



The University of World Economy and Diplomacy

Institute for Advanced
International Studies

IAIS Research Nexus

Volume 1. Issue 6

The Taliban's Afghanistan: Isolation, Engagement, and the New Regional Order

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INTRODUCTION: FROM ISOLATION TO INFLUENCE

Since their return to power in 2021, the Taliban have faced international isolation and economic crisis - yet they have steadily maneuvered from the margins to the center of regional geopolitics. No longer treated as ideological pariahs, Afghanistan's de facto rulers are now engaging with neighbors and global powers through transactional diplomacy, leveraging their strategic position at the crossroads of South and West Asia. This study examines the Taliban's calculated reintegration into regional affairs, exploring how border security, resource competition, and shifting alliances are transforming Afghanistan from a fractured state into an unlikely player in the geopolitical arena. As regional powers balance pragmatism with principle, the Taliban's survival hinges on their ability to turn necessity into influence.

However, Afghanistan's pursuit of peace [1] persists despite internal instability and increasing external geopolitical pressures. As the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan approaches its fourth year in power that characterized substantial developments in internal peace process efforts, continued conflict, pronounced international isolation, and the potential for external influence [2]. In this context, the Taliban-led regime has increasingly engaged with regional and global powers basically for international legitimacy, strategic partnerships, and economic development. On the other hand, since their return to power in August 2021, the Taliban leadership has faced diplomatic isolation and an acute economic crisis, prompting them to reorient their foreign policy toward a transactional model that appeals to the strategic interests of neighboring and influential states [3]. Rather than ideological alignment, these engagements are often framed by mutual interest - such as border security, counterterrorism cooperation, mineral extraction, and trade corridor access - reflecting a broader shift in the regional response to Afghanistan through the lens of pragmatic diplomacy [4]. Countries like China, Iran,

[1] Mahfuz Parvez, Afghanistan's Struggle for Peace, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol. 56, Issue No. 33, 14 Aug. 2021, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2021/33>

[2] <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/337-talibans-neighbourhood-regional-diplomacy-afghanistan>

[3] International Crisis Group, Taliban Rule in Afghanistan: Regional Responses, Asia Report No. 335, February 22, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/335-taliban-rule-afghanistan-regional-responses>

[4] Thomas Rutlig, "The Taliban's Foreign Policy Is Opportunistic and Pragmatic," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2023, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/taliban/talibans-foreign-policy-is-opportunistic-and-pragmatic/>



Russia, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian republics have adjusted their postures toward functional engagement, not out of endorsement of the Taliban's domestic governance model, but to protect strategic investments, maintain regional stability, and prevent the emergence of security vacuums [5]. This shift illustrates a wider strategic realist recalibration, where state actors evaluate the Taliban not as ideological pariahs, but as *de facto* rulers whose cooperation - however limited - may be necessary for 'securing national interests' [6]. As such, Afghanistan has increasingly become a testing ground for pragmatic diplomacy, where 'geopolitical necessity' often overrides 'political discomfort or normative principles' [7].

The current indicators suggest Afghanistan's security challenges and peace-building [8] has entered a new phase of a complex trajectory of political transformation and integration rather than genuine national reconciliation. The international community's engagement framework - prioritizing humanitarian access over political resolution - risks institutionalizing Taliban rule without addressing root causes of internal conflict. Amidst the multifaceted crisis confronting the Taliban-led authority - including economic collapse, humanitarian distress, institutional fragility, and international non-recognition - Afghanistan's geopolitical relevance has become increasingly pronounced in light of broader regional transformations. In particular, the recent de-escalation in India-Pakistan tensions, following years of military standoff and diplomatic disengagement, has opened up space for more pragmatic regional recalibrations where Afghanistan may emerge as a pivotal interlocutor or buffer in wider South Asian strategic dynamics [9]. At the same time, the escalating and bloody conflict between Iran and Israel has sharpened geopolitical fault lines across West Asia, indirectly raising the strategic profile of Afghanistan due to its geographic positioning at the intersection of South, Central, and West Asia [10]. As regional powers are forced to reassess priorities amidst competing crises, Afghanistan's status as a crossroads state - rich in mineral wealth, yet burdened by insecurity - makes it simultaneously a risk and a potential asset in wider strategic calculations [11].

These overlapping tensions and shifts create both challenges and opportunities. For regional actors, Afghanistan is no longer merely a site of instability but increasingly a space that requires careful diplomatic balancing - whether to prevent spillover of extremism, protect emerging trade and energy corridors, or counterbalance rival spheres of influence [12]. In this context, the Taliban administration, while diplomatically isolated,

[5] Avinash Paliwal, "Afghanistan and the Return of Realpolitik in South Asia," *The Diplomat*, September 15, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com>.

[6] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 703–745.

[7] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1978), 4–15.

[8] <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban#:~:text=The%20Taliban%20victory%20has%20brought,Ayman%20al%20Zawahiri%20in%20Kabul>.

[9] C. Raja Mohan, "India-Pakistan: Managing a Cold Peace," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

[10] International Crisis Group, "The Regional Fallout of the Iran–Israel Conflict," *Middle East Brief No. 92*, May 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org>.

[11] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan's Mineral Wealth and Its Geostrategic Stakes," *Brookings Institution*, November 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu>.

[12] Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2023).



has leveraged regional rivalries and realignments to position itself as an indispensable stakeholder, seeking legitimacy through functional cooperation on border security, transit, and counterterrorism [13]. Policymakers in South and West Asia must now move beyond reactive postures and consider constructive frameworks of engagement that recognize Afghanistan's strategic entanglement in regional stability, connectivity, and geopolitical competition. This necessitates a pragmatic but principled diplomacy, one that blends realist security imperatives with humanitarian concerns and long-term development goals.

TALIBAN'AFGHANISTAN AS A GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT

The rebirth of the Taliban [14] in power since the fall of Kabul in August 2021 has fundamentally reshaped Afghanistan's internal political landscape, regional equation, and importance. In the absence of formal international recognition, the Taliban have established a 'de facto governing structure' [15] - commonly referred to as a shadow government - which now functions as the central authority across much of the country. Fascinatingly, the warlords who have transitioned into political administrators have effectively maintained the minimal diplomacy with neighbouring nations and international powers that is necessary for its stable political structure. This evolving political art and governance framework reflects not merely a continuation of conflict, but a transition toward a durable, if controversial, political order. As the Taliban navigate complex domestic challenges - ranging from economic stagnation to human rights criticisms - their regime simultaneously asserts itself as a regional actor, with strategic importance in South and West Asian geopolitics. The changing dynamics in the India-Pakistan relationship and the Iran-Israel conflict further highlight the Taliban's potential to influence regional alignments, either directly or indirectly, thus positioning Afghanistan as more than just a passive arena of conflict, but an emerging participant in shaping the broader regional order.

Afghanistan's strategic relevance extends far beyond its borders, becoming increasingly central to the evolving geopolitical dynamics of both South Asia and West Asia. The country's post-2021 political realignment under Taliban rule has not only reshaped its domestic affairs but also had ripple effects across regional fault lines. In South Asia, Afghanistan remains a critical variable in the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry. Pakistan's historical patronage of the Taliban movement and its continued influence over segments of the Afghan political landscape [16] contrast sharply with India's strategic interests [17] in maintaining regional stability, investing in Afghan infrastructure, and countering Pakistan-backed militancy. The Taliban's presence thus complicates regional security calculations, particularly as India recalibrates its approach toward engagement with the Afghan regime.

[13] Thomas Ruttig, "The Taliban's Foreign Relations in a Fragmented World," Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 2024, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org>.

[14] <https://www.islamicity.org/79086/the-rise-fall-and-rebirth-of-the-taliban/>

[15] <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/the-taliban-at-war/>

[16] <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/>

[17] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505249>



In parallel, West Asia's volatile geopolitical context [18] - marked by the intensifying conflict between Iran and Israel - introduces further complexity. Afghanistan, though not directly involved, may be increasingly implicated in these dynamics due to ideological proximities, shifting alliances, and potential insurgent movements that transcend national borders. As the Taliban-led government seeks [19] regional legitimacy, its stance on such conflicts - and the manner in which it manages relationships with Iran, Gulf states, and broader Islamic political currents - could significantly shape its role as a mediator, ally, or destabilizing force in the wider region. Thus, Afghanistan is emerging not just as a site of internal transformation, but as a pivotal actor in the geopolitical chessboard of South and West Asia.

Afghanistan under Taliban rule stands at a critical juncture - one forged not merely by its own tumultuous history, but by the hardened contours of regional conflict that scar South and West Asia alike. This moment in its modern political trajectory is not merely pivotal; it is portentous. It may well shape the very terms under which Afghanistan engages, or fails to engage, with the world beyond its rugged borders.

TALIBAN'S AFGHANISTAN AND NEIGHBOURING STATES

The absence of formal international recognition has not prevented the Taliban from engaging with its neighbors, most of whom have adopted pragmatic, interest-driven approaches. Iran, China, Pakistan, Russia, and the Central Asian republics have sought to balance concerns over terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and refugee flows with opportunities for economic and strategic influence. As a result, Afghanistan has become a focal point for regional diplomacy, where geopolitical rivalries intersect with efforts to maintain stability along its porous borders.

AFGHANISTAN-IRAN

The Taliban-controlled Afghanistan emerges as a significant variable in the strategic calculus of neighbouring states and broader regional security architectures. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Taliban-led Afghanistan share a 'complicated and changing relationship' [20]. Historically, their relationship has been contentious and frequently hostile. The Shia theocracy that ruled Iran in the 1990s harboured strong misgivings toward the Sunni traditionalist Taliban, especially after the 1998 'Mazar-i-Sharif killing' [21] of Iranian diplomats that nearly pushed both nations to war. But particularly after 2021, the geopolitical environment has changed significantly, leading to a cautious rapprochement between Tehran and the Kabul.

Following the U.S. exit and the Taliban's comeback, Iran has forced to change its political posture to protect its interests. In order to maintain border security, safeguard Shia minorities, especially the 'Hazara' [22] population, and stop the flow of refugees and

[18] <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/west-asia-a-heavily-militarised-region>

[19] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732345>

[20] <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/06/iran-and-afghanistans-long-complicated-history>

[21] <https://english.news.cn/20230808/5ede36a1974e48bf93dc9f78cfd18f2/c/c.html#:~:text=8%2C%201998%2C%20during%20the%20Afghan,%2C%20humanitarian%20and%20international%20commitments.%22>

[22] <https://minorityrights.org/communities/hazaras/>



drugs across the porous border, Tehran has pursued limited cooperation with the Taliban leadership. Iran's larger regional strategy of controlling instability on its eastern border while keeping Afghanistan from serving as a platform for anti-Iranian militant activity or outside influence, especially from the US or Gulf adversaries, is reflected in this practical engagement.

Interestingly, Iran faces both strategic risks and opportunities in Afghanistan under the Taliban. On the one hand, the establishment of strong alliances is hindered by the ideological divide between the Taliban's 'Deobandi-inspired Sunni orthodoxy' [23] and Iran's 'revolutionary Shiism' [24]. However, overlapping interests result from a shared resistance to the Western military presence and a shared desire to get over sanctions imposed by the United States. This balancing act may become more difficult as a result of the Taliban's growing connections with Iran's regional rivals, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, particularly if Afghanistan is utilized as a buffer zone or proxy in the larger Saudi-Iranian conflict. From an ideological standpoint, sectarian tensions could be stoked or exacerbated by the Taliban's rigid Sunni Islamic administration model, particularly if anti-Shia rhetoric is entrenched. This might exacerbate sectarian strife in Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria and endanger Iran's regional allies internally. Iran might, however, use the modest doctrinal convergence - especially on pan-Islamic anti-Western narratives - as a foundation for tactical collaboration provided it is handled correctly.

Afghanistan's deepening ties with Iran have significant implications for global sanctions regimes, regional security architectures, and international diplomacy. From a Western perspective, this alignment may be interpreted as an extension of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" - comprising Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, and potentially a neutral or ambivalent Afghanistan. However, if the Taliban pursues a multi-vector foreign policy that engages simultaneously with Iran, China, Russia, India, and Gulf states, it could emerge as a pragmatic, transactional actor within a reconfigured regional order [25].

Afghanistan and Iran, long marked by tension, are undergoing a strategic rebalancing shaped by regional realignments and pragmatic interests [26]. Tehran's engagement with the Taliban has evolved from cautious outreach to more substantive cooperation, covering diplomatic coordination, economic integration through energy and infrastructure initiatives, and security collaboration to manage shared challenges such as drug trafficking and water disputes. This emerging partnership has significant implications for the stability of Western and South Asia, on two levels:

a) Regional Peace and Order: A stabilized Iran-Afghanistan axis could mitigate cross-border risks - particularly narcotics flows and refugee surges - while also enhancing water-sharing mechanisms (e.g., for the Helmand River), thus supporting more

[23] <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-long-shadow-of-deobandism-in-south-asia/>

[24] See, Juan Ricardo Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism...* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004).

[25] Adapted from analysis of current regional dynamics involving Afghanistan and Iran's evolving bilateral relationship; see discussion in recent policy briefings and Middle East security reports.

[26] Silvia Boltuc, *Iran-Afghanistan Relations: Emerging Dynamics and Challenges*, *Persian Files* ISSN2975-0598 Vol27, No2 (Nov 2024).

sustainable governance and reducing sources of interstate friction [27].

b) Afghan Domestic Governance and Sectarian Relations: Iran's influence - through soft power and advocacy [28] for inclusive governance - exerts pressure on the Taliban to accommodate Shī'a minorities, especially Hazaras. As Kabul warms to Tehran, Afghanistan's internal sectarian fault lines may become more moderated through diplomacy and cooperation - though challenges and uncertainties remain.

AFGHANISTAN-CENTRAL ASIA

Since the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan has stood at a strategic inflection point - shaped by both urgent internal needs and shifting regional realities. Across South, West, and especially Central Asia, neighboring states now recognize that Afghanistan's stability is intrinsically bound to their own security and development objectives [29]. Central Asian countries, led by Uzbekistan [30], have adopted a pragmatic and cooperative posture toward Kabul. Tashkent has spearheaded efforts to facilitate economic connectivity - backing infrastructure projects like the proposed Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway - and convened forums and diplomatic channels that frame Afghanistan not as a threat, but as a potential linchpin for regional integration [31].

In practice, Uzbekistan's approach reflects a balanced blend of engagement and non-alignment: it channels humanitarian assistance and emphasizes counter-terrorism cooperation and water/resource management [32]. This strategy has yielded growing trade - exceeding \$1 billion by 2024 - and incremental trust, even as regional bodies like the SCO and UN recognize the need for sustained inclusion of Afghanistan [33].

The evolution of this Central Asian paradigm highlights two key determinants shaping Afghanistan's future role. First, the extent to which the Taliban government aligns with regional norms - such as diplomatic openness, inclusive governance, and economic modernization - will influence whether Afghanistan can be accepted as a partner rather than pariah. Second, the unity of Central Asian neighbors, strengthened by recent trilateral border accords and Uzbekistan's diplomatic activism, indicates a willingness to share responsibility for maintaining Afghan peace [34].

[27] Asif Shuja, "Iran-Taliban Cooperation: New Dimension in Afghan Conflict?," RSIS Commentary, (October 2021).

[28] Niaz M. Hamdard, Abdulbasit Elham, and Rafiudeen Shahid, "Iran and Afghanistan Soft Power Diplomacy," Policy Research Journal 3, no. 1 (January 2025): 515–28.

[29] Ukraine-era dynamics have prompted Central Asian states to pursue autonomy and embrace diversified regional engagement—including with Afghanistan—for shared economic and security interests.¹ See Russia officially recognized the Taliban government on July 3, 2025, signaling increased regional engagement. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-becomes-first-country-recognise-taliban-government-afghanistan-2025-07-03/>.

[30] Nargiza Umarova, Uzbekistan's Approach to Afghanistan in the Context of Strengthening Regional Security, The Diplomat, September 12, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/uzbekistans-approach-to-afghanistan-in-the-context-of-strengthening-regional-security/>.

[31] Uzbekistan has actively promoted trans-Afghan infrastructure (rail, trade corridors), including the 573km Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway and strong participation in 2021's Tashkent Connectivity conference. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uzbekistan%E2%80%93Afghanistan%E2%80%93Pakistan_Railway_Project

[32] The "6+3" initiative and Tashkent's sustained counterterrorism coordination, UN-backed dialogue mechanisms, and humanitarian support highlight a low-blocs, high-diplomacy strategy.

[33] Uzbekistan-Afghanistan trade recently exceeded \$1 billion, with growing Afghan investment in Uzbekistan. They also host SCO and UN summits on Afghan integration.

[34] The March 2025 Khujand trilateral border treaty between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan exemplifies Central Asia's shift toward collective regional architecture. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khujand_treaty

Together, these dynamics point toward a more constructive future: rather than sidelining Afghanistan, Central Asia is crafting a calibrated framework that interweaves connectivity, security collaboration, and political normalization. If the Taliban reciprocates through pragmatic adaptation, Afghanistan could emerge not on the margins of geography, but at the nexus of Eurasian stability and economic renewal.

AFGHANISTAN-SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan's relations with South Asian states under Taliban rule are undergoing a process of pragmatic recalibration, shaped by shifting geopolitical imperatives, mutual security concerns, and deepening economic interdependence. The Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 triggered initial uncertainty and diplomatic caution across the region. However, by 2023–2025, South Asian states began adjusting their policies - moving from normative condemnation to strategic engagement based on realpolitik and shared interests.

Pakistan, once seen as the Taliban's key patron, has found its relationship increasingly fraught. Despite early optimism, Kabul's unwillingness - or inability - to restrain cross-border militancy, particularly the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has led to renewed hostilities, border closures, and refugee expulsions. Nevertheless, Pakistan continues to engage diplomatically, driven by the need to stabilize its western frontier and limit regional isolation [35].

India has adopted a cautious yet strategic approach in engaging with the Taliban regime, shaped by its broader regional security and economic interests. While it has withheld formal recognition, New Delhi has reopened its diplomatic mission in Kabul, resumed humanitarian assistance, and continued its involvement in infrastructure development, including projects such as the Salma Dam, highway construction, and the Chabahar port initiative. Recent diplomatic interactions, including ministerial-level dialogues in 2025, underscore India's intent to maintain a calibrated presence in Afghanistan. This policy reflects a deliberate balancing act: mitigating Pakistan's influence, addressing potential security threats, and preserving avenues for future economic engagement [36].

Smaller South Asian states - such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal - have maintained cautious engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan, largely aligning with regional and international consensus. While these countries are not primary actors in Afghan affairs, they remain sensitive to the broader consequences of instability, particularly the transnational risks of extremism, narcotics trafficking, and irregular migration. Although formal regional mechanisms like SAARC [37] have seen diminished

[35] Still, efforts to normalize relations have resumed. In mid-2025, Pakistan upgraded its diplomatic mission to ambassadorial level and reaffirmed cooperation on cross-border militancy during Beijing-mediated talks, though concerns over civilian safety and militant sanctuaries persist. See, Diplomatic upgrade and China-mediated outreach: AP News, June 2025.

[36] Harsh V. Pant and Rudra Chaudhuri, India's Afghan Strategy after the Taliban Takeover, Observer Research Foundation Report, April 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-afghan-strategy>.

[37] Afghanistan continues to hold membership in SAARC, even as institutional cooperation has weakened post-2021. At the same time, the Taliban have participated in broader regional formats—such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation contact group—signaling intent to engage diplomatically while easing external tensions.

activity, dialogue persists through United Nations forums, bilateral outreach, and initiatives such as the South Asia Peace Initiative, reflecting a continued, if limited, commitment to regional stability and conflict mitigation [38].

In essence, Afghanistan's relations with South Asian states under Taliban rule have transitioned from ideological confrontation to cautious, interest-driven engagement. Pakistan's approach remains primarily security-oriented, focused on curbing cross-border militancy, while India emphasizes development cooperation and strategic balancing. Meanwhile, other South Asian countries, though less directly involved, remain attentive to the regional implications of Afghan instability. These dynamics underscore a broader recognition that Afghanistan's trajectory significantly affects the subcontinent's security and economic outlook. The effectiveness of this evolving regional posture ultimately depends on the Taliban's willingness to address shared concerns - particularly in counterterrorism, human rights, and connectivity - without fully relinquishing its ideological stance [39].

THE NORMALIZATION OF ENGAGEMENT AND THE STRATEGIC REINTEGRATION OF TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN

Through practical, de facto interactions, Taliban-led Afghanistan is gradually establishing a place in the regional and global order despite the lack of official diplomatic recognition. The majority of regional powers, including competitors and stakeholders, have started productive discussions with the government on topics ranging from border security to trade and connectivity, even though no state has yet to provide the Islamic Emirate de jure recognition. As geopolitical realities force engagement over isolation, this approach shows a transition from ideological rejection to strategic accommodation. India, which was previously a strong opponent of the Taliban, has significantly 'changed its mind' [40]. A major diplomatic overture was made recently when Afghanistan's temporary foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, spoke with India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, over the phone shortly after 'Operation Sindoor' [41], termed as 'Breaking the Ice' [42]. This action shows that New Delhi understands the importance of continuing to be involved in Afghan affairs, especially to safeguard its own strategic interests in the area and to offset Pakistan's historical influence.

The Taliban's growing engagement [43] in multilateral regional diplomacy is further evidenced by the subsequent informal trilateral meeting that Afghanistan's acting foreign

[38] Sumit Ganguly and M. Amarjeet Singh, *Afghanistan and South Asia: Security Spillovers and Regional Responses*, Institute of South Asian Studies Policy Brief No. 92, January 2025, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/afghanistan-and-south-asia-security-spillovers>.

[39] Harsh V. Pant and Kabir Taneja, *Afghanistan and South Asia: Evolving Geopolitical Realities under Taliban Rule*, Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper No. 404, March 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/afghanistan-and-south-asia-evolving-geopolitical-realities>.

[40] <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8ke9e27dxo>

[41] <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/operation-sindoor-a-coming-of-age-for-india-s-defence-industry>

[42] https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&id=12941&lid=7908

[43] <https://www.iss.org/ja-JP/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/towards-the-reintegration-of-afghanistan-into-the-international-community/#:~:text=Approximately%2015.8%20million%20people%20suffer%20struggle%20to%20meet%20basic%20needs.&text=From%20August%202021%E2%80%93January%202024,Bank%20and%20Asian%20Development%20Bank.&text=Against%20an%20increasingly%20complicated%20geopolitical%20reintegr>



minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, attended with his Chinese and Pakistani counterparts [44]. This normalization trend is further supported by Pakistan and Afghanistan's decision to raise their diplomatic relations to the ambassadorial level. These trends indicate Afghanistan's gradual reintegration into the regional diplomatic system, based on shared strategic imperatives rather than official recognition.

Afghanistan under Taliban rule is gradually transitioning from an isolated pariah state to a contentious yet consequential actor in the geopolitical dynamics of South and West Asia. This emerging role is being shaped through both bilateral engagements - with key players like India and Pakistan - and participation in multilateral frameworks involving influential regional powers such as China and Iran. While this evolution is fraught with contradictions and strategic risks, it is poised to significantly influence the trajectory of international diplomacy, ideological alignments, and the regional balance of power.

Importantly, the responsibility for shaping Afghanistan's path does not rest with Kabul alone. Regional stakeholders must confront a critical policy dilemma: whether to engage with the Taliban regime through coercion, integration, or strategic disengagement. Afghanistan's future will either mirror the persistent pathologies of regional instability or, despite all odds, create a more positive and stabilizing position within its neighborhood at this precarious crossroads between historical grievance and geopolitical recalibration.

CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING ISOLATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN A SHIFTING REGIONAL LANDSCAPE

Policymakers across South and West Asia are now presented with a strategic opportunity to move beyond reactive, short-term crisis management and adopt forward-looking frameworks of regional engagement. In light of Afghanistan's ongoing transitions and its central location at the nexus of South, Central, and West Asia, regional actors must consider its stabilization as a shared priority [45]. This moment calls for a shift toward collaborative and multilateral diplomacy rooted in institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and relevant United Nations agencies.

While SAARC has long faced political gridlock, its founding mandate - to promote regional peace, stability, and economic cooperation - remains relevant. Revitalizing SAARC's mechanisms for disaster response, food security, and cross-border connectivity could provide a constructive platform for re-engaging Afghanistan in non-political, development-focused cooperation [46]. At the same time, the SCO offers a more security-oriented framework through which regional powers, particularly China, Russia, India, and Pakistan, can coordinate on counterterrorism, border stability, and economic integration initiatives that include Afghanistan [47].

[44] <https://mfa.gov.af/en/18756>

[45] Rubin explains Afghanistan's regional entanglements and its impact on neighboring states' stability. See, Rubin, Barnett R. *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*. London: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[46] Rizvi, Gowher. "SAARC: Problems and Prospects." *South Asian Survey*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–15.

[47] Allison, Roy. "The SCO and Afghanistan: Regional Organisation or Regional Engagement?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, pp. 63–73; Roy, Meena Singh. "Afghanistan in SCO: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and Security." ORF Occasional Paper No. 395, Observer Research Foundation, 2023.



Complementing these regional platforms, UN agencies such as UNDP, UNHCR, and UNODC continue to play critical roles in humanitarian support, institutional capacity building, and anti-narcotics efforts. A synergistic policy that aligns regional political commitments with UN-led development programming could significantly strengthen long-term peacebuilding efforts [48].

To ensure sustainable peace and stability, diplomacy must be pragmatic - addressing immediate security and economic concerns - and principled, foregrounding inclusive governance, human rights, and local ownership of development pathways [49]. Such an approach can help transform Afghanistan from a site of geopolitical rivalry into a catalyst for regional cooperation, resilience, and mutual growth. Moreover, a sustainable and stable future for Afghanistan requires a dual approach to diplomacy - one that is both pragmatic in addressing immediate security and economic concerns, and principled in promoting inclusive governance and human rights. While many regional actors have prioritized functional engagement with the Taliban - focused on cross-border security, narcotics control, and trade connectivity - this has occurred largely without formal recognition or normative conditionalities. As Western influence wanes, countries like China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan have become more central in shaping regional responses, emphasizing strategic stability over political reform.

This evolving landscape reflects a shift from binary choices of engagement versus isolation toward selective, issue-based cooperation. Multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and potential revitalization of SAARC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) offer pathways to balance immediate interests with long-term peacebuilding.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's integration into a stable regional order will depend not only on the Taliban's diplomatic flexibility but also on the collective responsibility of neighboring states to support a vision rooted in security, inclusivity, and respect for human and regional peace, stability and development [50].

[48] UNDP Afghanistan. "Crisis Response and Resilience Strategy." UNDP, 2023. Describes UNDP's integrated approach to livelihood, governance, and gender programming in Afghanistan.

[49] Saikal emphasizes the need for inclusive, regionally-supported governance as the basis of long-term peace. See, Saikal, Amin. *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*. I.B. Tauris, 2012.

[50] International Crisis Group, *A Balanced Regional Strategy for Afghanistan*, Report No. 332, April 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/balanced-strategy-afghanistan>.

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2. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/337-talibans-neighbourhood-regional-diplomacy-afghanistan>
3. International Crisis Group, Taliban Rule in Afghanistan: Regional Responses, Asia Report No. 335, February 22, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/335-taliban-rule-afghanistan-regional-responses>
4. Thomas Ruttig, "The Taliban's Foreign Policy Is Opportunistic and Pragmatic," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 2023, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/taliban/talibans-foreign-policy-is-opportunistic-and-pragmatic/>.
5. Avinash Paliwal, "Afghanistan and the Return of Realpolitik in South Asia," *The Diplomat*, September 15, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com>.
6. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 703–745.
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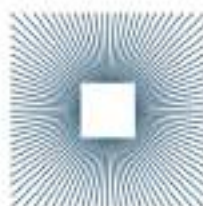
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