

# 1. India – Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan's Taliban foreign minister met external affairs minister S. Jaishankar in New Delhi.

## Overview of the Engagement

India's recent diplomatic interaction with the Taliban regime marks the first high-level direct engagement since the Taliban took power in Kabul in August 2021. The meeting signifies a major recalibration in India's foreign policy, aimed at re-establishing an active diplomatic presence in Afghanistan while managing risks associated with terrorism and instability. The Indian envoy's visit came soon after India's participation in a regional consultation in Russia (Moscow Format) on Afghanistan, which included representatives from China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Central Asian republics – all stakeholders in the Afghan question.

## Key Assurances and Developments

**Counterterrorism Assurance** – The Taliban assured India that Afghan soil would not be used by any terrorist or militant group to target another country. This commitment is central to India's long-standing security concerns regarding cross-border terrorism and extremist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

**Reopening of the Indian Embassy** – External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar announced India's decision to reopen its full-fledged embassy in Kabul, upgrading the limited technical mission established in 2022 for humanitarian and trade facilitation.

**Regional Diplomatic Context** – Nearly a dozen countries – including China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Qatar – already maintain embassies in Kabul. India's move aligns it with other regional powers that have chosen engagement over isolation.

## Significance of the Engagement

**Strategic Balance and Influence** – India seeks to maintain its influence in Afghanistan amid the growing presence of Pakistan and China, both of which have deep political and economic stakes under the Taliban regime.

**Security Imperatives** – Ensuring that Afghan territory is not used to shelter anti-India elements is vital for India's national security and counterterrorism strategy.

**Diplomatic Realism** – Although India has not officially recognized the Taliban government, its diplomatic outreach indicates a de facto acknowledgment of the Taliban's control – recognizing geopolitical realities without formal endorsement.

**Regional Stability and Cooperation** – India's participation in multilateral platforms such as the Moscow Format shows a preference for regional consensus-building on Afghanistan's political, economic, and security future.

## Why India is Engaging with the Taliban Regime

**Strategic Realism and Regional Relevance** – Since the Taliban now exercise complete control over Afghanistan, India recognizes the necessity of engaging the de facto authority to safeguard its strategic interests. Ignoring the Taliban regime would effectively cede geopolitical ground to Pakistan and China, both of whom already hold considerable influence in Kabul.

**Security and Counterterrorism** – India shares international concerns about Afghanistan becoming a hub for transnational terrorism. Taliban assurances on non-use of Afghan soil for terror are significant, though India remains cautious about their credibility.

**Protection of Indian Investments** – India has invested over USD 3 billion in Afghanistan's reconstruction, including –

1. The Zaranj–Delaram Highway, enhancing connectivity with Iran.
2. The Salma Dam (India–Afghanistan Friendship Dam).
3. The Afghan Parliament building, symbolizing democratic cooperation. Re-engagement helps India monitor, safeguard, and potentially revive these projects.

**Response to Regional Power Shifts** – China's engagement through mining and infrastructure deals (e.g., Mes Aynak copper mines) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have expanded its footprint.

Russia and Iran maintain active diplomatic channels with the Taliban. India's absence would mean strategic marginalization in its own neighbourhood.

**Economic and Connectivity Goals** – Afghanistan remains geographically central to India's plans for connectivity with Central Asia. Engagement strengthens India's position in regional infrastructure initiatives like –

4. Chabahar Port in Iran (gateway to Central Asia).
5. International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC).
6. Counter-balancing China's CPEC and BRI routes.

### India's Engagement Strategy

**Engagement without Formal Recognition** – India's decision to reopen its embassy with a chargé d'affaires (rather than an ambassador) signals non-recognition of the Taliban regime while ensuring a diplomatic presence. This allows India to preserve autonomy and flexibility in its Afghanistan policy until an international consensus emerges.

**Balancing Great Power Alignments** – India supports the Moscow Format's principle of no foreign military presence in Afghanistan, aligning partially with Russia and China. However, it remains cautious not to be seen as aligning fully with the Russia–China bloc, thereby maintaining balance with Western partners and the US.

**Humanitarian and Development Focus** – India continues to deliver food aid, medicines, and vaccines through the UN and direct humanitarian channels – ensuring goodwill among the Afghan population.

**Avoiding Ideological Entrapment** – India's silence on human rights and women's education in its latest statements signals a shift from value-based diplomacy to realist pragmatism. The focus is now on security, stability, and economic engagement rather than ideological conditionalities.

### Challenges in Engagement

**Credibility of Taliban Assurances** – Past experiences raise doubts about the Taliban's control over all militant factions, especially Haqqani Network and Pakistani proxies.

**Risk of Regional Isolation** – If India's engagement is perceived as legitimizing the Taliban, it could strain relations with Western partners who still refuse formal recognition.

**Human Rights Dilemma** – India's avoidance of the human rights issue may attract criticism from international rights groups, affecting its image as a democracy promoting liberal values.

**Security Risks on the Ground** – Maintaining diplomatic and development staff in Afghanistan remains challenging due to security and intelligence risks.

### Conclusion

India's evolving engagement with the Taliban regime reflects strategic pragmatism rooted in geopolitical realism. By reopening its embassy and maintaining dialogue, India seeks to protect its investments, manage security threats, and retain influence in Afghanistan's future political and economic order. This approach mirrors India's broader foreign policy trend – balancing principles with practicality, and idealism with strategic interests, in a shifting multipolar world. Ultimately, India's calibrated re-engagement is not about endorsement but about remaining a relevant power in Afghanistan's evolving geopolitical landscape.

Source – <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-upgrade-its-kabul-mission-to-full-embassy-status-jaishankar/article70147326.ece>