



POLICY BRIEF

A New Playbook? Europe, India, and Afghanistan beyond 2021

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This policy brief examines India's engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond. It discusses how increasing uncertainty about the nature of a U.S withdrawal could affect Indian's interests in Afghanistan and the region.¹ It also details scenarios for which New Delhi needs to prepare and policy options available to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan. As their strategic partnership gains traction but uncertainty looms large, this brief also explores areas in which India and the EU could address joint interests in Afghanistan.

India's Afghanistan policy has been shaped by its rivalry with Pakistan. New Delhi and Kabul have enjoyed a very close relationship since India's independence in 1947. Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's membership into the UN and, subsequently, during the Cold War, supported India's non-alignment policy. Going against its strict principle of non-alignment during the Cold War, New Delhi embraced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, seemingly to balance Pakistan's increasing support for anti-Soviet *mujahedin*.² Since then, India has repeatedly supported Afghan actors it sees as useful in balancing or stymying Pakistan's influence, including aid to the Northern Alliance that rallied against the Taliban during the 1990s (some Northern Alliance figures continue to receive Indian backing today). Since 2001, New Delhi has pursued a proactive and expansionist Afghanistan policy beyond obstructing Pakistan. India has been aiding the country financially to the tune of over 3 billion dollars in the past 18 years, including large-scale infrastructure projects, technical training programmes, and new trade corridors that expand Afghanistan's landlocked options.

The Peace Process, Withdrawal, and India's Concerns

Uncertainty around NATO's potential military exit has left New Delhi pondering how to preserve its interests best. India faces a tall order if a withdrawal takes place, raising several concerns: one is whether India will be able to support a friendly Afghan state without substantial buy-in from Western nations. Another is the question of how far India might go to prevent a Taliban takeover that could grant Islamabad further *strategic depth* - enabling regional militants to stage attacks on India. New Delhi has vehemently warned the U.S., the EU, and other allies against a hasty withdrawal, emphasising that the Taliban have not delivered on most of their commitments to the U.S.-Taliban deal signed on 29 February. These include an understanding to reduce violence and a series of promises to limit the activity of terrorist groups, including Al-Qaida. It has also cautioned that Pakistan has made no formal commitment to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries on its soil, enabling the group to return to war quickly at any point, regardless of progress toward a peace settlement.



¹ The project "From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan's Neighborhood?" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan's neighbours, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Dr Timor Sharan and Andrew Watkins to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

² By 1990s, there were seven Sunni and one Shia Jihadi groups were operating from Pakistan, aided by the U.S., Saudis and others.

New Delhi is concerned that without such assurances, it could find itself exposed to severe asymmetric threats, including in the disputed territory of Kashmir. To date, India's approach has therefore focused on aggressively lobbying the U.S. for a conditions-based and "responsible" exit and on persuading NATO to at least leave an international counter-terrorism contingency force behind that could function as a stopgap in the post-withdrawal environment in Afghanistan.

Also, New Delhi has intensified its outreach and engagement to key Afghan stakeholders, including regional strongmen. India is banking on its traditional support for non-Pashtun constituencies in Afghanistan and their leaders who occupy key positions in the Afghan government to diversify its influence. To this end, Abdullah Abdullah, Abdul Rashid Dostum and former Governor Atta Mohammad Noor have received official invitations to New Delhi in a "charm offensive". India has also promised additional financial commitment to Kabul and the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in case of continued war.

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Evolving Geostrategic Context: India Losing out?

As it has more than once since 1979, New Delhi finds itself scrambling to respond to a rapidly changing strategic environment in Afghanistan, this time shaped by the U.S.-Taliban deal and the potential emergence of a regional power vacuum. From India's perspective, the U.S. reliance on Pakistan's support to mediate and deliver a peace settlement has been even more fraught. The idea of Pakistan assuming a prominent role in a post-war Afghanistan troubles New Delhi (and Kabul), well beyond immediate threats. Thus far, the peace process's framework and progress have disadvantaged the Indian government as well as the Afghan; the outcome is widely seen as likely to limit Delhi's strategic diplomatic, economic and political manoeuvring space in the region. After American disengagement, any rebalancing of power may even threaten India's global power ambitions, as it will likely include Russian and Chinese repositioning.

New Delhi faces a dilemma: while it seeks to preserve diplomatic, security, and economic interests in Afghanistan and within the region, it seems highly likely to lose ground in the near future, regardless of which one of the outlined below unfolds. This is because Pakistan has positioned itself and its influence over the Taliban as central to the Afghan peace process, ensuring that if it succeeds or fails, its ability to shape Afghan affairs remains. The zero-sum thinking that defines much of India-Pakistan tensions means that Pakistan's continued influence is a loss for India. Moreover, Delhi's economic integration investments, established with the intent of bypassing Pakistan and dependent on a fragile regional equilibrium, may well come under pressure regardless of the outcome. A Taliban-dominated government might opt out of trade arrangements preferable to India, while an expanded civil war could easily render the logistics and security of regional trade defunct. Thus, Delhi's strategic approach toward Afghanistan can best be characterised as seeking to minimise risks.

New Delhi has a range of options to shield its interests, many of which are likely to prompt reactions across the region; one path includes stepping up the financial support, arming, and training of Afghan security forces to ensure its sustainability. Conversely, as it has happened in the past, India may feel compelled to support armed resistance outside of the state's armed forces, if at some point, it deems the Taliban to have gained a dominant position. This option would have regional ramifications as well: India could partner more closely with Iran and Russia, with which it shares some compatible regional interests, and which are both likely to increase their support for intra-Afghan powerbrokers; if not, these efforts might wind up in competition.



Map of South Asia
Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

A Common Regional Vision? Taking Ownership of the Region's Problems

India and the European Union have enjoyed common goals and principles in post-2001 Afghanistan around democratisation, the rule of law, fighting terrorisms, and the promotion of peace and stability. In practical terms, both have "put their money where their mouth is," providing substantial aid to the Afghan state. The July 2020 *EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025* highlights common security threats and regional concerns, encouraging stronger cooperation on shared objectives, including counter-terrorism.³ Building on this mechanism and the recent *Joint Communication* to regularise and structure their consultations, both sides could broaden and deepen political cooperation on peace, stability and prosperity in the region. To date, however, there has been little institutionalised and structured coordination on Afghanistan beyond communiqués.

Shared values and Principles



Shared democratic values anchor EU-Indian cooperation towards development and security objectives in Afghanistan. There is a convergence of multiple goals between Delhi and Brussels in terms of the peace process, including political stability, minority rights, and sustaining gains of the past 19 years. This has been evident in the EU's and India's position on recent elections, the peace process, and broadly their support for the current political order. In the future, they could jointly lobby and pressure regional and international stakeholders to uphold these values and gains to help Afghans preserve them.



Regional integration and inter-regional cooperation

India is an important trade partner for the EU, ambitious to emerge as a major economic power. Yet regional security dynamics and instability have prevented India from reaching its potential to access and connect with Central Asia economically. As India's strategic partner, the EU could also help mediate between India and Pakistan to create incentives for greater regional economic integration.



Political stability in Afghanistan and the Region

India is focused on ensuring the stability of the current political order in Afghanistan and preventing state collapse or the Taliban's monopoly of power. India and various EU countries could cooperate on development and stabilisation even in the event of a continuing U.S. military withdrawal. If they choose, they have the resources to "stay the course" and at least partially fill in the "aid gap" that is only likely to grow in coming years, evident from the funding decrease in the 2020 Geneva Conference.

Possible Scenarios in Afghanistan: The View from India

At this point, New Delhi is concerned about all potential outcomes of the ongoing peace process and the composition of the future Afghan state. For broader stability of the regional security environment and a strong position vis a vis Pakistan, its primary objective is to convince NATO and the U.S. to maintain some form of contingency force in Afghanistan, likely based on a rationale of counter-terrorism. Even this option is fraught with the risk of destabilisation, as a much smaller international presence might not prevent the government from fracturing under increasing Taliban momentum. Failing that best-case though still unsatisfying outcome, India would likely grapple with future scenarios in the following ways:

- **A Stable and Internationally Legitimate Government:** This scenario would see the Afghan state survive approximately in its current form, including the Taliban in a power-sharing arrangement. It is perhaps a preferred scenario for India if power brokers of the current regime remain able to protect and assure some of Delhi's interests. However, both the Taliban and Pakistan have indicated they will demand a "cleaning house" in Kabul in any final peace settlement.⁴ India's ability to influence such a future government, at least in the near term, would rely on Taliban power-sharing with key figures backed by India – which may prove difficult for the Taliban and Pakistan to accept.

³ In July 2020, the 15th EU-India Summit held on 15 July 2020, endorsed a new "EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025", as a common roadmap to guide joint action and further strengthen the EU-India relations for the next five years.

⁴ "Pakistan's FM Qureshi Gave Opinions About the Prisoner Release, and a Retired Pakistani General Called for a Regime Change in Kabul", ToloNews, September 2020.

- **A Stable but Taliban Dominated Regime:** In this scenario, the Afghan government is either removed or collapses and the Taliban rule the country with little commitment to human rights and today's constitutional principles. A Taliban-dominated government could potentially become a Pakistan client state or would at least be more hostile to India. India would likely lose anticipated returns on its economic and infrastructure investments in Afghanistan and find itself isolated in the region. Kashmir's security environment could become even more vulnerable at a time when border tensions with China are rising. To undermine such a future state, India might re-align itself with other regional players like Iran. Indian officials have been ambiguous, however, about New Delhi's reaction to a scenario where the Taliban welcome constructive relations with India, whether it would accept such overtures in good faith or reject them out of hand.
- **A Civil War Scenario:** The state fragments without a stable new order emerging and conflict expands. In this scenario, all-out war must be expected, with neighbouring countries supporting rival factions and groups and potentially carve up Afghanistan into regional buffer zones, reminiscent of periods during the civil war in the 1980s and 90s. Faced with the potential of a Taliban-dominated government, some security officials in Delhi might cynically prefer this scenario, assisting non-state powerbrokers in Afghanistan's north and central highlands to tie down the Taliban and undermine the geographic scope of their – and Pakistan's – influence. In this situation, India could increase support and perhaps even send arms to Afghan allies, likely including remnants of the Afghan security forces, and might cooperate with other regional players. It would almost certainly not send boots on the ground, risk-averse to any potential for casualties or international intrigue.

Recommendations

- For mutual advantage in stabilising Afghanistan after a Western military withdrawal, both India and the EU should move from their current exploratory phase of bilateral cooperation on Afghan development and security issues to an implementation phase. EU engagement with India on strengthening security cooperation, including counter-terrorism, could even benefit regional stability. Indian support for the Afghan security and defence forces, always hotly regarded with suspicion by Pakistan, may be less vulnerable to criticism or adverse reactions if enshrined in a multilateral architecture.
- Building on their signed Strategic Partnership, EU and India should take a regional approach to the Afghan issue and explore the possibility of setting up a joint financial assistance fund for Afghan peace, and post-peace settlement stabilisation and prosperity in Afghanistan. India's resources make it a prime candidate to join the EU as a primary donor state to an Afghan government that will continue to require substantial, even existential levels of support.
- It would be mutually beneficial if India engages more prominently with Iran and Russia diplomatically, given the EU's limited ability to influence those two actors' regional interests. Carried out in conjunction with a closer EU-India working relationship, the two should maximise diplomatic leverage of a newly established donor bloc and discourage other powers from pursuing destabilising approaches in Afghanistan.
- In the areas of migration and tourism, India should further liberalise its visa policy, especially medical tourism and investment visas to Afghans. For many Afghans, India is one of the primary, often the only, destination for high-quality medical treatment. Such people-to-people exchanges are a necessary condition for continued and sustainable good relations between the two countries.

About the authors

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About the cover photo

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) signs a guest book, next to Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani (2nd R), during the inauguration of Afghanistan's new parliament building which was built with the Indian government's financial assistance, in Kabul, Afghanistan December 25, 2015. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

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