

## FROM FOES TO FRIENDS: INDIA-TALIBAN BONHOMIE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

By

**Maheen Shafeeq**

*Research Associate*

*India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI*

Edited by

**Dr. Khurram Abbas**

February 3, 2025

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



On January 8, 2025, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met with Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai.<sup>1</sup> This was the highest-level meeting between India and the Taliban since the fall of Kabul in August 2021. According to reports, Misri focused on enhancing bilateral ties, and indicated a renewed interest in engaging in the developmental projects in Afghanistan. The two sides reviewed the humanitarian assistance provided by India, including wheat, medicine and vaccines.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the two sides discussed using Iran’s Chabahar port to facilitate trade and assistance. In response to Afghan request, reports added, India would prioritise cooperation in health, refugee rehabilitation and sports.<sup>3</sup> The Afghan side acknowledged India’s security concerns, and the two sides agreed to remain in touch. This meeting indicates a significant upgradation of India-Taliban relations.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, “Foreign Secretary’s meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan” press release, January 8, 2025, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign\\_Secretarys\\_meeting\\_with\\_the\\_Acting\\_Foreign\\_Minister\\_of\\_Afghanistan](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign_Secretarys_meeting_with_the_Acting_Foreign_Minister_of_Afghanistan)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, “Foreign Secretary’s meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan” press release, January 8, 2025, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign\\_Secretarys\\_meeting\\_with\\_the\\_Acting\\_Foreign\\_Minister\\_of\\_Afghanistan](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign_Secretarys_meeting_with_the_Acting_Foreign_Minister_of_Afghanistan)

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, “Foreign Secretary’s meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan” press release, January 8, 2025, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign\\_Secretarys\\_meeting\\_with\\_the\\_Acting\\_Foreign\\_Minister\\_of\\_Afghanistan](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign_Secretarys_meeting_with_the_Acting_Foreign_Minister_of_Afghanistan)

## India's Posture towards Taliban

India has maintained an adverse posture towards Taliban since the 1990s. India neither recognised the Taliban's first regime (1996-2001) nor has it recognised the current interim government. Rather, during the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, India supported the anti-Taliban forces, including the Northern Alliance and its warlords. This was intended for two purposes. Firstly, to support the U.S. 'War on Terror'; and, secondly, to collect intelligence on and launch terrorist attacks inside Pakistan to destabilise it.<sup>4</sup>

India's interest in Afghanistan primarily rests on the adversarial relations with its neighbour, Pakistan. As soon as the U.S. departed from Afghanistan, the Indian mission in Kabul and consulates in other cities also packed their bags, and left the country due to fear of Taliban's revenge and other terrorist attacks. This illustrated an overall unfriendly and antagonistic attitude vis-a-vis the Taliban. However, this posture started to change after India recalibrated its approach towards the Taliban in 2022.

## Taliban in Limelight

India has witnessed the Taliban garnering significant regional attention. What was most concerning for New Delhi was the Taliban's close engagement with Pakistan and China – two neighbouring countries with whom India harbours adversarial relationships. Soon after they regained power, the Taliban went both to China and Pakistan to seek assistance for redevelopment of Afghanistan. The three sides also held trilateral dialogues. Although China had always maintained an interest in inclusion of Afghanistan in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and connecting Peshawar to Kabul, a renewed push to promote this framework emerged with the proposal to expand the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> This rang further alarm bells in New Delhi, which felt a distinct sense of losing grip on Afghanistan despite its humanitarian assistance. An interest in developmental efforts, especially the Chabahar Port, was also alluded to during the Misri-Muttaqi

---

<sup>4</sup> Jayshree Bajoria, "RAW: India's External Intelligence Agency," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 7, 2008, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/raw-indias-external-intelligence-agency>; Shemin Joy, "RAW had recruited three warlords in Afghanistan, says book," *Deccan Herald*, August 2, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/raw-had-recruited-three-warlords-in-afghanistan-says-book-868599.html?form=MG0AV3>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, "Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue" press release, May 8, 2023, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-statement-of-the-5th-china-afghanistan-pakistan-foreign-ministers-dialogue>

meeting.<sup>6</sup> In order to begin the process of gaining influence over the Taliban after two decades of hostile relations, India pragmatically modified its approach.

### India's Renewed Interest and Attention

India reopened its Embassy in Kabul after a gap of one year.<sup>7</sup> This time, however, India claimed that the Embassy was functional with a 'technical team.' The 'technical team' received huge criticism from the local populace which extolled the Indian Embassy for not issuing visas, especially to students and patients.<sup>8</sup> This was due to the reason that the Embassy was operational with a particular purpose. The so-called 'technical team' was in effect to serve as the eyes and ears<sup>9</sup> of Indian intelligence agencies to monitor the Taliban's moves and the overall developments in Kabul.

India apprehended that a complete exit from Afghanistan will put the Taliban fully under Islamabad's and Beijing's sway. To prevent this from happening, India began softening its tough posture towards the Taliban as early as November 2023 when a senior Indian diplomat met with the Taliban Defence Minister in Kabul.<sup>10</sup> India also started establishing contact with the Taliban representatives in Abu Dhabi. India even invited the Taliban envoy to its Republic Day in 2024, despite not recognising their government. India also maintained an unsupportive posture towards the Afghanistan Embassy in New Delhi (which was hosting appointees of Ashraf Ghani's government), which had to eventually close down due to lack of funds and 'unsupportive' attitude of New Delhi. Meanwhile, the Taliban representatives slowly started to take charge of the Embassy in New Delhi. Following the Misri-Muttaqi meeting in Dubai, three more Taliban diplomats will be sent to India.<sup>11</sup> These developments indicate that New Delhi is according special attention to engaging the Taliban more closely.

- 
- <sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Foreign Secretary's meeting with the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan" press release, January 8, 2025, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign\\_Secretarys\\_meeting\\_with\\_the\\_Acting\\_Foreign\\_Minister\\_of\\_Afghanistan](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38898/Foreign_Secretarys_meeting_with_the_Acting_Foreign_Minister_of_Afghanistan)
- <sup>7</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Deployment of a technical team in Embassy of India, Kabul" press release, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35437/Deployment+of+a+technical+team+in+Embassy+of+India+Kabul>
- <sup>8</sup> "Taliban urges India to ease visa process for Afghan businessmen, patients & students," *Economic Times*, March 11, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/latest-updates/taliban-urges-india-to-ease-visa-process-for-afghan-businessmen-patients-students/articleshow/108317189.cms?from=mdr>
- <sup>9</sup> Anjana Pasricha, "India Returns to Afghanistan with Small Diplomatic Presence," *VoA*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-returns-to-afghanistan-with-small-diplomatic-presence/6648776.html>
- <sup>10</sup> "Indian diplomat meets Taliban ministers, ex-president Karzai," *Dawn*, November 9, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1871171/indian-diplomat-meets-taliban-ministers-ex-president-karzai>
- <sup>11</sup> "Taliban To Send 3 More Diplomats To Afghan Embassy In Delhi, Reports The Sunday Guardian," *Afghanistan International*, January 20, 2025, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202501208897>

## Sour Tone of Taliban-Islamabad Relations

The Taliban are keen to draw foreign investment regardless of its source to revive the economy in view of the continuing international sanctions. However, Taliban's eagerness to engage with India could also be a way to get back at Pakistan by extending ties with its arch rival, especially when the relations between Islamabad and Kabul are passing through a difficult phase. The Taliban have not fulfilled their commitment and pledges to the international community. Their reluctance to contain terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, and evidently using this issue as a bargaining point, has introduced a sour tone in Taliban-Islamabad relations. In view of a lethargic response from the Taliban, Pakistan has at times resorted to direct measures to address the issue.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding these latest developments, Islamabad has hosted four million Afghanistan refugees for four decades, and continues to provide livelihood to daily wage earners, educational opportunities for students, and health facilities for the patients. After the withdrawal of most foreign Embassies in Kabul, Afghan nationals are utilizing Pakistan's foreign missions to apply for visas, particularly in light of the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the need for resettlement options, which has caused significant backlog for Pakistani citizens seeking visas. Regardless, the Taliban have opted to pursue activities inimical to Pakistan's interests and simultaneously court India. Evidently to return the favour, New Delhi even issued a rare statement criticising Pakistan's alleged airstrikes.<sup>13</sup> This statement came as the stage was set for the Misri-Muttaqi meeting in Dubai.

### 'Encirclement' of Pakistan?

The afore-mentioned moves indicate that by extending an olive branch to the Taliban, India is pursuing an effort to encircle Pakistan. This coincides with a time of falling dominos for India in terms of its engagement in South Asia. After its relations with Bangladesh deteriorated, and Dhaka's ties with Islamabad improved, India has a revised strategy to salvage its sinking influence in the region. Reaching out to the Taliban is also employed as part of the response to the post-Hasina Islamabad-Dhaka equation. The Taliban aligning their interests with India is naturally being viewed with extreme caution by Islamabad.

---

<sup>12</sup> Riaz Khan And Munir Ahmed, "Airstrikes target suspected Pakistani Taliban hideouts in Afghanistan," December 25, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanistan-militant-camp-air-strikes-aac6f1f0aa42f1f3ad88f619b7305724>

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Official Spokesperson's response to media queries regarding airstrikes on Afghan civilians" press release, January 6, 2025, [https://www.mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/38889/Official\\_Spokespersons\\_response\\_to\\_media\\_queries\\_regarding\\_airstrikes\\_on\\_Afghan\\_civilians](https://www.mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/38889/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_media_queries_regarding_airstrikes_on_Afghan_civilians)

Although as of now India and Afghanistan have not had any substantial progress in their relations, this relationship will remain on Islamabad's radar including due to security concerns. Pakistan believes that India has financed and trained anti-Pakistan groups including the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) through its missions in Kabul and Jalalabad.<sup>14</sup> Despite the Taliban's commitment under the Doha agreement, they have not done enough to eliminate the terrorist sanctuaries from Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> As the Taliban continue to host these sanctuaries, India would continue to provide fuel and fire to these separatists and terrorist elements to destabilise Pakistan through terrorist attacks and hybrid warfare. These attacks not only target Pakistan but also Chinese infrastructure in the country. This also indicates that New Delhi seeks to also hurt Pakistan's economy through systematic manoeuvring and targeting.

### Conclusion

Both India and the Taliban maintained a distance before and during the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. As per the Indian statements, the Taliban even launched attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan. However, as the Taliban regained power in August 2021, and have since garnered regional and international attention, India has recalibrated its approach. The meeting between Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi indicates a palpable shift in India's posture towards the Taliban. India appears to be pursuing this strategy to 'encircle' Pakistan as the dominos of its regional influence fell one after another. While the Taliban have a sovereign right to engage with whoever they wish to, courting India to harm Pakistan's interests, and failing to curb the Indian support to terror groups in Afghanistan, is not the extent to which it should go. Regional peace and stability must be the ultimate goal of all engagements, especially at a time when Afghanistan needs rebuilding, and the region is seeking to enhance economic integration and connectivity.

---

<sup>14</sup> "Irrefutable evidence': Dossier on India's sponsorship of state terrorism in Pakistan presented," *Dawn*, November 14, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1590333>

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>