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**Rajamandala Revisited: India's Geopolitical Recalibration toward Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan****Soyhunlo Sebu^{1*} and Laxmi Parmar²**¹Department of Education in Social Sciences and Humanities Regional Institute of Education, NCERT, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 prompted a major shift in India's foreign policy toward Afghanistan, challenging two decades of developmental investments. This paper examines India's geopolitical recalibration through Kautilya's Rajamandala theory, arguing that New Delhi's posture reflects classical strategic realism rather than ideological alignment or reactive improvisation. Through qualitative thematic analysis of official statements, peer-reviewed scholarship, and policy reports up to early 2026, the study maps the transition from a cautious "wait-and-watch" stance to a calibrated "engage but do not endorse" approach. India maintains functional diplomatic and economic relations with the de facto authorities while withholding formal recognition under the Vienna Convention (1961). Three converging imperatives drive this engagement: shared counterterrorism interests amid a growing Taliban-Pakistan rift; regional connectivity anchored in Iran's Chabahar Port and the INSTC to secure a Pakistan-bypass route to Central Asia; and great-power balancing against China's expanding economic and strategic footprint. Concurrently, the paper critically evaluates the severe normative tensions this strategy generates, given the regime's systemic oppression of women and girls. It assesses the arguments for diplomatic isolation and finds them empirically unconvincing, as historical patterns indicate that isolation entrenches rather than moderates the Taliban. Ultimately, India's Kautilyan recalibration represents a pragmatic strategic recovery, though its long-term sustainability relies on maintaining a normative voice alongside functional engagement.

INTRODUCTION

India and Afghanistan share a relationship that transcends the formal structures of modern diplomacy. Rooted in civilisational depth, cultural affinity, and centuries of commercial and spiritual exchange along the ancient Silk Road, the bilateral bond has provided a resilient foundation for engagement even through periods of profound political turbulence (Paliwal, 2017). The early civilisational connections are well-documented: the Rigveda's reference to the Kubha (Kabul) River places parts

of present-day Afghanistan within the geographical consciousness of Vedic civilisation, while striking parallels between the Rigveda and the Avesta, including shared references to places such as Balkh, attest to the deep cultural and spiritual affinities of the ancient period (Dupree, 1977). The Maurya Empire's extension into Afghan territory through its treaty with Seleucus I Nicator in 305 BCE, and the subsequent flourishing of Buddhism alongside Zoroastrianism and Hinduism in the region, further underscore the antiquity and complexity of this

shared heritage (Bosworth, 1996).

This civilisational foundation was carried into the modern era through convergent anti-colonial solidarities. This shared anti-colonial ethos was formalised through the Treaty of Friendship in 1950 and sustained through India and Afghanistan's joint founding membership of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which provided an ideological framework for bilateral cooperation during the superpower rivalry of the Cold War (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022).

The relationship entered its most difficult phase with the Taliban's first seizure of power in 1996. India responded by forging a trilateral partnership with Iran and Russia in support of Ahmad Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance — a covert but consequential engagement that established the template of using Afghan proximate allies to balance Pakistani influence (Ramachandran, 2021). The nadir came in December 1999, when the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 to Kandahar forced India to negotiate directly with the Taliban and release three high-profile militants, including Masood Azhar, the future founder of Jaish-e-Mohammed. The episode made viscerally clear the security costs of a hostile Taliban regime in Kabul and shaped India's strategic calculus toward Afghanistan for the following two decades (Paliwal, 2017).

The US-led intervention in 2001 opened the most productive phase in India–Afghanistan relations. India pivoted from covert support to becoming one of Afghanistan's foremost development partners, committing over \$3 billion in assistance and delivering transformational infrastructure — the Afghan Parliament building, the Salma Dam in Herat, the Zaranj–Delaram Highway, the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul, alongside more than 30,000 scholarships to Afghan students (MEA, 2019–20; D'Souza, 2016). By 2019–20, bilateral trade had reached approximately \$1.5 billion. This engagement was institutionalised through Afghanistan's first Strategic Partnership Agreement with any country since the Soviet era, signed with India in October 2011, which provided a comprehensive framework for cooperation in development, security, trade, and political consultations (Norfolk, 2011). India's Afghan policy during this period demonstrated a cardinal principle: that regional influence is most durably built through investment in people and institutions rather than through military presence or political interference.

The collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021 and the Taliban's return to power represented the most significant strategic reversal India had suffered in the region in two decades. Yet India's response, cautious, calibrated, and ultimately marked by a progressive re-

engagement with Taliban authorities, has not received systematic analytical treatment in the existing literature. Existing scholarship has largely focused either on India's developmental engagement during the Republic period or on the immediate security implications of the Taliban's return. Crucially, limited attention has been paid to analysing India's post-2021 policy through an indigenous geopolitical framework, one that might explain not merely what India is doing, but why this behaviour follows a coherent strategic logic rather than representing reactive improvisation.

This paper pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it traces the historical evolution of India–Afghanistan relations, identifying the structural factors that compelled India's fundamental policy recalibration following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Second, it applies Kautilya's Rajamandala theory as a systematic analytical framework to examine India's 'engage but do not endorse' approach toward the de facto Taliban authorities, demonstrating that this posture reflects coherent strategic logic rather than reactive improvisation. Third, it assesses the key opportunities and tensions arising from this recalibration across the domains of counterterrorism, regional connectivity, great-power competition, and human rights and evaluates the normative counter-arguments against engagement. Together, these objectives allow the paper to contribute both to the empirical literature on post-2021 India–Afghanistan relations and to the broader theoretical project of recovering non-Western frameworks for the analysis of contemporary international relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The foundational scholarship on India–Afghanistan relations is largely anchored in the 2001–2021 period of intensive developmental partnership. Paliwal's (2017) comprehensive study *My Enemy's Enemy* remains the definitive historical account, tracing India's Afghan policy from the Soviet invasion through the US withdrawal and demonstrating how New Delhi consistently sought to leverage Afghan territory as a counterweight to Pakistani strategic depth. Pant (2010) similarly examines India's Afghan engagement as a test case for an emerging power, arguing that India's developmental investments reflected a deliberate strategy of building institutional goodwill rather than military presence. Fair (2010) extends this analysis by mapping the structural constraints on India's Afghan policy, particularly its lack of a land border and dependence on Iranian and Central Asian transit routes — constraints that remain directly relevant to the post-2021 connectivity debate examined in this paper. D'Souza (2016) and Norfolk (2011) further document how the 2011

Strategic Partnership Agreement institutionalised this developmental relationship, positioning India as Afghanistan's largest regional donor and most trusted bilateral partner.

Ganaie and Ganaie (2022) provide one of the earliest systematic analyses of India's post-withdrawal posture, arguing that New Delhi's "quest for strategic space" reflects a continuation of realist imperatives under radically altered conditions. Bhattacharya (2023) examines the South Asian anxieties triggered by the Taliban's return, situating India's recalibration within a broader regional security realignment in which the Taliban–Pakistan rift has paradoxically created new openings for Indian engagement. United States Institute of Peace (2024) argues that ISIS-K presents a rising threat with reach beyond the immediate region, greater than during the pre-withdrawal period. While the worst-case scenario concerning al-Qaeda's reconstitution in Afghanistan has not materialized, that group and its South Asia affiliate continue to maintain ties with and receive support from the Taliban and to call for attacks against US citizens, allies, and partners (including India) and US interests. Manhas and Mishra (2025) offer the most recent peer-reviewed treatment, documenting India's policy shift toward the Taliban de facto government and analysing its implications for regional security architecture. Grossman (2025), writing for the RAND Corporation, provides a policy-oriented assessment of why India is quietly strengthening Taliban ties, foregrounding the counterterrorism and great-power balancing rationales that this paper develops further. Saraswat (2025), writing for MP-IDSA, traces the continuities and changes in India's engagement trajectory, while Shome (2025) explicitly invokes the Kautilyan tradition to characterise India's outreach as a "Kautilyan moment" in Indian foreign policy.

Kautilya's *Rajamandala* theory, which conceptualises interstate relations as a circle of states in which immediate neighbours are natural adversaries (*ari*) and their neighbours are natural allies (*mitra*), has attracted growing scholarly attention as a non-Western alternative to Waltzian neorealism and liberal institutionalism. Scholars, including Boesche (2003) and Modelski (1964) have noted that the *Arthashastra* anticipates many of the core insights of modern realism while grounding them in a distinctly South Asian civilisational context. Within Indian foreign policy studies, the *Rajamandala* framework has been applied to explain India's neighbourhood policy more broadly, its strategic partnerships with Iran, Vietnam, and Japan as counterweights to Chinese and Pakistani influence, but its systematic application to India's engagement with the Taliban remains underdeveloped in the existing literature. Rehaieem (2025) touches on the

China–Taliban nexus from a BRI perspective, and Zhang (2021) analyses China's Afghan calculus from a Chinese strategic studies standpoint, but neither situates these developments within a *Rajamandala* analytical framework.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, combining a systematic narrative review with thematic analysis to examine how India's geopolitical stance toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has evolved since August 2021.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is anchored in Kautilya's *Rajamandala* theory, drawn from the *Arthashastra*, which serves as the primary conceptual lens throughout the study. This framework was selected over Waltzian neorealism (Waltz, 1979), which abstracts away the civilisational and geographic specificities of South Asian interstate relations; liberal institutionalism (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Keohane, 1984), which has limited traction given the Taliban's near-total international isolation; and constructivism (Chacko & Pant, 2018), which underweights the hard structural imperatives driving India's recalibration.

The theoretical justification draws on Shahi's (2018) argument that the dominance of Western IR paradigms reflects intellectual hegemony rather than theoretical superiority, and that the *Arthashastra* constitutes an autonomous analytical system, grounded in a distinct civilisational epistemology, whose application to the modern state system requires careful adaptation rather than mechanical transplantation. Three such adaptations are made explicit here. First, the classical *ari-mitra* logic is treated as capturing structural incentives rather than determining outcomes, given the vast capability asymmetries of the contemporary South Asian system. Second, China is incorporated as a *vijaigishu*-type variable, an expansionist third-order power whose geographic distance does not prevent decisive influence within the mandala (Shahi, 2018). Third, *kosha* is applied in its contemporary equivalent, trade architecture, port development, and connectivity investment, rather than its classical sense of revenue extraction.

Consistent with Shahi's (2018) caution against "civilisational essentialism," the *Rajamandala* framework is deployed here not on grounds of cultural affinity, but because its analytical categories, *ari*, *mitra*, *kosha*, map with unusual precision onto the structural features of India's contemporary strategic environment, a claim some Indian policymakers have themselves advanced (Shome, 2025).

DATA SOURCES AND SELECTION CRITERIA

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources, organized into four tiers by evidentiary weight. The primary tier comprises official documents and statements from India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), including press releases, bilateral agreements, annual reports, and parliamentary records. The second tier consists of peer-reviewed articles and scholarly monographs from journals such as Strategic Analysis, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, and the Journal of Strategic Security. The third tier includes policy reports from recognized think tanks: the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), MP-IDSA, and the RAND Corporation. The fourth tier draws on credible investigative journalism from outlets such as The Hindu, BBC News, and Al Jazeera, used primarily to document recent events for which peer-reviewed sources are not yet available; sources from this tier serve as corroborating evidence rather than primary analytical authority.

DISCUSSION

The following sections apply the Rajamandala framework to India's post-2021 Afghanistan policy: moving from the structural mapping of classical categories onto contemporary South Asia, through the diplomatic, security, economic, and great-power dimensions of India's recalibration, and concluding with the normative tensions this engagement generates.

APPLYING THE RAJAMANDALA FRAMEWORK TO POST-2021 SOUTH ASIA GEOPOLITICS

With the Rajamandala framework established in the methodology, this section maps its classical categories onto the contemporary South Asian strategic environment, beginning with the Pakistan-Afghanistan dynamic that sits at the heart of India's northwestern strategic calculus.

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan

exemplifies such geopolitical complexities. The two states have experienced enduring political tensions centered on the approximately 2,600-kilometer Durand Line, a boundary demarcated by British colonial authorities in 1893. Following Pakistan's creation in 1947, Afghanistan notably opposed its admission to the United Nations, reflecting early diplomatic friction between the two countries. These tensions persist in contemporary times, with Pakistan alleging that the Afghan Taliban provide sanctuary to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant organization accused of launching attacks against Pakistan from Afghan territory.

However, it is not only Pakistan whose influence matters; China's role cannot be ignored either. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 created a significant geopolitical vacuum that altered the regional balance of power and opened new opportunities for external actors to expand their influence. In this evolving strategic environment, China has emerged as a key regional power capable of playing an influential role in Afghanistan due to its geographic proximity and substantial economic and security interests in the country (Rehaiem, 2025). Mapping these classical categories onto the contemporary South Asian strategic environment makes the analytical architecture of this paper explicit. Pakistan occupies the *ari* position as India's immediate adversary and the principal sponsor of militant networks hostile to India. Afghanistan, as Pakistan's neighbour and itself a victim of Pakistani strategic interference, occupies the natural *mitra* position, alliance-driven not by ideological affinity but by structural geometry. China functions as a third-order variable that the classical two-circle model did not envisage, whose expanding Afghan footprint intensifies rather than invalidates the *Rajamandala* imperative for Indian engagement. Finally, *kosha*: economic strength as an instrument of state power, underpins India's connectivity and trade strategy, examined in subsequent sections. Table 1 summarises this mapping.

Table 1: Rajamandala Framework applied to India's post 2021 Afghanistan policy			
Kautilyan Category	Classical definition	Contemporary mapping	Paper section
Ari (adversary)	Immediate neighbour as natural rival	Pakistan	Counterterrorism sub-section
Mitra (ally)	Neighbouring neighbours as natural partner	Afghanistan (Taliban)	Recalibration sub-section
Kosha (treasury)	Economic strength as an instrument of power	Chabahar, INSTC, Trade recovery	Economic and Connectivity sub-section
Extended variable	Third-order power disrupting the classical dyad	China	Great-power competition sub-section

INDIA'S POST -2021 RECALIBRATION: FROM "WAIT-AND-WATCH" TO "ENGAGE BUT DO NOT ENDORSE

India's latest diplomatic outreach to Afghanistan's Taliban government signals a marked shift in its perception of

regional geopolitical reality, occurring more than three years after India suffered a major strategic and diplomatic blow when Kabul fell to the Taliban (Biswas, 2025). India adopted a cautious "wait-and-watch" approach rooted in the Taliban's historical ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its documented links to anti-India militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) (Grossman, 2025; Manhas & Mishra, 2025). India closed its four consulates in Afghanistan, evacuated its embassy staff, and voted in favour of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2593, which called upon the Taliban to ensure that Afghan territory is not used for terrorist activities, a direct response to UN findings that JeM and LeT continued to maintain training camps inside Afghanistan (PTI, 2022).

Nevertheless, India did not abandon Kautilyan strategic logic. Communication channels remained open even at the height of the crisis. The first official contact occurred in Doha within weeks of the Taliban takeover, when India's Ambassador to Qatar met with Taliban representative Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai (Roy, 2021). By mid-2022, India had reopened a technical mission in Kabul after a high-level MEA delegation, led by J.P. Singh, secured security assurances from senior Taliban figures, including Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi and Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani (Haidar, 2022).

India's engagement thereafter followed a carefully calibrated trajectory. Key milestones include the acceptance of a Taliban Consul General in Mumbai and the accreditation of Ikramuddin Kamil as acting envoy in New Delhi in November 2024. The January 2025 Dubai meeting between Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Muttaqi, followed by Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi's landmark visit to New Delhi in October 2025, marked a decisive step toward normalisation. During the visit, India announced the upgrade of its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy, signalling pragmatic engagement without formal diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime (MEA, 2025). External Affairs Minister Jaishankar also publicly appreciated Afghanistan's condemnation of the April 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir. This gesture reflected a degree of convergent strategic signalling between the two sides. Taken together, these milestones reflect India's sustained application of Kautilyan principles, leveraging geography and sustained presence to balance adversarial neighbours, even under changing regimes (Shome, 2025).

India's policy is best described as 'engage but do not endorse,' maintaining functional diplomatic and economic ties with the de facto Taliban authorities without conferring formal legitimacy. This posture finds its legal architecture in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic

Relations (1961), whose Article 2 distinguishes the establishment of diplomatic relations from the maintenance of a diplomatic mission, and whose Article 3 defines mission functions: negotiation, information-gathering, and protection of nationals, in terms that do not presuppose formal recognition of the receiving government. India has exploited this distinction precisely, operating first through a technical mission and subsequently upgrading to a full embassy, while consistently withholding the formal recognition that would reward the Taliban's governance record.

The sharpest expression of this posture came in 2026, when India explicitly condemned Pakistan's airstrikes along the Durand Line, with MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stating that "India strongly condemns Pakistan's airstrikes on Afghan territory that have resulted in civilian casualties, including women and children, during the holy month of Ramadan" (Hussain, 2026). Pakistan, in turn, accused the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into an "Indian colony," a striking reversal from its active support for the Taliban's return to power in 2021 (The Hindu, 2026; Shankar, 2026).

COUNTERTERRORISM CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Beneath the diplomatic choreography lies a harder convergence of tactical security interests. Despite profound ideological differences, India and the Taliban share a common adversary in Pakistan-backed militant networks, albeit for distinct reasons. India seeks to prevent LeT, JeM, and ISIS-K from operating on Afghan soil and directing attacks into Indian territory. This parallel threat perception has created a de facto, if unacknowledged, counterterrorism alignment between New Delhi and Kabul.

However, the convergence has clear limits. Concerns persist about residual Taliban ties to anti-India groups, even if the operational space for such networks appears to have narrowed, less as a result of Indian diplomatic pressure and more as a structural consequence of the Taliban-Pakistan rift (Grossman, 2025; Bhattacharya, 2023). India has, accordingly, adopted a restrained posture, deliberately avoiding any direct military involvement or security assistance to the Taliban regime. Through this posture, India seeks to preserve its regional credibility as a responsible actor while keeping open the channels necessary to monitor and, where possible, constrain anti-India militant activity on Afghan soil.

ECONOMIC AND CONNECTIVITY DIMENSIONS

Economic strategy is not merely a supplement to India's diplomatic recalibration; it is its most durable foundation.

While Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is primarily associated with political realism and statecraft, it places equal emphasis on *kosha* (treasury) and economic strength as prerequisites of state power. India's post-2021 engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan reflects precisely this logic: sustaining an economic presence and investment in connectivity as instruments of long-term strategic influence, even in the absence of formal diplomatic recognition.

Pre-2021 bilateral trade had peaked at approximately \$1.5 billion in 2019-20. Although trade contracted sharply after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, it recovered to \$1 billion (\$997.74 million) in FY 2023-24 (Sharma, 2025). Notably, Afghanistan enjoys a significant trade surplus in this relationship, driven by exports of dried fruits, saffron, and nuts (Sharma, 2025), an asymmetry that India has strategically tolerated, recognising that Afghan economic dependence on Indian markets strengthens New Delhi's leverage and goodwill simultaneously.

India's wider connectivity strategy pivots on Iran's Chabahar Port as its central artery. In May 2024, India signed a landmark 10-year operational agreement for Chabahar, committing \$120 million in investment and a \$250 million credit line. The strategic significance of this deal was underscored in February 2025, when the first India-Afghanistan transit train reached Herat via Iranian rail, a major operational milestone that provides Afghanistan access to Indian goods and markets entirely bypassing Pakistani territory, while simultaneously reducing India's dependence on Chinese-controlled or Pakistani-mediated trade routes (ORF, 2024; Saraswat, 2025). This corridor is not merely a trade route; it is India's most concrete answer to the geographic disadvantage of lacking a land border with Afghanistan.

India's long-term commitment to this strategy is further evidenced by the Union Budget 2026-27, which includes a 27% increase in development assistance to Afghanistan, a deliberate signal of sustained engagement at a time when most Western donors have curtailed aid (Ghosh, 2026). For India, a stable Afghanistan serves as an indispensable land bridge to Central Asia's markets and energy resources, directly advancing its broader Eurasian connectivity ambitions through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). India's connectivity investments, however, cannot be evaluated in isolation from the intensifying great-power competition reshaping the region, and it is here that the Kautilyan case for engagement becomes most strategically urgent.

THE GREAT-POWER COMPETITION DIMENSION: CHINA'S SHADOW

India's Afghanistan policy cannot be evaluated in isolation from the intensifying great-power competition reshaping

the region since the US withdrawal in 2021. The American exit created a significant geopolitical vacuum, and China has moved swiftly and deliberately to fill it. Unlike India, which has proceeded cautiously and without formal recognition, China's approach has been driven primarily by strategic and economic calculations, with far fewer normative constraints shaping its engagement.

Since 2021, China has steadily expanded its footprint in Afghanistan through economic investments and strategic development initiatives. Afghanistan lies at the heart of a region central to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and Beijing has expressed interest in investing in the country's natural resource wealth, estimated at \$1 trillion, including extensive copper, lithium, and gold deposits (Ng & Tewari, 2023), a move that signals not merely economic interest but a deliberate geopolitical positioning. From the perspective of India's Kautilyan strategic framework, this development is deeply concerning: China's growing influence in Afghanistan risks facilitating closer strategic coordination between two states that India already perceives as regional rivals, Pakistan and China. Thereby potentially altering the regional balance of power to India's disadvantage.

An additional and more immediate challenge arises from the proposed extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, an initiative designed to institutionalise trilateral economic cooperation among China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. For India, this carries a dual strategic threat: not only does it risk consolidating a China-Pakistan-Afghanistan axis on India's northwestern flank, but it also directly implicates India's longstanding opposition to CPEC infrastructure passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Taken together, China's expanding Afghan presence reinforces, rather than undermines, the Kautilyan case for India's own engagement: to cede the field to Beijing would be to surrender influence in a state that sits at the intersection of India's counterterrorism, connectivity, and great-power balancing imperatives.

Yet India's pragmatic recalibration carries a cost that no amount of strategic logic can fully neutralise, a profound and unresolved normative tension between India's constitutional values and the character of the regime it is engaging.

NORMATIVE TENSIONS AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS CHALLENGE

India's pragmatic engagement with the Taliban is not without serious internal contradictions. The Taliban's governance record stands in sharp and irreconcilable contrast to the democratic and constitutional values that define India's own political identity. The regime's severe

restrictions on girls' and women's education, exclusion of women from employment and public life, and the legislative sanctioning of child marriage (Joya, 2026; Fetrat, 2025) represent not merely cultural divergences but, as Amnesty International has documented, potential crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute (Amnesty International, 2023). For a state whose Constitution guarantees equality and whose foreign policy has historically projected democratic solidarity, engaging a regime of this character carries unavoidable normative costs.

These tensions were made visible during Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi's October 2025 visit to New Delhi, when women journalists were barred from a press conference, an incident that drew immediate criticism from opposition leaders and media bodies within India itself (Chowdhury, 2025). The episode illustrated that the reputational costs of engagement are not merely abstract: they surface domestically and publicly, testing the coherence between India's foreign policy posture and its stated values. India has responded with deliberate restraint, neither endorsing the Taliban's social policies nor making their reversal a precondition for engagement, seeking to preserve the diplomatic channel while avoiding complicity. Whether this posture constitutes principled pragmatism or, as critics contend, a form of moral evasion remains a live and legitimate debate.

THE NORMATIVE AND MORAL COUNTER-ARGUMENT

While this paper has argued that India's 'engage but do not endorse' approach represents a pragmatic and strategically sound recalibration, a significant body of scholarly opinion contends that such engagement is misguided, premature, and potentially damaging to India's long-term interests. The most forceful critique comes from human rights scholars who argue that by hosting the Taliban's acting foreign minister, upgrading its mission to a full embassy, and increasing development assistance, India is effectively normalising a government condemned for systematic gender apartheid (Joya, 2026; Fetrat, 2025). The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies has warned that India's silence on human rights and women's education raises a critical question: why is engagement viewed as strategic calculus when it involves an illegitimate regime founded on repression? (Shanti, 2025). Organisations such as Global Human Rights Defence have gone further, warning that pragmatic engagement without conditions or public criticism becomes normalisation (GHRD, 2025). Critics therefore argue that India should maintain diplomatic distance until the Taliban demonstrates verifiable progress on human rights, particularly girls' education and media

freedom (Human Rights Watch, 2025b).

These normative critiques carry genuine moral weight and should not be dismissed as strategically naïve. However, the isolationist alternative rests on a questionable empirical premise, that diplomatic distance would meaningfully pressure the Taliban toward reform. The historical record of international isolation of the Taliban (1996–2001) produced neither moderation nor compliance; it produced entrenchment. India's engagement, by contrast, preserves the channels through which conditionality can be communicated, trade leverage maintained, and civilian welfare supported. Moreover, complete disengagement would not neutralise the Taliban; it would simply cede India's influence to actors, China foremost among them, with even fewer normative commitments. The challenge for India, therefore, is not whether to engage, but how to engage in a manner that advances strategic interests without abandoning its voice on human rights altogether.

Across all five dimensions, the Rajamandala framework reveals what other theoretical lenses obscure: India's Taliban engagement is driven by structural geometry, economic statecraft, and great-power balancing. Yet classical realism was never designed to resolve the collision between strategic imperatives and constitutional values. That tension is not a failure of Indian foreign policy; it is its defining challenge.

CONCLUSION

India's post-2021 Afghanistan policy, examined through the lens of Kautilya's *Rajamandala* theory, emerges as something more coherent than its critics allow and more constrained than its architects might prefer. The evidence traced across five dimensions; diplomatic recalibration, counterterrorism convergence, economic statecraft, great-power balancing, and normative tension, consistently vindicates the classical framework's core logic: that structural geometry, not ideological sympathy, governs India's engagement with the Taliban.

The most vivid confirmation came not from New Delhi's own statements but from Islamabad's reaction. Pakistan's accusation in 2026 that the Taliban had become an "Indian colony," following India's condemnation of Pakistani airstrikes on Afghan territory, is precisely the dynamic Kautilya would have predicted — the *ari* perceiving, with alarm, its neighbour consolidating ties with the *mitra*. That a relationship built on tactical necessity and mutual suspicion could generate this degree of Pakistani anxiety is itself a measure of India's recalibration having succeeded on its own terms.

Yet strategic success and normative coherence are not the

same thing. The Taliban's systematic denial of girls' education, exclusion of women from public life, and legislative sanctioning of child marriage — documented by Amnesty International (2023) as potential crimes against humanity — represent a moral fault line that no amount of Kautilyan logic can fully bridge. The barring of women journalists from Muttuqi's New Delhi press conference in October 2025 made this tension visible domestically, testing the coherence between India's foreign policy posture and its constitutional identity. India's response — neither endorsing Taliban governance nor making its reform a precondition for engagement — reflects a deliberate, if uncomfortable, choice: that the historical record of Taliban isolation (1996–2001) offers no evidence that disengagement produces moderation, and that India's presence preserves the channels through which humanitarian concerns can be raised and civilian welfare supported.

The deeper contribution of this paper lies not in resolving that tension but in reframing it. India's "engage but do not endorse" approach is not a failure of values — it is an attempt to hold strategic realism and normative responsibility in productive tension, in a neighbourhood where the refusal to engage is itself a strategic choice with real costs. Whether India can sustain that balance — maintaining its democratic identity while pragmatically engaging a regime antithetical to its values, and preserving its voice on human rights without sacrificing the leverage that engagement provides — will remain the defining test of its strategic maturity in the years ahead.

What Kautilya understood, and what India's post-2021 Afghanistan policy has begun to demonstrate, is that in a complex neighbourhood, principled distance is rarely costless — and engagement, managed carefully, is not the same as endorsement.

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