

India's Strategic Engagement in Afghanistan and its Implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: A Geopolitical Analysis

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Abstract

Afghanistan has remained a significant geopolitical space because of its strategic location connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. India's engagement with Afghanistan expanded after 2001 through diplomatic relations, development assistance, infrastructure projects, and political cooperation. This paper examines India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan and evaluates its implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The study applies Neorealism as a theoretical framework to understand how security competition, strategic interests, and regional power balancing influence state behaviour. A qualitative historical research methodology is adopted using primary and secondary sources. The study argues that India's increasing role in Afghanistan was interpreted by Pakistan through a security competition perspective, contributing to strategic mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul. The findings indicate that Afghanistan became an important arena of regional competition where India and Pakistan attempted to protect their respective strategic interests.

Keywords: India-Afghanistan Relations; Strategic Engagement; Geopolitical Competition; Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations; South Asian Security; Neorealism; Regional Power Dynamics.

Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan share geographical proximity, historical interaction, ethnic connections, and cultural similarities. However, despite these common characteristics, relations between the two countries have remained unstable due to political disagreements, security concerns, and competing strategic interests. Afghanistan's geographical position has historically increased its importance for regional powers because it provides connectivity between South Asia and Central Asia. India has maintained diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since 1947, but its engagement expanded significantly after the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. India became one of the major contributors to Afghanistan's reconstruction process through development assistance, infrastructure projects, education programmes, and institutional cooperation. According to Paliwal (2017), India's Afghanistan policy has evolved through different phases, influenced by regional security dynamics and its relationship with Pakistan. India's engagement cannot be understood separately from the wider India-Pakistan rivalry.

The post-2001 political environment created new opportunities for India to increase its presence in Afghanistan. India established diplomatic missions, supported reconstruction initiatives, and developed political relations with the Afghan government. The original research work identifies that India increased its engagement in Afghanistan through political, economic, and diplomatic activities after the removal of the Taliban regime (Ahmad, 2011). Pakistan viewed India's growing presence in Afghanistan through a strategic security perspective. Due to historical rivalry between Pakistan and India, Islamabad considered Afghanistan a strategically important state where hostile influence could affect Pakistan's western security environment. This perception contributed to Pakistan's concerns regarding Indian consulates, development activities, and political influence in Afghanistan (Fair, 2014). Although India presents its Afghan engagement as support for

reconstruction, development, and regional stability, Pakistan perceives increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan as a strategic challenge. The presence of competing regional interests has affected Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by increasing mistrust and creating security dilemmas. Therefore, this study examines how India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan influenced the dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Objectives

1. To examine the nature, objectives, and evolution of India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan.
2. To analyze the geopolitical implications of India's presence in Afghanistan for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it examines the relationship between regional power competition and bilateral relations in South Asia. Understanding India's role in Afghanistan provides important insights into Pakistan's security concerns and Afghanistan's position within regional politics. The study contributes to international relations literature by analysing how strategic competition among neighbouring states affects diplomatic relations and regional stability.

Literature Review

Existing literature demonstrates that India's engagement in Afghanistan has been influenced by security, economic, and geopolitical considerations. Paliwal (2017) provides a detailed analysis of India's Afghanistan policy from the Soviet period to the US withdrawal. The study argues that India's Afghan policy cannot simply be explained as opposition to Pakistan but represents a broader attempt to maintain regional influence and strategic balance. Paliwal (2015) examined India's dilemma regarding the Taliban and explained that India's approach toward Afghan political groups changed according to regional circumstances. The study highlights that Indian policymakers debated whether engagement or opposition toward Taliban forces would better protect Indian interests.

Paliwal (2016) further analysed the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan relationship by focusing on Afghanistan's foreign policy choices. The study argues that Afghanistan was not merely a passive actor but attempted to manage competing relationships with Pakistan and India according to its own interests.

Fair (2014) examined Pakistan's security perceptions and argued that Pakistan's Afghan policy has been strongly influenced by concerns regarding India. According to Fair, Pakistan's strategic thinking has frequently viewed Afghanistan through the lens of competition with India.

Mullen (2016) studied India-Afghanistan relations and highlighted India's role in reconstruction, economic assistance, and diplomatic engagement. The research explains that India's soft power approach became a central feature of its Afghan policy.

Rashid (2008) analysed Afghanistan's instability and argued that external involvement contributed to prolonged conflict. The study demonstrates how competition among regional and international actors affected Afghanistan's political development.

Ahmad (2011), in the study "A Study of Pak-Afghan Relations in Indian Context (1996-2011)," examined the Indian factor in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The research identified India's presence in Afghanistan as an important factor influencing Pakistan's foreign policy calculations. The literature indicates that India's role in Afghanistan has multiple dimensions, including development cooperation, regional connectivity, and strategic competition. However, the interaction between India's Afghan policy and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations requires further analysis through a theoretical perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Neorealism, also known as Structural Realism, to analyse India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan. Neorealism argues that states operate in an international system characterised by competition and uncertainty. States attempt to increase their influence and security because no central authority guarantees their survival (Waltz, 1979). Through this framework, India's Afghan policy can be examined as an attempt to enhance regional influence, while Pakistan's response can be understood as a security reaction to perceived strategic competition. The theory explains how Afghanistan became a space where India and Pakistan attempted to maintain their strategic positions.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative historical research methodology to examine India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The qualitative approach is suitable because the study focuses on historical developments, foreign policy decisions, diplomatic interactions, and strategic perceptions. The research uses historical analytical methods to examine major phases of India-Afghanistan relations, including the Cold War period, Taliban era, post-9/11 transformation, and India's expanded engagement after 2001. The methodology follows the approach of the original research work, which used both primary and secondary sources to analyse Pak-Afghan relations in the Indian context (Ahmad, 2011). Primary sources include official statements, government documents, diplomatic communications, and policy declarations. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, research reports, newspapers, and academic publications. These sources provide different perspectives regarding India's Afghan policy and Pakistan's security concerns. The collected information is analysed through thematic analysis. Major themes include India's diplomatic engagement, economic assistance, regional connectivity interests, Pakistan's security perceptions, and the role of Afghanistan in India-Pakistan strategic competition. The study does not attempt to measure public opinion statistically; instead, it focuses on understanding foreign policy behaviour and geopolitical dynamics through historical interpretation.

Analysis

India's relationship with Afghanistan developed through diplomatic and political cooperation after independence. During the Cold War period, Afghanistan maintained relations with India while both countries were influenced by wider international politics. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan transformed regional dynamics and increased competition among external actors. After the removal of the Taliban government in 2001, India expanded its engagement with Afghanistan. India supported reconstruction activities and contributed to infrastructure development, education, health, and institutional capacity building. Ahmad (2011) notes that India's post-Taliban engagement became a significant factor in Pakistan's assessment of regional security. India's approach largely focused on soft power instruments. Rather than deploying large military forces, India concentrated on development projects and diplomatic influence. This strategy helped India improve its image among sections of Afghan society.

Primary Data Analysis

(i) India's Diplomatic Engagement and Strategic Partnership with Afghanistan

The analysis of primary data indicates that India's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan has developed from historical friendship into a structured strategic partnership based on political cooperation, economic assistance, and regional security interests. Official diplomatic documents, statements of Indian leadership, and bilateral agreements demonstrate that India has consistently

emphasized Afghanistan's sovereignty, stability, and reconstruction. However, beyond the official narrative of development cooperation, the nature of India's engagement can also be interpreted through the framework of Neorealism (Structural Realism), which argues that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival and security depend on increasing relative power and strategic influence (Waltz, 1979).

The post-2001 period represents a significant transformation in India's Afghan policy. After the removal of the Taliban regime, India expanded its diplomatic presence and established itself as one of Afghanistan's important regional partners. Primary sources reveal that India focused on rebuilding Afghan institutions, strengthening governance structures, and supporting economic recovery. The signing of the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011 formalized cooperation in areas including political relations, economic development, security cooperation, and capacity building. The agreement reflected India's long-term commitment to Afghanistan and provided an institutional framework for bilateral cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011).

From a Neorealist perspective, India's diplomatic engagement can be understood as an attempt to enhance its strategic position in South Asia. Afghanistan holds considerable geopolitical importance because of its location between South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. India's active involvement in Afghanistan allowed it to develop political influence in a strategically significant region while limiting Pakistan's traditional dominance over Afghan affairs. According to Neorealist assumptions, states seek favourable positions within the international system because uncertainty and competition encourage them to maximize security and influence (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, India's diplomatic partnership with Afghanistan represented not only bilateral cooperation but also a strategic response to regional power competition.

The primary data further indicates that India consistently promoted the concept of an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process. Indian official statements emphasized that Afghanistan's political future should be determined by Afghan institutions rather than external powers. This position allowed India to present itself as a supporter of Afghan sovereignty. However, the strategic importance attached to Afghanistan suggests that India also considered the country essential for protecting its broader regional interests. India's diplomatic engagement helped establish political goodwill among Afghan governments, particularly during the administrations of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani.

(ii) India's Development Assistance as an Instrument of Strategic Influence

Primary sources demonstrate that development assistance became one of the central pillars of India's Afghan policy. Unlike traditional security-oriented approaches, India relied heavily on economic assistance, infrastructure development, education programs, and humanitarian initiatives to strengthen its relationship with Afghanistan. Indian government reports and official statements consistently presented these initiatives as contributions toward Afghanistan's reconstruction and social development. Major Indian-supported projects included the construction of the Afghan Parliament building, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, the Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam), healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and community development projects. These initiatives enhanced India's visibility among Afghan institutions and citizens. The Strategic Partnership Agreement specifically emphasized cooperation in infrastructure development, education, technical assistance, and institutional capacity-building (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011).

From a Neorealist viewpoint, development assistance can be interpreted as a non-military mechanism through which states increase their influence. Neorealism does not restrict power only to military capabilities; political influence, economic relationships, and strategic partnerships also contribute to a state's position within the international system. India's developmental approach

enabled it to create dependency networks and strengthen its strategic presence without deploying large military forces. The primary data also indicates that India deliberately avoided presenting its Afghan engagement as a military alliance. Instead, it focused on soft power instruments, including scholarships, cultural exchanges, and technical training. This approach helped India differentiate itself from external actors that were associated with military intervention. However, the expansion of Indian influence created concerns in Pakistan, which viewed India's increasing role in Afghanistan through a security perspective.

Pakistan's official position frequently expressed concerns regarding India's activities in Afghanistan, particularly regarding Indian diplomatic facilities, development projects, and security cooperation. Although India maintained that its activities were developmental in nature, Pakistan interpreted them as part of a broader strategic competition. This reflects the Neorealist concept of the security dilemma, where defensive actions by one state may be perceived as threatening by another state (Waltz, 1979).

(iii) Regional Connectivity and Economic Interests in Afghanistan

Primary data reveals that regional connectivity was another important objective behind India's engagement in Afghanistan. Due to geographical limitations and Pakistan's control over major transit routes, India sought alternative pathways to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Official policy documents highlight India's interest in promoting regional connectivity and economic integration. The development of the Chabahar Port in Iran and its connection with Afghanistan represented India's effort to establish an alternative trade route. This initiative allowed India to bypass Pakistan and create direct access to Afghan and Central Asian markets. Through this strategy, Afghanistan became important not only as a political partner but also as a geographical bridge connecting India with wider regional economies.

From the Neorealist perspective, connectivity projects reflect competition for strategic access and influence. States attempt to secure economic and strategic advantages by developing networks that strengthen their regional position. India's connectivity initiatives therefore served both economic and geopolitical purposes. They enhanced Afghanistan's trade opportunities while simultaneously increasing India's strategic relevance in Afghan affairs.

The primary data suggests that Pakistan viewed these connectivity initiatives with concern because they reduced Pakistan's traditional leverage over Afghanistan's external economic relations. Historically, Pakistan considered Afghanistan part of its immediate strategic environment due to geographical proximity and security concerns. India's attempts to establish independent access routes challenged Pakistan's regional position and contributed to strategic competition.

(iv) India's Security Cooperation and Pakistan's Strategic Concerns

Analysis of primary sources indicates that security cooperation became a sensitive dimension of India's engagement with Afghanistan. India supported Afghan security institutions through training programs, capacity-building initiatives, and limited defence cooperation. The India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement included provisions for security cooperation, particularly regarding training and institutional development of Afghan security forces.

India justified security cooperation as necessary for strengthening Afghanistan's ability to address terrorism and instability. However, Pakistan interpreted India's security role differently. Pakistani policymakers expressed concerns that India's presence in Afghanistan could negatively affect Pakistan's security interests, particularly in relation to militancy and border security.

Through the Neorealist framework, Pakistan's response can be understood as a reaction to perceived changes in the regional balance of power. When one state increases its influence in a strategically important neighbouring country, other states may attempt to counterbalance that

influence. Therefore, Pakistan's concerns regarding India's Afghan policy reflected broader regional competition rather than only bilateral disagreement.

(v) Afghanistan as an Arena of India-Pakistan Strategic Competition

Primary data analysis demonstrates that Afghanistan became a significant arena of India-Pakistan strategic competition after 2001. Both states viewed Afghanistan as important for their national security interests, but their approaches differed significantly. India emphasized reconstruction, diplomacy, and economic cooperation, whereas Pakistan focused more strongly on security considerations and strategic depth.

The competing approaches resulted in mutual suspicion. Afghanistan's closer relations with India were often viewed by Pakistan as a challenge to its regional security position. Similarly, India's concerns regarding Pakistan's influence over Afghan political groups shaped its engagement strategy. Neorealism explains this competition by emphasizing that states seek relative advantages rather than absolute gains. Even when cooperation benefits Afghanistan, India and Pakistan evaluate these developments according to their impact on their own strategic position (Waltz, 1979). Consequently, Afghanistan became a space where broader South Asian rivalry was reflected.

(vi) Transformation of India's Afghan Policy after the Taliban Takeover (2021)

The Taliban takeover in 2021 significantly changed the strategic environment in Afghanistan. Primary sources indicate that India adopted a cautious policy focused on humanitarian assistance, diplomatic communication, and protection of its long-term interests. India evacuated diplomatic personnel during the crisis but later maintained limited engagement with Afghan authorities. This shift demonstrates strategic adaptation according to changing geopolitical realities. From a Neorealist perspective, states continuously modify their strategies according to changes in the distribution of power and security conditions. India's continued attention toward Afghanistan after 2021 reflects its recognition that Afghanistan remains strategically important despite political changes.

Overall, primary data analysis demonstrates that India's engagement in Afghanistan has combined diplomatic cooperation, development assistance, connectivity initiatives, and security interests. While India officially frames its policy around reconstruction and Afghan stability, the geopolitical realities indicate broader strategic calculations. Through Neorealism, India's Afghan policy can be understood as an effort to increase regional influence and protect strategic interests in a competitive international environment. At the same time, Pakistan's response reflects concerns regarding the regional balance of power and the perceived expansion of Indian influence. Therefore, India's strategic engagement has significantly influenced Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by contributing to changing security perceptions and regional competition.

Secondary Data Analysis

Secondary data analysis examines existing academic literature, books, journal articles, policy reports, and scholarly interpretations regarding India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Unlike primary data, which reflects official policy positions and diplomatic narratives, secondary sources provide critical perspectives regarding motivations, consequences, and regional geopolitical dynamics. This analysis applies Neorealism (Structural Realism) as the theoretical framework to understand how India's engagement in Afghanistan reflects strategic competition, power balancing, and security considerations within an anarchic international system. According to Waltz (1979), states operate under conditions of uncertainty where survival depends on maintaining relative power and

preventing strategic disadvantages. Therefore, India's Afghan policy and Pakistan's response can be interpreted as competing efforts to secure influence and maintain regional strategic positions.

(i) Historical Evolution of India-Afghanistan Relations and Strategic Engagement

The secondary literature indicates that India-Afghanistan relations have historically been shaped by political cooperation, cultural connections, and shared strategic interests. Scholars argue that India and Afghanistan maintained relatively stable relations during different historical periods, but the geopolitical importance of Afghanistan increased significantly after the Cold War due to regional power competition (D'Souza, 2007). Afghanistan's geographical location between South Asia and Central Asia made it strategically important for neighbouring states seeking political influence and security advantages.

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the emergence of the Taliban regime in the 1990s, India's engagement became limited due to security concerns and the regional environment. Academic studies suggest that India viewed the Taliban's rise with concern because of its perceived association with extremist groups and Pakistan's increasing influence in Afghan affairs (Ganguly & Fair, 2014). During this period, India supported anti-Taliban forces, particularly the Northern Alliance, reflecting its attempt to prevent hostile strategic developments in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2012).

After 2001, India significantly expanded its Afghan engagement. Secondary sources highlight that India's involvement after the US-led intervention was driven by both developmental objectives and strategic considerations. According to Pant (2010), India used reconstruction assistance as a means to establish political influence and strengthen its regional position. The post-2001 Afghan government provided India with an opportunity to rebuild diplomatic relations and develop long-term partnerships.

From a Neorealist perspective, India's increased involvement after 2001 reflected strategic behaviour in response to regional competition. Afghanistan became an important geopolitical space where India attempted to increase its influence while Pakistan sought to maintain its traditional strategic interests. Neorealism explains that states often seek favourable positions within their regions because security depends not only on internal capabilities but also on external alliances and influence (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, India's engagement was not only a development initiative but also a strategic effort to shape regional power dynamics.

(ii) India's Soft Power Strategy and Development Diplomacy in Afghanistan

A major theme identified in secondary literature is India's reliance on soft power and development diplomacy as central instruments of influence. Unlike other regional actors that focused more heavily on security involvement, India emphasized infrastructure development, education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, and institutional capacity-building. Scholars argue that India's development-oriented approach helped create a positive image among Afghan citizens and political institutions. According to Bajoria (2010), India's assistance projects contributed to strengthening its reputation as a reliable development partner rather than an external power pursuing military objectives. Projects such as the Afghan Parliament building, Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and Salma Dam became symbols of India's commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

However, academic analysis suggests that development assistance also served strategic purposes. Kugelman (2012) argues that India's economic engagement was linked with broader geopolitical objectives, including increasing political influence and gaining regional access. Through development cooperation, India created long-term institutional relationships with Afghan actors and strengthened its diplomatic presence.

Neorealism provides an important explanation for this approach. Although classical interpretations of power often focus on military capabilities, Neorealism recognizes that states can enhance their strategic position through political and economic influence. India's soft power strategy allowed it to expand its regional role without direct military confrontation. In this sense, development assistance functioned as an alternative mechanism for increasing influence in Afghanistan.

(iii) India's Strategic Objectives and Regional Connectivity Interests

Secondary literature identifies regional connectivity and access to Central Asia as important motivations behind India's Afghan policy. Afghanistan's geographical position provides potential economic and strategic links between South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. Researchers argue that India viewed Afghanistan as a gateway for expanding trade networks and accessing energy resources (Mohan, 2011).

India's involvement in projects such as the Chabahar Port in Iran was designed partly to overcome geographical limitations created by Pakistan's control over direct transit routes. According to Tellis (2017), India's connectivity initiatives represented an attempt to reduce dependence on Pakistan while increasing its economic and strategic influence in the region.

From a Neorealist perspective, connectivity projects reflect competition for strategic advantage. States attempt to secure access to resources, markets, and transportation networks because these factors contribute to national power. Therefore, India's economic initiatives in Afghanistan cannot be separated from broader regional competition.

The literature further suggests that Pakistan viewed India's connectivity efforts with suspicion because they challenged Pakistan's traditional strategic importance in Afghan affairs. Pakistan has historically considered Afghanistan critical due to geographical proximity, border security issues, and concerns about hostile external influence. Thus, India's regional connectivity strategy contributed to Pakistan's perception of strategic competition.

(iv) Pakistan's Security Perceptions and the Impact on Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

Secondary studies demonstrate that India's growing presence in Afghanistan significantly influenced Pakistan's security perceptions. Scholars argue that Pakistan has traditionally viewed Afghanistan through a security framework because of concerns regarding border disputes, militancy, and strategic vulnerability (Fair, 2014).

According to Rashid (2012), Pakistan's policymakers have historically sought a favourable government in Kabul to prevent hostile external influence and maintain security along the western border. India's expanding diplomatic and economic role challenged this strategic outlook because Islamabad perceived Afghanistan's closer relationship with New Delhi as a potential security threat. The concept of the security dilemma within Neorealism explains this situation. Actions taken by one state to enhance its security may create insecurity for another state because intentions cannot always be clearly determined (Waltz, 1979). India's engagement with Afghanistan was officially presented as developmental cooperation, but Pakistan interpreted it through the lens of regional rivalry. This perception affected Pakistan-Afghanistan relations because Afghan governments' cooperation with India sometimes generated tensions with Pakistan. Academic literature suggests that disagreements regarding Indian influence, border issues, and security concerns contributed to mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul (Ganguly & Fair, 2014).

(v) India-Pakistan Rivalry and Afghanistan as a Geopolitical Arena

Secondary literature widely identifies Afghanistan as a major arena of India-Pakistan strategic competition. Scholars argue that both states have historically attempted to influence Afghan political developments because control over regional dynamics provides strategic advantages. Dalrymple (2013) describes Afghanistan as part of a broader triangular relationship involving

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. According to this perspective, Afghan politics cannot be fully understood without considering the competing interests of neighbouring states. India sought to strengthen relations with Afghan governments, while Pakistan attempted to preserve its influence due to geographical and security considerations.

The Neorealist framework explains this competition through the concept of balance of power. When one state expands its influence, competing states may attempt to counterbalance that influence to protect their own interests (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, Pakistan's concerns regarding India's role and India's concerns regarding Pakistan's influence represent broader patterns of strategic competition. However, secondary studies also emphasize that Afghanistan was not merely a passive arena for external rivalry. Afghan governments pursued their own interests by engaging with multiple regional actors. According to Rubin (2013), Afghanistan attempted to balance relationships with neighbouring states while seeking international assistance for reconstruction and security.

(vi) Post-2021 Regional Dynamics and Changing Strategic Calculations

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 created a new geopolitical environment and altered the nature of regional competition. Secondary literature suggests that India's direct influence declined after the collapse of the previous Afghan government; however, India continued engagement through humanitarian assistance and diplomatic communication (Zahid, 2022).

Pakistan initially expected that the Taliban's return would improve its strategic position, but subsequent disagreements over security issues, border management, and militant activities created new challenges in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations (International Crisis Group, 2022). This demonstrates that Afghanistan's political developments are shaped not only by India-Pakistan competition but also by internal Afghan dynamics. From a Neorealist perspective, post-2021 developments demonstrate how states continuously adjust their strategies according to changes in the regional balance of power. India adopted a cautious approach to preserve its interests, while Pakistan attempted to manage emerging security challenges. Other regional actors, including China and Iran, also increased their engagement, creating a more complex geopolitical environment.

Conclusion

India's Afghan policy has been connected with economic and regional connectivity interests. Afghanistan provides access toward Central Asia and offers opportunities for trade and energy cooperation. India's interest in regional connectivity projects reflects its broader objective of expanding economic and political influence. Pakistan interpreted these developments through a security dilemma framework. From Pakistan's perspective, increased Indian influence in Afghanistan could create strategic pressure on its western border. Neorealism explains this behaviour because states often interpret the actions of competitors as potential threats. Afghanistan became connected with broader India-Pakistan competition. Pakistan traditionally considered Afghanistan strategically important because of geographical proximity and security concerns. India's increasing presence after 2001 therefore influenced Pakistan's Afghan policy. The security dilemma emerged because actions considered defensive by one state were interpreted as threatening by another. India's development projects and diplomatic expansion were viewed by Pakistan as attempts to reduce its regional influence, while India considered its policies as legitimate engagement with Afghanistan. India's role also affected Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Pakistan expressed concerns regarding India's diplomatic presence and political influence in Afghanistan. These concerns contributed to mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul. However, Afghanistan also maintained its own foreign policy objectives. The findings support the argument of Neorealism that regional competition influences state behaviour. India sought influence in

Afghanistan to protect its strategic interests, while Pakistan responded according to its perception of security threats. Afghanistan became a location where both states attempted to maintain strategic advantages. The analysis demonstrates that India's Afghan engagement was not only a bilateral issue between India and Afghanistan but also influenced the wider regional balance of power. The interaction between Indian objectives, Pakistani security concerns, and Afghan political interests shaped the complexity of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Study results concluded that India's strategic engagement in Afghanistan has significantly influenced the geopolitical environment of South Asia. India's diplomatic, economic, and development activities strengthened its relationship with Afghanistan but also generated concerns in Pakistan. The study demonstrates that Afghanistan became an important area of strategic competition between India and Pakistan. Using Neorealism, the research explains that states pursue influence to protect their security interests. India's engagement and Pakistan's response reflect the dynamics of regional competition. Sustainable stability requires reducing strategic rivalry and promoting cooperative approaches among regional states.

Recommendations

1. India and Pakistan should avoid treating Afghanistan as an arena of strategic competition.
2. Afghanistan should maintain balanced relations with all regional countries.
3. Regional connectivity and economic cooperation should be prioritised over geopolitical rivalry.
4. Diplomatic mechanisms should be strengthened to address security concerns among neighbouring states.

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