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Nassir UI Haq Wani and Lyla Abdul Latif

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Nassir Ul Haq Wani
Lyla Abdul Latif

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Abstract

By examining India's role within South Asia's security environment, this paper suggests how India's relationship with Afghanistan's new political regime under a 'reformed' Taliban will lead to security cooperation and gateways to economic opportunities. The discussion is underpinned by an analysis of non-state actors from neighbouring jurisdictions, such as Pakistan, and China who pose a direct threat to the security of Indian interests. India being a key power player in the region relies on a stable Afghanistan and is therefore heavily vested in steering and overseeing political decisions by neighbouring states around peacebuilding, conflict management, and human security in the region. A discursive methodological approach based on country case study analysis provides the paper with the data needed to establish and explain what the security environment in the South Asian region looks like, the stakeholders, and political nuances that leave gaps for insecurity to thrive and upset vested interests. The contribution that the paper makes is to support policy direction towards entrenching stronger Indian and Afghan relations based on mutual strategic security and economic interests.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, non-state actors, south Asian regional partnership, politics, security.

Introduction

South Asia comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka is one of the most highly populated regions. Of these countries, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan pose political and security challenges which in turn have cross-border consequences.¹ These three countries are insecure regions in the world. With a population nearing 1.97 billion people, security concerns are therefore imminent and on the agenda of regional political discourse. The security situation in these three countries is currently under the direct grasp of insurgency and terrorist-related activities. Insecurity is largely fuelled by extremist ideas and discrimination against other racial/ethnic/religious groups. This has also further impacted the political relationship between these three countries governments. The region has seen the rise of *Al-Qaida* and the *Khurasan* wing of the Islamic State (I.S.K.) in addition to some alleged state-sponsored insurgent groups.²

¹ Borthakur, Anchita. "Afghan refugees: The impact on Pakistan." *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2017): 488-509.

² Jadoon, Amira. *The evolution and potential resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*. United States Institute of Peace, 2021.

This paper argues that India and Afghanistan are central to addressing the security threats posed by these non-state actors and addressing government ambivalence in security matters where some neighbouring states have been accused of sponsoring terrorist activities. The position of Pakistan in this region and towards protecting human security is also a key factor, however, the sour political relation between India and Pakistan requires the former to instead strengthen its relationship with Afghanistan in securing the region. Relatedly, India and Pakistan; both nuclear powers, are the main orchestrators behind South Asia's insecurity, economic, and political structure. When Barry Buzan and Ole Waever were theorizing the Regional Security Complex, they placed India and Pakistan at the cornerstone of the South Asian Complex and argued that the nature of this Complex has been revamped from a colonialist formation to a conflict one upon the partition of the two states in 1947.³ Such divergence has resulted in extra-regional players' like China and the U.S., taking up key roles in South Asia's security and political dynamics, of course, to alter the situation to their cause. Pakistan continues to pose a challenge to India. Any Indian resilience is faced with a counter-resilience by Pakistan and vice versa. Therefore, India needs to crack down on this bulwark somewhere else, namely Afghanistan. History shows that Afghanistan has been taken advantage of by foreign states as a result of its lack of coordinated governance, internal conflict, and weakened political regime offering open ground for foreign intruders to use the country as their base for causing regional instability and insecurity. This also stems from the fact that Afghanistan has a critical geographical location, as a nucleus of the region. As a result of Afghanistan's centrality, it is in the interest of both Pakistan and India to strengthen their relations with Afghanistan. There is another equally powerful player in the region; China, who also seeks a strategic partnership with Afghanistan and will benefit from excluding the Indian influence in Afghanistan. These are concerns for India which prompt an analysis relating to India's policy on Afghanistan.

Though much has been written about the nature of India's strategic engagement in South Asia and Afghanistan, this research tries to provide new insight into India's strategic involvement in Afghanistan in the context of the South Asian regional order. It analyses the issue from a strategic framework rather than particular cases. The study is qualitative in nature, and the narrative method is employed for drawing the outcomes. The current study focuses on India as a regional power in the South Asian security system, understands India's strategic interests in Afghanistan, and understands the role of Pakistan in shaping the Indian security perspectives on Afghanistan. The rest of the study is organized with section 2 focusing on scholarship analysing the political relations around security concerns in Afghanistan, section 3 discusses India's regional security strategy with Afghanistan, and section 4 demarcates present and future of relations primarily focusing on the post-Taliban takeover, and finally, section 5 concludes.

2. Scholarship Review

The Indian Concern about insecurity in Afghanistan and the move towards re-strategizing its regional partnership with Afghanistan is understood through the lens of the Pakistan and China problem, and India's economic interests.

³ Buzan, Barry, and Ole Waever. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (2003).

2.1 Pakistan and China's Problem

Routray⁴ argues that India's influence in Afghanistan is now under threat since the assumption of power by the Taliban. The Indian concern is further fuelled by Pakistan and China taking a central stage in Kabul. Therefore, India seeks new policy approaches to interactions with Afghanistan to protect its economic investments and be part of the process that prevents nonstate actors from using Afghan territory to launch attacks. The Indian strategy for Afghanistan has also been considered critical by Gareth Price⁵, according to whom a politically secure environment for Afghanistan is what India should be promoting. There are strong views that India's strategy towards Afghanistan is based on India's hostile relationship with Pakistan and the conflict between the two states over Jammu and Kashmir. Therefore, securing Afghanistan from the threats posed by insecurity and instability favours the Indian preservation of these conflict regions from a Pakistani-led attack from Afghan soil. This reductionist stance formulated by Price explains the Indian approach towards Afghanistan, which stems from the dispute over Kashmir. There are many instances of security threats to Indian interests in Afghanistan. For instance, during the suicide attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul, the Afghan government officials immediately blamed the Inter-Services Intelligence (I.S.I.) of Pakistan as the main operator behind it. There is a need, therefore, for Indian strategists to establish relations with the Taliban and utilize all possible options to ensure their Indian interests are not marginalized in the Afghan future scenario.⁶ This notion coincides with the recent United States South Asian strategy in which a prominent role is dedicated to India in the Afghanistan scene and across the region which has made Pakistani analysts indignant towards the United States.⁷

In the same fashion, the idea provided by Hanauer and Chalk confirms that India is seeking national security objectives in Afghanistan. For them, what India is doing is denying Pakistani efforts in creating threats to India using the Afghan destabilized territory by supporting extremist insurgent groups. That is why the Indian Permanent Representative to the United Nation asked for a collective international effort to bring security to Afghanistan.⁸ Similar to Hanauer and Chalk, Mitra also concludes that what India seeks in Afghanistan is limited to its national security and accepts a critical weight to the role of Pakistan as an undeniable sponsor of making threats to Indian national interests in the region. Afghanistan is Pakistan's launch pad in posing such threats to India by using insurgent groups.⁹ Afghanistan holds a periphery position inside the South Asian security system, thus drawing India's and Pakistan's attention to Afghanistan based on the mechanism of their threat perception.¹⁰

Dalrymple's point, on the other hand, seems to be that Indian strategists granted attention to Afghanistan during the 1970s when Pakistan, after being defeated by

⁴ Routray, Bibhu Prasad. "National security decision-making in India." (2013).

⁵ Price, Gareth. *India's Policy Towards Afghanistan* (p. 10). London: Chatham House. 2013.

⁶ Pradhan, S. D. "India's options in Afghanistan," *The Times of India*, May 18 2020.

⁷ Basit, Abdul. *Changing Security Situation in South Asia and Development of CPEC* (Islamabad: Abdul Manan Graphics, 2018), 16.

⁸ Hanauer, Larry, and Peter Chalk. *India's and Pakistan's strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the region*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2012.

⁹ Mitra, Joy. "India's policy thinking about its security objectives in Afghanistan needs re-imagining," *The Diplomat*, October 23, 2018.

¹⁰ Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbano. *South Asia and Afghanistan: The robust India-Pakistan rivalry*, *Prio*, 2011.

India for the third time, draw Afghanistan as its strategic depth. On the basis of this concept, Pakistan would establish sort of relations with Afghanistan that could provide Pakistan with a safe backyard when it is engaged in a war with India. This idea requires Afghanistan to have close ties with Pakistan and to be an opponent of India. When the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan during the 1990s, the dream of strategic depth of Pakistani strategists was about to come true because the Taliban had proved to be a foe to India. Though this dream was too short to collect its benefits for the reason that what happened on September 11, 2001, injected a strategic shift in the entire global politics, generally and in Afghanistan, specifically. Through this shift, the regime of the Taliban was overthrown and a new government, headed by Hamid Karzai, was established. President Karzai started a warm relationship with India rather than Pakistan. Thus India, too, reformulated its strategy towards Afghanistan in which Pakistan was visualized as a negative player and a grave threat to Indian national security.¹¹

Contrary to the above argument, Ganguly believes that the concept of strategic depth was circulating among the Pakistani strategists when this country had not been capacitated with nuclear force. Enhanced with such a power, Pakistan left to work on strategic depth concept because its nuclear capabilities provided it with a relative balance and a deterrent element against India. Pakistan has forgotten about that concept though but it follows a revised prescription of that strategy. Pakistan, correspondingly, strengthens the attempts to reduce and minimize the Indian influence in Afghanistan to the large possible scale.¹² Needless to say that the same strategy is followed by India as a logical reaction. Another dimension of the Indian strategy concerning Afghanistan is to influence the Afghan political environment to project soft power and conquer hearts and minds. With that being achieved, India will keep the Afghan masses impressed and that of Pakistan and China limited.¹³ This strategy ensures the psychological strengths of the Indian prevalence in the area. To achieve such an objective, India tried to support the Afghan government in democratizing its institutions which in turn paved the ground for the participation of all the Afghan ethnic groups in the government and policy-making processes, especially the Northern Alliance. India also defended the Afghan government's stance against the Taliban in the Afghan Peace Process negotiations which stem from the Indian concern about a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.¹⁴ The support provided by India to the Northern Alliance during the 1990s against the Taliban and based on the fact that the Alliance had a spacious role in 2001 settlements, softened the ground for India to enjoy a fair political position in the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan. From the beginning, India has done much regarding the state-building process and it was among the first countries that immediately recognized Afghanistan. As well as, by signing a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2002, India became Afghanistan's first strategic partner. Furthermore, to implement the process of democratization,

¹¹ Dalrymple, William. "A deadly triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan and India," *The Brookings*, 25 June 2013.

¹² Ganguly, Sumit. "India's Role in Afghanistan." *CIDOB Policy Research Project "Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Regional Perspective"*, Janvier 2012 (2011).

¹³ Dawlatzai, Muhammad Kawsar. "India and Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan: A new imperialism in the making?" *Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 1: 68, 2020.

¹⁴ Hanauer, Larry, and Peter Chalk. "India's and Pakistan's strategies in Afghanistan: implications for the US and the region." *Pittsburg: Rand Corporation* (2012): 1-71.

India helped the new government in training the elections staff and the local government officials.¹⁵

2.2 Indian Economic Interests

Besides political sway, economic strength constitutes an essential part of a country's national interests. And this is an undeniable fact that Central Asia and Afghanistan provide a fruitful economic opportunity as a regional market for India, especially in the energy and mining sectors. Afghanistan is a country full of natural assets, India, therefore, had been enthusiastic to invest in this country. Receiving the rights to extract *Hajigak* mines from an Indian consortium could be a vital example.¹⁶ Routray also assumes economic interests as one of the basic elements of the Indian strategy regarding Afghanistan.¹⁷ Perhaps, for this very account, a bilateral meeting was held between India and China on Afghanistan in a unique fashion to negotiate their economic interests after the withdrawal of the United States from the country. Thus, the interests of these two Asian powers and competitors are as vital as led to their face-to-face gathering. Needless to say, both countries have invested billions of dollars in Afghanistan, and the quest to bring stability to Afghanistan lies in their very interests.¹⁸

Meanwhile, concerning the regional trade sector, India has adopted a strategy based on which tries to make a strategic belt around Pakistan through the India-Iran-Afghanistan triangle. India is trying to be connected with oil and gas-rich Central Asian Republics by investing in the Chabahar port located in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both Iran and India are persuading Afghanistan to get benefited from this port instead of Pakistan's Karachi and Gwadar ports. By doing so, India is going to isolate Pakistan from economic opportunities. A survey, to confirm this, shows that the number of Afghan cargo containers in Chabahar port has been raised from 30,000 to 80,000 between 2009 and 2015.¹⁹ This inflicts a grave concern on the economy of Pakistan. This fortifies the idea of projecting a regional political influence which, in turn, leads to providing the platform that pushes a player into a regional power status. On that theme, India maintains active relations with all South Asian players, especially with Afghanistan to serve its regional expectations as a prominent regional power.²⁰ The same claim is supported by Larry Hanauer as he states that the Indian policymakers' concerns and engagement are not confined only to Afghanistan but what they quest for is beyond this country and covers the entire region and even further.²¹ This triggers the concerns of Pakistan's strategists as Maleeha Lodhi explains that one of the reasons for the instability and insecurity in the South Asian environment is the Indian strategists' desire to project power across the region and, through this, acquire dominance over the other small regional players.²² Some studies justify the importance of Afghanistan to India, strategically, because of the

¹⁵ Wang, Jin. "India's policy toward Afghanistan: implications to the regional security governance." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 112-120.

¹⁶ Price, Gareth. *India's Policy Towards Afghanistan* (p. 10). London: Chatham House. 2013.

¹⁷ Routray, Bibhu Prasad. "National security decision-making in India." (2013).

¹⁸ Jeganaathan, J. "Afghanistan: When India and China touch base," *The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*: 10-12. 2014.

¹⁹ Hussain, M. (2022). China-Pakistan economic corridor: Implications for Sino-Indian rivalry. In *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Politics of Connectivity* (pp. 147-169). Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

²⁰ Routray, Bibhu Prasad. "National security decision-making in India." (2013).

²¹ Hanauer, Larry, and Peter Chalk. "India's and Pakistan's strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the US and the region." *Pittsburg: Rand Corporation* (2012): 1-71.

²² Lodhi, M. Security challenges in South Asia. *The non-proliferation Review*, 8(2), 118-124. 2001.

location of Afghanistan as a route to rich Central Asia. To achieve this strategy, India has largely invested in Afghanistan, nearly 3 billion dollars in reconstruction purposes. Huge investments in Chabahar port is another attempt by India that makes it tied up with Central Asia and leaves Pakistan aside.²³

Needless to say, such an Indian regional dominance is perceived as a clear threat to Pakistan. Likewise, Indian consulates in Afghanistan have always been a source of Pakistan's rhetoric against Indo-Afghan relations. According to Pakistani analysts, these consulates are accused of acting as centres for launching operations against Pakistan and sources of supporting the Baloch Liberation Army, a separatist group in Baluchistan of Pakistan.²⁴ Some studies illustrate India as more than a regional power and drawn up as an extra-regional power and a suitable candidate for global power. The Indian position requires it to mitigate the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan and to prevent it from utilizing the Afghan domain as its strategic backyard.²⁵ The reviewed works of the literature suggest that some particular cases, like the Indo-Pak rivalry over Kashmir, merely constitute the cornerstone of India's approach towards the region. That is, these scholars isolate the regional strategic patterns by focusing on particular cases. They further assume that India's strategic interests in Afghanistan stem from that particular case. They, therefore, have paid little attention as far as India's strategy in the context of the South Asian regional security order is concerned.

3. India's Regional Security Strategy Towards Afghanistan

After the seizure of power, the Mujahidin leaders failed to reach an agreement on a power-sharing framework. Thus, Afghanistan was divided into influence zones, each governed by a leader. Due to such chaotic circumstances and lack of a strong central government, a large extent of corruption covered all the society. Taliban seemed to have emerged from such conditions in Kandahar province under Mullah Mohammad Omer who condemned Mujahidin for their perversions.²⁶ From 1994 to 1996, without some northern provinces under the control of Commander Ahmad Shah Masood, the Taliban took control of all the Afghanistan territory.²⁷ With the end of the Mujahidin rule in Afghanistan and the capture of Kabul by the Taliban, the Indian embassy in Kabul was closed. India not only did not recognise the government of the Taliban but called them a serious threat to its national interests and security and denounced what occurred in the country as external intervention. Moreover, in coordination with other regional players such as Iran and Russia, India started to support the anti-Taliban groups to counter their threats,²⁸ however, India simultaneously tried to paddle the narrative of being neutral.²⁹ In the history of Indo-Afghan relations, it was the first time that their ties got crossed off. Taliban, too, did

²³ Dawlatzai, Muhammad Kawsar. "India and Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan: A new imperialism in the making?" *Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 1: 68, 2020.

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ Fair, C. Christine. "Securing Indian interests in Afghanistan beyond 2014." *Asia policy* 17, no. 1 (2014): 27-32.

²⁶ Marsden, Peter. *The Taliban: War, Religion and The New Order in Afghanistan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.

²⁷ Wahab, Shaista, and Barry Youngerman. "A brief history of Afghanistan. New York: Facts on file." (2007).

²⁸ Hosam, Akram. "Iran and the struggle between regional and international powers in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal."

²⁹ Kamal, Marium. "Afghanistan-Pakistan-India relations: A paradoxical perspective." *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society* 33, no. 02 (2020).

not put any effort to restart diplomatic relations with India because their opponents, the Northern Alliance, were being backed by the Indian government.³⁰

The concerns of Indians, because of the Taliban's relations with the insurgent groups, active in Kashmir, were growing day by day. What made India more concerned, was the narco-economy of Afghanistan which was tied to the insurgency in Kashmir.³¹ In addition, the nature of Pak-Taliban relations made India suspicious of Pakistan's intentions in their use of Afghan soil against India as a safe haven for extremist groups. As many insurgent group members busted in Jammu and Kashmir, according to the Indian government, had been trained in Afghanistan.³² Notwithstanding these facts, in 1997, when the city of Mazar-e Sharif was captured by the Taliban, India tried to pass a rapprochement with the regime of Taliban.³³ India seemed to have chosen to deal with the Taliban rather than leave them alone. The Indian approach to maintaining its regional position, the need for India to lead the economic ecology of South Asia, and denying other powers challenging India's growing might, is the core discussions of this section. Under the auspices of these strategic themes, the following sections will determine the position of Afghanistan within the Indian strategic behavior towards the region. India, the largest and the most populous country in South Asia, holds 75% of the population of the entire region, GDP, and military spending, and 65% of South Asia's landmass and military forces.³⁴ The geographic location of the Indian subcontinent has granted it a geo-strategic superiority over other regional players. Preserving a regional power position, initially, requires India to boost its military and diplomatic capabilities. India therefore after its Independence, during the Cold War era, established and joined the policy of the Non-alignment Movement.³⁵ It was, perhaps, because of the new country's tendency towards a self-building mechanism to prepare India as a single nation and a stable player both, regionally and internationally. It therefore might not have sufficiently supported the then-Afghan government while it was confronting the threats of Mujahidin. By becoming a nuclear power country, India jumped into a new phase of its regional and international contact.³⁶ Needless to say that entering into the list of nuclear power countries was the first step for India moving toward a regional power position.

Furthermore, to increase its conventional military capabilities, India absorbed military equipment, technology, and license production of military tools from the Soviet Union and the United States of America during the Cold War period but latterly, in the 21st century, India established a strong relationship with Israel as now it has become one of the prominent customers in the military sector.³⁷ Moreover, the statistics show that in 2020 after the United States of America and China, India was

³⁰ Mahdavi, Abdul Hamid. "The intertwined and complex history of the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan triangle," *Etilaatroz*, 19 December 2016.

³¹ Hosam, Akram. "Iran and the struggle between regional and international powers in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal."

³² Ali, Ashfaq Maqsood. "Indo-Afghan relations since 9/11." PhD diss., *University of Kashmir Srinagar*, 2013.

³³ Paliwal, Avinash. "New alignments, old battlefield: Revisiting India's role in Afghanistan." (2017).

³⁴ Hanif, Melanie. "Indian involvement in Afghanistan: Stepping stone or stumbling block to regional hegemony?" (2009).

³⁵ Sharma, Devika, and Jason Miklian. "India's global foreign policy engagements- a new paradigm?" *Noref Report*, February (2016).

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ Cohen, Stephen P., and Sunil Dasgupta. *Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization*. Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

the third country in the world with high military expenditure.³⁸ It is clear that such spending is not allocated for addressing the Pakistan factor only but, it follows the regional agenda and even beyond that. As such, after being enlisted among nuclear powers, Indian policymakers were more encouraged to formulate their own type of deterrent strategies. India, subsequently, began to spend on cruise and ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. The recent series of Agni ballistic missiles are apt for being armed with Multiple Independently targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), for example.³⁹ Obviously, these developments are providing India with the opportunity of enjoying strike capability and the prowess to widely draw its interest. Similarly, due to the growing threats and challenges, the increasing amount of India's military spending post-2001 is quite beyond national security calculations and spells India's quest for sustaining its regional power position.

India's National Security Strategy of 2019 well justifies the reasons behind the increment of those military spending because, India is engaged with three main factors at the regional level which are China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Indian strategy does not recognize terrorism as an independent phenomenon but rather assumes it as a state-sponsored structure that tries to check Indian interests in the region.⁴¹ The interdependency of these factors brings Afghanistan to the fore as a player or as a tactical ground that the regional games are being played on and as bait in the strategies of regional and even international actors. India's foreign policy is aimed at preparing the ground for India's conversion into a modern nation. This requires the country not to be confined to its own territory but to practice dynamic contact with outside nations. The government under Prime Minister Modi has therefore strong tendency in establishing active relations with both, the South Asian neighbors and the trans-regional states.⁴² The Indian policymakers consider the fact necessary to be in touch with the world for a prosperous and successful India.⁴³ Based on Modi's active diplomacy framework, India formulated two region-oriented policies. In accordance with the 'Neighborhood First Policy', the government of Modi initiated a new phase of contact with its South Asian neighbors. Though this policy in some the countries like Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Myanmar has been translated into interference in their internal affairs.⁴⁴ Besides this, according to the distribution of power, there are two different orders spanned over South Asia. On the eastern side, due to the considerable influence of India, a hegemonic order is developed, unlike the western side which is still exposed to contentions.⁴⁵ So, the eastern flank could more be exposed to the Neighborhood First Policy than the western one. The 'Act East Policy' is the second attempt of the Indian government,

³⁸ Kaushik, Kaushik. "India third highest military spender in 2020, states data published by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute," *The Indian Express*, April 27 2021.

³⁹ Ghoshal, Debalina. "India's agni missile systems: Strengthening India's nuclear deterrence." *Artha Journal of Social Sciences* 17, no. 4 (2018): 53-69.

⁴⁰ Hooda, D. S. "India's national security strategy.

⁴¹ *Ibid*

⁴² Pant, Harsh V., and Kabir Taneja. "Looking ahead, looking back: Foreign policy in transition under Modi," *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, no. 93: 48-53. (2019)

⁴³ Menon, Shivshankar. *India's Foreign Affairs Strategy*. Brookings India, 2020.

⁴⁴ Spiegeleire, S. D. Jans, K. Verhagen, P. "Strategic alert: Is India catching great power Aassertivitis," *The Hague Center for Strategic Studies*: 2. (2017)

⁴⁵ Hanif, Melanie. "Indian Involvement in Afghanistan in the context of the South Asian security system." *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 2 (2010): 13-26.

attached to its 'active diplomacy' framework that leads India towards the ASEAN nations for economic exchange and security cooperation.⁴⁶

Besides all efforts to maintain its regional power position, India is, too, more assertive to reach a great power position because India's both, demographic and geographic potentials are apt for that status. That is to say that, India's need for acquiring such a status is not only limited to addressing the threats coming from Pakistan but to matching with China because India has already got the ability to meet Pakistan's questions.⁴⁷ Inalienably, the dramatic surge of Modi's foreign policy in 2014, formulated for the South Asian domain, is also considered a section of India's global agenda.⁴⁸ Within the above context, as a prominent regional power in South Asia, India contributed to the attempts launched by the international community in 2001 for reviving Afghanistan's infrastructures that had been smashed by 20 years of wars. By spending two billion dollars since 2001, India has become the biggest regional financial supporter of the Afghan government.⁴⁹ The (then) President Hamid Karzai, was also more tendentious towards India than other countries in the region.⁵⁰ Thus a wide range of contacts was established between the two countries which, of course, provided more room for India to act openly in Afghanistan of post-2001. Another facilitator was India's growing economic, political, and military might at the beginning of the 21st century which paved the ground for Indian strategists to ambitiously draw their interests and foreign policy framework as wide as possible.⁵¹

All the above facts absorbed India's attention towards the Afghan domain and therefore, to maintain a strong foothold, Afghanistan was offered military personnel training in India in 2007 and the opportunity for military equipment, weapons, and munitions transfers. Additionally, Indo-Afghan relations got more tightened when Dr. Ghani took office from Karzai in 2014. Nevertheless, the Pakistani government's hostile activities against Afghanistan and the Indian strategic interests played a vital role in embodying that strength. Accordingly, the Afghan Air Force received four Russian Mi-25s and three Cheetah-type helicopters in December 2016 as India's military supports Afghanistan.⁵² To work as closely as possible, on the 4th of October 2011 India and Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement which also is considered an essential part of India's regional strategy and indicates its long-term interests spanned Afghanistan.⁵³ As a predictable reaction to this agreement, the initial response came from Pakistan was that states should avoid initiatives that end in harming regional stability.⁵⁴ What made Pakistan take such a stance, is the political and security cooperation section of the agreement in which India pledges to equip,

⁴⁶ Spiegeleire, S. D. Jans, K. Verhagen, P. "Strategic alert: Is India catching great power Aassertivitis," *The Hague Center for Strategic Studies*: 2. (2017)

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ Sharma, Devika, and Jason Miklian. "India's global foreign policy engagements- a new paradigm?" *Noref Report*, February (2016).

⁴⁹ Upadhyay, Dinoj K., and Athar Zafar. "Assessing India's decade-long engagement in Afghanistan." *Indian council of world affairs* 23 (2013): 1-5.

⁵⁰ Sethi, Hargun. "A see-saw relationship: An overview of Afghanistan's ties with India and Pakistan." *E*, August 6 (2020).

⁵¹ Pant, Harsh V. "India's challenge in Afghanistan: With power comes responsibility." *Contemp. Readings L. & Soc. Just.* 2 (2010): 36.

⁵² Sethi, Hargun. "A see-saw relationship: An overview of Afghanistan's ties with India and Pakistan." *E*, August 6 (2020).

⁵³ Upadhyay, Dinoj K., and Athar Zafar. "Assessing India's decade-long engagement in Afghanistan." *Indian council of world affairs* 23 (2013): 1-5.

⁵⁴ Ashraf, Sajjad. India-Afghanistan strategic agreement: Opportunity for peace and for Pakistan. *Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore*, 2011.

train, and provide other military facilities to the Afghan National Security Forces.⁵⁵ Pakistan, for decades back, has quested for a strategic depth in Afghanistan which falls under military terms rather than other types of influence.⁵⁶ Thus Pakistan perceives the Indo-Afghan strategic agreement as an obstacle in front of its long-term old strategy. Such perception of course articulates Pakistan's behaviour in regard to Afghanistan.

Besides the cooperation in the military sector, India has, too, spent on developing non-military sectors; economic, political, agriculture, industry, humanitarian, health, education, and many more infrastructures in Afghanistan such as allocating 50 million dollars to the project of 220 kilometers of Zaranj-Delaram road. The construction of the Salma Power Dam in the province of Herat and the Afghan Parliament building are the other major Indian projects.⁵⁷ Likewise, in different scientific fields, India grants hundreds of scholarships to Afghan students annually.⁵⁸ Inevitably, these efforts illustrate the tendency of India in projecting soft power, besides utilizing hard power, in order to achieve its strategic objectives in the region. India also tried to secure its regional position or apply for a great power position, which needs a resilient military power backed by a strong economic base. As far as India could not be excluded from this principle, therefore, for India, it is necessary to take a leading share in orchestrating the economic frame of South Asia.

The quest of India is to lead the regional economy pitches on Central Asian energy markets as well, and for developing Chabahar Port. The vast economic opportunities in Central Asia require India to approach the territories of Pakistan and Afghanistan. But the rising political and security tensions with the former instigated India to replace it with the Islamic Republic of Iran by investing in Chabahar Port. The investment in this port came true in May 2016 when a Trilateral Trade and Transit Corridor Agreement was signed by India, Iran, and Afghanistan which was first operationalized in 2019.⁵⁹ The Port, of course, provides India with the chance to isolate Pakistan, with its terrible conditions, and readily turn to Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics. Chabahar also leaves Afghanistan and Central Asian republics away from the opportunistic limitations of Pakistan and Russia.⁶⁰ Moreover, it is expected that by completing the entire project, this Port would be connected to the Hajigak ore mine in Afghanistan through 900 kilometers of railway.⁶¹ To maximize the extent of its economic prevalence, besides developing sea and land routes, India has also invested in opening the air corridors for practicing mutual trade with Afghanistan by opening Indo-Afghan Air Corridor. Again, Pakistan's denial of providing land routes to India has led to such an initiative. The basis of the air corridor notion was developed in September 2016 at the sixth round of the Heart of Asia Conference/Istanbul Process where President Ashraf Ghani and

⁵⁵ "Agreement on strategic partnership between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Republic of India," October 4, 2011

⁵⁶ Ashraf, Sajjad. India-Afghanistan strategic agreement: Opportunity for peace and for Pakistan. *Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore*, 2011.

⁵⁷ Pant, Harsh V. "India's challenge in Afghanistan: With power comes responsibility." *Contemp. Readings L. & Soc. Just.* 2 (2010): 36.

⁵⁸ Hanif, Melanie. "Indian involvement in Afghanistan in the context of the South Asian security system." *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 2 (2010): 13-26.

⁵⁹ Pant, Harsh V., and Kabir Taneja. "Looking ahead, looking back: Foreign policy in transition under Modi," *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, no. 93: 48-53. (2019)

⁶⁰ Snedden, C. (2016). Shifting geo politics in the greater South Asia region. *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Honolulu United States*.

⁶¹ Dave, B. (2016). Resetting India's engagement in Central Asia: From symbols to substance.," 9.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached a decision of practicing trade through the air.⁶² In the South Asian regional security system, India as a leader of the system is facing two, intra- and extra-system, challengers which are Pakistan and the People's Republic of China. Entire India's South Asian strategy is circulating around the initiatives in checking those challenges in the region, including India's Afghan policies which are targeting Pakistan's and China's prevalence in Afghanistan which acts as a regional connectivity hub. Most importantly, this serves India's purpose to check the challengers.

4. Present and Future of Relations

Whereas India has been set to gain much in a stabilized regional order therefore extremism and insurgency, because of their uncertain nature, are expected to disturb its regional strategy and, consequently, its regional dominance. So, India, as far as the Taliban as an insurgent group is concerned, initially tried to prevent them from enjoying a monopoly of the Afghan political power but the ground conditions unsurprisingly would lead India to maintain its footholds in Afghanistan in order to best serve the strategy of curtailing its regional parts. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan would be interpreted in India as the spreading of the extent of insurgency and extremism across the region. India, therefore, tried much to convince the United States of America to a 'responsible withdrawal'.⁶³ However, instead of illustrating India as a categorical part of the Afghanistan peace scenario, the Trump administration, in its South Asia Strategy of 2017, reduced India to only a new economic partner of the United States, thus replacing Pakistan which has been proven as an unreliable partner because of its support of the groups harming the American people.⁶⁴

India, therefore, adhered to a series of actions in order to prove its role central. Included among them are; encouraging a number of Afghan politicians to withstand against the Taliban, the commitment of some financial support of the ANDSF in case war continued⁶⁵ and working with Moscow and Tehran to forge a regional convergence.⁶⁶ Moreover, India supported a process of peace that was led by the Afghans and owned by the Afghans.⁶⁷ In other words, India was more interested in totally denying the Taliban at first⁶⁸ but if not so, it supported a process in which the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has an abundant share than those of the Taliban. What makes India so concerned about the Taliban takeover of power in Afghanistan, lies more in the extension of insurgent movements that challenges India's regional interests and constrains its strategic manoeuvre.⁶⁹ It further threatens even the national security of India through the extremist networks running across the Durand Line. Among these networks, the Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK)

⁶² Vyas, P. (2017). "Indo-Afghan air corridor: An assessment," *South Asia Voices*: 2.

⁶³ Sharan, T. Watkins, A. (2021). "A new playbook? Europe, India and Afghanistan beyond 2021," *Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung*: 3.

⁶⁴ Owais, Muhammad. "US President Trump policies towards South Asia with particular reference to Afghanistan, India and Pakistan." *Journal of Indian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): 245-254.

⁶⁵ Sharan, T. Watkins, A. (2021). "A new playbook? Europe, India and Afghanistan beyond 2021," *Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung*: 3.

⁶⁶ Pant, H. V. (2012). "India's changing Afghanistan policy: Regional and global implications," *Strategic Studies Institute*: 20.

⁶⁷ Hooda, D. S. (2019). India's national security strategy.

⁶⁸ Dobbins, J., & Shinn, J. (2011). *Afghan peace talks: A primer*. Rand Corporation.

⁶⁹ Sharan, T. Watkins, A. (2021). "A new playbook? Europe, India and Afghanistan beyond 2021," *Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung*: 3.

is the most notable and notorious one which has been created in 2015 and is active in South and Central Asia.⁷⁰ It has the ability to launch attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also looks for followers inside India⁷¹ as I.S.-affiliated publications often persuade Indian Muslims to revolt against the government.⁷² Though the extent of the I.S. presence in India is limited but the tendency of the other Jihadi groups to join the I.S. network is more likely.⁷³

Furthermore, the strong military wing of the Taliban, represented by the Haqqani Network (HQN), is assumed to be more antagonistic towards India⁷⁴ which means that the interests India was seeking for twenty years in Afghanistan have been leveled down to the ground. Sirajuddin Haqqani, a well-known figure inside the Taliban leadership, however, defined the Taliban's perspective towards other nations as friendly as to take their concerns solemnly into account.⁷⁵ While this statement might provide some optimism but due to the disheartened background of the H.Q.N., India would cautiously take it into consideration. On the other hand, the collapse of the Afghan government will provide more space for Pakistan's overwhelming intelligence activities.⁷⁶ This factor, consequently, would deter India from enjoying a strategic superiority over the region because, as of now, Pakistan will utilize the opportunity as India did so in the past twenty years.

4.1 A Shift in Strategy

As far as peace with the Taliban is concerned, the Indian government chose to look at it through the lens of the Afghan government. Therefore, the Indian National Security Strategy suggested a rigorous stance toward the Taliban.⁷⁷ This stance, according to some analysts, pushed India into the periphery of the Afghan Peace Process⁷⁸ but after understanding the fact that the Taliban are the next and upcoming political reality of Afghanistan, the Indians have begun to compromise their position in regard to the Taliban. As, in London Conference on Afghanistan held in 2010 where 60 countries joined, India got surprised by the fact that the Taliban are likely to be part of the Afghan political power in a near future. Therefore, they initially divided the Taliban into good ones and bad ones.⁷⁹ Furthermore, there are shreds of evidence suggesting that there are some figures of Taliban in Doha, Qatar who are as independent as to be subjected to Indian considerations.⁸⁰ These factors conducted India towards the notion that being engaged with the Taliban would be better than turning back to them. This marks a shift in its strategy which would help India come

⁷⁰ Chaudhuri, R., & Shende, S. (2020). *Dealing with The Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After US Withdrawal*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁷¹ Basit, A., Bashar, I., Siyech, M. S., Mahmood, S., & Gunasingham, A. (2019). South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 11(1), 33-64.

⁷² Singam, K. V. (2020). The Islamic State's reinvigorated and evolved propaganda campaign in India. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 12(5), 16-20.

⁷³ Siyech, M. S. (2017). The Islamic state in India: Exploring its footprints. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 9(5), 23-27.

⁷⁴ Pandey, S., & Sareen, S. (2020). Between a republic and an emirate: The future of Afghanistan. *Observer Research Foundation*.

⁷⁵ Chaudhuri, R., & Shende, S. (2020). *Dealing with The Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After US Withdrawal*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

⁷⁷ Hooda, D. S. (2019). India's national security strategy.

⁷⁸ Chaudhuri, R., & Shende, S. (2020). *Dealing with the Taliban: India's strategy in Afghanistan after US withdrawal*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁷⁹ Pant, H. V. (2012). "India's changing Afghanistan policy: Regional and global implications," *Strategic Studies Institute*: 20.

⁸⁰ Chaudhuri, R., & Shende, S. (2020). *Dealing with The Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After US Withdrawal*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

over and heal the upcoming frustrations stemming from the collapse of the Afghan government.

That being the case, the Indian government dispatched its observers to Russia to join the Moscow Conference held with Taliban presence.⁸¹ In addition, in September 2020 in a forum held in Qatar, New Delhi expressed consent for talking directly with the Taliban, which has so far publicly been denied, in order to sustain the Indian interests in Afghanistan.⁸² Likewise, India claimed to be in touch with the Taliban via clandestine channels which have been opened since the first surge of Taliban in 1996.⁸³

4.2 Post-Taliban Takeover

Be it a 'Saigon 2.0' or a great intelligence scandal,⁸⁴ on August 15, 2021, the Taliban took over Kabul city and like many other countries having diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, India too closed its embassy and did drive out Indian diplomatic staff and nationals from the country. This, dramatically, reduced India from a notable regional ally to the most none-availed one in the Afghan political scenario⁸⁵ that is, a complete geopolitical loss. On top of that, whereas Afghanistan is a critical part of the Chabahar economic ecology, part of that loss, therefore, is going to be geo-economic as well.⁸⁶ Be it conditioned-based or not but to heal the frustration of a complete loss, India is supposed to welcome the Taliban as Kunwar Natwar Singh, the ex-Indian foreign minister proposes. Some other observers, however, suggest a 'wait and watch policy.'⁸⁷ Amid this, some argue that since Pakistan claims to have influence inside the Taliban that India has among the Afghan society who carry the legitimization card with them, so on the bases of this fact the Taliban government could expose themselves to India to hamper Islamabad's pressures over them. Because Pakistan has not a positive face within the Afghan community.⁸⁸ Moreover, this might assure and portray the independence of the Taliban as well. Though India was claimed to be at a minimum tendency towards the Taliban and made very late to open ties with them.⁸⁹ But after the takeover, India unsurprisingly got activated. Therefore, India invited the National Security Advisors of Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian Republics to join the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan held on November 10, 2021, hosted by Ajit Doval, the Indian National Security Advisor, in Delhi. The agenda revolved around the security repercussions

⁸¹ Pant, H. V. Taneja, K. (2019). "Looking ahead, looking back: Foreign policy in transition under Modi," *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, no. 93: 48-53.

⁸² Pandey, Shubhangi, and Sushant Sareen. "Between a republic and an emirate: The future of Afghanistan." *Observer Research Foundation* (2020).

⁸³ Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "India weighs up new security risks in wake of Taliban takeover," *The Guardian*, 13 September 2021.

⁸⁴ Khan, Furqan. "The Afghan conundrum: Taliban's takeover and the way forward," *Journal of Indopacific Affairs*: 2. (2021)

⁸⁵ Kuchay, Bilal. "Taliban takeover a 'body blow' to Indian interests in Afghanistan," *Al-Jazeera*, 29 August 2021.

⁸⁶ Kaleji, V. (2021). "The Taliban takeover of Kabul and implications for the India-Iran-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan transit corridor," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 18, no. 147: 5.

⁸⁷ Kuchay, Bilal. "Taliban takeover a 'body blow' to Indian interests in Afghanistan," *Al-Jazeera*, 29 August 2021.

⁸⁸ Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "India weighs up new security risks in wake of Taliban takeover," *The Guardian*, 13 September 2021.

⁸⁹ Kuchay, Bilal. "Taliban takeover a 'body blow' to Indian interests in Afghanistan," *Al-Jazeera*, 29 August 2021.

of the post-Taliban takeover to which all the participants expressed concerns⁹⁰ and discussed the possible ways of engagement with the Taliban.⁹¹ Expressing different reasons, China and Pakistan hesitated to join the Dialogue.⁹² Instead they did join the 'Troika Plus' meeting on Afghanistan held in Islamabad the next day of the Delhi Dialogue on November 11, 2021, in which Russia and the United States attended too.⁹³ As a response to Delhi Dialogue the Taliban government, which was not invited to the meeting, stated that they appreciate any movement that leads to benefiting Afghanistan.⁹⁴ This statement could be a green light to India which might be ended in an Indo-Taliban understanding and further cooperation. However, the future of relations for mutual engagement seems shaky but not bleak.

5. Conclusion

As a giant political figure walled in by small units around it, India has, upon independence, been put in motion towards development and prosperity. This inevitably bestowed India with a regional power status and, subsequently, the prowess to spin out that strength across the region. As this study found, Pakistan and partly China are the actors which meet the standards of the denying mechanism because they seem to project influence in Afghanistan, a place within India's strategic radar since 2001. With its conventional and unconventional capabilities both, Pakistan has been raised as a hardcore challenge to India's regional might. To sustain its regional position and confront Pakistan and China, India has elevated the significance of Afghanistan within its regional security strategy for the 21st century. Afghanistan has, as such, become a chessboard of regional players to a deadly extent as a pro-Islamabad government in Kabul could best serve to give strength to Pakistan against India and conversely a foothold against Pakistan. Such resilience is therefore intolerable for New Delhi and Islamabad both. On this account, Afghanistan is occasionally switched to the causes of these actors. In addition to this, descended into the mix-ups of domestic accounts and doomed to corruption, the Afghan authorities and security policy-makers disappointedly did not lead those games away to avoid scandal in Afghanistan in August 2021 when the Taliban dramatically seized power. The Taliban's phenomenal takeover of the Afghan political fortune and the Western forces' hotfoot evacuation left Afghanistan more open to regional politics and, meanwhile, exposed the entire regional dynamics to a re-articulation. For India, post-takeover means a great regional strategic failure. Because of what India could gain from the previous regime in Kabul, the current one provides otherwise. In other words, in a post-takeover environment, Pakistan and China are expected to be more active in South Asian strategic drives which, according to this study, are proved to be the main two power challengers against Indian regional might. Islamabad and Beijing, for example, recently announced Afghanistan's add-on to the gigantic OBOR project through Pakistan. This might be one of the first initiatives in side-lining the Indian-made projects and ambitions in Afghanistan.

⁹⁰ Staff, FP. "Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan: all you need to know about NSA-level talks," *Firstpost*, November 10, 2021. Retrieved from <<https://www.firstpost.com/india/india-to-host-regional-nsas-today-from-agenda-to-anticipated-outcomes-all-you-need-to-know-about-event-10122051.html>>

⁹¹ Jain, R. (2021). "India hosts first regional meeting on Afghanistan since Taliban takeover," *Reuters*.

⁹² Staff, FP. "Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan: all you need to know about NSA-level talks," *Firstpost*, November 10, 2021.

⁹³ Chaulia, Sreeram. "What did the Delhi regional security dialogue on Afghanistan accomplish?" *The Diplomat*, November 12 2021.

⁹⁴ Jain, Rupam. "India hosts first regional meeting on Afghanistan since Taliban takeover," *Reuters*, November 10 2021.

Finally, to save its strategic face and to minimize the perimeters of its failure, India needs to increase its contacts with the new Taliban regime. In doing so, not only does India purchase the opportunity to avail itself of a strategic prevalence but it could also be economically benefited. The TAPI project still is a fruitful option that India could count on. As such, Chabahar is another opportunity that India may gain. New Delhi since August 2021 has commenced some initiatives like opening the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan to discuss the security repercussions of the Taliban takeover. Additionally, India has yet to explicitly recognize any Afghan movement against the Taliban and has pledged to convey 50,000 tons of wheat as humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. India, as another approaching option, has a chance to infiltrate the room filled with those players whom the Taliban count on and India practices good relations with such as Russia and Qatar. Through this circle, India will find a way to save its core interests in Afghanistan and the region.

About the Authors

Dr. Nassir Ul Haq Wani, Assistant Professor, School of Graduate Studies, Kardan University. <n.wani@kardan.edu.af>
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3871-99857

Dr. Lyla Abdul Latif, Chair, Committee of Financial Studies, School of Law, University of Nairobi and Tutorial Fellow, Warwick Law School. <khanla2@cardiff.ac.uk> ORCID ID: 0000-0001-55315307