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INDIA-PAKISTAN RIVALRY IN AFGHANISTAN: PROXY INFLUENCE AND REGIONAL STABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan has long been a crucible for the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan. This review explores how South Asia's two nuclear-armed neighbors have engaged in a proxy contest for influence in Afghanistan and the implications of this rivalry for regional stability. It traces the historical roots of Indo-Pakistani competition in Afghanistan since 1947, highlighting how divergent security interests and mutual suspicions have shaped each country's Afghan policy. India has pursued diplomatic and developmental engagement to build goodwill and counter Pakistan's influence, whereas Pakistan has often relied on militant proxies – most notably the Taliban – to secure its interests and seek "strategic depth" against India. The paper examines key periods, including the 1990s Taliban regime and the post-2001 era of U.S. involvement, during which India invested over $3 billion in Afghan reconstruction while Pakistan covertly supported the Taliban insurgency. The 2021 return of the Taliban has altered the dynamics: Pakistan initially viewed it as a strategic victory, but tensions have since emerged between Islamabad and the new regime, even as India cautiously re-engages to protect its interests. By analyzing these developments, the paper assesses how the India-Pakistan rivalry has exacerbated Afghanistan's instability and impeded peace efforts. It concludes that this proxy rivalry—fought through diplomacy, economic aid, and militant clients—poses a persistent challenge to regional security, even as global and regional powers seek to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a battleground for broader geopolitical contests.

Keywords: *India-Pakistan rivalry; Afghanistan; proxy war; strategic depth; soft power; Taliban; regional stability; South Asia*

1. INTRODUCTION

The protracted conflict in Afghanistan has been profoundly shaped by the rivalry between India and Pakistan. As two of South Asia's major powers with a history of enmity dating back to Partition, India and Pakistan view Afghanistan through a highly adversarial lens (Constantino, 2020). Each side fears the other's influence in Kabul as a threat to its own security and regional interests. For India, a friendly

Afghanistan offers strategic leverage against Pakistan and denies sanctuary to anti-India militants. For Pakistan, Afghanistan is often seen as providing "strategic depth" – a buffer and potential rear base in a conflict with India – and Islamabad has sought a pliant regime in Kabul that would exclude Indian presence (Jadoon, 2025; Grare, 2006). These zero-sum perceptions have led both countries to pursue mutually exclusive objectives in Afghanistan, turning it into a theater for their proxy competition. Analysts have even described Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India as a "deadly triangle" of mutual distrust (Dalrymple, 2013), in which Afghan stability is undermined by Indo-Pak tensions.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan and its implications for regional stability. It first explores the historical background of Indo-Pak competition in Afghanistan, from the early post-independence years through the Cold War and the rise of the Taliban. Next, it examines the post-2001 era, when the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the U.S.-led intervention opened space for India's expanded engagement in Afghanistan even as Pakistan continued to wield influence via militant proxies. A comparative analysis of each country's strategic interests and methods of influence is presented, highlighting how India emphasized soft power and state-building assistance while Pakistan leveraged insurgent networks (Constantino, 2020; Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). The paper then analyzes recent developments following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and how the rivalry has adapted to the new reality. Finally, it assesses the consequences of this proxy rivalry for Afghanistan's security and the broader region, including the risks of escalation and the prospects (if any) for mitigating tensions.

Understanding this rivalry is vital, given its role in Afghanistan's prolonged conflict and the potential for spillover. As both India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed states, their indirect confrontation in Afghanistan carries high stakes for regional peace (Yusuf, 2018). By reviewing the strategic contest for influence in Afghanistan, this paper sheds light on why peace in that country has been so elusive and why Afghanistan's future remains intertwined with the fraught India-Pakistan relationship.

1.1 Historical Roots of the Indo-Pakistan Competition in Afghanistan

India and Pakistan's contest for influence in Afghanistan has deep historical underpinnings. Despite Pakistan's geographic proximity to Afghanistan, relations between Islamabad and Kabul were strained from the outset, creating opportunities for India to cultivate ties with Afghan leaders (Howenstein & Ganguly, 2009). In 1947, as the British Raj was partitioned, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations, due to Kabul's refusal to recognize the Durand

Line border and its support for Pashtun irredentism in Pakistan's northwest. During the long reign of Afghan King Zahir Shah (1933–1973), Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan remained tense over the Pashtunistan issue, whereas India enjoyed relatively cordial relations with Kabul (Howenstein & Ganguly, 2009). India tacitly supported Afghanistan's position on Pashtunistan, which kept Pakistan on the defensive and diverted its attention – an early manifestation of India's strategy to exploit Pakistan's western vulnerabilities (Grare, 2006). This period established the pattern of Kabul-New Delhi friendship versus Kabul-Islamabad mistrust that would persist intermittently throughout the 20th century.

Following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the dynamics of the rivalry shifted but did not disappear. India, aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, maintained working relations with the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul, though New Delhi was uneasy about the invasion (Howenstein & Ganguly, 2009). Pakistan, by contrast, became a frontline state for the U.S.-supported anti-Soviet jihad: Islamabad's military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, eagerly partnered with Washington to arm and train Afghan mujahideen insurgents fighting the Soviet forces. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency gained extensive influence over Afghan Mujahideen factions in the 1980s, using that influence not only to counter the Soviets but also to ensure a post-war Afghanistan friendly to Pakistan and hostile to India (Dalrymple, 2013). During this period, India had limited direct involvement in the Afghan conflict but quietly supported factions that were aligned against Pakistan's proxies. For instance, India developed contacts with Ahmad Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance, a predominantly Tajik force that opposed the Pakistan-backed mujahideen groups and later the Taliban (Howenstein & Ganguly, 2009). This foreshadowed India's strategy of aligning with Afghan minorities and anti-Pakistan elements to secure its interests.

The 1989 Soviet withdrawal and subsequent collapse of Afghanistan's communist government led to a fierce civil war in the 1990s – a decade that fully exposed the India-Pakistan rivalry on Afghan soil. Pakistan openly supported the rise of the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun Islamist movement that emerged from Pakistani madrassas and swiftly captured Kabul in 1996 with direct backing from the ISI (Paliwal, 2017). Islamabad welcomed the Taliban takeover as it finally delivered a regime in Kabul that was considered Pakistan-friendly and would provide the desired "strategic depth" against India (Siddique, 2014). In Pakistani strategic thinking, the Taliban regime, along with Pakistan's long-standing support for Kashmiri militant groups, was part of an integrated effort to blunt India's influence on both its western and eastern flanks (Fair, 2011). India, on the other hand, was alarmed by the Taliban's ascent. New Delhi had been a close supporter of the ousted Afghan President

Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Northern Alliance. With the Taliban in power, India lost its diplomatic presence in Kabul – the Indian embassy was closed in 1996 – but India did not abandon the Afghan theatre. Throughout the late 1990s, India (along with Iran and Russia) continued to back the Northern Alliance as the legitimate resistance to the Taliban Emirate (Paliwal, 2017). Indian intelligence provided the Northern Alliance with funding, high-altitude warfare equipment, and even operated a hospital in Tajikistan to treat Alliance fighters (Howenstein & Ganguly, 2009). This proxy support was driven by India's interest in preventing a total Taliban–ISI domination of Afghanistan which would severely curtail India's regional influence and potentially provide a safe haven for anti-India terror groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (Fair, 2011).

By the end of the 1990s, Afghanistan had effectively become a proxy battleground in which Pakistan and India backed opposing sides in the civil war. Pakistan's alignment with the Taliban also had far-reaching consequences: Afghanistan under the Taliban became a sanctuary for extremist groups not only targeting India (such as Jaish-e-Mohammed, which had members training in Afghanistan) but also eventually the West (Al-Qaeda). The stage was thus set for Afghanistan's conflict to intersect with global security concerns, leading to the post-2001 international intervention. Yet, as the next section will show, even that intervention did not erase the fundamental Indo-Pak rivalry – it merely ushered in a new phase of competition under changed circumstances.

1.2 The Post-9/11 Era: Proxy Competition during International Intervention

The ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001, in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, presented both India and Pakistan with new opportunities and challenges in pursuing their interests. For the first time in years, Afghanistan had a government in Kabul (led by President Hamid Karzai) that was receptive to Indian involvement and largely suspicious of Pakistan's intentions. India moved swiftly to re-establish its presence, while Pakistan sought to retain influence by covertly aiding a Taliban resurgence. The two rivals' strategies in this period starkly illustrated their contrasting approaches: India emphasized soft power, economic aid, and diplomatic support to the Afghan government, whereas Pakistan maintained ties to militant proxies as a leverage against both Kabul and New Delhi (Constantino, 2020; Ahmed, 2022).

India's Engagement and Soft Power: Under the Karzai administration (2002–2014) and later President Ashraf Ghani, India became one of Afghanistan's largest regional donors and a key development partner. New Delhi provided **over $3 billion in aid** from 2001 to 2021, funding major

infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, and capacity-building programs (Constantino, 2020; Asian News International, 2022). Iconic examples of India's aid include the construction of the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram highway linking Afghanistan to an Iranian port (bypassing Pakistan), the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul, and the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam) in Herat province (Pant, 2010; Kumar, 2025). India also invested in healthcare, education, and electricity generation, and it offered scholarships and training for thousands of Afghan students, civil servants, and security personnel (Constantino, 2020). These efforts were part of India's broader objective to cultivate goodwill among ordinary Afghans and support a friendly, stable Afghan state that could act as a bulwark against Pakistan-based extremism (Constantino, 2020). Notably, India deliberately avoided any large-scale military deployment to Afghanistan, mindful of not provoking Pakistan; its security assistance was limited to training Afghan officers and supplying some military equipment like transport helicopters (Kumar, 2025). Indian policymakers argued that a democratic, pluralistic Afghanistan aligned naturally with India's interests and would deny space to anti-India terrorist groups (Constantino, 2020; Fair, 2011). India's "soft power" approach paid dividends in terms of public perception: Afghan public opinion toward India became overwhelmingly positive, while views of Pakistan were abysmal. A 2016 poll found that **almost 62% of Afghans viewed India favorably, compared to a mere 3.7% who viewed Pakistan favorably** (Constantino, 2020). In fact, Pakistan was seen less favorably than even the Taliban or Islamic State in some surveys, reflecting Afghans' deep resentment of Pakistan's meddling (Constantino, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates this stark contrast in Afghan popular sentiment, which Indian officials often touted as a strategic asset.

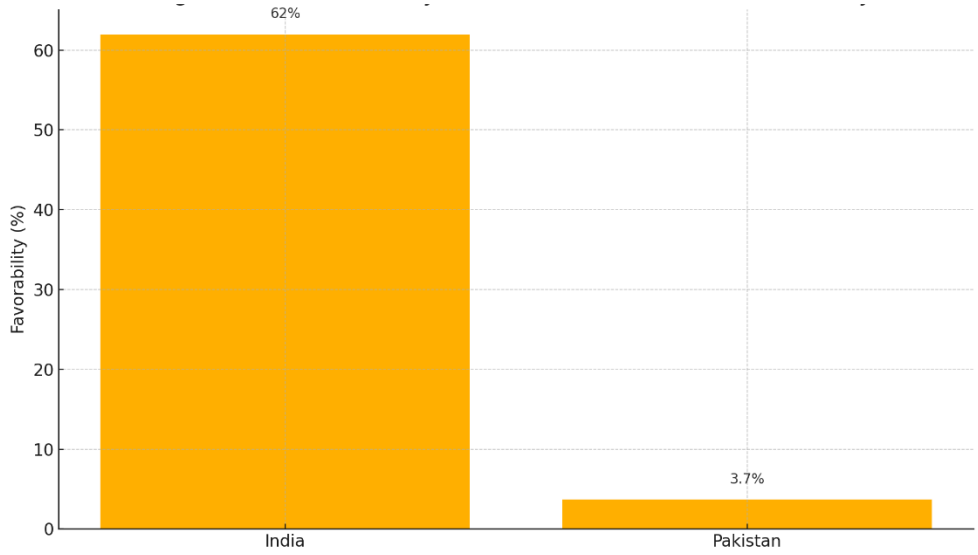


Figure 1 Afghan Public Favorability toward India vs. Pakistan (2016 survey). India enjoyed a highly positive image among Afghans (nearly 62% favorable), whereas Pakistan's favorability was extremely low (under 4%), reflecting Afghanistan's distrust of Pakistani influence (Constantino, 2020).

Pakistan's Proxy Strategy and Concerns: Despite officially becoming a U.S. ally in the "War on Terror" after 9/11, Pakistan remained fixated on limiting India's presence and influence in Afghanistan. Pakistani strategists were deeply skeptical of Afghanistan's new government, suspecting it of being too close to India. President Karzai, for instance, had studied in India and openly welcomed Indian aid – a posture that fed Islamabad's fears of strategic encirclement by an "Indo-Afghan nexus" (Grare, 2006). Pakistan's primary lever in Afghanistan continued to be its relationship with Islamist insurgents. By 2003–2004, elements of the Taliban had regrouped in Pakistan's border regions; Pakistan's security establishment provided covert sanctuary and support to these Taliban factions, viewing them as an instrument to counter growing Indian influence and to ensure a Pakistan-friendly outcome in Afghanistan should Western forces depart (Fair, 2011; Ahmed, 2022). Indeed, Pakistan's Afghan policy throughout the 2000s can be characterized as a hedging strategy: publicly it supported the U.S.-backed Kabul government, but privately the ISI maintained ties with Taliban leaders like Mullah Omar and the Haqqani network, enabling their insurgency (Constantino, 2020). **Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan were mainly India-centric** – Islamabad sought to undermine Delhi's influence while promoting its own, even if that meant destabilizing Afghanistan (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). This became evident in a series of high-profile attacks on Indian and Afghan targets which were traced back to Pakistan-linked militants. For example, in July 2008 a suicide bombing devastated the Indian Embassy in Kabul, killing over 50 people including India's defense attaché. U.S. intelligence concluded that the Haqqani network, acting with ISI support, orchestrated the attack – a blatant effort to "punish" India's growing role in Afghanistan (Constantino, 2020). The following year, a second bombing targeted the Indian Embassy. Likewise, Pakistan-based groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) reportedly set up camps in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal belt during the insurgency, and were implicated in attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan (Constantino, 2020; Jadoon, 2025). Pakistan, for its part, accused India of using its consulates in Afghan cities (such as Kandahar and Jalalabad) to foment unrest inside Pakistan – including supporting Baloch separatists – claims that India strongly denied (International Crisis Group, 2014). These mutual allegations underscored the trust deficit: each country perceived the other's Afghanistan policy as a direct threat to its own security and unity.

Table 1 provides a comparison of India's and Pakistan's strategic objectives and methods in Afghanistan during the post-2001 period. This highlights how divergent their approaches were in this proxy rivalry.

Table 1: India vs. Pakistan – Strategic Objectives and Influence Tactics in Afghanistan (Post-2001)

Aspect	**India's Approach (New Delhi)**	**Pakistan's Approach (Islamabad)**
Core Strategic Interest	Stable, friendly Afghanistan to deny safe havens to anti-India militants; extend India's regional influence; access Central Asia (Constantino, 2020; Kumar, 2025).	"Strategic depth" against India; an Afghan government friendly to Pakistan and hostile to India, to prevent encirclement (Jadoon, 2025; Siddique, 2014).
Allied Afghan Factions	Historically allied with Northern Alliance and other non-Pashtun groups (Tajiks, Hazaras); built ties across ethnic spectrum under Karzai/Ghani regimes (Paliwal, 2017).	Historically allied with Pashtun Islamists (Mujahideen factions in 1980s, Taliban in 1990s and post-2001); maintained influence via Taliban network (Fair, 2011).
Methods of Influence	Soft power and state-building: economic aid, infrastructure projects, training and education programs, diplomatic support for elected Afghan government (Pant, 2010; Constantino, 2020). Some security cooperation: military training for Afghan officers, limited arms supplies (4 helicopters), no troops on ground.	Proxy warfare and covert support: provided sanctuary, funding, and guidance to Taliban insurgents and Haqqani network to leverage influence and undermine pro-India Kabul government (Ahmed, 2022; Constantino, 2020). Political pressure: periodically attempted to shape Kabul's policies by brokering talks, leveraging border trade and refugee flows.

Perception Among Afghans	Generally, very positive due to reconstruction aid and cultural linkages – e.g. 69% of Afghans in a 2022 survey named India as Afghanistan's "best friend" nation (Asian News International, 2022).	Largely negative due to Pakistan's perceived interference and support for the Taliban insurgency; many Afghans blame Pakistan for violence (Constantino, 2020; ICG, 2014).
Key Concerns & Red Lines	Concerned by Taliban revival and Pakistan's support to extremists that target India (e.g. LeT, JeM operating from Afghan soil); opposed any power-sharing with Taliban that would give them control over security (Fair, 2011).	Obsessed with limiting India's footprint (e.g. number of Indian consulates, Indian presence in Afghan security sector); wary of Indo-Afghan cooperation such as transit trade agreements or intelligence sharing (Grare, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2014).
Notable Actions	Built major projects (Parliament, dams, roads); expanded diplomatic missions to 5 (embassy + 4 consulates); hosted Afghan students and patients in India; signed 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement with Kabul (Constantino, 2020; Pant, 2010).	Alleged to have shielded Taliban leadership (Quetta Shura) and Haqqani fighters on Pakistani soil; facilitated Taliban's revival after 2004. Pak-based militants carried out Kabul embassy bombings (2008, 2009) and attacks on Indian consulates (Constantino, 2020). Also frequently accused Afghan regimes of harboring anti-Pakistan TTP militants (Ahmed, 2022).

As shown above, India and Pakistan were effectively working at cross-purposes in Afghanistan. India's developmental contributions – building roads, transmission lines, schools, hospitals – were aimed not only at earning Afghan goodwill but also at *circumventing Pakistan*, for instance by opening

trade routes through Iran (Pant, 2010). Pakistan viewed even India's soft power with deep suspicion, interpreting the Indian presence as a cover for encirclement and espionage (International Crisis Group, 2014). Each side's activities fed into the other's fears, creating a classic security dilemma. The result was that Afghanistan became a proxy battleground where New Delhi and Islamabad settled scores indirectly. Scholars have argued that this Indo-Pak rivalry significantly impeded Afghanistan's stabilization – for example, peace initiatives or regional cooperation schemes were often thwarted by India-Pakistan mistrust (Mitton, 2014). The U.S. and NATO, while focused on counterinsurgency, had to navigate this rivalry carefully; Washington at times tried to reassure Pakistan by tempering India's security role, even as it praised India's economic aid (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). By the end of the international intervention (circa 2020), Afghanistan remained unstable, and the India-Pakistan rivalry was as intense as ever. In 2019, India's decision to revoke the special status of Kashmir (another flashpoint of their rivalry) led to Pakistani threats of retaliation "in Afghanistan or elsewhere," illustrating how intertwined the theaters had become (Constantino, 2020). Indeed, Pakistan's military planners openly contemplated punishing Indian interests in Afghanistan in response to developments on the Kashmir front (Constantino, 2020). Such linkages underscored that the rivalry is not just bilateral but triadic, involving Afghanistan as an arena for broader South Asian disputes (Dalrymple, 2013; Jamal, 2021).

2. THE TALIBAN'S 2021 RETURN: SHIFTING DYNAMICS IN THE RIVALRY

The collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government and the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 marked a pivotal turning point for the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. Initially, the Taliban's victory was perceived in Pakistan as a strategic triumph and in India as a major setback – even a *"body blow"* to Indian interests (Kumar, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2021). After all, Pakistan had been the Taliban's primary patron, and many in Islamabad expected that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would reliably serve Pakistan's agenda by excluding India. Conversely, India, having invested heavily in the fallen Afghan Republic, suddenly found itself with zero presence on the ground and its allies ousted. However, developments in the months and years following the Taliban takeover showed that the new reality is more complex and fluid than initial impressions suggested. **Pakistan's "proxy" is now in power**, but managing the Taliban has proven difficult for Islamabad, while **India has cautiously re-opened channels** to the Taliban regime to safeguard its interests and counter Pakistan. The rivalry has not disappeared; it is evolving within a changed context of Taliban rule and shifting great-power involvement.

Pakistan's Initial Satisfaction and Subsequent Frustrations: Pakistani officials initially hailed the Taliban's return as vindication of Pakistan's long-held strategy. The Afghan Taliban's victory in 2021 accomplished Pakistan's objective of ousting the pro-India Ghani government and ending India's formal diplomatic presence (Jamal, 2021). For a brief moment, Islamabad's influence in Kabul appeared unrivaled: Pakistan's intelligence chief Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed even visited Kabul right after its fall, in a widely publicized moment that symbolized Pakistan's sway (Foreign Policy, 2021). However, the honeymoon was short-lived. The Taliban regime – while still maintaining ideological and personal ties with Pakistan – began asserting its autonomy in ways that have alarmed Islamabad. A major thorn has been the issue of the **Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**, a Pakistani Taliban faction responsible for insurgency inside Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban, due to longstanding camaraderie and shared jihadist credentials, have **refused to crack down on the TTP**. The TTP found refuge in Afghanistan post-2021, and cross-border attacks into Pakistan surged, straining Islamabad's patience (Ahmed, 2022; Jadoon, 2025). By 2022–2023, relations between Pakistan and the new Taliban government deteriorated markedly over this TTP sanctuary issue, leading to deadly border clashes and even Pakistani airstrikes on TTP positions in eastern Afghanistan (Jadoon, 2025; Kumar, 2025). This represents a rich irony: Pakistan spent decades nurturing the Afghan Taliban as a "strategic asset" to gain depth against India, but now that very asset harbors a militant group that Islamabad considers its top internal threat (Jadoon, 2025). In effect, Pakistan's quest for strategic depth created a *security dilemma at home*, with an emboldened TTP challenging the state. Pakistan's frustration was evident as its leverage over the Taliban proved limited – appeals and threats yielded little, and heavy-handed tactics like border fencing and occasional bombings only worsened tensions (Ahmed, 2022). Moreover, the Taliban leadership did not unconditionally defer to Pakistan's wishes on other matters either. They have engaged diplomatically with Pakistan's rivals, including India, and resisted being a pliant proxy. Pakistan remains an influential player – many Taliban leaders were long based in Pakistan, and the Haqqani network faction within the Taliban government is considered close to the ISI. However, unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban today are also seeking legitimacy and assistance from multiple sources (China, Iran, Gulf states, etc.), not just Pakistan (Kumar, 2025; Small, 2015). Recognizing this, Pakistan has had to recalibrate its strategy. It continues to push for an inclusive Taliban approach that would limit space for India, but the deterioration of Pakistan-Taliban ties on security issues has undercut Islamabad's once confident position (Jadoon, 2025).

India's Comeback and Pragmatic Engagement: For India, the Taliban's takeover was undoubtedly a severe blow – India had to abruptly shut down its embassy and evacuate diplomats in August 2021,

losing its direct foothold. Yet, New Delhi adopted a pragmatic stance over time, driven by the realities on the ground and regional geopolitics. India refused to formally recognize the Taliban regime, aligning with most of the international community on that point, but by mid-2022 it cautiously reopened dialogue. In June 2022, India sent a **"technical team" to Kabul to re-establish a diplomatic presence** and coordinate humanitarian aid, such as shipments of wheat and medical supplies, aimed at the Afghan people (Grossman, 2025). This move helped rebuild a channel of communication with the Taliban authorities. Over 2022–2023, India incrementally stepped up contacts: it hosted talks with Taliban representatives at regional forums and quietly allowed Afghanistan's Taliban-appointed diplomats to take charge of the Afghan embassy in New Delhi (Grossman, 2025; Kumar, 2025). The most significant milestone came in early 2025 when India's Foreign Secretary met the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister in Dubai – the first high-level official meeting between India and the Taliban regime (Kumar, 2025). Indian officials framed these engagements as necessary to address humanitarian concerns and protect India's long-term interests, such as ensuring Afghanistan does not once again become a base for anti-India terrorist groups like LeT and JeM (Grossman, 2025). Indeed, Indian diplomacy has sought assurances from the Taliban on curbing these groups. Notably, reports indicate that the Taliban have not allowed JeM and LeT to operate as freely as in the past – partly because the Taliban do not want trouble with anyone, and partly because of their own rift with Pakistan (Grossman, 2025). Indian strategists have capitalized on the strains between Kabul and Islamabad: for example, India openly condemned Pakistan's airstrikes on Afghan territory in 2022 and 2024, positioning itself as a country that respects Afghan sovereignty unlike Pakistan (Kumar, 2025). The Taliban, in turn, have shown interest in engaging India. Taliban spokesmen have described India as an "important regional country," and sought economic and diplomatic ties. They reinstated security for the Indian consulate in Kandahar and voiced interest in resuming paused Indian infrastructure projects (Kumar, 2025). Analysts observe that the Taliban's outreach to India is partly a balancing tactic – to signal to Pakistan that the Taliban are not beholden to any one patron (Small, 2015; Kumar, 2025). For India, the calculus is that having lines of communication with Kabul can prevent Pakistan and China from completely dominating Afghanistan's future. In essence, India is **quietly boosting ties with the Taliban** to ensure it is not left out in the cold (Grossman, 2025). This approach marks a significant shift from India's stance in the 1990s, when it outright rejected the Taliban. It reflects New Delhi's pragmatic recognition that the Taliban regime is a reality it must deal with, albeit carefully (Kumar, 2025).

Regional and International Factors: The post-2021 phase of the rivalry is also being shaped by broader regional realignments. Pakistan's traditional close ally, China, has ramped up its engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, mainly to secure its strategic and economic interests (Small, 2015). China and Pakistan largely converge in wanting to limit Indian influence in Afghanistan, and both have signaled openness to the Taliban regime. However, Beijing has its own concerns (e.g. Uyghur militants) and has encouraged the Taliban to stabilize the country. India, on the other hand, finds itself in an informal alignment of interests with countries like Iran and Russia, which also remain wary of a Pakistan-dominated Taliban and the spread of jihadist groups. All these players are maneuvering in the new Afghan political landscape, creating a more multipolar contest compared to the U.S.-centric past (Rubin, 2013). The absence of U.S./NATO troops removed one layer of constraint on Pakistan (which had earlier moderated some actions for fear of U.S. backlash) but also removed a security blanket that India had indirectly relied upon. With the U.S. withdrawal, some feared Afghanistan could become a "playground" for regional rivalries (Jamal, 2021). So far, India and Pakistan have avoided any direct confrontation regarding Afghanistan, but both remain vigilant. Washington's approach has evolved too – initially it was concerned that a heavy Indian role could provoke Pakistan, but after 2021 the U.S. has itself minimal leverage and has quietly welcomed India's diplomatic re-engagement as a counter-weight to Taliban dependence on Pakistan and China (Grossman, 2025; Small, 2015). In sum, the Taliban's return has altered the context but not erased the rivalry. Pakistan no longer has to worry about an overt Indian political presence in Kabul (since no anti-Pakistan regime exists for now), but it faces the unintended consequences of its proxy's empowerment. India lost a friendly government but is finding ways to stay relevant. The rivalry has thus shifted into a new phase of *indirect influence* – Pakistan trying to coax or pressure the Taliban to align with its interests, and India trying to diplomatically win over or neutralize the Taliban's hostility. This delicate dance will significantly impact Afghanistan's trajectory and is closely tied to the region's stability, as discussed next.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN AND REGIONAL STABILITY

The enduring India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan has had profound consequences for Afghanistan's stability and the security of the broader region. Their proxy competition has often exacerbated Afghan conflicts, undermined peace efforts, and internationalized what might have remained a local civil war. Several key implications can be identified:

1. Prolongation of Afghanistan's Conflict: The Indo-Pak rivalry has added layers of complexity to the Afghan conflict, making its resolution far more difficult. When external powers back opposing

sides, the warring parties are incentivized to fight longer, expecting outside support. In the 1990s, Indian and Pakistani support to rival Afghan factions (Northern Alliance vs. Taliban) helped prolong the civil war after the Soviet withdrawal (Paliwal, 2017). Post-2001, Pakistan's covert aid to the Taliban insurgency was partly driven by the desire to counter India's influence, which in turn prevented the Afghan government from consolidating control despite Western military support (Fair, 2011; Mitton, 2014). The Taliban could always count on sanctuary and replenishment from Pakistan, which weakened the military pressure they faced and derailed successive U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaigns. Every time Afghanistan seemed on the cusp of a political settlement or a decisive military tide, the rivalry injected mistrust. For instance, peace talks with the Taliban were viewed skeptically by India if Pakistan had too big a role, and conversely by Pakistan if India or its allies (like the Northern Alliance figures) had prominence (Constantino, 2020). This tug-of-war limited the space for a genuinely inclusive peace process. Analysts note that any **Afghan peace settlement would require buy-in from both India and Pakistan**, otherwise one or the other will have incentives to play the spoiler (Mitton, 2014; Rubin, 2013). Indeed, the collapse of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal of 2020 in part reflected regional power games: Pakistan pressed for Taliban gains, while India was uneasy with a deal that might return the Taliban (and by extension Pakistan) to power. The absence of a regional consensus – largely due to Indo-Pak enmity – has meant that Afghanistan continues to be treated as a chessboard rather than a sovereign nation by its neighbors.

2. Afghanistan as a Safe Haven for Militancy and Terrorism: The rivalry has also manifested through **cross-border terrorism**, with each country accusing the other of using Afghan soil to sponsor proxy violence. Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban and allied groups like the Haqqani network directly contributed to Afghanistan's instability and created ungoverned spaces in which international terrorist outfits thrived (Fair, 2011). Al-Qaeda's entrenchment in Taliban-run Afghanistan in the 1990s, and later the presence of groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) post-2015, were enabled by continual conflict and state weakness – which in turn are tied to the proxy war dynamics. From India's perspective, the risk was that a Pakistan-aligned regime in Kabul would allow anti-India terror groups free rein. This nearly materialized in the 1990s and remains a concern. For example, Jaish-e-Mohammed's leadership reportedly spent time in Afghanistan, and the 2008 Kabul embassy bomber was from an LeT network (Constantino, 2020). After 2021, Indian officials fear that if the Taliban do not act against groups like LeT and JeM, Afghanistan could again become a staging ground for attacks on India (Grossman, 2025). Meanwhile, Pakistan has faced the blowback of supporting militancy: the Taliban victory emboldened the TTP insurgency against Pakistan,

contributing to Pakistan experiencing its **deadliest wave of terrorism in years** (Ahmed, 2022; Jadoon, 2025). In late 2024, Pakistan even resorted to cross-border airstrikes against TTP camps in Afghanistan – a move that not only risked civilian casualties but also nearly provoked a border war with the Taliban regime (Jadoon, 2025). This illustrates how instability in Afghanistan can quickly radiate outward. If Pakistan-Taliban skirmishes were to escalate, it could draw in other militant actors and even foreign intervention. The militancy conundrum is thus both a product of and a catalyst for the rivalry: Pakistan's proxy strategy yielded unintended militants that now destabilize Pakistan; India's lack of on-the-ground influence limits its ability to counter those militants except through covert or distant means, potentially prompting India to adopt more aggressive covert strategies that would inflame conflict further.

3. Nuclear Overhang and Risk of Escalation: While India and Pakistan have thus far confined their contest in Afghanistan to indirect means, the rivalry occurs under the shadow of their broader hostility, which includes the possibility of direct conflict. Both nations possess nuclear weapons, which has historically deterred full-scale war between them. However, proxy conflicts can create circumstances that test this deterrence. For example, a major terrorist attack in India traced back to Afghan-based militants (with alleged Pakistani backing) could trigger an Indian military response against Pakistan. This was nearly witnessed after the 2008 Mumbai attacks (perpetrated by Pakistan-based LeT) – India showed restraint then, but in recent years it has been more willing to launch retaliatory strikes (e.g., the 2019 Balakot airstrike in Pakistan following a Kashmir suicide bombing). If a similar incident were to occur via Afghanistan, it could ignite direct India-Pakistan clashes (Yusuf, 2018). Conversely, Pakistan's leadership, feeling strategically encircled or domestically pressured, might overplay its hand in Afghanistan – for instance, by encouraging the Taliban or other fighters to provoke India or by asserting claims in border areas – which could lead to dangerous brinkmanship. The presence of nuclear weapons imposes caution, yet it also emboldens each side to use proxies under the assumption that the other will avoid extreme retaliation. This dynamic of **"stability-instability paradox"** means Afghanistan remains a theater for low-intensity conflict that nonetheless carries a latent risk of spiraling into a larger crisis (Yusuf, 2018). International observers worry that continued instability in Afghanistan coupled with India-Pakistan tensions elsewhere (such as Kashmir) stretches both countries' security focus and increases chances of miscalculation (Rubin, 2013). In a worst-case scenario, a terror attack or border clash involving Afghanistan could be a spark in an already volatile India-Pakistan relationship.

4. Impediments to Regional Cooperation and Development: The rivalry has also stymied potentially beneficial regional projects that require a stable, cooperative Afghanistan. Initiatives like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline or trans-Afghan trade corridors have been delayed or derailed in part because of India-Pakistan mistrust (Small, 2015; Kumar, 2025). Pakistan has been reluctant to grant India overland transit access through its territory into Afghanistan, fearing economic infiltration along with intelligence operations (International Crisis Group, 2014). As a result, India had to find alternative routes (like via Iran's Chabahar port) to trade with Afghanistan. This has made trade more costly and limited Afghanistan's connectivity. Likewise, any talk of a cooperative counter-terrorism approach in Afghanistan is hampered by the blame game between Indian and Pakistani agencies. In essence, **South Asia's geopolitical fault line runs through Afghanistan**, and until India and Pakistan find some modus vivendi, broader regional integration schemes (for example, SAARC initiatives) remain unfulfilled. Afghanistan, being geographically contiguous to both but partitioned by their rivalry, loses out on economic opportunities and remains dependent on extra-regional support. Some scholars suggest that Afghanistan could instead become a bridge between Central and South Asia – but that vision is unattainable unless Indo-Pak relations improve (Rubin, 2013).

5. No Quick End in Sight – but Potential Avenues for Mitigation: Unfortunately, the current trends do not indicate a near-term resolution of the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. Both countries appear set in their strategic suspicions. Pakistan's security establishment, despite problems with the Taliban, is unlikely to embrace an Indian role in Afghanistan; it may instead double-down on backing groups within Afghanistan that can secure its interests (Jadoon, 2025; Ahmed, 2022). India, for its part, will likely continue engaging the Taliban regime only to the extent necessary, while possibly deepening ties with anti-Taliban elements quietly (such as maintaining contacts with ethnic minority leaders or the National Resistance Front in Panjshir). This suggests that Afghanistan could see **continued proxy competition**, albeit in new forms. However, there are some glimmers of a more positive approach. Both India and Pakistan publicly welcomed the idea of a peaceful, stable Afghanistan (even if they differ on what that entails). In theory, a neutral Afghanistan that poses no threat to either could be in both their interests. Initiatives like the **Moscow Format** or other multilateral dialogues on Afghanistan include India and Pakistan and could serve as platforms to reduce misunderstandings (Kumar, 2025). Additionally, Pakistan's ongoing economic crisis and domestic militancy issues might compel it to recalibrate policies that have been costly – voices within Pakistan have debated the wisdom of continued confrontation with India at the expense of internal stability

(Grare, 2006; Ahmed, 2022). If Pakistan were to curb its support for cross-border militancy and if India, in turn, were to reassure Pakistan that its aid to Afghanistan is not a hostile encirclement strategy, some confidence-building could occur (Constantino, 2020). Confidence-building measures, such as information-sharing on development projects or coordinated humanitarian assistance, have been suggested by analysts, though enthusiasm is low (Constantino, 2020). The reality remains that **Kashmir and other India-Pakistan disputes spill into Afghanistan**, so without broader rapprochement, only limited progress can be expected in Afghanistan-specific cooperation (Rubin, 2013). An inclusive political settlement within Afghanistan – one that perhaps brings moderate Taliban and other factions into a balanced power-sharing – might alleviate Pakistan's fear of an India-dominated Kabul while also assuring India that extremist anti-India groups are kept in check. Such a settlement, if it emerges, would reduce the space for proxy war by giving both regional players a stake in Afghanistan's stability (Mitton, 2014; Constantino, 2020). For now, that remains aspirational.

In summary, the India-Pakistan rivalry has been a destabilizing factor for Afghanistan and will likely continue to pose challenges. It has fueled insurgencies, hindered peace, and turned Afghanistan into a geopolitical chessboard to the detriment of its people. Regional stability will depend in part on whether New Delhi and Islamabad can temper this rivalry and agree that a peaceful Afghanistan is a shared benefit rather than a zero-sum prize. As the final section concludes, addressing this rivalry might well be a prerequisite for any enduring peace in Afghanistan.

4. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's contemporary history cannot be understood without accounting for the competitive interference of India and Pakistan. The strategic contest between these two rivals has transformed Afghanistan into a proxy battleground, where development projects and militant attacks become moves in a larger zero-sum game. This review has shown how India and Pakistan, driven by their mutual suspicions and security dilemmas, have pursued sharply different courses in Afghanistan – India largely via soft power and Pakistan largely via proxies – and how this rivalry has undermined Afghanistan's security at each turn. From the roots of the conflict in the mid-20th century to the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, Indo-Pak competition has been a constant undercurrent. It manifested in the 1990s when Indian and Pakistani proxies fought on Afghan soil and persisted after 2001 in subtler forms, with schools and roads on one side and bombs and insurgents on the other. The return of Taliban rule has not ended the rivalry; it has merely shifted its dynamics, offering Pakistan both the

boon of a friendly regime and the bane of an uncontrollable ally, while prompting India to devise new ways of maintaining influence.

For Afghanistan, the costs of this rivalry have been devastating. It has meant protracted wars, impeded state-building, and the conversion of Afghanistan into a stage for larger geopolitical plays – all at the expense of its own development and peace. For the broader region, the India-Pakistan standoff in Afghanistan has aggravated South Asia's instability and complicated international efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking emanating from Afghan territory. **Regional stability will remain elusive as long as New Delhi and Islamabad view Afghan affairs in terms of encirclement and zero-sum gains** (Mitton, 2014). A key insight from this analysis is that Afghanistan's neighbors need to move from rivalry to some level of **cooperative security framework**. Confidence-building measures – however modest – could include dialogue on terrorism concerns, mutual respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty, and perhaps tacit agreements on limiting each other's military footprints in the country. Such steps would require political courage: Pakistan's leadership would have to relinquish the notion of Afghanistan as India's backyard to police, and India would have to manage its understandable anger at Pakistan's use of extremist proxies. The international community, particularly powers like the United States, China, and Russia, can play a facilitative role by encouraging and mediating regional discussions that include India and Pakistan (Rubin, 2013; Small, 2015). Any comprehensive peace process for Afghanistan should ideally have a parallel track for regional powers to settle their concerns.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's best hope for stability lies in being seen not as a prize to be won by one and lost by another, but as a neutral ground for cooperation. This may seem a distant prospect amid the current mistrust. Yet, history offers examples (however fleeting) of pragmatic accommodation – for instance, in the early 2000s, Pakistan tolerated India's development role under U.S. assurance, and India refrained from overt security involvement to avoid inflaming Pakistan. Reviving and institutionalizing such understandings could reduce the intensity of the rivalry. If India and Pakistan can calibrate a *live-and-let-live* approach in Afghanistan – agreeing that a stable, independent Afghanistan aligned with neither's hostile designs is preferable to an unstable one – the vicious cycle can be broken.

In conclusion, the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan has been a destabilizing proxy struggle fueled by deep strategic distrust. It has outlasted Afghan governments and international interventions, adapting to new contexts but always posing a barrier to peace. Breaking this pattern is essential for

Afghanistan to finally emerge from conflict. While neither India nor Pakistan will likely abandon their interests, they must recognize that their current strategies yield diminishing returns and heightened risks. A shift toward cooperation, or at least non-interference, in Afghanistan would significantly enhance regional stability and allow the Afghan people to determine their own future. Given the entrenched narratives in New Delhi and Islamabad, this will not be easy – but after decades of war by proxy, it may be the only path left that has not been tried. As Afghanistan stands at a crossroads under the Taliban regime, the actions of India and Pakistan in the coming years will remain critical in either exacerbating turmoil or helping to secure the peace that Afghans desperately need.

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