

EXTENSION OF THE CPEC TO AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

On May 21, 2025, during a trilateral meeting in Beijing, the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan discussed the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship initiative of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to Afghanistan, to deepen regional connectivity networks. Traditionally, similar moves have been opposed by India over sovereignty and security concerns, given that such an extension would involve construction through the disputed region of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) with the help of a third country.¹ For instance, in 2022, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) had remarked, "We have seen reports on encouraging proposed participation of

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1. TOI News Desk, "China Pakistan Economic Corridor to Extend into Afghanistan: Why It Matters for India," *The Times of India*, May 21, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-to-expand-into-afghanistan-why-it-matters-for-india/articleshow/121315480.cms>. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

third countries in so-called CPEC projects. Any such actions by any party directly infringe on India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. India firmly and consistently opposes projects in the so-called CPEC, which are in Indian territory that has been illegally occupied by Pakistan".² The CPEC, having originated as an economic initiative between China and Pakistan, has now evolved into a bigger regional initiative with the potential to alter the economic and security dynamics of the whole region. China, for its part, wants to expand the CPEC into Afghanistan for multifarious reasons: to take advantage of its natural resources; capitalise on its potential as a hub for regional connectivity; fortify its ties with the Middle East and Europe; and reduce dependence on maritime pathways that are vulnerable to political instability. Afghanistan stands to benefit from this by securing funds from China to enhance its own energy and transportation infrastructure.

The Taliban signalled their willingness to join the CPEC immediately after taking over Kabul in August 2021. This is best evidenced by a September 2021 conference on "Rebuilding Afghanistan Together", wherein Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid labelled the proposed extension as "very important," affirming the Taliban's commitment to securing projects associated with the corridor.³ Further, China's top diplomat Wang Yi and Afghan interim Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met in July 2022, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) where Wang said, "Beijing supports the extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan and shares China's developmental prospects".⁴ On August 20, 2025, during the sixth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue held in Kabul, Afghanistan, the three sides again expressed their similar intent.⁵

2. Ibid.

3. Shafqat Ali, "CPEC Extension to Afghanistan 'Very Important': Taliban," *Gwadar Pro*, 2021, <https://www.gwadarpro.pk/1434040518837125121/cpec-extension-to-afghanistan-very-important-taliban>. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

4. China News Network, "Wang Yi Meets Acting Afghan FM Muttaqi in Tashkent," July 29, 2022, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1739702210046599037>. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

5. PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministers of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan Hold the Sixth Dialogue", August 21, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxhd/202508/t20250822_11694221.html. Accessed on August 12 2025.

Expanding the CPEC into Afghanistan symbolises a major shift in the political landscape of South Asia as China's flagship trade corridor would no longer be just a China-Pakistan project but a regional one, shifting the power dynamics by drawing Afghanistan into China's economic sphere and reshaping South Asia's geopolitical dynamics which will have an impact on India too.⁶ Recently, Russia became the first and only country to recognise the Taliban-led administration⁷—the Taliban government has not yet been recognised by the majority of the international community, including India, and, therefore, lacks legitimacy.⁸ However, China has gone a step further and appointed a new envoy to Afghanistan in September 2023.

For India to secure a stable and prosperous South Asia, it must, thus, closely monitor the events surrounding the CPEC and its expansion, take diplomatic measures to protect its interests, and look for chances for cooperation and collaboration with other regional partners. This paper takes a qualitative approach to briefly explore the CPEC's development, analyse the trilateral relationships, assess China's strategic interests, and evaluate the strategic implications for India, while suggesting a way forward for safeguarding India's national interests.

OVERVIEW OF CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

To further their alliance, China and Pakistan signed an agreement on April 20, 2015, to commence work on the US\$ 46 billion project to connect Pakistan's Gwadar port to China's Kashgar (see Fig 1) and termed it the CPEC.⁹ The CPEC is now an approximately US\$ 62 billion project which serves as a major foundation in the China-Pakistan economic and strategic partnership and is aimed at fostering

6. M. Hussain and A. B. Jamali, "Geo-Political Dynamics of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A New Great Game in South Asia," *Chinese Political Science Review*, 4, no. 3, 2019, pp. 303–326, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-019-00035-1>

7. Victoria Bisset, "Russia Becomes First Country to Recognize the Taliban Government", *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2025. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

8. Xiuqin and Ling Guo, "A Study of the Extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan in the Context of the Taliban's Return to Power: A Response from Sichuan," *World Journal of Social Science Research*, 9, no. 2, 2022, www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/wjssr. Accessed on August 1, 2025.

9. Dhruvajyoti Bhattacharjee, "China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)," Indian Council of World Affairs, May 12, 2015, <http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/IB/2014/CPECIBI20520.pdf>. Accessed on August 2, 2025.

economic cooperation, enhancing connectivity and integrating both countries with the global economy. It is intended to be the primary undertaking of China's BRI. The CPEC's objectives include addressing Pakistan's chronic energy shortfall, expanding transport and logistics infrastructure, and stimulating industrial and socioeconomic development.¹⁰ The CPEC projects are broadly divided into energy, transport infrastructure, Gwadar, industrial cooperation/Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and social sector development. One of the most important CPEC projects is the Gwadar port.¹¹ This is an important project because of its geostrategic location in the Persian Gulf. It is strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz, a key global oil shipping lane, making it vital for regional trade and energy security. Various projects under the flagship of Gwadar include an international airport, hospital, water desalinisation treatment plant, berthing area/channel dredging, breakwater building, and the Eastbay Expressway.¹²

The CPEC projects have been progressed under various phases. In the early harvest phase (2013–18), the CPEC prioritised energy and transport. Energy addition targets under the early harvest projects were for approximately 10,400 MW (MegaWatts) by 2018, out of a broader CPEC energy goal of around 17,045 MW, including both early harvest and actively promoted projects. Transport infrastructure projects initiated or under construction during this phase include the Karakoram Highway Phase II (HavelianThakot, ~118 km), the Lahore Orange Line Metro (~25.6 km, trial operation in October 2017), and the Multan-Sukkur section (\approx 392 km) of the Karachi-Peshawar Motorway.¹³ In the second phase (2019–23), the focus shifted to industrialisation: multiple SEZs—including Rashakai in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Islamabad Model

10. Ayesha Khattak, "10 Years of CPEC: A Decade of Progress," *Modern Diplomacy*, January 2, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/01/02/10-years-of-cpec-a-decade-of-progress/>. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

11. M. J. Cheema, "Pakistan-India Conflict with Special Reference to Kashmir", *South Asian Studies*, 2015, 30(1), p. 45.

12. Mehtab Haider, "China Converts \$230m Loan for Gwadar Airport into Grant," *Geo News*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/6270-china-converts-230m-loan-for-gwadar-airport-into-grant>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

13. Parvez Jabri, "Early Harvest CPEC Projects Adding 17,045MW Electricity to National Grid", *Business Recorder*, May 20, 2016. Accessed on September 11, 2025.

SEZ—were initiated, alongside expansions of the Gwadar Free Zone and the Gwadar Eastbay Expressway.¹⁴ The third phase (2023 onwards) places significant emphasis on sustainable industries, green energy, the Mainline-1 (ML-1) railway upgrade, and coastal tourism.¹⁵ From Pakistan’s perspective, the dividends expected out of these projects include relief from severe energy shortages [which once caused estimated annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) losses of \$13.5 billion] and improved power reliability.¹⁶ Transport infrastructure has had a transformative impact: more than 800 km of new roads and transmission lines have reduced travel times and logistics costs while strengthening regional connectivity.¹⁷ The Gwadar port’s expansion—which will enable it to handle 45–65 million tons by 2030 and potentially 300 million by 2050—may position Pakistan on major global trade routes.¹⁸

However, the CPEC’s implementation has faced delays and challenges. Chinese media sources report that under Phase I, 38 projects worth approximately \$25.2 billion have been completed, while 26 projects totalling \$26.8 billion are still pending or under development.¹⁹ A total of 63 projects were scheduled to be completed by 2030. However, the completion of 38 projects suggests that approximately 60 per cent of the planned projects have been completed so far, with many projects still under construction, stalled

14. Warda Tahreem. “Special Economic Zones of Islamabad,” *STRAFASIA*, December 16, 2024, <https://strafasia.com/special-economic-zones-of-islamabad/>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

15. Energy Update. “CPEC’s Second Phase to Prioritize ML-1, Industrial Cooperation, Agriculture, and Energy,” *Energy Update*, June 13, 2024, <https://www.energyupdate.com.pk/2024/06/13/cpecs-second-phase-to-prioritize-ml-1-industrial-cooperation-agriculture-and-energy>. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

16. Arshad Hussain and Muhammad Azam, “Economic Impact of Energy Crisis in Pakistan: A Case Study,” *Pakistan Journal of Economic Studies*, 2, no. 1, 2019, pp. 35–50.

17. Murad Ali, “German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), “A Decade of China–Pakistan Development Partnership: Achievements and Expectations,” *The Current Column*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.idos-research.de/en/the-current-column/article/a-decade-of-china-pakistan-development-partnership-achievements-and-expectations/>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

18. Muhammad Ali Khan, et al., “China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, Logistics Developments and Economic Growth in Pakistan,” *Logistics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2021, p. 35.

19. Genevieve Donellon-May, “The Cost of CPEC: Debt, Security, and Geopolitical Struggles,” *Modern Diplomacy*, January 18, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/01/18/the-cost-of-cpec-debt-security-and-geopolitical-struggles>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

Kabul's recognition of the newly formed Communist regime in Beijing. However, relations stagnated in the late 1970s as Afghanistan became increasingly aligned with the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1980s, during the Soviet-Afghan conflict, China and the United States found themselves on the same side, jointly opposing the Soviet military invasion. The Sino-Afghan relationship during the Cold War was, thus, dominated by great power rivalry.²¹ In the post-Cold War period from 1991 to 2001, Afghanistan did not play an essential part in the Chinese foreign policy-making. China's approach to the Taliban during 1996–2001 was marked by caution, pragmatism, and security concerns. When the Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996, Beijing declined to recognise the new regime, in contrast to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.²² China's primary fear was that the Taliban's hardline Islamist ideology could embolden separatist tendencies among the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, particularly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which was beginning to organise cross-border militancy during this period.²³

In the early years after 2001, China's involvement with the U.S.-supported Afghan government was minimal. However, starting in 2012, when the Obama Administration announced plans to pull back U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces deployed in Afghanistan following the 9/11 terrorist attack and US-led "War on Terror", China expanded its diplomatic, security, and economic engagement with Afghanistan. That year, Afghanistan obtained observer status in the SCO, and Beijing and Kabul elevated their relationship to a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership in June 2012. Post U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, China's relationship with the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate has undergone significant changes. Beijing's interaction with the Taliban is largely motivated by its concerns over regional security and its economic interests. Key issues include protecting the stability of

21. John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 20-156, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190261054.001.0001>.

22. M. Rubin, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. xiv+273. *Iranian Studies*, 2003; 36(1): 153-157. doi:10.1017/S0021086200001481. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

23. Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst, 2015), pp. 102–103.

Xinjiang's Uyghur region, securing the BRI's projects throughout Central Asia (see Fig 2), and safeguarding major investments in the CPEC.²⁴ Between August 2021 and February 2024, the Taliban engaged in over 1,300 diplomatic meetings with representatives from 80 different countries, with China accounting for the highest number—215 meetings—reflecting its heightened focus in the region.²⁵ Diplomatic relations advanced further in January 2024 when President Xi Jinping officially accepted the credentials of the Taliban's ambassador at a formal event held at Beijing's Great Hall of the People.²⁶

Fig 2: China's Planned Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Bradford Betz, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *Fox News* channel, April 30, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/what-is-chinas-belt-road-initiative>. Accessed on September 11, 2025.

24. Ayjaz Wani, "China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor," Observer Research Foundation, *Issue Brief*, No. 796, April 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-and-afghanistan-s-jousting-over-the-wakhan-corridor>. Accessed on August 3, 2025.
25. Ariana News, "IEA Has Had More Than 1,300 Meetings with 80 Countries Since Takeover," *ATN News*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.ariananews.af/iea-has-had-more-than-1300-meetings-with-80-countries-since-takeover/>. Accessed on August 3, 2025.
26. PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "You Asked Whether China Officially Recognizes the Taliban Government," May 30, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347691.html. Accessed on August 3, 2025.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Besides diplomatic relations, China has significant economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has significant reserves of minerals such as copper, lithium, rare earth elements and natural gas. China is interested in investing in Afghanistan's mining sector, particularly in mineral exploration and extraction.²⁷ Since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, China has pursued investments in the country's natural resources, particularly focussing on oil and lithium. In 2023, the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company, a Chinese firm, entered into an agreement with the Taliban administration to invest approximately \$550 million in oil extraction over a three-year period.²⁸ Taliban representatives have also indicated that China plans to invest around \$10 billion in tapping into Afghanistan's lithium reserves.²⁹ Despite these ambitions, progress has been slow. China's two most significant projects—the Metallurgical Corporation of China's \$3 billion venture at the Aynak copper mine and the China National Petroleum Corporation's involvement in the Amu Darya oil fields—have faced significant delays and are currently operating well below expectations. The Aynak copper field is in Logar, one of Afghanistan's most violent provinces, and is now widely seen as a failed investment.³⁰ China also views Afghanistan as an ideal location for its investors to engage in infrastructure development, given its strategic position along the major trade route.³¹ By including Afghanistan in the

27. R. M. Khan, "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan," *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.51721/fwusjss.v1i1.27>.

28. Diksha Madhok, Ehsan Popalzai, and Masoud Popalzai, "A Chinese Company Has Signed an Oil Extraction Deal with Afghanistan's Taliban," *CNN*, January 6, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/06/business/china-company-taliban-oil-deal-hnk-intl/index.html>. Accessed on August 3, 2025.

29. "China Eyes Afghanistan's Lithium Reserves, Offers to Invest USD 10 Billion," *The Economic Times*, April 15, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-eyes-afghanistans-lithium-reserves-offers-to-invest-usd-10-billion/articleshow/99521732.cms>. Accessed on August 3, 2025.

30. Feng Zhang, "China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal," *LSE Public Policy Review* 2, no. 3, 2022, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.52>. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

31. B. C. James, "China's Interests in Afghanistan: Current Projects and Future Prospects" (doctoral diss., Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), <https://hdl.handle.net/10945/34554>. Accessed on July 31, 2025.

game, China hopes to increase its influence, foster economic unity, and gain access to crucial markets and trade routes in Central and South Asia.

Beijing is also concerned about security and stability along its northwestern frontier of Xinjiang due to the presence of terrorist groups like the ETIM in the region. Therefore, it views Afghanistan as an essential ally in its fight against terrorism and extremism.³² In September 2012, Zhou Yongkang, a senior member of the Politburo Standing Committee overseeing internal security, travelled to Kabul, marking a clear effort by China to enhance cooperation with Afghanistan on security and counter-terrorism, especially to safeguard Xinjiang, after the U.S.' planned withdrawal.³³ Chinese forces from the People's Armed Police were deployed alongside Afghan troops to patrol the northeastern province of Badakhshan. The ETIM's presence in Badakhshan directly threatens the Wakhan Corridor, the only land link between Afghanistan and China's Xinjiang. Control over this corridor is vital for trade and connectivity as this corridor is expected to be a part of the CPEC's extension into Afghanistan. Additionally, China helped establish a mountain brigade within Afghanistan's National Security Forces. In a reciprocal move, the Afghan government handed over Uyghur detainees to China, seeking to encourage Beijing to use its leverage with Pakistan to promote negotiations with the Taliban³⁴. Afghanistan serves as a crucial transportation junction connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In this regard, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan have floated the idea of a Kabul-Peshwar Motorway, which could be named the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Plus Cooperation (CAPPCC) and may pave the way for Afghanistan's inclusion into the CPEC.³⁵ This highlights the importance of the inclusion of Afghanistan in the

32. Khan, n. 27.

33. M. Clarke, "One Belt, One Road and China's Emerging Afghanistan Dilemma," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70, no. 5, 2016, pp. 563-79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1183585>.

34. Zhang, n. 30.

35. "Peshawar-Kabul Motorway to Pave Way for Afghanistan to Join CPEC", China Radio International (CRI), September 11, 2019, <https://cpecinfo.com/peshawar-kabul-motorway-to-pave-way-for-afghanistan-to-join-cpec/>. Accessed on September 11, 2025.

CPEC to promote land-based connectivity to facilitate commerce and travel along the BRI routes.

PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

Pakistan and Afghanistan share deep historical, ethnic, and cultural ties, but their bilateral relationship has been marked more by distrust and strategic rivalry than cooperation. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan can disrupt the smooth extension of the CPEC by creating security challenges, instability, and resistance along the transit routes. This may delay the infrastructure projects, reduce investors' confidence, and hinder regional connectivity goals. The dynamics of their relations have evolved significantly over the decades, especially following major geopolitical shifts such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, the U.S.-led war on terror in 2001, and, most recently, the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

The Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship before 2021 was historically uneasy. The most persistent point of contention had been the Durand Line, the colonial-era border drawn by the British in 1893. Afghanistan has consistently refused to formally recognise it as the international boundary, viewing it as illegitimately dividing the Pashtun population between two states.³⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan became a frontline state in the Cold War during the Soviet-Afghan War, supporting the Afghan Mujahideen fighters with U.S. and Saudi assistance. This support not only created a strategic dependency but also initiated the long-standing policy of Pakistan seeking influence in Afghanistan through non-state actors.³⁷ With the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, Pakistan became one of only three countries to recognise their regime. Pakistan saw the Taliban as a potential stabilising force and a strategic ally in ensuring a pro-Pakistan government in Kabul.³⁸ Despite some diplomatic overtures, such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity

36. Rubin, n. 22.

37. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 210-25.

38. *Ibid.*

(APAPPS), the trust deficit remained the defining feature of pre-2021 relations.

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant turning point. Pakistan initially welcomed the Taliban's return, hoping it would bring an end to cross-border attacks and usher in a new era of strategic cooperation.³⁹ Islamabad anticipated that a friendly Taliban government would crack down on anti-Pakistan militant groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and prioritise economic cooperation. However, these hopes were short-lived. Contrary to expectations, the TTP regained strength, launching several deadly attacks within Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces.

The border tensions have also been worsened between the two countries. Pakistan accelerated fencing along the Durand Line to control movement and enhance security, but the Taliban opposed the project, leading to repeated skirmishes.⁴⁰ The issue of Afghan refugees—with over three million living in Pakistan—added further pressure, particularly as Islamabad began tightening regulations and repatriation efforts.⁴¹ The trajectory of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations reveals a pattern of persistent mistrust, aggravated by mutual accusations over militancy and border disputes.

INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

India and Afghanistan share a long history of cultural, economic, and strategic relations rooted in mutual interests and regional stability. India's engagement with Afghanistan before 2021 was characterised by robust diplomatic, developmental, and security cooperation, framed by New Delhi's desire to foster a stable and democratic Afghanistan as a bulwark against regional extremism and instability. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, India emerged as one of Afghanistan's most significant development partners, investing over \$3 billion in infrastructure, health, education, and governance

39. Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan Hopeful of Taliban Fulfilling Their Promises," *The Express Tribune*, August 17, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

40. "Afghanistan Accuses Pakistan of Cross-Border Shelling Amid Tensions," *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

41. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Pakistan Fact Sheet* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2023), <https://www.unhcr.org>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

projects.⁴² India's critical development assistance included the construction of the Afghan Parliament building, the Salma Dam in Herat (also called the Afghan-India Friendship Dam), and numerous schools and hospitals across the country.⁴³

India has trained thousands of Afghan police and military personnel and provided intelligence support to help stabilise the country. Indian diplomatic presence in Kabul was substantial, with India maintaining one of the largest embassies there, symbolising its commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction.⁴⁴ Politically, India supported Afghanistan's democratic institutions and was involved in regional frameworks such as the Heart of Asia process, aimed at fostering cooperation among Afghanistan's neighbours.⁴⁵

Post 2021, after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, India's initial response was cautious but pragmatic. While New Delhi has not officially recognised the Taliban government, it has maintained diplomatic engagement through the reopening of its embassy in Kabul in June 2022, emphasising humanitarian assistance and stability.⁴⁶ India has delivered significant humanitarian aid, including food, medicines, and vaccines, to Afghanistan to support the Afghan people amid the country's economic and humanitarian crisis.⁴⁷ The Taliban's historical association with Pakistan complicates India's strategic calculus. Despite these challenges, India has sought to maintain a foothold in Afghanistan through diplomatic

42. Wajid Ali, "Historical Perspective of Indo-Afghan Relations". *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, July 2019, 1, pp. 26-29. 10.33545/26646021.2019.v1.i2a.17, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372082674_Historical_perspective_of_indo-Afghan_relations. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

43. Anwar Iqbal, "India's Development Assistance to Afghanistan: Projects and Strategic Interests," *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 34, no. 2, 2020, pp. 122-39.

44. Harsh V. Pant, "India's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan," *Asian Security* 16, no. 3, 2020, pp. 209-25.

45. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Amritsar Declaration at the 6th Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia". December 4, 2016. https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27746/Amritsar_Declaration_at_the_6th_Ministerial_Conference_of_Heart_of_Asia_December_04_2016. Accessed on August 5, 2025.

46. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India's Engagement with Afghanistan Post-2021," Press Release, November 2021, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm>. Accessed on August 1, 2025.

47. Manish Sharma, "India's Humanitarian Response to Afghanistan's Crisis," *The Diplomat*, March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/indias-humanitarian-response-to-afghanistans-crisis/>. Accessed on August 4, 2025.

means and support for regional stability. However, while India remains committed to Afghanistan's stability, its direct involvement has reduced. New Delhi now emphasises humanitarian aid and indirect engagement through regional partners rather than large-scale infrastructure projects or security cooperation. The future of this relationship will likely depend on how the Taliban govern, the regional security dynamics, and India's ability to navigate the new geopolitical landscape while safeguarding its strategic interests.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Inclusion of Afghanistan in the CPEC carries multiple strategic implications spanning sovereignty, encirclement, regional influence, economy, and security dynamics for India. The corridor's expansion into Afghanistan is likely to deepen China's strategic footprint in South Asia and Central Asia, effectively surrounding India through a growing axis of China-Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation. Moreover, the extension could challenge India's sovereignty claims, particularly regarding Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), as the corridor passes through territories claimed by India but illegally occupied by Pakistan. India perceives this as a direct infringement on its territorial integrity, complicating bilateral relations with both China and Pakistan, and potentially undermining peace efforts.⁴⁸ The development of the CPEC-Afghanistan axis could create a strategic arc surrounding India—linking Gwadar in the south, Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) in the north, and Afghanistan further northwest—thereby enhancing China's access to the Indian Ocean and increasing Pakistan's strategic leverage over India's western and northern flanks.⁴⁹ India is also concerned that China may try to take over the Bagram Air Force base, the biggest airport and technically well-equipped air force base in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ This could provide

48. Yogesh Joshi, "Geopolitical Challenges and India's Connectivity Strategies in Central Asia," *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 16, no. 1, 2019, pp. 102–119. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S147959141800042>. Accessed on July 29, 2025.

49. Harsh V. Pant, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Indian Ocean Geopolitics," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43, no. 2, 2020, pp. 210–234.

50. P. Sharma, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Pragmatism Towards Political Normalization," *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 139–151, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367336594>.

China increased military presence in the region close to India. The expansion of the CPEC into Afghanistan threatens to undermine these efforts by offering a competing corridor deeply integrated with Chinese and Pakistani economic structures.⁵¹

THE WAY FORWARD

Considering these developments, India faces a strategic dilemma. It must adopt a proactive, multi-pronged strategy by strengthening political, economic, and cultural ties with Afghanistan. India must recalibrate its engagement with Afghanistan—balancing development assistance with diplomatic outreach—to preserve its influence in Kabul.⁵² India should accelerate the development of alternative routes such as Chabahar port in Iran, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and possibly expand its participation in Central Asian transport or rail networks to ensure it retains access and influence in Afghanistan and offer connectivity choices beyond Chinese-led corridors.⁵³ India needs to communicate its vision of connectivity grounded in democratic principles, equitable partnerships, and territorial respect, in contrast with the propaganda framing of the CPEC as a hegemonic investment.

India's Connect Central Asia policy is also important in countering the CPEC while expanding India's political, security, and cultural connections with the region, especially after the Taliban takeover.⁵⁴ Engaging constructively with regional stakeholders, investing in alternate routes, and promoting an inclusive, rules-based connectivity framework may allow India to maintain strategic relevance. These measures would benefit India to protect its own interests and keep its influence as the political situation in the region changes.

51. Anit Mukherjee, "Strategic Geography and India's Security," in Anit Mukherjee, ed., *India's Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2020), pp. 155–173.

52. Hameed Hakimi, "The Future of India–Afghanistan Relations," *Chatham House Asia Programme Report*, March 2017.

53. Joshi, n. 48.

54. Y. Raiphea, "India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership: An Analysis of India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan Perspectives," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 3, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1–4, <http://www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-0413.php>. Accessed on August 7, 2025.

