

# Why India is pursuing ties with the Taliban

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Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri this month met the acting foreign minister of the Taliban government, Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai. This was India's highest level of interaction with the Taliban since the latter regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021.

Applauding this important engagement, the Afghan Foreign Ministry in

Kabul described India as a "significant regional and economic partner," affirmed its interest in strengthening "political and economic relations with India," reiterated that "there is no threat from Afghanistan," and sought the facilitation of Indian visas for traders, patients and students "in order to enhance diplomatic relations." No country has

so far established formal diplomatic ties with the Taliban government, though at least 40 interact with Taliban officials, some through resident missions.

This interaction between the Indian foreign secretary and the Afghan acting foreign minister was part of a carefully calibrated evolution of India's ties with the Taliban. Following the destruction of the Taliban "emirate" at Kandahar by US forces

after the 9/11 attacks, India had supported the governments in Kabul led by President Hamid Karzai and later President Ashraf Ghani. It also provided development assistance valued at \$3 billion for infrastructure and education and health projects. This earned extraordinary goodwill for India among the Afghan people.

This period also witnessed heavy fighting between the Taliban and the

Kabul government, which was backed by a US-led international coalition. India viewed the Taliban as an extremist movement. Hence, after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the coming to power of the Taliban in Kabul in 2021, India ended its diplomatic presence and development assistance.

However, given the importance India attaches

to its historic bonds with the Afghan people, in late 2021 it provided food and medical assistance in the war-devastated country. In June 2022, India reopened its embassy in Kabul. This has been described as a "technical team" and does not entail formal diplomatic ties with the Taliban government.

The latest bilateral engagement in Dubai signals a major upward trajectory in

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India-Afghanistan relations. It has largely been influenced by the Pakistan factor. Islamabad has watched the Taliban continue to provide sanctuary to the militants of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, who regularly conduct armed attacks in Pakistan.

The divide between the Pakistani and Taliban governments has provided India with the opportunity to explore the prospects of constructive ties with the Taliban and to revive its links with the Afghan people. In order to encourage a positive Indian response, the Taliban have reiterated that they will not allow their territory to be used by movements hostile to India.

Besides India's interest in reengaging with the Afghan people with health and welfare support and addressing its own concerns relating to extremist groups, improved ties with the Taliban will also serve India's longer-term geopolitical interests. This pertains to using Iran's Chabahar Port to set up links with Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. This vision of logistical connectivity has been in place for at least two decades but could not be realized earlier due to the conflict in Afghanistan. These linkages can now be realistically pursued.

Though there is much value in the engagements being shaped with the Taliban, the situation is not without its uncertainties and challenges.

Firstly, the Taliban have not yet convinced India and large sections of the international community that they have shed their extremist persona.

Secondly, the movement is not a united house; it is made up of several diverse groups, some of which could oppose improved ties with India.

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Thirdly, the Taliban do not control the whole country. There are motley opposition movements that could be instigated to revive armed conflict against the Taliban and plunge the country into fresh fighting.

The Taliban government is presently torn between its ideological commitments and attendant affiliations with like-minded extremist groups and the need to obtain external support to meet the development needs of its people. India's ties with the Taliban may be expected to move forward in line with continuing evidence that the Taliban are fulfilling their commitments on the terrorism issue and are capable of inclusive and effective governance.

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