

India's Taliban Dilemma: Navigating Strategic and Normative Commitments (2021–2026)

Pranay Kumar Shome¹ and Dr. Prerana Bhaduli²

¹PhD scholar in Political Science, Department of Political Science, Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar, India.

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i10.005 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i10.005>

Received: 10 August 2026 / Accepted: 19 September 2026 / Published: 10 October 2026

ABSTRACT

The Taliban group's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 generated significant problems for India. Any form of relationship with the group entailed important strategic, political, and normative costs. The ensuing conditions sharpened the policy contradictions for New Delhi in dealing with a regime whose ideological orientation and conduct remained antithetical to India's secular values, making unbridled engagement a matter of considerable controversy. India's pressing security, diplomatic, and social capital needs, however, made complete shunning of the group well nigh impossible. Against this backdrop, this article examines India's relationship with Taliban group during its second stint in power over a five-year period (2021–2026) through the theoretical perspectives of Kautilyan realism and ethical realism. While Kautilyan realism explains India's strategic adaptation, particularly in relation to security, political influence, and strategic flexibility, Ethical realism provides an account of the moral constraints and political responsibilities associated with such engagement. The paper further argues that India's post-2021 approach reflects the pursuit of a balanced statecraft where strategic engagement, humanitarian assistance, and security considerations have been combined with continued moral reservations regarding the Taliban's conduct. The approach, however, does not resolve the tension between strategic interests and normative commitments; rather, it seeks to manage it under conditions of constraint.

Keywords: Kautilyan Realism, Ethical realism, Afghanistan, Proximate Justice, Political Responsibility, Taliban, India.

1. Introduction

The necessities of statecraft frequently compel responsible state actors to consider engagement with regimes whose ideology, conduct, and interests may appear irreconcilable with the values, constitutional principles, and security concerns of those states. Such engagement, nevertheless, seeks to protect national interests, maintain regional stability, and preserve external security. At the heart of this politics of engagement with problematic regimes lies the idea of interest. Hans J. Morgenthau argued that politics must be understood through the realities of political life and that political action cannot be separated from the circumstances within which states operate. The conduct of states must therefore be governed by interests rooted in political reality rather than by abstract universal principles (Morgenthau & Thompson, 1948, pp. 3-17).

In this regard, state actors rarely operate under conditions that appear completely favourable to their national interests. Instead, they are faced with situations where every choice they make ends up imposing costs—strategic, economic, political, and moral. This is precisely the situation that India found itself in following the return of the Taliban regime to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 (Saran, 2021). The collapse of the Afghan democratic regime and the Taliban's capture of power transformed the strategic environment in which India had operated for two decades. New Delhi's extensive engagement with Afghanistan, which had been built around a democratic political order, had now disappeared. Left with few options, it became essential for India to create a new approach toward a group with which it had historically maintained an adversarial relationship and which maintained a close relationship with Islamabad and Pakistani military elites.

The problem confronting India, therefore, can be understood as a conflict between two necessities. The first was the strategic necessity of maintaining communication with the authority that had emerged as the unquestionable ruler of Afghanistan. The second was the ethical necessity of maintaining principled distance from such a regime whose conduct conflicted with important Indian constitutional and moral commitments. Neither consideration could simply be discarded without generating severe consequences.

It is in this situation that this article seeks to examine India's relationship with the Taliban group during its second term in power through the dual perspectives of Kautilyan realism and Ethical realism. Kautilyan realism examines the strategic logic of India's engagement. His focus on the interest of the state, security, and strategic flexibility in response to changing configurations of power offers an essential basis for understanding why India decided to maintain contact with the group despite its reservations. Ethical realism, on the other, is articulated through the ideas of two key Western philosophers, thereby providing a complementary lens for examining and

understanding the moral limitations of political action that confront states when competing obligations act as roadblocks.

The two perspectives are not employed as competing explanations. Instead, they highlight different dimensions of India's policy: Kautilyan realism explains the strategic necessity of engagement, while Ethical realism explains the moral and political dilemmas accompanying that engagement. The combination is particularly useful because India's policy toward Taliban group in its second term in power cannot be adequately understood either as a straightforward pursuit of national interest or as a purely normative foreign policy exercise.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Kautilyan Realism and the Imperatives of Statecraft

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* represents one of the most important traditions of political thought emerging from ancient India. His conception of statecraft provides several concepts that remain highly relevant for understanding behavior of states.

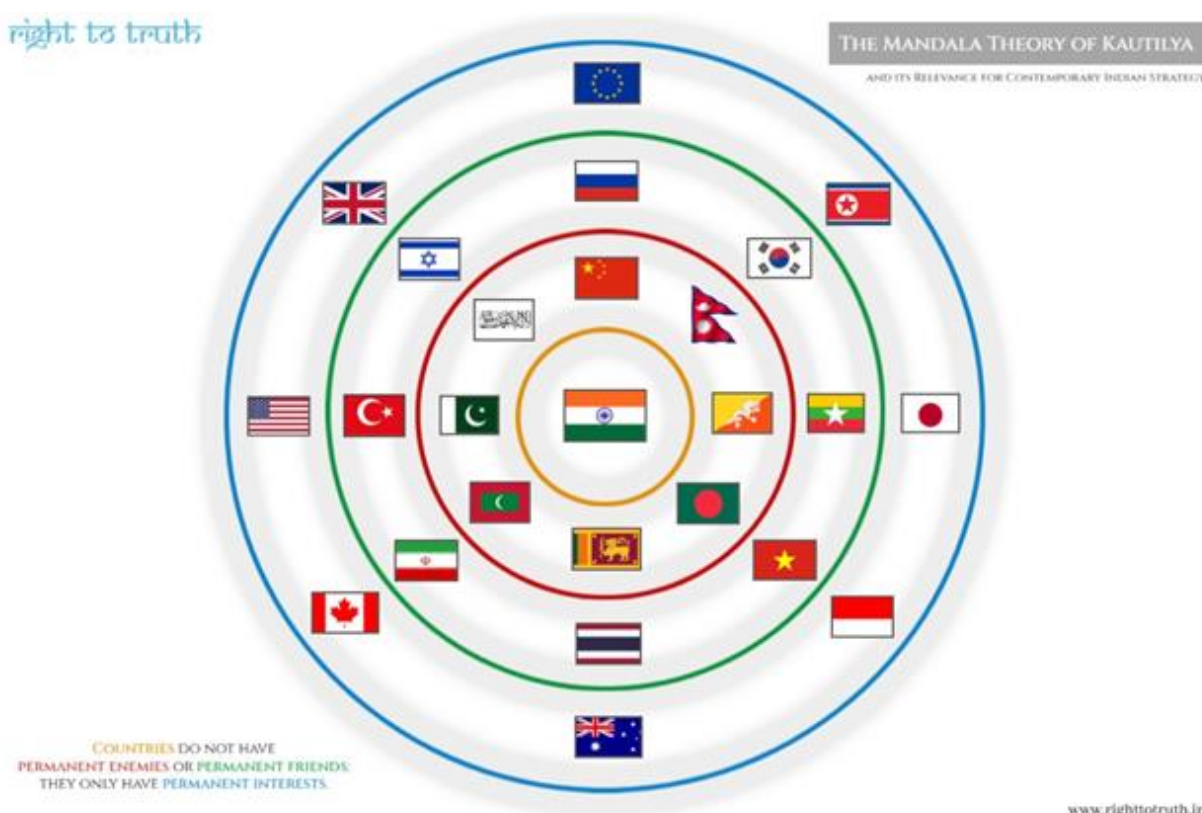
The central concern of Kautilyan statecraft is the preservation and advancement of the state's interests. Political authority is required to protect the national community from internal and external threats and to employ available instruments in accordance with changing circumstances. This emphasis on changing circumstances is particularly evident in the *Mandala* theory (Bhattacharya, 2024). The political environment can be understood as a configuration of inter-state relationships where actors may simultaneously represent sources of threat, opportunity, and partnership. The nature of these relationships is not permanently fixed; it is continuously influenced by contingencies, capabilities, and changing interests (Kautilya, 2026).

Within the *Mandala*, states apply the *Shadgunya Niti* (six methods of foreign policy) for strategic manoeuvring. Peace (*Sandhi*), war (*Vigraha*), neutrality (*Asana*), marching (*Yana*), seeking protection (*Samsraya*), and dual policy (*Dvaidhibhava*) are the distinct components of the policy employed based on the precise circumstances confronting the state (Shome, 2025). The objective is not to remain permanently fixed on a single course, but to select the action most suitable at the moment towards the preservation of national power. Complementing the *Shadgunya Niti* is the four *Upayas*—conciliation (*Sama*), inducement (*Dana*), division (*Bheda*), and force (*Danda*)—thereby articulating the dynamic character of Kautilyan statecraft (Soni, 2025).

Once the Taliban established effective control over Kabul, New Delhi had to adapt to a political reality that was disadvantageous to its national interests. The Kautilyan perspective demonstrates that functional contact is not equal to a normative endorsement of the Taliban's political order. Engagement represents an effort to preserve strategic interests under changed circumstances.

Maintaining communication allows New Delhi to monitor developments, communicate security concerns, protect investments, and retain a degree of political influence. Complete disengagement, by contrast, risked surrendering India's political space in Kabul entirely to regional rivals like Pakistan and China.

Figure 1: Kautilya's Mandala Theory (Circle of States)



Source: Right to Truth

2.2 Ethical realism and the Limits of Political Action

Strategic necessity alone cannot provide a complete account of India's policy posture toward Afghanistan's new rulers. While it explains why India engages the Taliban, it cannot adequately provide an explanation for the ethical reservations that continue to accompany such engagement. Ethical realism, therefore, provides the suitable framework for understanding this normative dimension.

One of the most prominent thinkers of this tradition was Reinhold Niebuhr, who attempted to reconcile the realities of political power with moral responsibility. He believed that collective

political life is governed by the self-interest of groups. Within that context, communities, unlike individuals, are unable to operate altruistically because political authorities are obligated to protect their own interests (Niebuhr, 1932).

In this regard, his differentiation between the "children of light" and the "children of darkness" highlights this tension. The children of darkness understand political power but lack moral restraint; in contrast, the children of light recognize moral ideals but underestimate the cynical realities of collective political life (Niebuhr, 2011). Responsible statecraft, therefore, requires neither an unrestrained pursuit of power nor a purely idealistic disregard for political realities. It demands prudence—evaluating the concrete circumstances in which choices are made and the consequences that follow. Political action often involves choices where no available option can result in the full satisfaction of every moral obligation.

Within this framework, the concept of proximate justice serves as a crucial benchmark. Political actors may not possess the capacity to establish a perfectly just political order, but they can pursue limited improvements in security, order, and human welfare that are attainable. Another thinker, Paul Ramsey, reinforced this framework through his idea of political responsibility (Ramsey, 1961). He argues that states have responsibilities to their political communities that require them to judge choices by its consequences rather than merely by intentions. Such choices are often inherently tragic: protecting national security may necessitate engagement with a morally objectionable regime; yet distancing oneself entirely may undermine the state's capacity to protect its citizens or mitigate regional threats (Ramsey & Hauerwas, 2007).

Ethical realism, hence, accepts that political action occurs under conditions of imperfection and competing obligations. Combining Kautilyan realism with ethical realism bridges the gap between statecraft's operational necessities and the ethical burdens associated with it.

3. India and Taliban 2.0: From Cautious Contact to Calibrated Engagement

For two decades, India's engagement with Afghanistan was built around a democratic political order with which New Delhi had developed extensive diplomatic, developmental, and strategic relations. The collapse of that order forced New Delhi to determine how to protect its interests in an environment dominated by an entity and its benefactors with which it historically maintained adversarial relationships. India initially adopted a cautious posture, evacuating diplomatic personnel and suspending its physical presence in Kabul. Complete disengagement, however, was unsustainable (Cherian, 2021). Afghanistan's geographical position, New Delhi's substantial developmental stakes, and external security considerations, particularly Afghan territory being used by terror organizations as a launchpad for targeting India made total jettisoning of the group very costly.

The establishment of an Indian technical mission in Kabul in June 2022 marked the first transition to a conditional functional engagement. This step enabled India to maintain direct communication with the new authorities in Kabul without extending them formal recognition. India's technical presence facilitated dialogue on security concerns, while humanitarian assistance preserved New Delhi's connection with broader Afghan society (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022). By late 2025, this posture had evolved into more structured diplomatic interaction. On 10 October 2025, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar held detailed discussions in New Delhi with the Taliban's Acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, marking the first formal ministerial-level engagement between the two sides since 2021 (Maheshwari, 2025). Discussions encompassed bilateral relations, regional security, development assistance, trade, connectivity, and health infrastructure.

Simultaneously, India announced the upgradation of its technical mission in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy, signaling a qualitative shift from its earlier posture (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Viewed through a Kautilyan lens, this recalibration reflects practical statecraft. Unable to restore the previous Afghan Republic, strategic flexibility required New Delhi to interface directly with the authority exercising effective territorial control.

This strategic accommodation, however, does not remove the underlying moral tension. Higher degrees of interaction risk signaling tacit approval of the regime's domestic governance. Ethical realism highlights that while prudence demands recognizing political realities, political necessity should not be conflated with moral endorsement. India's evolving stance reflects an ongoing effort to maintain necessary functional channels while avoiding complete political alignment.

4. Humanitarian Assistance as Moral Statecraft

Humanitarian assistance has remained a constant pillar of India's pre as well as post-2021 Afghan policy. Following the Taliban takeover, India continued delivering wheat, medical supplies, vaccines, and winter assistance to Afghanistan (ANI, 2023). While serving an urgent humanitarian purpose, these deliveries also preserved goodwill among the Afghan people despite the collapse of the previous government.

The distinction between the Afghan people and the ruling Taliban regime has been central to Indian diplomacy. India's historical goodwill in the country was built through infrastructure, education, healthcare, and human resource development across Afghan society, rather than strictly through political and security elites. Providing aid after 2021 provided a sense of continuity in the midst of political disruption. The October 2025 ministerial meetings further expanded this footprint. India announced new development projects in public health, municipal infrastructure, capacity-building programs, disaster relief assistance for earthquake-affected

regions, and educational scholarships for Afghan students (Ghosh, 2026). This humanitarian posture highlights the convergence of strategic and moral considerations. From an ethical realist perspective, delivering aid represents an exercise in proximate justice—alleviating immediate human suffering under non-ideal political constraints. Concurrently, it retains India's positive social capital and diplomatic footprint within the country.

Nonetheless, a central dilemma persists. Delivering aid requires operational coordination with the Taliban authorities, allowing the regime to gain indirect political legitimacy or misappropriate resources. Withholding assistance, conversely, would inflict hardship on vulnerable civilians and erode decades of Afghan goodwill. This dilemma represents a classic tragic choice in statecraft, where every available path carries distinct liabilities.

5. Security and India's Recalibration

Beyond humanitarian concerns, security imperatives remain a driving force behind India's Afghan policy. Preventing Afghan territory from being utilized by hostile militant groups has been a top national security objective for New Delhi since the 1990s (Patel, 2021). Engaging Kabul provides diplomatic channels to articulate these security concerns.

Security coordination gained renewed momentum in 2025. Following the Pahalgam terrorist attack in April 2025, Taliban representatives publicly condemned the attack, leading to formal security dialogue with Indian officials (Parashar, 2025). As a logical follow up, the October 2025 Joint Statement explicitly highlighted counter-terrorism cooperation, underscoring Kabul's commitment that Afghan soil would not be used to threaten neighbouring states, particularly India.

This engagement must also be evaluated against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Kabul and Islamabad. The historic strategic alignment between Pakistan and the Taliban has increasingly given way to intense cross-border conflagrations. By 2026, frequent border clashes and Pakistani military strikes inside Afghanistan signalled a severe rift between the two (Shahzad, 2026). Islamabad accuses Kabul of hosting anti-Pakistan militants—a charge the Taliban consistently denies. Renewed military confrontations in September 2026 further underscored this rupture (Ahmed & Castillo, 2026).

From a Kautilyan perspective, this recalibration reflects *Dvaidhibhava* (dual policy) and strategic adaptation. As regional alignments shift, maintaining active channels with Kabul prevents Pakistan from establishing “strategic depth” along India's northwestern periphery. However, Ethical realism cautions against allowing realpolitik calculations to fully dictate policy. Security concerns explain the necessity of functional contact, but treating strategic interest as an absolute justification risks erasing normative boundaries altogether. Responsible statecraft must remain

mindful of both the strategic consequences of disengagement and the ethical costs of uncritical accommodation.

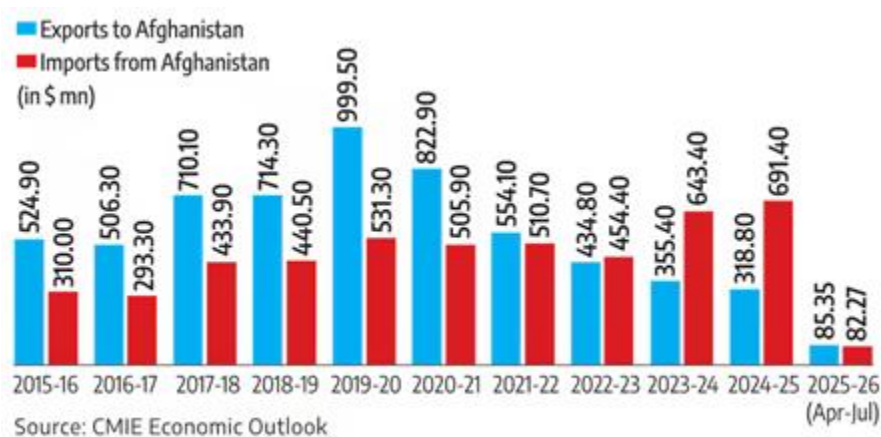
6. Economic Engagement and the Expansion of Strategic Space

Since late 2025, India-Taliban relations have broadened into economic and trade domains. In November 2025, Afghanistan's Minister of Industry and Commerce, Nooruddin Azizi, led a trade delegation to India to negotiate commercial ties, market access, and transit infrastructure. Both sides agreed to reactivate the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor across the Kabul-Delhi and Kabul-Amritsar routes, re-establish the Joint Working Group on Trade, Commerce and Investment, and explore mining sector opportunities (The Hindu, 2025).

Economic cooperation provides India with additional leverage and strategic space in Central and South Asia. Operating the Air Freight Corridor allows direct commercial exchange while bypassing land routes controlled by Pakistan. In Kautilyan thought, *Artha* (material well-being and economic power) is central to power projection. Economic instruments complement diplomatic and security measures in securing state interests. However, deepening commercial ties creates structural dependencies that tend to complicate the issue of moral distance. As economic integration grows, maintaining a distinction between functional cooperation and political approval becomes increasingly difficult.

Here, Ethical realism emphasizes the necessity of moral awareness. Prudence does not require abandoning trade, but it demands that political leaders remain fully cognizant of how economic ties reinforce the governing authority's domestic legitimacy.

Figure 2: India-Afghanistan trade (2015-2025)



Source: CMIE Economic Outlook

7. Human Rights and the Limits of Accommodation

The most acute normative challenge facing India's Afghan policy is the Taliban's severe repression of women, girls, and political dissenters. Systematic restrictions on female education, employment, mobility, and public life have drawn severe international condemnation (Ochab, 2023). These practices conflict directly with India's constitutional values and its global emphasis on promoting inclusive governance and human rights.

As diplomatic and economic contacts have deepened, this normative friction has become more visible. Interestingly, the October 2025 Joint Statement focused primarily on trade, security, connectivity, and development, while internal governance issues were visibly sidelined. Rather than indicating an abandonment of values, this shift is reflective of the tragic choice facing Indian foreign policy—maximizing strategic access requires functional cooperation; demanding compliance with human rights norms, however, generates the risk of diplomatic alienation and loss of regional influence. Ethical realism provides the vocabulary for this dilemma: political choices under constraint rarely offer ideal solutions. It insists on the fact that strategic flexibility must not descend into unprincipled accommodation. Prudence requires making necessary choices while being aware of the moral trade-offs involved.

8. Conclusion

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 fundamentally altered South Asian geopolitics, forcing India to re-evaluate a foreign policy built around a collapsed political order. India's trajectory—from initial diplomatic withdrawal to technical representation, ministerial dialogue, the upgrading of its technical mission to embassy status, and economic cooperation is demonstrative of significant strategic adaptation and improvisation. This evolution is explained by Kautilyan realism. Faced with changing power dynamics, New Delhi exercised strategic flexibility to safeguard national security, protect investments, and maintain regional influence.

In addition to this, ethical realism highlights the enduring moral dilemmas of this posture. By emphasizing prudence, proximate justice, and political responsibility, ethical realism demonstrates that statecraft cannot be reduced either to moral absolutism or to uncritical realpolitik. It requires navigating imperfect choices while remaining conscious of the moral liabilities. India's policy towards the Taliban demonstrates that engagement and endorsement remain distinct. New Delhi interacts with the Taliban as the effective governing authority in Kabul while retaining significant reservations regarding its internal governance, theological makeup and external posturing. Ultimately, India's Afghan policy represents neither a complete triumph of realpolitik over values nor a rigid adherence to normative principles. It stands as a

continuous exercise in prudential statecraft—managing the inescapable tension between strategic necessity and moral commitment under conditions of severe structural constraint.

References

1. Ahmed, M., & Castillo, E. E. (2026, October). *Pakistan's army says Afghan Taliban governor hosted militants plotting attacks*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/10/01/pakistan-officials-militant-groups-meet-afghanistan/78d3e762-bdbd-11f1-81fc-9b76f8343b6c_story.html
2. ANI. (2023, August 20). *India supplied 47,500 MT of wheat to Afghanistan since Taliban's takeover*. Business Standard. Bsinidia. https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/india-supplied-47-500-mt-of-wheat-to-afghanistan-since-taliban-s-takeover-123082000014_1.html
3. Bhattacharya, S. (2024, January 6). *Mandala Theory and South Asia*. The Geostrata. <https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/mandala-theory-and-south-asia>
4. Cherian, J. (2021, August 22). *Afghanistan's neighbours react cautiously to Taliban takeover*. Frontline. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/afghanistans-neighbours-react-cautiously-to-taliban-takeover/article36036101.ece>
5. Ganaie, R. A., & Ganaie, M. A. (2022). India's Afghanistan policy: A quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01489-7>
6. Ghosh, A. (2026). *India's aid boost to taliban-ruled Afghanistan and the evolving delhi-kabul engagement*. Icwa.In. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=14213&lid=8638
7. Kautilya. (2026). *The arthashastra* (L. Rangarajan, Trans.). Penguin Random House India Private Limited.
8. Maheshwari, S. (2025, October 13). *Muttaqi in Delhi: Is India inching towards recognition of Afghanistan's Taliban government?* The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/muttaqi-delhi-india-afghanistan-taliban-jaishankar-10303977/>
9. Ministry of External Affairs. (2025, October 21). *Upgradation of the Technical Mission of India in Kabul to Embassy of India*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press->

releases?dtl/40223/Upgradation_of_the_Technical_Mission_of_India_in_Kabul_to_Embassy_of_India

10. Morgenthau, H. J., & Thompson, K. W. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
11. Niebuhr, R. (1932). *Moral man and immoral society: A study in ethics and politics*. Kessinger Legacy Reprints.
12. Niebuhr, R. (2011). *The children of light and the children of darkness*. University of Chicago Press.
13. Ochab, E. U. (2023, August 14). *The legacy of the Taliban: Poverty, human rights violations and gender apartheid*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2023/08/14/the-legacy-of-the-taliban-poverty-human-rights-violations-and-gender-apartheid/>
14. Parashar, S. (2025, April 29). *India briefs Taliban; Afghanistan govt condemns Pahalgam attack*. The Times Of India. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-briefs-taliban-afghanistan-govt-condemns-pahalgam-attack/articleshow/120709288.cms>
15. Patel, M. (2021, July 22). *Who are the taliban – part I: From hardliners to moderates, is there a generational shift?* The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/who-are-the-taliban-part-i-from-hardliners-to-moderates-is-there-a-generational-shift-7416339/>
16. Ramsey, P. (1961). *War and the Christian conscience*. Durham, N.C.: Published for the Lilly Endowment Research Program in Christianity and Politics by Duke University Press.
17. Ramsey, P., & Hauerwas, S. M. (2007). *The just war: Force and political responsibility*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
18. 15. Saran, S. (2021, September 27). *The return of the Taliban heightens India's security concerns | Toda Peace Institute*. Toda Peace Institute. <https://toda.org/global-outlooks/the-return-of-the-taliban-heightens-indias-security-concerns/>
19. Shahzad, A. (2026, September 25). *Explainer: What has turned the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan from partners to foes?* Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-has-turned-afghan-taliban-pakistan-partners-foes-2026-09-25/>

20. Shome, P. (2025, December 25). *A kautilyan moment in Indian foreign policy*. Raksha-Anirveda.Com. <https://raksha-anirveda.com/a-kautilyan-moment-in-indian-foreign-policy/>
21. Soni, N. (2025, January 17). *Sam, Dana, Dand, bheda: Theories of conflict resolution*. The Geostrata. <https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/sam-dana-dand-bheda-theories-of-conflict-resolution>
22. The Hindu. (2025, November 19). *Afghan Commerce Minister Azizi leads business delegation to India*. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/afghan-commerce-minister-azizi-leads-business-delegation-to-india/article70299911.ece>