

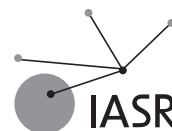


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Article

India-Pakistan Geopolitical Competition and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

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Abstract

After the withdrawal of US-led foreign troops and the collapse of Afghanistan's democratic government in August 2021, the Taliban's quick capture of Kabul generated initial celebrations in Pakistan because of the prevailing belief that the Taliban's dominance would facilitate India's reduced influence in Afghanistan. However, this optimism short-lived, as Pakistan soon grappled with the complexities of its reduced control over the Afghan Taliban. In contrast, India, perceiving the Taliban primarily as a proxy of Pakistan, quickly closed its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the subsequent actions of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) revealed a marked autonomy from external influence, particularly from Pakistan, thereby presenting India with a renewed opportunity to re-establish its presence in Afghanistan. This article examines the geostrategic interests of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan, by focusing on their engagement with proxy actors to further their national interests. This research engages with the proxy war literature, exploring how the evolving dynamics between the Taliban and its traditional sponsors reflect broader shifts in regional power dynamics. By analyzing the Taliban's increasing autonomy, this article contributes to a better understanding of proxy relationships, arguing that the geopolitical ambitions of India and Pakistan continue to drive their engagement with the Taliban regime despite persistent concerns over stability. Ultimately, the IEA, despite lacking formal international recognition, is exhibiting behaviors characteristic of a sovereign state, employing a balancing strategy in its relations with both India and Pakistan.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Geopolitics, India-Pakistan rivalry, Proxy war, Afghan Taliban

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Introduction

Various factors have influenced India and Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was the first country to oppose independent Pakistan's membership in the United Nations in 1947, whereas India managed to initiate cooperative relations with Afghanistan. The relationship between Kabul and Islamabad was further dogged by Afghanistan's claim over Pashtun-populated areas of Pakistan by disputing the validity of the Durand Line agreement, which was signed between Afghanistan and the British Empire in India (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2015). Kabul began to support insurgents in Pakistan, mainly during the 1960s; in response, Islamabad started looking at Afghanistan through the lens of strategic depth by forging closer ties with Afghan Islamists and nourishing those relations in later decades for influence in Afghanistan. Islamabad's influence was further enhanced during the Afghan-Soviet War when Pakistan became the United States' frontline ally in defeating the Soviets (Ahmed, 2012). While the Taliban was not Pakistan's first choice, given the circumstances, it soon realized that the group was the only viable option to bring stability to Afghanistan. Hence, Islamabad shifted its focus from Islamists to the Taliban and recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in 1996. Then, fearing reprisals from IEA factions, India closed its diplomatic mission in Kabul but continued to support the Northern Alliance just like other regional actors: Iran, Russia, and Central Asian Republics (CARs). The fall of the first IEA in 2001 offered India with an ideal opportunity to expand its engagement in Afghanistan through development aid. As the Taliban fighters regained control of the country during July-August 2021, India quickly shut down its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan due to its then perception of the Afghan Taliban being Pakistan's proxy. Now that the Taliban has been back in power for over three years, this paper aims to see whether the new developments have once again given rise to the proxy engagement of external actors in Afghanistan. To answer this question, this paper focuses on India and Pakistan's current geopolitical interests concerning Afghanistan to understand the degree to which they can shape on-the-ground realities through their proxies. This article mainly focuses on how India and Pakistan have engaged with the Taliban since August 2021.

India and Pakistan are influenced by their national and geopolitical interests concerning Afghanistan. To counterbalance its troubled history with Northern Alliance factions, Islamabad prefers to maintain influence over the Taliban regime, but it has not been easy since 2021. In contrast, New Delhi has mostly enjoyed cordial relations with Kabul starting from the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1951. The only period New Delhi had no cooperation with Afghanistan was during the IEA rule from 1996 to 2001. Therefore, India was among the first countries to welcome the post-Taliban Western-led war on terrorism that started in December 2001. Despite occasions of cooperation and dialogue, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan was dominated more by mistrust as Kabul continued to blame Pakistan for the revival of the Taliban. With India being a key donor in Afghanistan during the last two decades, Pakistan viewed erstwhile Afghan governments as India's proxies. But the tables turned with the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. India hastily closed all its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. However, it continues to seek ways to achieve its geopolitical influence. There is a strong correlation between geopolitical and geoeconomic interests as India and Pakistan attempt to establish strong trade links with the energy-rich CARs. For this reason, India has been investing in the Chabahar Port in Iran, and Pakistan in the Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The above developments lead India and Pakistan to engage in a proxy war.

Proxy war is a type of international conflict involving third-party engagement, typically defined as "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some or all of that

country's manpower, resources, and territory as means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies" (Deutsch, 1964, p. 102). External involvement is therefore central to proxy wars, as foreign powers use the internal conflict of another country to pursue their strategic objectives. Proxy wars are characterized by third-party involvement where foreign states support non-state paramilitary groups, often to advance their geopolitical aims (Hughes, 2014; Mumford, 2013). This form of conflict was particularly noticeable during the Cold War due to the asymmetrical relationships between states and their local proxy actors. These wars allowed powerful states to exert influence indirectly without engaging directly in conventional warfare. In the literature on proxy wars, there is a tendency to focus on the role of sponsoring states or the principal actors, often at the expense of understanding the role of proxies or agents (Groh, 2019). The traditional principal-agent theory, which focuses on the relationship between the sponsor (principal) and the proxy (agent), has limitations. It inadequately captures the often conflicting and changing dynamics between sponsoring states and their proxies (Eisenhardt, 1989).

To understand proxy war dynamics, it is important to focus on motivations behind proxy wars and proxy relationships vis-à-vis battlefield effectiveness. The primary motivation for states to engage in proxy wars is often economic as they are perceived as a way of conducting "warfare on the cheap" (Mumford, 2013, p. 1). This allows states to achieve strategic objectives with minimal direct costs or risks. Other key motivations include territorial control, economic and military interests, regional power balance, and perceptions of success in conflict (Mumford, 2013; Pearson, 1974). The relationship between sponsoring states and their proxies is critical for the effectiveness of proxy forces in conflict. Proxies are often highly dependent on their principals (sponsors) for resources, strategy, and legitimacy. The nature of this relationship can significantly influence their effectiveness on the battlefield (Craig, 2010). Changes in this relationship may alter the course of the conflict, indicating a complex and dynamic interaction between the proxy and the sponsoring state.

The existing literature on India and Pakistan's geopolitical interests has extensively examined the dynamics of conflict, competition, and cooperation between the two countries, particularly in Afghanistan (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2015; Mitton, 2014). While there has been considerable work on Pakistan's proxy engagement in Afghanistan and Jammu and Kashmir (Swami, 2004; Taye and Ahmed, 2021), a critical gap remains in the comparative analysis of how India and Pakistan's rivalry involving local actors in Afghanistan. Traditionally, proxy wars have been a tool of great powers; however, in the context of South Asia, middle or regional powers—namely India and Pakistan—are key players, using proxy engagements to extend their geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic influence. Pakistan's involvement focuses on supporting the Taliban and other factions, resolving border disputes, leveraging China's influence, and securing international recognition for the Taliban regime. Conversely, India's current strategy centers on soft power, aiming to win Afghan hearts and minds through development projects, humanitarian aid, and strategic alignment with Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics. This research seeks to illuminate the distinct strategies employed by these middle powers, their methods of gaining popular legitimacy, and the regional architecture they develop to engage with the Taliban. By addressing this understudied aspect, this study will contribute a new dimension to the proxy war literature, specifically within the South Asian context, offering insights into the geopolitical power play between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan.

In terms of the structure, this paper begins with two separate case studies of Pakistan and India's proxy engagements in Afghanistan. The aim of this separate examination is to examine the nature of those proxy relationships.

Pakistan's Proxy Engagement in Afghanistan

Pakistani policymakers have historically framed their Afghanistan policy through the lens of strategic depth, aiming to curtail India's influence in Kabul and secure a regime aligned with Islamabad's interests. This dynamic, reflected in Pakistan's ongoing ties with the Afghan Taliban, albeit with interruptions, exemplifies the broader literature on proxy warfare, where external actors seek to exert influence through non-state or insurgent groups (Hughes, 2014; Mumford, 2013). The historical context of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations underscores the evolution of this proxy dynamic.

Following its independence in 1947, Pakistan faced immediate challenges with Afghanistan, which refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Durand Line and contested Pakistan's membership in the United Nations. Afghanistan's claims to Pashtun-majority areas of Pakistan, based on the concept of Pashtunistan, further strained relations, particularly between 1947 and 1979 (Burki, 1986). While Pakistan initially focused on its rivalry with India, Afghanistan proactively supported proxy warfare by supporting insurgent elements in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan, following Sardar Daoud Khan's ascension in 1973 (Fair, 2014). The Daoud government's overt backing of Pashtunistan insurgencies deteriorated bilateral relations and heightened Pakistan's insecurity, especially in the wake of the 1971 loss of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Sattar, 2017).

The Pakistani response during the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government involved a calculated engagement in Afghanistan's internal politics, as Islamabad established ties with anti-Daoud factions such as Burhanuddin Rabbani's Islamist movement (Nadiri, 2014). This development aligned with the broader scholarship on proxy wars, highlighting the use of local actors by external powers to achieve geopolitical goals. Pakistan's support for Afghan insurgents can be seen as a strategic attempt to mitigate its vulnerabilities by influencing the internal dynamics of Afghanistan. In line with proxy war theory, these external interventions were not merely tactical but reflected broader geopolitical objectives aimed at offsetting Indo-Afghan cooperation. Thus, the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, shaped by mutual distrust and proxy engagements, has been more conflictual than cooperative, with Afghanistan often aligning with India, further complicating Islamabad's strategic landscape.

In the context of Pakistan's evolving foreign policy, its security cooperation with the United States was disrupted after 1971, particularly following Pakistan's withdrawal from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1973. However, the Cold War offered a renewed opportunity for Pakistan to re-establish strategic ties with Washington, especially in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This event marked the beginning of Pakistan's role as a key player in a broader proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In line with the proxy war literature, Pakistan, as a middle power, became a channel for US support to the Afghan mujahideen, transforming Afghanistan into a battleground for Cold War rivalries (Ahmed, 2012). The mujahideen, recruited globally and trained in Pakistan, became crucial actors in this proxy war, reflecting the dynamics of state support for non-state actors to achieve foreign policy objectives (Hughes, 2014).

During the Afghan-Soviet War (1979–1989), Pakistan received significant economic and military aid from the United States, which strengthened its regional influence by deepening ties with Afghan mujahideen factions (Ahmed, 2012). This engagement exemplifies the principal-agent relationship typical of proxy warfare (Groh, 2019), where Pakistan, acting as the principal, empowered local Afghan actors (the agents) to counter the Soviet expansion. The eventual emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s, as a reorganization of many of these mujahideen fighters, further strengthened Pakistan's proxy role. By 1996, Pakistan was among the few countries to

recognize the Taliban's IEA, a move that enhanced Islamabad's strategic depth in the region and alleviated its concerns about New Delhi's influence in Kabul (Behuria, 2007). However, while Pakistan benefited from a friendly regime in Kabul, it also faced challenges typical of proxy dynamics, where the relationship between the principal and agent is often fraught with conflicting objectives. Despite the Taliban's reliance on Pakistan for support, the group resisted Islamabad's demands, such as recognizing the Durand Line and refraining from destroying the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Bouchenaki, 2020). This reflects the limitations of the principal-agent theory in explaining the complexities of proxy warfare, where agents often pursue their own agendas, diverging from the strategic goals of their patrons (Eisenhardt, 1989).

After the 9/11 attacks and Pakistan's subsequent alignment with the United States. in the 'War on Terror,' Islamabad found itself in a contradictory position, compelled to act against the very group it had supported. Pakistan's operations against the Taliban and its capture of key Taliban figures, such as Mullah Abdul Salam Zareef and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, strained its relationship with the group, triggering retaliatory attacks on Pakistani forces (Borger, 2010). This turn of events underscores the inherent risks for states engaging in proxy warfare, as the proxies can become hostile following a shift in the patron's objective (Mumford, 2013). Despite these tensions, Pakistan and the Taliban quickly reconciled due to their mutual dependencies. Islamabad's strategic interest in re-establishing a friendly regime in Kabul aligned with the Taliban's desire to remobilize against foreign forces in Afghanistan. This pragmatic convergence, allowing the Taliban to regroup through the Quetta Shura, highlights how proxy relationships can endure despite periodic conflict (Riedel, 2013). Pakistan's continued engagement with the Taliban, including facilitating peace talks in Doha, Murree, Islamabad, and Moscow, further demonstrate the complex relationship between proxy actors and their sponsors, where both parties seek to navigate geopolitical pressures while maintaining strategic objectives (Crisis Group, 2021).

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan throughout the Cold War and beyond illustrates key themes in the literature on proxy warfare. The fluctuating dynamics between Pakistan and the Taliban highlight the limitations of the principal-agent framework, as proxies often act with relative autonomy, making the patron-agent relationship one of negotiation rather than unilateral control. Moreover, Pakistan's reliance on proxy actors, like the Taliban, reflects a broader pattern of middle powers engaging in proxy wars to safeguard their regional interests in an increasingly multipolar world (Ero & Atwood, 2023).

Since the Taliban's Takeover in August 2021

In August 2021, when the Taliban regained control over Afghanistan, there was immediate speculation on how this development would shape Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan. Islamabad's initial response, exemplified by former Prime Minister Imran Khan's remark that Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery" (Muzaffar, 2021), reflected a celebratory tone. However, Pakistan's foreign office adopted a more cautious approach, emphasizing the need for an inclusive government in Kabul that would accommodate various ethnic groups. This suggests Pakistan's desire to see a stable and balanced regime in Afghanistan, mindful of the geopolitical complexities that accompany proxy warfare dynamics. Pakistan embarked on shuttle diplomacy, engaging with regional actors like China, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics to encourage a unified regional approach toward Afghanistan (The Express Tribune, 2021).

This diplomatic play reflects a broader theme in proxy war literature, where regional powers seek to stabilize their neighboring states by supporting specific regimes or factions. Pakistan, having long-standing ties with the Taliban, viewed the group's return to power as an opportunity

to secure its strategic depth in Afghanistan and counter India's influence. Yet, like other regional actors, Pakistan's initial focus was narrowly tied to the withdrawal of international troops, underscoring a short-term vision characteristic of many proxy engagements (Groh, 2019). However, once the withdrawal was settled, regional concerns shifted to the cross-border consequences of the Taliban's rise, particularly the resurgence of militant groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which poses a direct threat to Pakistan's security.

The release of TTP leaders and troops during the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan exposed Pakistan to security risks. In response, Islamabad employed multiple strategies, including mediation by the IEA and surgical strikes inside Afghan territory to neutralize TTP elements (MOFA, 2024). This approach underscores Pakistan's complex relationship with the Taliban, which parallels many historical principal-agent dynamics in proxy wars, where the patron state (Pakistan) struggles to maintain control over its proxy (the Taliban), particularly when the proxy harbors its own strategic interests (Hughes, 2014). While the Taliban has reiterated its commitment not to allow Afghan soil to be used by foreign powers, the unresolved issue remains whether the TTP will continue to operate from Afghanistan. The TTP, along with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), has been implicated in several attacks on Pakistani soil, including the killing of nine Chinese engineers in July 2021 (Chew, 2021), highlighting the spillover effects of proxy warfare that often transcend state boundaries and involve external actors, such as China, in this instance.

Despite Pakistan's repeated appeals to the Taliban to restraint TTP activities, the new regime in Kabul has yet to address Islamabad's security concerns, particularly regarding the TTP (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023). This unresolved issue has become a significant point of contention in Pakistan-Taliban relations, illustrating a common challenge in proxy warfare where the proxy, once empowered, may not fully align with the patron's strategic objectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). The continued insurgent attacks within Pakistan further complicate this relationship, exemplifying the unintended consequences that arise when states support non-state actors as proxies.

For greater international recognition than during its previous rule (1996–2001), the Taliban has relied heavily on diplomatic ties with regional powers like Pakistan, China, Iran, and Russia. These ties are crucial for the Taliban's quest for legitimacy, a dynamic that reinforces the role of regional stakeholders in shaping the trajectory of proxy wars (Mumford, 2013). Soon after the re-establishment of the IEA, Pakistan was actively involved in lobbying for international engagement with the Taliban, urging the United Nations and other multilateral organizations to open direct dialogue with the group. Despite being sidelined during the August 2021 UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan, Pakistan played a leading role in convening an emergency session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in December 2021 to mobilize humanitarian aid for Afghanistan (OIC, 2021).

Islamabad's leverage over the Taliban further diminished with the repatriation of Taliban members and their families from Pakistan. This compelled Pakistan to seek new avenues of influence, particularly through China's growing role in Afghanistan. Beijing's involvement provided Pakistan with a new platform to exert pressure on the Taliban, aligning their mutual interests in regional stability and countering insurgent groups such as the ETIM (Behuria, 2007, p. 531). Pakistan's call for an inclusive government in Kabul, as well as its efforts to host a regional conference involving all stakeholders, reflect a strategic recalibration aimed at managing its image as the principal supporter of the Taliban. This shift highlights the fluid nature of proxy relationships, where state actors must continuously adapt to changing geopolitical realities and recalibrate their strategies to maintain influence over their proxies (Riedel, 2013).

With the Taliban's return to power, like its first regime (1996–2001), it was envisaged that Pakistan will no longer have to worry about India's influence in Afghanistan. This was further

reiterated with the Taliban's assertion that Afghan territory will not be used against other nations. However, the critical question remains whether the Taliban possesses the capacity to control various terrorist groups operating on the Afghan soil, including not only the TTP and ETIM but also the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), a group that the Taliban has historically fought against. After the Taliban took control of Kabul and shared security responsibilities at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, ISKP launched a devastating suicide bomb attack, killing nearly 100 people (Jadoon & Mines, 2021). While the Taliban is likely to counter ISKP, it may face difficulties in taking similar action against the TTP, as the latter supported the Taliban in its military campaign. This dynamic reflects classic elements of proxy warfare, where a proxy's support for a principal during a conflict can complicate the relationship in the post-conflict period (Moghadam & Wyss, 2020).

Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban is far from trouble-free. Despite historical ties, the Taliban has consistently prioritized Afghanistan's national interest, particularly in its stance on the Durand Line dispute. Many members of the Taliban harbor anti-Pakistan sentiments, as evidenced by incidents like a Taliban official removing the Pakistani flag from a truck carrying humanitarian aid and threatening to burn it (Hayat, 2021). The Taliban, like previous Afghan governments, has opposed Pakistan's efforts to build a border fence along the Durand Line, which it considers illegal (Jamal, 2022; Reuters, 2021). This longstanding territorial disagreement has strained relations between the two, creating a dilemma for Pakistan as it grapples with both the security threat posed by the TTP and deteriorating ties with the IEA. Although Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had previously provided strategic support to the Taliban—offering refuge, weapons, and diplomatic backing—this relationship has soured over time. Pakistan's capture and handover of senior Taliban leaders to the United States fostered deep mistrust, complicating relations after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Proxy war theory helps explain this dynamic: the ability and desire of a sponsor to control its proxy vary based on the sponsor's capacity (Moghadam & Wyss, 2020). Pakistan, lacking the financial means to fully fund the Taliban, has seen its influence over the group diminish. The Taliban, having achieved its goal of reestablishing the IEA, now seeks to assert itself as a legitimate state actor, resistant to external interference—a common evolution in patron-client relationships after a proxy's victory (Groh, 2019).

This shift in the Taliban's priorities is also reflected in its outreach to other international actors, including India. While India closed its diplomatic missions before the Taliban takeover in 2021, however since then, signs of normalized relations have emerged. In 2022, India partially reopened its embassy in Kabul with a technical group (Haider, 2022). The Taliban's willingness to allow India to resume its military training program for Afghan forces signals a desire to reduce its reliance on Pakistan and expand its international relationships. This is consistent with proxy war theory, which suggests that once proxies gain power, they often seek to diversify their external alliances to strengthen their autonomy (Riedel, 2013).

Pakistan's faded leverage over the Taliban has been worsened by its security concerns regarding the TTP. Thousands of anti-Pakistan militants, primarily associated with the TTP, are based in Afghanistan (Gannon, 2020). The resurgence of TTP activities since the Taliban's takeover has included fundraising, recruitment, and attacks within Pakistan (Ahmed, 2022; Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). Despite Pakistan's repeated requests to the Taliban to act against the TTP, the IEA has advised Islamabad to pursue peaceful negotiations. The Taliban's facilitation of talks between Pakistan and the TTP ultimately failed, leading Pakistan to launch airstrikes targeting TTP hideouts in Afghanistan. The IEA condemned these strikes as a violation of Afghan sovereignty, further straining relations between the two countries (Mir, 2022). Pakistan's military has continued to conduct surgical strikes across the Durand Line (MOFA, 2024), but

these have proved counterproductive, deepening the rift between Islamabad and the IEA. The Taliban's perceived inaction on the TTP issue has driven Pakistan to seek alternative strategies, including regional cooperation through forums such as the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral dialogue. In the context of proxy war theory, this reflects the patron's need to realign its foreign policy when a proxy becomes less compliant (Eisenhardt, 1989). Also, Pakistan's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in Afghanistan have increased, particularly with respect to its National Security Policy and its partnership with China under CPEC (Leeza, 2022). Despite its strained relationship with the Taliban, Pakistan recognizes the necessity of cooperation to address its security concerns, particularly regarding the TTP. However, the Taliban's engagement with India threatens to undermine Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. India's historical investments in Afghanistan and its improving relations with the Taliban could lead to a reduced role for Pakistan in Afghan affairs (Fazl-e-Haider, 2022).

Pakistan's evolving relationship with the Taliban is shaped by the complex dynamics of proxy war. The initial patron-client relationship, built on strategic support during the Taliban's insurgency, has transformed as the Taliban seeks greater autonomy and international legitimacy. Facing both security challenges from the TTP and diminished leverage over the Taliban, Pakistan is transforming its foreign policy to adapt to these new realities. This case study illustrates how the changing dynamics of proxy warfare can lead to shifts in regional power alignments, particularly when a proxy begins to assert its independence from its sponsor.

India's Proxy Engagement in Afghanistan

India and Afghanistan share deep-rooted social, cultural, and historical ties that span millennia. These connections were further solidified following India's independence in 1947 with the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1951. This treaty underscored the commitment to "everlasting peace and friendship" between the two governments, aiming to "maintain and strengthen the cordial relations existing between the people of their respective countries" (MEA, 1950). Following the treaty, India adopted a constructive approach to Afghanistan, benefiting from Kabul's strained relations with Islamabad. These tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan effectively opened two disputed border fronts for Pakistan, providing India with strategic leverage. While Pakistan supported various Islamic groups, including the Taliban, India aligned itself with the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance, alongside Iran and Russia. However, the Northern Alliance, despite this backing could not withstand the Taliban's advances, largely due to Pakistan's support to the Taliban. India quickly realized that its lack of direct access to Afghan territory severely constrained its logistical and supply lines, a significant disadvantage compared to Pakistan's geographic contiguity with Afghanistan.

A turn in the relationship took place with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. While India supported the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul; Pakistan and the US backed 'holy warriors', the mujahideen (mainly Afghan Pashtuns), to force the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989, former mujahideen signed the Peshawar Accord in Pakistan to establish an interim government (1992-1996) in Kabul which was recognized by India. This arrangement was a failure from the start as the government of President Mohammad Najibullah was deposed by Burhanuddin Rabbani of Jamiat-e Islami in 1992, which triggered a power struggle and civil war. Ultimately Pashtun mujahideen, under the leadership of Mullah Omar, established the Taliban regime in 1996. As India viewed the Taliban as Pakistan's proxy, it quickly closed its diplomatic mission in Kabul. India (along with Russia, Turkey, and Iran) supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance formed by deposed President Burhanuddin

Rabbani and his defense minister Ahmad Shah Massoud to halt the Taliban's advance. Despite this, the Northern Alliance failed to pose a serious challenge to the Taliban regime, which was mainly supported by Pakistan (Withington, 2001).

During the Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, India could not revive the same level of influence as before. In the post-9/11 period, with the US-led 'war on terror' and ousting of the Taliban government in 2001, New Delhi reopened its embassy in Kabul and new consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat to serve its strategic interests. However, the Pakistani government and other sources accused the consulates of involvement in covert intelligence activities (Fair, 2011). With the deposition of the Taliban regime, India supported a democratic government against the Taliban's support for Sharia law. For this cause, India enthusiastically took part in the Bonn Conference to chart a future roadmap for Afghanistan and supported Hamid Karzai as the potential leader, who was later elected president in 2004 (UN, 2001). To further enhance its institutional links, India provided training to Afghan professionals such as diplomats, judges, lawyers, doctors, teachers, paramedics, women entrepreneurs, and government officials to acquaint them with democratic values and institutions. At the same time, the Indian military trained thousands of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) personnel.

To firm up its commitment to the 1951 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, India signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan in 2011. Both parties agreed "to the common ideals of peace, democracy, the rule of law, non-violence, human rights and fundamental freedoms" (MEA, 2011). This agreement also emphasized the "principles of sovereignty, equality and territorial integrity of States, non-interference in their internal affairs, mutual respect and mutual benefit" (MEA, 2011).

India desisted from deploying military in Afghanistan as it could have seemingly worked in Pakistan's favor and give credence to Islamabad's doctrine of strategic depth (Parkes, 2019). Additionally, Pakistan could have opened two fronts against India—Afghanistan and the conflict in Jammu & Kashmir—which may have stretched India's resources. Furthermore, as a developing nation, India lacked the capacity and capability to maintain a substantial military presence in Afghanistan, a factor that should have further bolstered Pakistan's position. Recognizing these constraints, India adopted a soft power strategy to gain influence in Afghanistan (Ahmad, 2022). Ultimately, India's strategic calculus led it to prioritize domestic issues over deep military involvement in Afghanistan, a region historically referred to as the 'graveyard of empires'. This decision allowed India to focus on its internal challenges while simultaneously leveraging diplomatic and developmental tools to maintain its influence in Afghanistan. Thus, without military 'boots on the ground', India used soft power by investing over US\$3 billion in over 400 infrastructural, developmental, and other common-good projects in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan to win the hearts and minds of the people. Furthermore, India has been allocating around US\$25 million development aid package in its annual budget since 2022. This is the biggest ever investment by a regional country that the Kabul government and the ordinary Afghans appreciate.

With the signing of the Peace Agreement between the US and the Taliban in February 2020, the former's withdrawal from Afghanistan on 31 August 2021, and capturing of power by the Taliban on 15 August 2021, the old strategic dynamics changed. Interestingly, the Indian security establishment accused the Taliban of being a proxy of Pakistan. India, which previously supported the Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani governments and the US presence in Afghanistan, became marginalized in this context. In the words of former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, "India is the biggest loser in Afghanistan" (Geo News, 2021).

After capturing of power by the Taliban, Pakistan, alongside some other regional players (namely, China and Russia), played a proactive role in giving at least regional legitimacy to the

regime, while India expressed its reservations about the Taliban. During the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, its militant wing, the Haqqani Network, attacked Indian interests in Afghanistan. In addition, militant activities also increased in Kashmir. Pakistan-supported Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) started to recruit local Kashmiri cadres. However, getting limited local support for jihad, HM attempted to assassinate Kashmiri moderates, who acted as a stumbling block for the Kashmiris to join the proxy war (Ghosh, 2000). Yet, another strategy adopted to fuel the proxy war in Kashmir was the cross-border movement of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) militants to perpetrate terroristic activities against the state (Dulat et al., 2018). However, finding the proxy war ineffective in Kashmir, the ISI directed the formation of the United Jihad Council in 1994 (Hooda, 2017).

But falling short of achieving the goal of liberating Kashmir from India, the Pakistan military waged a war in Kargil with the help of non-state actors in May–July 1999 to cut off Kashmir from the rest of India. This war backfired and exposed Pakistan’s role in sponsoring a proxy war in Kashmir. As per the former ISI chief Asad Durrani (a retired lieutenant general of the Pakistan Army), “one and all blamed us for Kargil, which was anyway a foolish operation” (Dulat et al., 2018, p. 126). Yet another major incident took place in December 1999, when an Indian Airlines hijacked plane (IC-814) was allowed to land in Kandahar. Instead of handing over the hijackers to India, the Taliban regime bargained for the release of three militants, Masood Azhar, Omar Sheikh, and Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar, who were locked in Indian prisons on charges of terrorism. After the militant swap, they were allowed safe travel to Pakistan. Masood Azhar regrouped Jaish-e-Mohammed, whom the UN declared a global terrorist; Omar Sheikh organized Harkat-ul-Ansar, beheaded Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl and is currently serving a life term in prison in Pakistan; Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar renewed the activity of Al-Umar Mujahideen and operates from Muzaffarabad, close to the Line of Control (LoC) (Bhardwaj, 2019). Their reorganization and channelizing of militants across the LoC further fueled the proxy war demonstrated by the bombing of the J&K state parliament building and the national parliament in New Delhi. The proxy war halted only after the Mumbai bomb attacks in 2008, which resulted in the death of 174 people when one of the militants captured live disclosed his links with the militant organization LeT and the ISI (Ahlawat & Malik, 2019, p. 66).

During the Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, India accused it of allowing the Afghan territory to become a “deep state” for training militants who crossed into Indian territory with the objective to liberate J&K from India. That interpretation is feasible, as some of those groups -LeT, JeM, and others- fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan (Laskar, 2021). A UN report published in 2020 revealed that Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) actively participated with the Taliban insurgents (UN, 2021). AQIS has been threatening India since 2014. In addition, the Haqqani Network, which acts as a liaison between the Taliban and Al Qaeda, retains strong relations with Pakistan’s ISI. Specifically, the revocation of Article 370 in J&K by New Delhi in August 2019 infuriated Islamabad, which in turn led the Haqqani Network to attack Indian interests in Afghanistan (Ahlawat & Izarali, 2020). In response, India closed its embassy and consulates before the US withdrawal, fearing retaliation from the Haqqani Network.

The Taliban lacked legitimacy in Afghanistan, as per a survey conducted in 2019. Eighty-five percent of participants (including all the states, 51% male and 49% female, 82% rural and 18% urban households) responded that they had no sympathy for the Taliban (Akseer et al., 2019, p. 69). In contrast, India’s support to the Karzai and Ghani governments and other ethnic groups and heavy investment is considered honest overtures to help the country in dire need. As per a survey conducted from March to May 2022, 69% of Afghans chose India as Afghanistan’s “best friend” country (Chaudhury, 2022). Thus, India’s close relationship with the Taliban may cost its hard-earned legitimacy and influence within Afghan society. The above analysis indicates India’s

apprehensions about the Taliban regime.

Apprehensions aside, India, an influential country in South Asia, would not only like to remain relevant but also become a key stakeholder in shaping the regional order. Since 2013 India's external intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) appears to be in contact with different Taliban leaders. This was perceptible when the Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef quietly attended a Think Fest in Goa, India. Zaeef, a former ambassador to Pakistan, was a confidant of Mullah Omar, who headed the Taliban government from 1996 to 2001 (The Economic Times, 2013). It is quite likely that since then, there may have been some interaction with individual Taliban leaders, as some were educated in India (Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai) while others who were prisoned in Pakistan (Zaeef, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar) may have some inclination towards India. Be that as it may, in a more nuanced way, the meeting of Indian officials with the Taliban's office bearers in Doha in June 2021 marked a policy shift from informal contacts to diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. It is anybody's guess as to what transpired behind the curtain between the Indian and Taliban representatives (Roy, 2021). Was it the Taliban's compulsion to overcome regional isolation? Was it too challenging to neglect India? Or was it to counter-balance Pakistan with India? Whatever the reason, in a historic turnaround, the Taliban urged India "to maintain diplomatic presence in Afghanistan" (BBC, 2021). Moreover, the Taliban's Qatar-based spokesperson, Suhail Shaheen, appreciated India's humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (BBC, 2021). To assuage India's concerns of the ISI using the Afghan soil as a deep state, the Taliban leader Anas Haqqani assured that "Kashmir is not part of our jurisdiction and interference is against our policy" (Khare, 2021). Instead, the Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid urged Pakistan and India to sit down and resolve all issues (ARY News, 2021). Based on these initial confidence-building measures, India's ambassador and the Head of Taliban's Political Office in Doha, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, held a meeting at the Embassy of India in Doha in August 2021, "on the request of the Taliban side", where Stanikzai assured that Afghanistan's soil would not be allowed to be "used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism in any manner" (MEA, 2021 August 31).

Since the Taliban's Takeover in August 2021

India's approach to Afghanistan and its complex relationship with the Taliban can be analyzed through the lens of proxy war theory, which emphasizes the role of external actors in supporting local proxies to achieve strategic objectives in a third-party conflict zone. Although India had significant reservations about engaging with the Taliban, a closer examination of the 1999 IC-814 hijacking incident reveals that the Taliban despite allowing the hijacked plane to land in Kandahar, the Taliban had not orchestrated the hijack. As noted by the Government of India (MEA, 2000), the hijacking was primarily an "ISI brainchild", and there is no credible evidence linking the Taliban to direct support for jihadist activities in Jammu and Kashmir. Paliwal (2017) highlights that while the Taliban expressed sympathy for Kashmiri separatists, they consistently denied active involvement in the conflict and viewed Kashmir as an internal matter for India.

Even when Pakistan sought to leverage Washington's mediation on the Kashmir dispute by bringing the Taliban into peace negotiations, the Taliban resisted entanglement in broader regional conflicts. They explicitly rejected the idea of Afghanistan becoming a battleground for external powers (Abi-Habib, 2019). India's evolving strategy towards Afghanistan was complicated by the Haqqani Network, a militant faction within the Taliban. Despite the Taliban's claims of non-involvement in cross-border militancy, India's interests in Afghanistan were frequently targeted by this group, which maintained close ties with Pakistan. The appointment of Sirajuddin Haqqani to the Taliban's interior ministry in 2021 further complicated India's threat perception, even though

the Haqqani Network did not hold unilateral decision-making authority within the Taliban regime.

The Taliban's use of Afghanistan as a base for proxy actors—including groups like AQIS, LeT, and HM—has been a critical concern for India. These groups, which fought alongside the Taliban, have historically operated as proxies for Pakistan's ISI, engaging in cross-border militancy aimed at India (Verma, 2022). However, as Pakistan seeks to distance itself from direct support for these groups, particularly after being removed from the Financial Action Task Force's grey list in 2022, Afghan soil may once again become the primary base for such actors. Proxy war theory provides a useful framework for understanding how Pakistan has historically used Afghan territory to host militant groups without directly implicating itself in conflict with India, allowing it to achieve strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability.

India's strategic objective in Afghanistan now centers on limiting the influence of these proxies and reducing Pakistan's leverage in Kabul. India's publicly stated policy of supporting an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled" peace process aligns with the Taliban's own declarations that Afghan soil will not be misused for external aggression (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022). This reflects India's interest in ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a staging ground for cross-border militancy, especially in Kashmir. Proxy war theory illustrates that while the Taliban regime may not directly engage in hostilities with India, their tolerance for proxy groups operating within Afghanistan remains a significant concern. India has adopted a multifaceted strategy to engage with the Taliban, seeking assurances that Afghan territory will not be used for anti-India activities. This includes leveraging its development assistance, which continues despite the regime change, and exploring diplomatic avenues, as demonstrated by India's participation in the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in 2021. Despite Pakistan's accusations of India acting as a "spoiler" in Afghanistan (Dawn, 2021), the Taliban has signaled a willingness to engage with New Delhi. Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen refuted claims of the Taliban's involvement in jihadist activities in Kashmir, affirming that the organization does not interfere in the internal affairs of other nations (Gupta, 2020).

In terms of proxy dynamics, the Taliban's increasing autonomy from Pakistan has presented a major opportunity for India. The IEA resisted becoming a mere tool of Pakistan's strategic interests, as evidenced by their opposition to the Durand Line and their defiance of Pakistani attempts to control their foreign policy (Jamal, 2022). This shift suggests that India could capitalize on intra-Taliban divisions and nationalist tendencies to counter Pakistan's influence. As Storey (2023) notes, India favors nationalist elements within the Taliban who seek an "autonomous foreign policy", offering New Delhi a potential avenue to reduce Pakistan's control over the group. India's re-engagement with Afghanistan, symbolized by the reopening of its embassy in Kabul and continued development assistance, reflects a pragmatic approach rooted in proxy war dynamics. New Delhi seeks to balance its engagement with the Taliban while securing credible commitments that Afghan soil will not be used as a proxy battleground for Pakistan. Although the broader framework of the 1951 Treaty and the 2011 Strategic Agreement remains in place, its implementation in the current geopolitical context remains uncertain. However, India's cautious diplomacy, combined with its development aid and humanitarian assistance, positions it to maintain a strategic foothold in Afghanistan, even as it navigates the complex proxy war dynamics involving Pakistan and its proxies.

Conclusion

In the context of proxy war literature, the evolving dynamics between India, Pakistan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan illustrate significant shifts in the traditional understanding of patron-

client relationships. Proxy wars have been broadly defined as conflicts wherein external powers, rather than engaging directly, support local actors or non-state paramilitary groups to achieve strategic objectives, as was the case during the Cold War. Pakistan's long-standing relationship with the Taliban, and its previous role as a sponsor, reflects the classical model of proxy warfare. However, as contemporary scholarship emphasizes, this model often exaggerates the dominance of the principal actor (state sponsor) and underestimates the agency of proxies themselves. The case of the Taliban demonstrates the limitations of the principal-agent framework, especially when the proxy begins to assert its own autonomy and strategic interests, as seen in the Taliban's post-2021 posture.

During the Cold War, the principal-agent dynamic was characterized by asymmetrical relationships where the sponsor exerted significant control over its proxy. Pakistan's early support for the Taliban mirrored this dynamic, as Islamabad used the group to counter Indian influence and project its own geopolitical ambitions. However, as the Taliban consolidated power in Afghanistan, the traditional principal-agent relationship has been disrupted. Instead of acting solely as a proxy, the Taliban has sought to distance itself from Pakistan's sphere of influence, asserting its independence by engaging with other regional powers, including India. This shift challenges the conventional wisdom of proxy warfare that privileges the interests of the sponsoring state over the agency of the proxy.

India's cautious re-engagement with the Taliban, despite having previously supported Northern Alliance factions as its own proxy, underscores the evolving nature of proxy relations in Afghanistan. The Taliban's strategic autonomy complicates Pakistan's ability to control the group, thereby limiting Islamabad's capacity to use Afghanistan as a battleground for its rivalry with India. According to Mumford (2013), motivations for engaging in proxy warfare include territorial control, economic and military interests, and regional power balances. Both India and Pakistan have historically pursued these goals in Afghanistan, with Pakistan relying on the Taliban to counterbalance India's influence. However, the Taliban's increasing independence from Pakistan and willingness to engage with India suggests that it is no longer a simple proxy but a more complex actor with its own strategic objectives after having re-established the IEA.

This transformation in the Taliban's role reflects broader critiques in the proxy war literature about the inadequacy of the principal-agent model to capture the fluidity of proxy relationships. While Pakistan once leveraged its support for the Taliban to project power in Afghanistan, it now faces the challenge of managing a proxy that is not only autonomous but also willing to engage with its strategic rival, India. For Pakistan, this represents a significant shift, as the Taliban no longer serves exclusively as a tool for advancing Islamabad's regional objectives. Instead, the Taliban has begun to pursue its own agenda, balancing relations with multiple actors, including China, Russia, and India, to enhance its legitimacy and secure developmental aid. This case study, therefore, demonstrates the changing nature of proxy warfare, where traditional sponsor-proxy relationships are increasingly fluid. The Taliban, once a proxy for Pakistan, is now exercising independent agency, reshaping its relationships with both India and Pakistan.

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