance.
- By the end of 2023, tensions resurfaced as the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi ceased operations, citing a “lack of support” from the host government and internal challenges within the Afghan administration.

Evolving Regional Diplomacy (2024-2025)

- In January 2024, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi hosted diplomats from 11 regional countries, including India, advocating a “region-centric narrative” for constructive engagement.
- The **Taliban government condemned the Pahalgam terror attack**, aligning with India's counterterrorism concerns — a subtle sign of growing diplomatic coordination.

Why India Is Choosing to Engage with the Taliban Now

- Taliban leaders have consistently praised India's developmental role in Afghanistan, contrasting it with the "selfish motives" of the United States.
- Indian officials assessing these interactions believe the Taliban is eager for engagement and seeks India's assistance to rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and economy.

Balancing Diplomacy with Principles

- India's outreach comes with moral and diplomatic dilemmas.
- While engagement aligns with strategic and security interests, it raises questions about New Delhi's stance on the Taliban's regressive policies, especially regarding women's rights and freedoms.

A Changed Geopolitical Landscape

- The **regional power matrix** has shifted dramatically since the Taliban's last rule:
 - **Pakistan**, once the Taliban's key backer, is now an **uneasy partner**.
 - **Iran** is **weakened** by internal and economic challenges.
 - **Russia** is **embroiled in war**.
 - The **US**, under **Donald Trump 2.0**, has adopted a **non-committal approach**.
 - Meanwhile, **China** has **deepened its influence**, becoming the **first major power to exchange ambassadors** with the Taliban.
- This evolving scenario has **opened strategic space for India**, pushing New Delhi to **recalibrate its Afghanistan policy**.

Strategic Imperatives for India

- India fears that **non-engagement would erode its decade-long investments** — in infrastructure, education, and connectivity projects — and diminish its regional security leverage.
- Given Afghanistan's proximity and potential to influence India's internal security and trade routes, maintaining direct communication with Kabul has become essential.
- Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban now faces no internal political opposition within Afghanistan.
- India's decision to side with the Taliban in **rejecting Trump's plan to reclaim the Bagram air base** underscores how far New Delhi's position has evolved — from isolation to pragmatic engagement.

The Pakistan Factor in India-Taliban Relations

- The deteriorating relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan has created new opportunities for India's engagement with Kabul.
- As Pakistan deports thousands of Afghan refugees, India has stepped in to provide humanitarian aid and logistical support to Afghanistan.
- India has delivered **extensive relief shipments to Afghanistan**, including: 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat; 300 tonnes of medicines; 27 tonnes of earthquake relief material; 40,000 litres of pesticides; 100 million polio doses; 1.5 million Covid-19 vaccine doses; 11,000 hygiene kits for drug de-addiction programmes.

- India and Afghanistan have also discussed strengthening **sports cooperation, particularly in cricket**, which enjoys massive popularity among Afghan youth.
- Additionally, both sides agreed to enhance trade through Iran's Chabahar Port, facilitating commercial exchange and humanitarian shipments, and reinforcing India's strategic role in regional connectivity.

What the Taliban Seeks from India

- The **Taliban government** has requested **India to issue visas** for **Afghan businessmen, patients, and students**, aiming to restore people-to-people ties disrupted since the regime change.
- However, this demand faces challenges because **India does not officially recognise the Taliban**, has **security concerns** regarding visa applicants, and currently **lacks functional consulates or a visa office** in Afghanistan.
- Despite these limitations, New Delhi has expressed willingness to continue and expand development projects across all 34 Afghan provinces, signalling a pragmatic approach focused on reconstruction and long-term engagement rather than formal recognition.

Source: IE

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