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MULLAH AMIR KHAN MUTTAQI'S VISIT TO INDIA AND THE SHIFT IN POLICIES



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MULLAH AMIR KHAN MUTTAQI'S VISIT TO INDIA AND THE SHIFT IN POLICIES

Introduction

Although India and Afghanistan do not share a direct land border, the two countries have long been connected through historical, cultural, commercial, and diplomatic ties. Throughout history, Pakistan has viewed this relationship with suspicion and has based part of its foreign policy on preventing India's influence in Afghanistan.

Looking at India-Afghanistan relations in a broader historical context, during the Cold War period, the two countries maintained relatively good relations. This was largely because Afghanistan's pro-Soviet governments shared close ties with the Soviet Union, India's strategic partner at the time. However, after the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of Dr. Najibullah's government, relations between India and Afghanistan declined until the establishment of the Republic. During the twenty years of the Republic (2001–2021), India and Afghanistan gradually rebuilt their relationship and brought it to a constructive and cooperative level.

The Indian Scholar *Sri Pati Narayanan* notes:

"From 1947 to 1992, India's influence in Afghanistan was greater than Pakistan's. In order to reduce this influence and expand its own role in Afghan affairs, Pakistan sought an opportunity and eventually found it through the Taliban movement. Internal divisions among the Mujahideen paved the way for Pakistan to facilitate the rise of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. With the Taliban's ascent to power, India withdrew from Afghanistan, cut all diplomatic ties with Kabul, and classified the Taliban as a terrorist group."

Relations between the Islamic Emirate and India were revived after a long hiatus, particularly following the signing of the Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the United States. As the Taliban rapidly gained control over much of Afghanistan, India became increasingly concerned and decided to establish informal contact with the group. Indian policymakers believed that if the Taliban were to take full control of Afghanistan, India needed an alternative mechanism to safeguard its national interests there.

When the Taliban eventually took power across Afghanistan, India initially acted with great caution. Later, it adopted a strategy centered on humanitarian diplomacy, assisting as a means of limited engagement with the Taliban authorities. Through this approach, New Delhi reactivated its embassy in Kabul under the title of the "Technical Team for Humanitarian Assistance and Coordination."

Finally, on Thursday, October 9, 2025, when the Taliban's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, visited India, the Indian government announced that it would officially reopen its embassy in Kabul to facilitate formal diplomatic relations. This decision marked the beginning of a new



chapter in bilateral relations between the two countries, and the present analysis focuses precisely on this development.

HISTORICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN

From a historical perspective, after gaining independence from Britain, India sought to strengthen its political ties with Afghanistan by signing the *Treaty of Friendship* in 1950. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, India supported the Soviet Union and aligned itself against the Afghan Mujahideen.

From 1996 to 2001, when the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Taliban regime) was in power, India severed all diplomatic relations and support for Afghanistan. The main reason was India's belief that the Taliban were a Pakistan-backed group and that Pakistan intended to use Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a haven for militant groups operating in Kashmir. Consequently, India supported the *Northern Alliance* during that period.

When the Taliban government collapsed in 2001, India swiftly re-established its relations with Afghanistan. It reopened its embassy in Kabul and later established consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, Herat, and Kandahar, thereby restoring full diplomatic engagement. In 2011, India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan signed a *Strategic Partnership Agreement* committing both countries to extensive cooperation in political, economic, cultural, educational, and other sectors.

INDIA'S POLICY SHIFT TOWARD THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

In September 2020, India's External Affairs Minister, *Subrahmanyam Jaishankar*, participated via video conference in the inaugural session of the peace talks between the Afghan government's negotiating team and the Taliban in Doha. This marked a significant step, signaling that dialogue and engagement with the Taliban had become a necessity driven by India's national interests.

Before Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi visited India, New Delhi had adopted a "*Watch and Wait Policy*"—also referred to as *strategic patience*—toward the Taliban. Under this approach, India closely monitored the policies and behavior of the Islamic Emirate. It deferred any decision on formal engagement until it had sufficient confidence in the group's intentions and governance style.

During this period of observation, India pursued two parallel diplomatic strategies:

1. Humanitarian Diplomacy:



India launched a broad humanitarian initiative toward Afghanistan. In 2021, it sent 50,000 tons of wheat to support the Afghan population. Later that year, India delivered 1.6 tons of medical supplies to the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul and donated five million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to help curb the pandemic. Following the devastating earthquake in Paktika province, India dispatched 27 tons of emergency relief materials, including tents and blankets.

This humanitarian diplomacy proved effective, helping to build goodwill and encouraging the Islamic Emirate to consider constructive bilateral engagement with India. In mid-2022, India deployed a technical team to Kabul to coordinate the delivery of its humanitarian aid in cooperation with the Taliban authorities. The team also held occasional meetings with senior Taliban officials, which gradually contributed to improving mutual understanding and trust between the two sides.

2. Regional and Multilateral Diplomacy:

India's second, less publicized strategy was its regional and multilateral approach toward the Islamic Emirate. Rather than engaging unilaterally, India preferred to coordinate its policies with other regional actors and to express its views on Afghanistan through joint platforms.

In this context, India participated in several regional meetings on Afghanistan and hosted the *Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan* on November 10–11, 2021. National Security Advisers from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran attended the meeting, while Pakistan and China were notably absent. By chairing this dialogue, India clearly articulated its regional position and, together with the other participating countries, issued a joint declaration that highlighted several key principles. The declaration underscored the importance of establishing an inclusive government in Afghanistan that represents all communities, ensuring respect for human rights, preventing the spread of terrorism, and guaranteeing that Afghan territory would not be used to threaten or undermine the security of any other nation.

India also took part in the Fifth Multilateral Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, hosted by Russia in Moscow in February 2023. India's representative reiterated New Delhi's position that it seeks a *safe, stable, and peaceful Afghanistan* and called for enhanced regional security and intelligence cooperation to counter groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and other transnational terrorist organizations.

Furthermore, India actively participated in discussions on Afghanistan within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), seeking to align its stance with that of other regional powers and to promote a collective and balanced approach toward Afghanistan's stability and future.



THE END OF INDIA'S "WATCH AND WAIT" POLICY FOLLOWING AMIR KHAN MUTTAQI'S VISIT

After Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, visited India on Thursday, October 9, 2025, and met with senior Indian officials, including the External Affairs Minister, India's "Watch and Wait" policy came to an end. This visit marked a turning point in India's approach toward the Islamic Emirate and brought about several key changes:

- a. India officially announced the reopening of its embassy in Kabul, thereby restoring full diplomatic representation and elevating bilateral relations to a formal diplomatic level. This move demonstrated that India had concluded its phase of cautious observation and had gained sufficient confidence in the policies and conduct of the Islamic Emirate to engage directly and officially.
- b. Previously, India's engagement in Afghan affairs had been primarily conducted within a multilateral framework. New Delhi preferred to act collectively with regional states rather than independently. However, this visit signaled a shift—India took an autonomous decision to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Islamic Emirate, underscoring a new level of confidence and strategic independence in its Afghanistan policy.
- c. Until then, India's presence in Kabul had been limited to humanitarian coordination through a technical team stationed at its embassy. With the official reopening of the embassy, the scope of relations expanded beyond humanitarian aid, paving the way for broader cooperation in political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian fields between the two countries.

CONCLUSION

India has historically viewed Afghanistan through the prism of its rivalry with Pakistan. Whenever Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan increased or its relations with the Afghan government improved, India's presence and engagement tended to decline. For instance, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when Pakistan supported the Mujahideen, India sided with the Soviet Union. Similarly, during the Taliban's first regime, when Pakistan recognized and supported the Islamic Emirate, India completely severed its ties with Kabul. Conversely, during the twenty-year Republic period (2001–2021), when India and Afghanistan enjoyed close cooperation, relations between Kabul and Islamabad were strained.

In essence, Afghanistan has often served as a geopolitical arena for a proxy rivalry between India and Pakistan, each seeking to expand its influence within Afghan political structures and safeguard its own strategic interests, often at the expense of Afghanistan's stability and sovereignty.



After the return of the Islamic Emirate to power in 2021, India pragmatically recognized the new political realities on the ground and initiated contact with the Taliban. Nonetheless, for the first four years, it maintained its “Watch and Wait” approach, refraining from formal engagement. Muttaqi’s visit to India marked the end of that phase: India reopened its embassy in Kabul, signaling a readiness to move toward normalized bilateral relations. This visit holds great importance for the future of Indo-Afghan ties.

India has played a significant role in Afghanistan’s reconstruction and was among its closest and most strategic partners during the Republic era. For Pakistan, the “India card” remains strategically vital, as any Afghan government’s relationship with India can serve as leverage in Islamabad’s regional calculations.

Meanwhile, relations between the Islamic Emirate and Pakistan have deteriorated sharply due to disputes over the Durand Line, refugee issues, and cross-border security tensions. The recent Pakistani airstrike on Kabul, followed by retaliatory attacks from the Islamic Emirate along the Durand Line, has pushed relations to their lowest point in decades. In international relations, it is often said that *“the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”* Given the current hostility between Kabul and Islamabad, this dynamic could naturally bring the Islamic Emirate closer to India. It is also notable that Pakistan’s attack on Kabul coincided with Muttaqi’s visit to India. This event clearly illustrates Islamabad’s discomfort with any government in Afghanistan drawing closer to New Delhi.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Building Trust with India:

The Islamic Emirate should assure India that its foreign policy is fully independent and grounded in national and Islamic values. It must emphasize that Afghanistan will not view India through the lens of its relations with Pakistan.

2. Maintaining Strategic Balance:

The Islamic Emirate should strive to maintain a balanced foreign policy between India and Pakistan. Excessive closeness to one side, especially India, could further strain relations with Pakistan, a neighboring country with which Afghanistan shares a long and sensitive border.

3. Enhancing Trade Relations:

To strengthen bilateral trade as in the past, India should simplify visa procedures and travel facilitation for Afghan traders, while both governments should work toward expanding official trade cooperation and infrastructure connectivity.



4. Educational Cooperation:

A large number of Afghan students are currently studying in India, and many more wish to pursue higher education there. Therefore, the Government of India is encouraged to continue providing educational opportunities, scholarships, and easier visa access for Afghan students to promote academic and cultural exchange.

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