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An Analysis of New Diplomatic Opportunities and Challenges in India-Afghanistan Relations

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Abstract

The relationship between India and Afghanistan has long been founded on cultural, economic, and security cooperation. However, following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, a new phase emerged in bilateral relations, bringing forth numerous challenges as well as opportunities. The political transformation in Afghanistan has prompted India to reassess its diplomatic approach, particularly in identifying new avenues for enhancing cooperation across various sectors. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, analyzes the emerging diplomatic opportunities in India–Afghanistan relations in the post-Taliban era. These opportunities include India's participation in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction processes, strengthening economic relations through infrastructure investment, promoting bilateral trade, and expanding security and intelligence cooperation. Moreover, India can contribute to Afghanistan's social and educational improvement by fostering cultural and academic collaboration. In this regard, India must adopt a strategic and multilateral diplomatic approach that takes into account Afghanistan's complex security and political conditions. Collaboration with other countries and international organizations especially in combating terrorism, addressing humanitarian crises, and strengthening Afghan state institutions will be essential. The paper also addresses key challenges, such as India's non-recognition of the Taliban, regional rivalries, and security threats stemming from terrorist groups. It concludes with recommendations for addressing these challenges and capitalizing on emerging opportunities. Ultimately, India–Afghanistan relations in the new era can serve as a model for positive regional and international cooperation, provided that both sides effectively utilize their existing capacities.

Keywords: *Afghanistan; Diplomacy; Economic Cooperation; India; Security; Taliban*

Preview (2 / 10) - ketabton.com

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1- Introduction

The relationship between India and Afghanistan, one of the most significant bilateral ties in South Asia, has a long and complex history. These relations have evolved over centuries under the influence of political, cultural, and security developments.

In ancient times, India–Afghanistan relations were shaped by trade and cultural exchanges. Major trade routes passing through Afghanistan connected the two lands, facilitating close interactions. During this era, Afghanistan and India shared not only economic but also cultural and religious connections.

Traditionally, India has supported democratic governments in Afghanistan. During the presidencies of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, political relations between the two countries reached their peak. India expanded its political engagement with Afghanistan, seeking to strengthen it as a strategic partner against the influence of Pakistan and other regional actors (Suri, 2018).

India also participated in Afghanistan's political and electoral processes, supporting the country's democratic transition (Chacko, 2012). Furthermore, India actively contributed to peace negotiations and humanitarian assistance.

During this period, India launched several infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan, including the construction of roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals, which significantly contributed to the country's reconstruction (Ganguly, 2008). India became one of the largest donors to Afghanistan's reconstruction projects, especially in infrastructure and energy sectors. The Chabahar Railway Project, one of India's most important regional initiatives, exemplifies India's efforts to strengthen economic ties between the two nations (Panda, 2019).

India has allocated around $3 billion in economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in recent years (Chacko, 2012). These contributions have continued both during the post-2001 reconstruction era and after the Taliban's return to power.

From a strategic standpoint, Afghanistan holds immense significance for India due to its natural resources and geopolitical location in South Asia. One of the most vital areas of cooperation between the two countries is trade. Despite challenges, India and Afghanistan have maintained notable commercial relations. Afghanistan serves as an important market for Indian goods, and these trade relations are expected to expand further during the new phase of reconstruction and economic opportunities (Bhatnagar, 2018).

In terms of security, Afghanistan is of great importance to India. The two countries have cooperated in counterterrorism, anti-narcotics efforts, and other shared security concerns. Such collaboration has been especially significant in combating terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, including ISIS.

India and Afghanistan have engaged in extensive cooperation in countering terrorism and extremism, including intelligence sharing, training Afghan security forces, and joint counterterrorism initiatives. Given the presence of terrorist groups along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, India considers its security cooperation with Afghanistan essential (Ganguly, 2017).

The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 created new challenges for India–Afghanistan relations. Having cooperated with Afghanistan's democratic governments since 2001, India now faces difficulties

Preview (3 / 10) - ketabton.com

in recognizing the Taliban regime. Nevertheless, India seeks new diplomatic pathways to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan while indirectly supporting the Afghan people (Barfield, 2021).

With the Taliban's resurgence, Afghanistan's security landscape has changed dramatically. India, which played a key role in post-2001 security and counterterrorism efforts, now confronts new obstacles in its engagement with Kabul. India is cautiously managing its interactions with the Taliban while striving to maintain its internal security and strategic interests (Rizvi, 2021).

Although India has not officially recognized the Taliban government, it continues to support Afghanistan through humanitarian aid. India aims to sustain its diplomatic and security presence—particularly in countering shared threats such as terrorism—through multilateral cooperation (Rashid, 2019).

Despite these challenges, India is currently reassessing its strategic approach toward Afghanistan. It has initiated multiple meetings and contacts with the Taliban in various countries to explore potential avenues of cooperation. In particular, India sees possible collaboration in security and economic sectors with both the Taliban and other Afghan political groups. Moreover, India seeks to strengthen its partnerships with other international actors in Afghanistan to preserve its influence in the country's evolving political landscape (Singh, 2022).

2- Statement of the Problem

After the fall of the Republic government of Afghanistan in 2021 and the return of the Taliban to power, a new phase emerged in the relations between the two countries. India closed its embassy in Kabul, evacuated its staff, and refrained from recognizing the new regime in Afghanistan. With the Taliban taking control, India could not easily establish direct relations with them, as historically and traditionally, India had supported democratic governments in Afghanistan.

However, after more than four years under the new regime, regional countries have gradually moved closer to the Taliban. India, despite the existing challenges, is also cautiously engaging with the Taliban and is gradually moving toward recognizing the new reality in order to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan while indirectly supporting the Afghan people.

It appears that India is reconsidering its foreign policy toward the Taliban to establish direct engagement based on its national interests and to play a significant role as a key actor in Afghanistan-related affairs.

This paper seeks to examine the new opportunities that have emerged in Indo-Afghan relations since 2021, aiming to identify and advance the future direction of relations between the two countries.

3-Theoretical Framework

The relations between India and Afghanistan entered a new phase of political and diplomatic engagement following the political transition in Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power in 2021. To analyze these evolving dynamics, applying the major theoretical frameworks of International Relations particularly Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—provides a more comprehensive understanding of the behavior of both countries, as well as the opportunities and challenges that define their interactions.

Preview (4 / 10) - ketabton.com

Realism emphasizes power and national interest as the central pillars of international relations. According to this perspective, states operate in an anarchic international system where survival and security are their primary objectives, and their interactions are largely shaped by the pursuit of national interests and the balance of power. Within this framework, post-2021 India–Afghanistan relations can be analyzed as follows: India seeks to safeguard its security, economic, and geopolitical interests against the growing influence of Pakistan and China in Afghanistan, while the Taliban aim to gain international legitimacy and leverage their relations with India to secure political and economic advantages. Therefore, from a realist standpoint, India's engagement with the Taliban represents a pragmatic strategy to preserve its regional influence and maintain the balance of power.

Liberalism, on the other hand, underscores cooperation, interdependence, and the role of international institutions. From this viewpoint, India can employ tools of soft power, such as humanitarian aid, development projects, and educational initiatives, to expand its influence in Afghanistan. Since 2021, India has sought to maintain informal contacts and provide humanitarian assistance to lay the groundwork for future cooperation. This approach demonstrates that India, instead of direct confrontation, opts for gradual engagement and non-political collaboration to sustain its presence in Afghanistan.

According to Constructivist theory, identities, beliefs, and mutual perceptions play a crucial role in shaping international relations. In this context, India's perception of the Taliban and the Taliban's perception of India are decisive factors in determining the nature of diplomatic interactions between the two sides. India is attempting to reconstruct its image among Taliban leaders as a neutral and supportive actor, while the Taliban, in turn, seek to reshape their image within the international community and earn the trust of countries such as India. Hence, within this framework, identity, mutual understanding, and the reconstruction of reciprocal trust are key elements in forming the emerging diplomatic relations between India and Afghanistan.

4- Methodology and Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as its main objective is to provide an in-depth analysis of the political, economic, cultural, and strategic opportunities between India and Afghanistan. Instead of focusing on numerical data, the research emphasizes collecting opinions, experiences, and interpretations. The method used for data collection is semi-structured interviews, one of the most effective techniques in qualitative research, as it allows greater flexibility for participants to express their personal and analytical viewpoints. A total of seven (7) participants were selected for the study, including political analysts, university professors, foreign relations experts, and public policy researchers. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, meaning those individuals who have direct academic and professional relevance to the topic of study. The interviews were conducted between October 1 and October 20, 2025. The interview questionnaire was prepared in advance, and the purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of the interviews were clearly explained to all participants. Each interview was recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed for analysis. For the analysis of the collected data, the thematic analysis method was applied. All ethical principles of research were strictly observed. The personal identities of the participants were kept confidential and referred to in the report only by codes (e.g., *Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2,* etc.). All participants took part in the study based on informed consent. To ensure the validity of the research, data were cross-checked from multiple sources, including academic articles and official documents alongside the interviews. For reliability, the transcription and analysis processes were reviewed twice to prevent any distortion or misinterpretation of information.

Preview (5 / 10) - ketabton.com

5- Objective of the Paper

- To analyze the new diplomatic opportunities created following recent developments in Afghanistan
- To examine the challenges and obstacles in India–Afghanistan relations

5-1 A Brief Overview of India–Afghanistan Relations

Although India and Afghanistan do not share a land border, their relationship has a long history founded on cultural, commercial, and diplomatic ties. Indo-Afghan relations in ancient times were shaped significantly by trade and cultural exchanges. Major trade routes passing through Afghanistan facilitated close connections between the two regions. During this period, Afghanistan and India were linked not only economically but also culturally and religiously.

During the reign of various Indian empires such as the Maurya and Gupta Empires, Afghanistan played a critical role in trade routes. Notably, under Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, Afghanistan came under the influence of the Indian Empire (Ludden, 2002).

The advent of Islam in Afghanistan in the 7th century CE ushered in a new phase in Indo-Afghan relations, as Afghanistan emerged as a strategically significant region for both trade and military routes (Acxir, 2024).

In the 11th century, the Ghaznavids, with their capital in Ghazni, Afghanistan, established extensive relations with India. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni was among the most prominent rulers of this era, expanding political and military relations with Indian kingdoms (Bosworth, 2002).

In the 16th century, with the establishment of the Mughal Empire in India under Emperor Akbar, Indo-Afghan relations expanded considerably, especially in political and military domains. Akbar endeavored to maintain close ties with Afghan rulers, recognizing Afghanistan as a strategically important region for the Mughal Empire (Richards, 1993).

In the 19th century, with British presence in India, Indo-Afghan relations were deeply affected by the “Great Game” between Britain and Russia. During this period, Afghanistan became a vital buffer zone between the British and Russian empires.

Three major Anglo-Afghan wars occurred in this period: the First (1839–1842), the Second (1878–1880), and the Third (1919), primarily driven by competition for influence and control over Afghanistan as a buffer state (Mackenzie, 2009).

A significant outcome of this era was the Durand Line demarcation in 1893, which defined the boundary between India and Afghanistan. This line has remained a contentious issue and continues to be a sensitive matter between Afghanistan and modern-day Pakistan (Barfield, 2012).

5-1-1 Contemporary Relations since the 1950s

Formal relations between Afghanistan and modern India began after 1950 (Paliwal, 2021). In this period, both nations, as independent states, sought to strengthen their relationship on the basis of non-alignment and developmental cooperation.

Preview (6 / 10) - ketabton.com

India was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Kabul following Afghanistan's independence in 1919. In the 1950s and 1960s, India extended significant economic and cultural cooperation to Afghanistan, contributing to reconstruction and development projects (Nabavi, 2017).

During the 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, India strengthened its relationship with Afghanistan by supporting the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan through military and economic aid. These ties persisted throughout Afghanistan's civil wars and after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 (Rashid, 2001).

India never recognized the Taliban regime between the 1990s and 2001 and considered it a security threat. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India took a highly active role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, emerging as a major supporter of Afghanistan's democratic governments.

India traditionally supported democratic governance in Afghanistan, and during the presidencies of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, political relations reached their zenith. India sought to strengthen Afghanistan as a strategic partner in countering Pakistan's influence and other regional actors (Suri, 2018).

India also actively participated in Afghanistan's political and electoral processes and supported democratic consolidation (Chacko, 2012). It engaged in peace negotiations and humanitarian assistance programs.

India initiated multiple infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, including roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals, significantly contributing to Afghanistan's reconstruction (Ganguly, 2008). Recognized as one of Afghanistan's largest development partners, India also invested heavily in energy projects, including the strategically important Chabahar Port and railway project to enhance regional trade (Panda, 2019).

In recent years, India has allocated nearly $3 billion in economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (Chacko, 2012), continuing both after 2001 and following the Taliban's return to power.

Afghanistan's strategic location and natural resources make it a vital partner for India. Trade has been a key pillar of Indo-Afghan relations. Despite challenges, Afghanistan remains an important market for Indian goods, and opportunities for economic cooperation could expand during Afghanistan's reconstruction phase (Bhatnagar, 2018).

5-1-2 Security Dimensions

From a security perspective, Afghanistan is crucial for India. Both countries have collaborated in combating terrorism, narcotics, and other security threats. This cooperation has been particularly significant against terrorist groups active in Afghanistan, including ISIS (Ganguly, 2017).

5-1-3 Post-2021 Developments

The return of the Taliban to power on 15 August 2021 marked a complex transformation in South Asia, significantly impacting Afghanistan's relations with regional and global powers, especially India. This shift has altered Afghanistan's security and political landscape, creating a new set of challenges for Indo-Afghan relations.

Preview (7 / 10) - ketabton.com

India, which had cooperated with Afghanistan's democratic governments since 2001, now faces difficulty in recognizing the Taliban regime. Nonetheless, it seeks new diplomatic solutions to protect its interests in Afghanistan while continuing indirect support for the Afghan people (Barfield, 2021).

Following the Taliban's takeover, India was among the first to be aware of the political crisis in Afghanistan. Given its past role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, India expressed deep concerns about the implications for its security and economic interests.

India has consistently refrained from recognizing the Taliban as a legitimate government. It has stressed the importance of forming an inclusive government representing all Afghan ethnic groups and has maintained that recognition of the Taliban depends on their respect for human rights, women's freedoms, and minority rights (Rizvi, 2021; Chacko, 2022).

6-1 New Diplomatic Opportunities in India–Afghanistan Relations

Interviewee 4: With more than four years having passed since the Taliban's return to power and as international actors have gradually adjusted their approaches toward the group, India is also expected to modify its foreign policy toward the Taliban in order to play a more active and influential role in Afghanistan's affairs. This paper seeks to examine the existing opportunities in India–Afghanistan relations that could pave the way for future cooperation, strengthening, and reconstruction between the two nations.

6-1-1 Humanitarian and Diplomatic Assistance

Although India does not officially recognize the Taliban, it continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. India has delivered medical aid, food supplies, and health equipment to Afghanistan through international organizations. These efforts contribute to strengthening India's position in Afghanistan and the wider region (Chacko, 2022).

While India initially adopted a cautious approach toward the Taliban's return to power, the new circumstances present opportunities for India to enhance its relations with Afghanistan based on evolving security and economic priorities.

6-1-2 Aid and Reconstruction Programs in Afghanistan

One of India's most significant opportunities in the post-Taliban era lies in contributing to Afghanistan's reconstruction. *Interviewee 3: As a key development partner over the past two decades, India can play an active role in reconstruction projects—particularly in border regions most affected by conflict*. These opportunities include infrastructure development, education, health, and energy projects (Ganguly, 2021).

6-1-3 Relations with Afghanistan's Neighbors

Under the new circumstances, India can strengthen its regional influence by enhancing ties with Afghanistan's neighbors, such as Iran and Turkmenistan, particularly in economic and energy sectors. Projects like the Chabahar Port and regional trade linkages could help India consolidate its influence in Afghanistan and the broader region (Panda, 2022).

6-1-4 Economic Opportunities

Preview (8 / 10) - ketabton.com

Afghanistan, as a potentially important market for India, presents opportunities for expanding trade and investment. Infrastructure projects, especially in energy and transport, could attract particular attention. Notably, projects such as Chabahar, which facilitates India's access to Central Asia, remain strategically important (Panda, 2022).

6-1-5 Cultural and Educational Exchanges

India can further strengthen people-to-people ties by promoting cultural and educational exchanges. Such initiatives may include scholarships for Afghan students in India, joint scientific research, and cultural events. Leveraging its substantial academic and educational capacity, India can play a pivotal role in empowering Afghanistan's next generation—particularly in technology, engineering, medicine, and the humanities (Deshmukh, 2021).

6-1-6 Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation

India places high importance on security cooperation with Afghanistan. Given the persistent terrorist threats in Afghanistan and the region, India could engage in security collaborations with the Taliban, although such cooperation would remain limited and sensitive. Areas of possible cooperation include counterterrorism efforts against groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which pose direct threats to India (Ganguly, 2021).

6-1-7 Engagement with International and Regional Actors

India can leverage its strengths in regional diplomacy to collaborate with other countries—such as Iran and Central Asian states—to counter Pakistan's and the Taliban's growing influence in Afghanistan (Rizvi, 2021).

6-1-8 Strengthening Intelligence and Security Cooperation

In addition to security cooperation, India can bolster intelligence-sharing and cybersecurity capabilities to counter terrorism in Afghanistan. Such collaborations could help stabilize regional security and enhance India's role as a strategic security partner (Ganguly & Ghosh, 2021).

6-1-9 Border Security and Combating Human and Drug Trafficking

Afghanistan is one of the world's largest producers of narcotics, posing serious threats to regional security. India can collaborate with Afghanistan to combat drug trafficking and human smuggling, strengthening border security and mitigating threats. This cooperation would be especially impactful in border regions of both countries and neighboring states such as Pakistan (Mishra, 2022).

6-1-10 Limitations to Project Implementation in Unstable Afghanistan

Currently, economic and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan face significant constraints. Past Indian initiatives—such as building schools, hospitals, and roads—have been affected by insecurity, administrative corruption, and political instability. Continued international sanctions and the Taliban's lack of recognition by most countries have further hindered financial resources and international cooperation in Afghanistan (Sharma & Verma, 2021). These challenges have reduced India's capacity to support Afghanistan's economic and social reconstruction.

Preview (9 / 10) - ketabton.com

6-2 Analysis of New Opportunities

India–Afghanistan relations have undergone significant changes, especially since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. India, previously one of Afghanistan's main supporters, adopted a cautious approach and minimized relations with Kabul after the collapse of the republic. However, the recent visit of an Indian delegation led by the Deputy Foreign Minister to Kabul marks a pivotal shift in India's foreign policy. This visit could signify the beginning of a redefined relationship between India and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

6-2-1 Moving Beyond a Policy of Hesitation

After the fall of the Islamic Republic and the Taliban's rise to power, India adopted a cautious stance toward Afghanistan. While India did not completely sever diplomatic ties, it maintained a limited embassy presence in Kabul to retain situational awareness.

India feared that Afghanistan could become a safe haven for Pakistani extremists who had long fueled insurgency in Kashmir. However, analysts believe Taliban leaders have avoided actions contrary to India's security interests, thereby gradually building New Delhi's trust.

Interviewee 1: *"They have carefully adhered to their commitments to prevent anti-India terrorist activities within their territory. Therefore, the level of engagement with the Taliban has gradually improved… Afghanistan remains a focal point of instability, and it is in India's national interest to maintain a presence there."*

Shortly after a senior Indian official visited Kabul, reports emerged of the Taliban appointing a diplomat in Mumbai, indicating a mutual interest in dialogue. The Indian delegation met with senior Taliban officials and former President Hamid Karzai.

This shift suggests that India is moving from a posture of hesitation to one of cautious engagement and cooperation with the Taliban, opening discussions on resuming developmental aid, including transit projects through Chabahar Port, dam construction, and other infrastructure initiatives.

6-2-2 Economic and Infrastructure Dimensions: Transit and Dam Projects

Economic and infrastructure cooperation is a central theme in recent India–Taliban discussions. India's previous contributions, such as the "Friendship Dam" in Herat, underscore its role in Afghan infrastructure development. However, commitments to new projects—including Chabahar Port—have yet to be fully realized. Chabahar's strategic location positions it as a key transit hub to Afghanistan, and India seeks to revive developmental aid in this sector.

India previously financed and contributed to the Farah–Dilaram–Nimroz highway, enhancing Afghanistan's connectivity to Iran and Chabahar. Given Afghanistan's heightened reliance on Iranian transit due to Pakistan's obstruction, India could expedite this corridor's activation, which would serve as a litmus test of its commitment to Afghanistan.

6-2-3 Geopolitical and Security Challenges: Tensions with Pakistan

The geopolitical and security dynamics of India–Afghanistan relations are complex. A major challenge is India's concern about Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and the strengthening of Taliban–

Preview (10 / 10) - ketabton.com

Islamabad ties. Pakistan similarly views India's presence in Afghanistan as destabilizing. India's efforts to enhance its influence in Afghanistan may exacerbate tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, with potential security and political consequences.

6-2-4 Transboundary Water Issues and Potential Threats

Another important aspect of India–Afghanistan relations is the management of transboundary waters. India has previously participated in dam construction in Afghanistan, including the Friendship Dam in Herat. Given Afghanistan's strategic river systems flowing into Pakistan, India may wish to support future Afghan dam projects, although this could heighten Pakistan's concerns. Afghanistan currently has no water-sharing agreement with Pakistan, unlike its arrangement with Iran for the Helmand River, making water resource management a pressing priority for Afghanistan, especially for hydropower and irrigation.

7- Discussion

Based on previous research on India–Afghanistan relations, this study focuses on new dimensions that have not been adequately examined since the collapse of the republican government in Afghanistan. The paper investigates the emerging diplomatic opportunities in the relationship between India and Afghanistan, demonstrating that since the Taliban's return to power, these relations have transitioned from a phase of uncertainty and suspension to one of limited but purposeful engagement.

Despite not formally recognizing the Taliban regime, India continues to seek ways to maintain its influence and safeguard its interests in Afghanistan. This pragmatic approach combines humanitarian diplomacy with infrastructure, economic, and security cooperation. One of the most important aspects of this engagement is the expansion of infrastructure and transit projects, particularly the Chabahar Port Project, which plays a strategic role in facilitating India's access to Central Asia.

In addition, India—given its strong scientific and cultural capacities—has vast potential for educational and cultural exchanges with Afghanistan, which could strengthen long-term bilateral relations.

However, there are significant challenges to realizing these opportunities. Insecurity, political instability, and interference by regional actorsespecially Pakistan pose major obstacles that India must consider when designing its strategies. Moreover, issues related to water resource management and joint dam construction projects could create new sources of tension, requiring precise agreements and regional cooperation.

Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, etc Ultimately, to sustain its position in Afghanistan and achieve its strategic objectives, India needs a multilateral diplomatic approach that includes cooperation with neighboring countries and the development of shared capacities in economic, security, and cultural domains. Such an approach would not only strengthen India–Afghanistan relations but also contribute to the stability and development of the broader South Asian region.

Conclusion

The emergence of new diplomatic opportunities in India–Afghanistan relations reflects a strategic shift in India's foreign policy toward Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power. Despite not formally recognizing the Taliban regime, India is seeking to maintain its presence in Afghanistan through

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