

# Afghanistan as a Theatre for the new Great Game: India's Adaptive Realism in The Emerging Multipolar order

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## Abstract

*Afghanistan remains a pivotal geopolitical arena where global and regional powers contest influence and connectivity. This study fills an analytical gap in existing literature by demonstrating how India's post-2021 engagement with Afghanistan represents a case of adaptive realism—a recalibrated pursuit of strategic autonomy shaped by the pressures of an emerging multipolar order. Previous research often reduced India's role to soft power and reconstruction; this paper advances an integrated explanation linking systemic, regional, and domestic factors that drive India's pragmatic foreign-policy shifts. Drawing upon realism, neorealism, and strategic-autonomy frameworks, and using qualitative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and scholarly research from 2021–2024, the study reveals that India's Afghanistan policy has evolved from normative idealism to a multidimensional, interest-driven pragmatism. Empirically, it identifies India's balancing through humanitarian aid, multilateral diplomacy, and connectivity initiatives such as Chabahar, while avoiding formal recognition of the Taliban. The findings contribute original insight into how emerging powers sustain strategic relevance within a fluid, multipolar system.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, India's foreign policy, strategic autonomy, adaptive realism, multipolarity, Chabahar Port, regional geopolitics.

## INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan occupies a pivotal geopolitical position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. Historically viewed as a theatre of imperial rivalry—from the Anglo-Russian Great Game to the U.S.-led intervention—its relevance has re-emerged amid the decline of Western primacy and the rise of a fragmented multipolar order [6, 34]. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in August 2021, followed by the Taliban's return to power, triggered a systemic recalibration among regional and extra-regional actors including China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India [13, 23]. These shifts have transformed Afghanistan into a critical arena where competing power interests and connectivity ambitions intersect. For India, Afghanistan has historically been both a civilizational partner and a strategic frontier. Across two decades (2001–2021), India invested more than \$3 billion in reconstruction projects such as the Salma Dam, Zaranj–Delaram Highway, and the Afghan Parliament building [22]. These initiatives strengthened India's soft power and earned it substantial goodwill among Afghan citizens [11]. However, the post-2021 landscape—defined by China's expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistan's deep linkages with the Taliban, and the absence of a recognized Afghan government—has constrained India's earlier development-driven engagement model [37]. Consequently, New Delhi adopted a pragmatic realignment prioritizing security, connectivity, and strategic autonomy over normative idealism [30].

Additionally, Afghanistan remains essential to India's continental strategy as a gateway toward Central Asia and a buffer against adversarial alignments. Its evolving political order thus has direct implications for India's security, counterterrorism posture, and regional influence [6, 19].

## META ANALYSIS

The academic literature on Afghanistan's geopolitics and India's regional strategy has traditionally been shaped by Western scholarship that emphasizes intervention, counterinsurgency, and state-building paradigms [17, 33]. While these perspectives provide useful insights into international involvement in Afghanistan, they often overlook indigenous political agency, localized governance patterns, and regional power dynamics that influence Afghan stability. Recent studies from Afghan scholars such as Shahrani (2021) and Hakimi (2022), along with institutional outputs from the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), emphasize community-level resilience, informal political orders, and regional interdependencies. Integrating these non-Western perspectives reduces epistemic asymmetry and broadens the analytical lens necessary to understand India's evolving engagement with Afghanistan.

Furthermore, literature on India's foreign policy in Central and South Asia increasingly acknowledges the changing structural conditions of the international system.

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Scholars like Pant and Saha (2023) argue that India's continental diplomacy is being reshaped by the pressures of multipolarity, Chinese assertiveness, and Russia's fluctuating regional role. This study synthesizes global, regional, and India-specific academic debates to construct a comprehensive framework for analysing India's post-2021 approach in Afghanistan.

### Global Perspectives: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The global strategic environment has undergone profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. Early analyses emphasized a U.S.-dominated unipolar order, famously described as the “unipolar moment” [21], where the United States exercised unparalleled military and ideological influence. This dominance shaped large-scale interventions, including Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), rooted in liberal institutionalism and democratic peace theory [16].

However, scholars increasingly contend that unipolarity has been eroding, giving rise to a multipolar order characterized by a diffusion of power to rising states such as China, India, Turkey, and middle-power coalitions [1, 39]. Offensive realist scholars like Mearsheimer (2022) view this shift as a structural inevitability leading to intensified balancing among great powers. Constructivist scholars, by contrast, argue that multipolarity also brings a contest of norms, identities, and political legitimacy [9, 41].

Afghanistan's 2021 political transition serves as a microcosm of these global transformations. The rapid collapse of the U.S.-supported Afghan government symbolized the fragility of liberal hegemony and created a vacuum for regional and non-Western actors to influence Afghanistan's political trajectory [23]. China's expanded outreach to the Taliban, Russia's reinvigorated diplomacy, and Iran's strategic hedging highlight a shift from Western-led governance to regionally-driven political configurations. India's approach cannot be analysed in isolation; it must be situated within broader debates on global order, great-power competition, and strategic autonomy.

### The New Great Game: External and Indigenous Perspectives

The conceptual framework of the “New Great Game” has been widely applied to explain geopolitical contestation in Afghanistan, particularly the competition among China, Russia, the United States, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states for strategic influence, transit corridors, and ideological dominance [20, 31]. This perspective draws parallels with the 19th-century Anglo-Russian rivalry, emphasizing Afghanistan as a passive battleground for external powers. However, indigenous Afghan scholars challenge this externalist approach for undermining Afghan agency and reducing complex internal socio-political dynamics to mere extensions of global rivalry. Organizations such as AAN (2022) and AREU (2023) demonstrate that Afghan governance structures, ethnic networks, religious authority, and informal institutions play a central role in shaping outcomes, often independently of external actors. Shahrani (2021) argues that Afghanistan should be understood not only as an object of power politics but as an active participant in redefining Asian regional order. Local actors—tribal shuras, ulema networks, political entrepreneurs, and transborder communities—respond to and recalibrate external pressures in ways that global models often overlook. Thus, integrating external and indigenous perspectives produces a more holistic foundation for analysing India's Afghanistan policy.

### Regional Security Complex: South and Central Asia

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a useful analytical framework for understanding Afghanistan's role within intertwined South Asian and Central Asian security systems. According to RSCT, regional clusters of states become mutually embedded in each other's security concerns due to geography, history, and interdependence. Afghanistan is a quintessential example of such embeddedness. Pakistan's long-standing patronage of the Taliban, aimed at securing “strategic depth,” directly constrains India's influence and shapes its security posture [14]. China's growing presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its interest in extending the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan adds a new layer to regional security calculations [40]. Iran's engagement is shaped by border security, refugee flows, and competition with U.S. influence.

For India, these interlinked regional dynamics create both constraints and opportunities. Initiatives such as the Chabahar Port, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and India–Central Asia summits signify New Delhi's aspirations for multi-vector diplomacy [19]. Yet, Afghan commentators caution that excessive securitization—whether by Pakistan, China, or India—risks undermining local development and governance objectives [4].

### India's Engagement with Afghanistan: Evolution and Challenges

India's engagement with Afghanistan has evolved significantly across three distinct phases.

**Phase 1 (1947–2001):** India adopted a policy of non-intervention and political neutrality, maintaining cordial diplomatic ties without military involvement.

**Phase 2 (2001–2021):** Following the collapse of the Taliban regime, India became one of Afghanistan's largest developmental partners, investing over \$3 billion in infrastructure, education, health, and capacity-building programs (MEA, 2021; Pant, 2019)<sup>[22-27]</sup>.

**Phase 3 (2021–present):** After the Taliban's return, India recalibrated its strategy by reopening its technical mission in Kabul, prioritizing humanitarian aid, and engaging cautiously through multilateral channels while maintaining non-recognition of the Taliban regime (MEA, 2022) [23]. Scholars describe this phase as “adaptive realism” — a pragmatic shift balancing India's security concerns, connectivity ambitions, and normative commitments [29, 36]. Afghan analysts interpret India's strategy as cautious pragmatism that ensures relevance without direct alignment [13]. Key challenges for India include Pakistan's geographic leverage, China's growing influence, uncertainty about Taliban factions, and the constraints imposed by the lack of formal recognition. Despite these challenges, India continues to invest in soft-power diplomacy, humanitarian engagement, and strategic infrastructure connectivity.

### Statement of the Problem

Although existing scholarship acknowledges India's developmental contributions and normative commitment to state-building in Afghanistan [28], limited academic work systematically examines how India recalibrates its strategic autonomy under the emerging multipolar order. The Taliban's resurgence, the China–Pakistan strategic axis, and the diplomatic ambiguity surrounding recognition of the Taliban regime create a complex environment in which India must navigate influence without direct alignment or military presence.

A clear research gap persists: How does India maintain relevance and autonomy in Afghanistan when traditional diplomatic and developmental instruments are constrained? Although analysts discuss India's interests, few studies link these policy shifts to broader systemic, regional, and domestic pressures shaping decision-making [13, 36]. This gap necessitates a structured evaluation of India's evolving engagement under what this study conceptualizes as adaptive realism.

**Research Gaps**

- A review of existing scholarship reveals several critical gaps:
1. Inadequate integration of India's Afghan strategy with multipolarity and hedging theories, which are crucial for understanding contemporary global order shifts.
  2. Minimal inclusion of Afghan indigenous perspectives, resulting in an analytical bias toward Western and Indian viewpoints.
  3. Limited exploration of India's continental-maritime strategic balance, particularly in relation to China's cross-regional ambitions.
  4. Weak theoretical linkage between India's development aid and security policy, despite their interconnected evolution.
  5. Sparse empirical grounding post-2021, due to rapidly changing ground realities.
  6. Lack of longitudinal comparisons between India's policy before and after the U.S. withdrawal.
  7. Limited field-based studies because of Taliban-era restrictions, which constrain primary data collection [3].
- This study addresses these gaps by employing a multi-level realist framework that integrates systemic, regional, and domestic variables to analyse India's adaptive strategy in Afghanistan.

**Objectives of the Study**

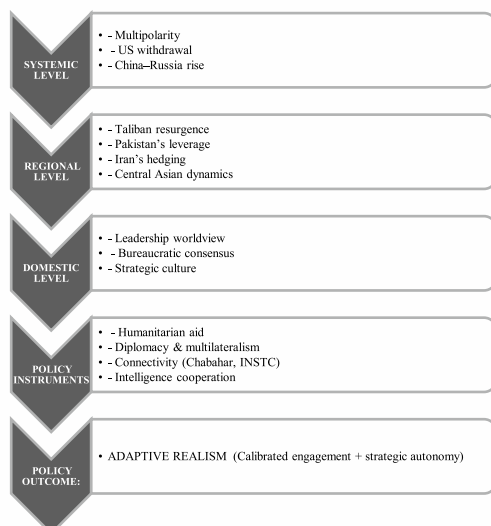
- RO1:** Situate Afghanistan's geopolitical relevance within the multipolar world order.
  - RO2:** Analyse India's evolving strategic objectives in Afghanistan post-2021.
  - RO3:** Examine how competition among major powers constrains and enables India's choices.
  - RO4:** Assess India's diplomatic, developmental, and security instruments in the Afghan context.
  - RO5:** Evaluate India's adaptive realist approach across systemic, regional, and domestic levels.
- Together, these objectives ensure a multi-level analysis consistent with contemporary international relations scholarship and enable a deeper understanding of how adaptive realism shapes India's foreign policy behaviour.

**Scope and Limitations**

This study examines India's Afghanistan policy from 2001 to 2024, with particular emphasis on developments following the Taliban takeover in 2021. It relies on qualitative analysis of secondary data, including official statements from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), multilateral communiqués, reports from United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and scholarly works from Indian, Afghan, and Western research institutions. Due to ongoing political instability and Taliban restrictions, primary interview-based or field ethnographic data could not be collected. This limitation is mitigated through triangulation of diverse, credible secondary sources, ensuring reliability and validity consistent with qualitative research standards [37, 42].

*Table 1: Levels of Analysis and Key Variables in Adaptive Realism*

Level of Analysis	Important Variables	Influence on India's Policy	Resulting Outcomes
<b>Systemic Level</b>	Global power diffusion; U.S. withdrawal; rise of China & Russia; multipolarity	Creates external pressures, strategic uncertainty, and need for balancing	Structural constraints shaping India's options
<b>Regional Level</b>	Taliban resurgence; Pakistan's leverage; Iran's strategic hedging; Central Asian posture	Defines competitive environment; limits India's access while opening selective opportunities	Regional competition and limited engagement space
<b>Domestic Level</b>	Leadership worldview; bureaucratic adaptation; strategic culture; internal consensus	Determines how systemic and regional factors are interpreted and acted upon	Policy recalibration (humanitarian aid, selective diplomacy)
<b>Policy Instruments</b>	Humanitarian aid; connectivity diplomacy; multilateral platforms; intelligence cooperation	Tools used to pursue national interests under constraints	Maintained strategic autonomy; calibrated engagement



**FIGURE 1: Conceptual Diagram – India's Adaptive Realism Framework**

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**Introduction and Design**

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design, which is the most appropriate approach for exploring India's policy adaptation in a complex and fluid geopolitical environment such as post-2021 Afghanistan. Qualitative methods enable the researcher to interpret meanings, policy signals, diplomatic shifts, and narrative patterns embedded in official statements, regional commentary, and scholarly publications. Since India's Afghanistan policy is shaped by political context, evolving security threats, and systemic pressures from multipolarity, qualitative inquiry offers the interpretive flexibility necessary to understand how these factors interact. The study draws on documentary evidence spanning 2001–2024, allowing both historical comparison and contemporary analysis.

The design aligns with adaptive realism and multi-level theoretical models, ensuring that systemic, regional, and domestic variables are examined coherently.

**Data Sources**

Data for the study were obtained exclusively from secondary but authoritative sources, due to the security challenges associated with on-ground fieldwork in Afghanistan. These sources fall into three major categories:

**a. Primary-type Secondary Sources**

These include official documents, press releases, and briefings from government and multilateral bodies such as:

- Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statements (2021–2024),
- UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) quarterly and annual reports,
- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) declarations,
- Taliban spokesperson statements and Afghan ministry announcements,
- Joint statements issued by India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states.

These documents serve as quasi-primary evidence because they directly reflect state positions and diplomatic intent.

Table 2: Summary of Data Sources Used in the Study

Category	Examples of Sources	Purpose in Research
Primary-type Secondary Data	MEA statements, UNAMA reports, SCO communiqués, Taliban press releases	Provide factual policy positions, diplomatic actions, and official narratives
Scholarly Literature	ORF, Brookings, AISS, AREU, IDSA, academic journals	Provide theoretical grounding, analytical perspectives, and contextual insights
Media Verification	BBC, The Hindu, Al Jazeera, The Diplomat	Validate events, timelines, and confirm cross-referenced information

**Data Collection and Coding**

Data collection followed a structured process using keyword-based searches across digital archives, institutional repositories, and academic databases. Keywords included “India–Afghanistan policy,” “Taliban 2021,” “regional security complex,” “Chabahar,” “strategic autonomy,” and “adaptive realism.” Documents were screened for **credibility, recency, and relevance.**

Data were then coded using a thematic coding framework, categorizing texts into four primary domains:

- 1. Security** (terrorism, regional threats, Taliban factions),
- 2. Diplomacy** (bilateral/multilateral engagements),
- 3. Connectivity** (Chabahar, INSTC, Central Asia links),
- 4. Autonomy** (hedging, strategic flexibility, multi-alignment).

This process enabled identification of patterns, continuities, and shifts in India’s strategic behaviour. Triangulation across scholarly, institutional, and media datasets enhanced internal validity and mitigated bias. Interviews were excluded due to security restrictions, limited access to Afghan stakeholders, and the sufficiency of official documentation in reflecting India’s policy evolution.

**Analytical Technique**

The study’s analytical approach combines content analysis, thematic analysis, and comparative analysis. Content analysis involved systematically scanning MEA statements, UN reports, and multilateral documents for frequently used terms, recurring themes, and policy makers such as “inclusive government,” “counterterrorism,” “regional stability,” and “connectivity.”

**b. Scholarly and Academic Sources**

Peer-reviewed publications were drawn from think tanks and academic journals including:

- Observer Research Foundation (ORF),
- Brookings Institution,
- Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA),
- Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS),
- Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU),
- Journals such as Strategic Analysis, Asian Affairs, Journal of South Asian Studies, and International Affairs.

These scholarly works offer conceptual clarity and theoretical grounding.

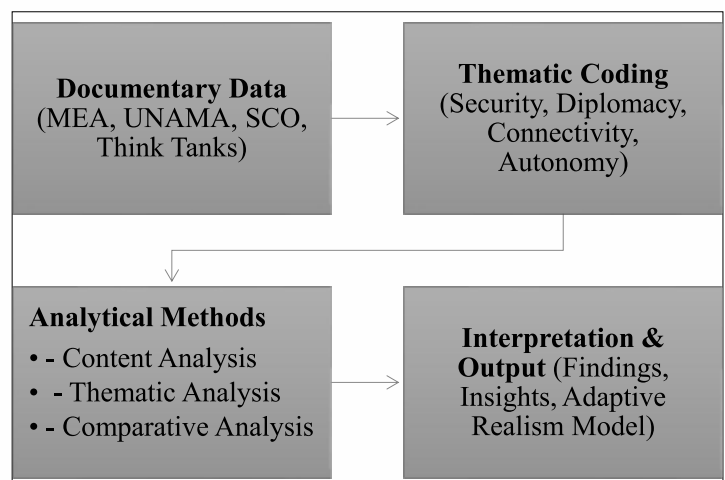
**c. Media and Verification Sources**

Reputed international and regional news agencies were consulted to verify timelines, statements, and factual developments:

- BBC,
- Al Jazeera,
- The Hindu,
- The Diplomat.

Triangulating these sources allowed for cross-validation of critical events and ensured accuracy in interpretation.

Thematic analysis facilitated the clustering of these patterns into conceptual themes aligned with the study’s theoretical framework, such as systemic constraints, regional pressures, and domestic mediation. Comparative analysis was used to position India’s behaviour vis-à-vis other major actors — including China, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia — enabling evaluation of India’s relative choices under competitive multipolar conditions. The combined use of these analytical methods ensures methodological transparency and aligns with qualitative best practices outlined by Yin (2021).



**Reliability, Validity, and Ethics**

Reliability was strengthened through methodological consistency and cross-verification of information across multiple credible sources.

Triangulation — using institutional reports, scholarly works, and verified news coverage — ensured that conclusions were not dependent on any single dataset. Validity was achieved through careful alignment of research objectives, theoretical frameworks, and analytical techniques, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in empirical evidence.

**Ethical considerations included:**

- strict use of publicly available and verified data,
- avoidance of classified or sensitive security material,
- accurate citation of all sources,
- commitment to neutrality and academic integrity.

Since field research in Afghanistan currently poses significant risks, the exclusive reliance on secondary data is both ethically appropriate and methodologically justified.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The study presents a detailed analysis of India's evolving strategic behaviour in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Drawing upon the adaptive realism framework developed in previous section, the analysis integrates systemic pressures, regional alignments, and domestic policy considerations to interpret India's calibrated engagement.

*Table 3: Major Powers and Their Strategic Postures in Post-2021 Afghanistan*

Actor	Primary Goals	Mode of Engagement	Implications for India
China	Extend BRI/CPEC; secure Xinjiang; access minerals	Economic outreach; high-level Taliban meetings	Strategic encirclement, reduced influence
Russia	Control over Central Asian security; counter US	Moscow Format diplomacy	Provides limited alignment opportunity for India
Iran	Border stability; anti-ISIS; refugee control	Trade, diplomacy, cultural ties	Convergence with India via Chabahar
Pakistan	Strategic depth; pro-Taliban influence	Intelligence & logistical support	Direct constraint on India's access
U.S.	Over-the-horizon counterterrorism; Indo-Pacific focus	Indirect strategic alignment	Limited support but shared counterterrorism concerns

**India's Strategic Interests and Objectives**

India's strategic interests in Afghanistan have remained relatively consistent, though their prioritization has shifted rapidly under the Taliban regime. The foremost concern is counterterrorism, particularly the prevention of Afghan soil being used by groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), or the Haqqani network. This concern intensified after the Taliban takeover due to uncertainties surrounding internal power distribution. Secondly, connectivity to Central Asia remains a central pillar of India's continental strategy. Projects such as Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) reflect India's attempts to bypass Pakistan's geographic veto and establish direct Eurasian access<sup>[24]</sup>. India seeks to protect past developmental investments worth over \$3 billion, including major infrastructure projects that continue to serve Afghan civilians. Preserving goodwill among Afghan people remains a key soft-power asset. India continues supporting regional stability and inclusive governance, recognizing that instability in Afghanistan has direct spillover effects across South Asia.

**Influence of Major Powers**

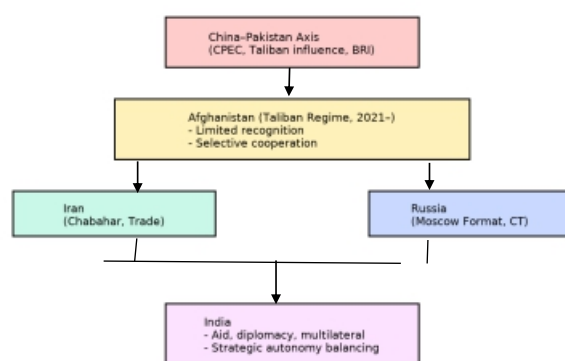
The behaviour of major powers significantly shapes India's room for manoeuvre in Afghanistan. The United States, though absent militarily, indirectly supports India through Indo-Pacific strategic frameworks that aim to counterbalance China's influence. Shared concerns about terrorism and regional instability provide limited but important convergence [7].

The period from 2021–2024 is especially significant because it reflects India's most constrained yet strategically innovative phase of engagement, marked by humanitarian outreach, cautious diplomatic presence, and multi-vector balancing across Eurasia [13, 24].

**Afghanistan's Role in the New Great Game**

Since the withdrawal of the United States, Afghanistan has re-emerged as a central geopolitical arena where major powers compete for influence, connectivity, and ideological presence. China has aggressively pursued its BRI-driven connectivity interests, including exploratory discussions on integrating Afghanistan into the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Russia, seeking strategic leverage in Central Asia, has intensified diplomatic coordination through the Moscow Format dialogues. Meanwhile, Iran has employed a hedging strategy—cooperating selectively with the Taliban while safeguarding border security and countering ISIS-K threats [4, 40]. The Taliban's selective cooperation—engaging China for investment, Iran for trade, and Russia for diplomatic legitimacy—illustrates Afghanistan's agency within a competitive multipolar environment. Rather than remaining a passive battleground, Afghanistan has positioned itself as an active negotiator that leverages great-power rivalry to maintain political survival and economic support.

The China–Pakistan Axis poses India's greatest structural challenge. China's willingness to invest in Afghanistan through the BRI, combined with Pakistan's deep historical ties to the Taliban, creates a geopolitical alignment that threatens India's interests and limits its direct influence [15]. Russia and Iran provide India alternative pathways. Moscow's convening of the Moscow Format dialogues gives India a platform to stay diplomatically relevant, while Iran's cooperation on Chabahar and INSTC strengthens India's continental links [27]. Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, publicly endorse India's role in regional stabilization, as seen in the 2022 India–Central Asia Summit. These states value India's non-intrusive, developmental approach.



## India's Policy Instruments

India's post-2021 policy toolkit reflects a careful mix of diplomatic caution and strategic persistence. Humanitarian aid has emerged as India's primary instrument, reinforcing its image as a responsible regional partner. Over 50,000 MT of wheat, medicines, and earthquake relief assistance were delivered through UN agencies [24]. India's diplomatic presence has been recalibrated. Instead of a full embassy, New Delhi reopened a limited *Technical Mission in Kabul* in June 2022 to coordinate aid and monitor security—signalling engagement without recognition. Connectivity diplomacy continues through Chabahar Port, INSTC, and India–Central Asia platforms, reflecting India's long-term goal to integrate with Eurasia. Through multilateral forums such as the SCO, Heart of Asia, and UNAMA consultations, India advances its normative position on inclusive governance and anti-terror guarantees. India also relies on intelligence cooperation with Russia, Iran, and Central Asian states to maintain situational awareness amid Taliban-era uncertainties.

Table 4: India's Key Policy Instruments in Afghanistan (Post-2021)

Instrument	Actions Taken	Strategic Purpose	Effectiveness Level
Humanitarian Aid	Wheat, medicines, disaster relief	Maintain goodwill; humanitarian diplomacy	High
Limited Diplomatic Mission	Kabul technical team	Engagement without recognition	Medium
Connectivity Projects	Chabahar, INSTC	Bypass Pakistan; Eurasian access	Medium
Multilateral Platforms	SCO, Moscow Format, UNAMA	Norm setting; legitimacy	Medium–High
Intelligence Cooperation	With Russia, Iran, CA states	Counterterrorism oversight	Medium

## Challenges and Adaptations

India's engagement faces substantial structural and diplomatic challenges. Pakistan's geographic leverage continues to impose severe restrictions on India's access to Afghanistan. China's growing involvement—economic, diplomatic, and security-related—creates an encirclement risk for India's continental strategy [40]. The Taliban's internal factionalism, unpredictable commitments, and ideological positioning create uncertainty around any long-term policy framework. Economic sanctions and the collapse of formal banking channels further constrain India's ability to directly fund development projects [38]. India has adopted a functional engagement strategy, focusing on humanitarian outreach, cultural ties, and capacity-building through scholarships, visas, and medical exchanges. Track-II diplomacy and partnerships with Afghan civil society organizations reflect India's efforts to retain its influence without legitimizing the Taliban politically [4].

## Theoretical Interpretation

From a realist perspective, India's actions reflect its focus on survival, security, and containment of hostile networks. Neorealism interprets India's behaviour as a response to structural pressures created by China–Pakistan alignment and U.S. retrenchment. Neoclassical realism highlights how domestic leadership preferences, bureaucratic assessments, and public diplomacy considerations mediate India's external strategy, strategic autonomy theory underlines India's desire to preserve foreign policy independence through multi-vector diplomacy, cautious engagement, and calibrated restraint. Together, these layers reveal India's adaptive realism, a hybrid approach that integrates normative commitments with pragmatic security calculations to sustain relevance within an increasingly multipolar Afghanistan.

## FINDINGS, POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### Major Findings

- 1. Afghanistan's Renewed Centrality:** Post-2021, it remains a testing ground for global power diffusion.
- 2. Fluid Multipolar Rivalries:** Overlapping partnerships replace binary alliances.
- 3. India's Core Interests:** Counterterrorism, connectivity, and stability continue to drive engagement.
- 4. Policy Transition:** Shift from normative idealism to pragmatic security engagement.

**5. Adaptive Realism:** India's multi-vector approach balances national interests under uncertainty.

## Policy Implications

- **Institutional Coordination:** Establish an inter-ministerial Afghanistan Policy Cell integrating diplomacy and intelligence.
- **Connectivity Expansion:** Operationalize Chabahar–INSTC synergy with Iran and Central Asia.
- **Multilateral Leverage:** Use SCO and UNAMA for legitimizing India's stabilizing role.
- **Humanitarian Diplomacy:** Continue aid via UN and local NGOs to sustain soft power.
- **Knowledge Collaboration:** Partner with AISS, AREU, and Indian think tanks for evidence-based policy design.

## Theoretical Contributions

This research:

- Validates *adaptive realism* as a variant of neoclassical realism in multipolar settings.
- Demonstrates the interplay of systemic, regional, and domestic levels in shaping middle-power behaviour.
- Advances understanding of strategic autonomy as a dynamic, not static, doctrine.

## Limitations and Future Research

Reliance on secondary data limits micro-level insights; future work should incorporate Afghan and Central Asian perspectives. Comparative studies across India's engagements in Iran, Myanmar, and the Indo-Pacific could enrich theory testing.

## Conclusion

Afghanistan remains a crucible where India's ideals and interests intersect. India's response to the Taliban's return illustrates strategic flexibility—avoiding both disengagement and overreach. Through humanitarian outreach, connectivity diplomacy, and multilateral engagement, India sustains influence without compromising autonomy. This adaptive realism exemplifies how a rising power recalibrates policy amid multipolar flux, contributing both empirically and theoretically to understanding realist adaptation in contemporary international relations.

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