

<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n3.31>

The ISI–Taliban Nexus: A Structural Challenge for India’s Security

Rashi Tiwari

PhD Research Scholar,
Department of Defence and Strategic Studies,
SPM PG College, University of Allahabad.

Dr. Raghvendra Pratap Singh

Assistant Professor,
Department of Defence and Strategic Studies,
SPM PG College, University of Allahabad.

Abstract

The nexus between Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Taliban has been a defining feature of Afghanistan’s political and security landscape for over three decades. Initially cultivated during the Taliban’s rise in the 1990s, this relationship provided Pakistan with strategic leverage in Afghanistan while simultaneously constraining India’s role in the region. For India, the ISI–Taliban connection translated into heightened security risks, ranging from cross-border terrorism to diplomatic isolation. Although the Taliban’s second regime since 2021 has attempted to signal greater autonomy and cautiously engage with New Delhi, the structural imprint of Pakistan’s influence remains evident through entrenched militant networks, ideological alignments, and Pakistan’s enduring reliance on proxy actors. This paper examines the historical roots, operational dimensions, and evolving dynamics of the ISI–Taliban nexus, and argues that despite changing political contexts, it continues to pose a long-term structural challenge for India’s national security.

Keywords: ISI-Taliban Nexus, Structural Challenge, Strategic Depth Doctrine, India’s National Security, Cross-border Terrorism

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

Introduction

Afghanistan's turbulent history has often been shaped by external interventions and proxy rivalries, with its instability reverberating across South Asia. Among the most enduring of these dynamics is the relationship between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Taliban which continues to shape the regional security environment.

The relationship between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Taliban represents one of the most enduring dynamics in South Asia's security environment. From the Taliban's emergence in the 1990s, the ISI played a decisive role in facilitating its rise by providing military training, logistical assistance, and strategic guidance. For Pakistan, the Taliban offered a means to advance its long-standing "strategic depth" policy, ensuring influence in Afghanistan while limiting India's presence. This partnership not only reshaped Afghanistan's internal power balance but also produced direct consequences for India, including the intensification of cross-border militancy and New Delhi's diplomatic marginalization during the Taliban's first regime.

Although the Taliban today attempts to project greater autonomy in foreign policy and has cautiously engaged with India, the legacy of ISI patronage continues to shape regional realities. The nexus functions less as a temporary alliance and more as a structural challenge—rooted in geography, ideology, and Pakistan's reliance on proxy actors to secure its strategic objectives. For India, this enduring connection underscores the difficulty of building a stable partnership with Afghanistan, as militant networks and intelligence linkages cultivated over decades cannot be dismantled quickly. Recognizing this dynamic is essential to understanding why the ISI–Taliban relationship remains central to India's security calculus.

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has complicated this equation further. On one hand, the movement has resisted Pakistan on contentious issues such as the Durand Line and Islamabad's demands to act against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). On the other, it still benefits from networks, sanctuaries, and militant linkages that were historically cultivated under ISI supervision. This duality highlights why the ISI–Taliban nexus cannot be dismissed as a relic of the 1990s but remains relevant to India's contemporary security concerns.

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s was deeply shaped by its pursuit of "strategic depth"—a military doctrine aimed at securing Afghanistan as a rear base in the event of conflict with India. This strategy, aggressively pursued by Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment, particularly the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), envisioned a friendly and compliant regime in Kabul that would deny India any influence in the region. By extending support to the Taliban, Pakistan not only sought to secure its western frontier but also aimed to limit India's diplomatic and strategic reach in South Asia.¹

¹ Tellis, A. J. (2021). *Pakistan's Strategic Depth and the Taliban: A Dangerous Calculus*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, has played a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of the Taliban in Afghanistan. This relationship dates back to the early 1990s when the ISI identified the Taliban as a viable proxy force to secure Pakistan's strategic depth against India and to stabilize Afghanistan under a pro-Islamabad regime². Pakistan's security establishment perceived the Taliban not only as a tool to counter India's influence in Kabul but also as a force capable of bringing order to the chaotic post-Soviet Afghan landscape. This paper traces the historical evolution, operational dynamics, and strategic consequences of the ISI–Taliban nexus, arguing that despite shifting contexts, it continues to represent a structural challenge to India's national security.

Origins of the ISI–Taliban Nexus

The roots of the ISI–Taliban relationship can be traced back to the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, when Pakistan's intelligence agency worked closely with the United States and Saudi Arabia to channel weapons, funds, and training to Afghan mujahideen fighting the Soviet Union. This collaboration not only enhanced the ISI's operational capacity but also created a militant infrastructure of training camps and ideological networks that survived long after the Soviet withdrawal. These institutions became the breeding ground for Taliban fighters in the following decade³

This period created extensive militant infrastructures—ranging from training camps to madrassas—that later provided the foundation for the Taliban movement. For Pakistan's security establishment, Afghanistan was not merely a neighbor but a potential rear base in the event of conflict with India. The idea of strategic depth thus meant ensuring that Kabul was ruled by a regime sympathetic to Islamabad, one that would deny India influence west of the Durand Line.

In addition to military infrastructure, Pakistan's Deobandi madrassas, particularly those in Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), played a pivotal role in shaping the Taliban's ideology and cadre base. Many early Taliban leaders were educated in these seminaries, where they received both religious indoctrination and exposure to militant networks. The ISI recognized the Taliban's potential as an ideologically reliable and strategically useful proxy, capable of aligning with Pakistan's regional objectives⁴

Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan during the 1990s was fundamentally shaped by its pursuit of “strategic depth,” a military doctrine designed to secure Afghanistan as a fallback zone

² Paliwal, A. (2017). *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal*. Oxford University Press.

³ Rashid, A. (2000). *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.

⁴ Haqqani, H. (2005). *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*. Carnegie Endowment.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

in the event of a conflict with India. This policy, advanced by Pakistan's military establishment and executed through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), sought to install a compliant regime in Kabul that would prevent any meaningful Indian presence west of the Durand Line. By backing the Taliban, Islamabad aimed not only to stabilize its western frontier but also to curtail New Delhi's diplomatic and strategic influence in South Asia. For India, this doctrine posed serious challenges, restricting its ability to participate in Afghan affairs while heightening fears of encirclement and cross-border militancy. Indian security officials grew increasingly alarmed at the possibility that Afghanistan could become a sanctuary for anti-India militant groups, further aggravating the volatile situation in Kashmir. In response, India adopted a cautious posture, extending limited support to the Northern Alliance while its broader ambitions in Afghanistan were constrained by Pakistan's aggressive maneuvering.

Following the collapse of the Soviet-backed Najibullah government in 1992 and the ensuing civil war among various mujahideen factions, Pakistan grew increasingly anxious about instability along its western frontier. When the Taliban emerged in 1994, promising law and order rooted in Islamic governance, the ISI began offering them covert military and logistical support⁵. This included training camps in Pakistan, arms transfers, funding, and access to cross-border sanctuaries. Pakistani madrassas, particularly those affiliated with the Deobandi school of thought, became ideological and manpower pipelines for the Taliban's rank and file.⁶

Over time, the ISI-Taliban relationship evolved into a symbiotic strategic alliance. Even after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the ISI continued to provide shelter and guidance to Taliban leaders through what came to be known as the "Quetta Shura" — a Taliban command council based in Pakistan's Balochistan province⁴. This persistent support contributed to the Taliban's resurgence in the mid-2000s, culminating in their eventual return to power in 2021. Despite official denials, scholars and intelligence reports have consistently highlighted the depth and continuity of ISI's involvement with the Taliban as a core element of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.⁷

The enduring relationship between the ISI and the Taliban underscores the depth of Pakistan's strategic calculus in Afghanistan. While framed as a means to secure regional stability

⁵ Tellis, A. J. (2021). *Pakistan and the Taliban: Defense, Deterrence, and Denial*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁶ Riedel, ssB. (2008). *The Search for al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*. Brookings Institution Press.

⁷ Jones, S. G. (2014). *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. W. W. Norton & Company.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

and safeguard national interests, this nexus contributed significantly to Afghanistan's prolonged instability by enabling the Taliban's consolidation of power and undermining international peace efforts. For India, this alignment between Pakistan and the Taliban translated into a constrained diplomatic posture, rising security threats, and shrinking influence in its immediate strategic periphery. The ISI–Taliban connection, therefore, was not merely a tactical arrangement—it became a long-term geopolitical challenge that shaped the trajectory of Indo-Afghan relations well into the 21st century.

When the Taliban emerged in the early 1990s, the ISI quickly identified them as a reliable proxy to fulfill these objectives. Drawing largely from Pakistan-based Deobandi madrassas, the Taliban offered both ideological alignment and military discipline. With ISI assistance in the form of arms, funding, and logistical support, the group consolidated its base in Kandahar and expanded rapidly toward Kabul. By 1996, the Taliban had established themselves as Afghanistan's ruling authority, with ISI backing ensuring their battlefield victories and political legitimacy. This alignment not only secured Pakistan's western frontier but also allowed Islamabad to entrench its influence in Afghan affairs at a critical juncture.

without a meaningful presence in Kabul, compelled to shut down its embassy and evacuate all The capture of Kabul by the Taliban in September 1996 marked a turning point in India's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. For the first time since Indian independence, New Delhi found itself wplomatic personnel. This withdrawal signified not just a physical retreat but also a profound diplomatic rupture. Unlike previous regimes, the Taliban did not offer any viable channel for formal dialogue, largely due to its ideological hostility toward India and its close strategic alignment with Pakistan. As the Taliban regime consolidated power and received official recognition from only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, India was effectively shut out of the political architecture in Afghanistan.⁸

This period of isolation was compounded by India's broader geostrategic limitations. The Taliban's control over Afghanistan coincided with the deepening of Pakistan's influence through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which had cultivated the group as a proxy force. This not only restricted India's access but also emboldened anti-India terror groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which reportedly received ideological and logistical support within Taliban-held territories⁹. With no diplomatic foothold in Kabul and limited ground-level intelligence, India was left to rely on backchannel links with the Northern Alliance, a fragile coalition of anti-Taliban forces operating from Afghanistan's northeast.

⁸ Paliwal, A. (2017). *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal*. Oxford University Press.

⁹ Riedel, B. (2008). *The Search for al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*. Brookings Institution Press

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

For India, the emergence of the Taliban under ISI patronage was viewed with growing concern. Although New Delhi adopted a restrained posture in the 1990s, Indian policymakers were aware that Pakistan was using the Taliban to construct a friendly regime in Kabul that would restrict India's presence in Afghanistan. The security implications were immediate: cross-border militancy intensified, and India found itself diplomatically sidelined during the Taliban's first rule. These early developments underscored the structural nature of the ISI-Taliban nexus, which from its very inception was designed to advance Pakistan's regional strategy at the expense of India's interests.

Operational Dimensions of the Nexus

Following the collapse of the Soviet-backed Najibullah government in 1992 and the ensuing civil war among various mujahideen factions, Pakistan grew increasingly anxious about instability along its western frontier. When the Taliban emerged in 1994, promising law and order rooted in Islamic governance, the ISI began offering them covert military and logistical support¹⁰. This included training camps in Pakistan, arms transfers, funding, and access to cross-border sanctuaries. Pakistani madrassas, particularly those affiliated with the Deobandi school of thought, became ideological and manpower pipelines for the Taliban's rank and file.¹¹

A pivotal component of this operational nexus is the **Haqqani Network**, a Sunni Islamist militant organization founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, who emerged as a top Afghan warlord and insurgent commander during the anti-Soviet war¹². He was a member of the Hezb-e Islami faction led by renowned mujahedin commander Younis Khalis. Jalaluddin later allied with the Afghan Taliban as that group's Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs when the Taliban held power in Afghanistan during the mid-to-late 1990s.¹³

The Haqqani Network has historically served as a critical intermediary between the ISI and the Taliban, facilitating a range of military and logistical operations. This includes the establishment of training camps, the coordination of cross-border insurgent activities, and the

¹⁰ Tellis, A. J. (2021). *Pakistan and the Taliban: Defense, Deterrence, and Denial*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹¹ Riedel, ssB. (2008). *The Search for al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*. Brookings Institution Press.

¹² Wikipedia contributors. (2021, November 18). *Haqqani network*. Wikipedia. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haqqani_network

¹³ War on the Rocks. (2021, November 8). *The Haqqani Network: Afghanistan's new power players*. Retrieved from <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-haqqani-network-afghanistans-new-power-players/>

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

execution of high-profile attacks.¹⁴ The network's strategic importance is underscored by its semi-autonomous status within the broader Taliban structure, allowing it to operate with a degree of independence while aligning with the Taliban's overarching objectives.

Even in the era of Taliban 2.0, the Haqqani Network continues to exert significant influence. Members of the network have been appointed to key positions within the Taliban's new government, including the Ministry of Interior, underscoring their ongoing role in shaping Afghanistan's security apparatus.¹⁵ This integration highlights the enduring operational and strategic partnership between the Haqqani Network and the Taliban, facilitated by the ISI's support.

Even after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the Haqqani Network remains deeply embedded within the new regime. Key members occupy influential positions within ministries responsible for security and internal administration, enabling them to shape both policy and enforcement mechanisms across Afghanistan.¹⁶ This integration ensures that the network's operational expertise directly informs governance strategies, illustrating a unique blend of militant operational capacity and political influence that reinforces the Taliban's control.

The enduring collaboration between the ISI, the Taliban, and the Haqqani Network represents a multi-layered strategic partnership that has evolved over decades. This triadic relationship allows the ISI to exert influence over Afghanistan indirectly, leveraging the operational and tactical capabilities of the Haqqani Network while maintaining plausible deniability. At the same time, the Taliban benefits from the network's operational sophistication, which enhances its ability to project power across Afghanistan and respond to internal and external threats effectively.¹⁷

The nexus also exemplifies the intersection of state and non-state actors in sustaining insurgent campaigns and governance structures in fragile states. By combining the intelligence, logistical support, and strategic planning of the ISI with the operational autonomy and local knowledge of the Haqqani Network, the Taliban has been able to maintain continuity and resilience in its military and political operations. This arrangement has allowed the Taliban to consolidate power, secure key territories, and neutralize challenges from both domestic opposition and international actors.¹⁸

¹⁴ War on the Rocks. (2021, November 8). *The Haqqani Network: Afghanistan's new power players*. Retrieved from <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-haqqani-network-afghanistans-new-power-players/>

¹⁵ War on the Rocks. (2021, November 8). *The Haqqani Network: Afghanistan's new power players*. Retrieved from <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-haqqani-network-afghanistans-new-power-players/>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

Finally, the operational and strategic integration of the ISI, Taliban, and Haqqani Network continues to shape the broader security environment in South Asia. The network's actions have implications not only for Afghanistan's internal stability but also for regional security dynamics, particularly concerning Pakistan's strategic ambitions and India's security concerns. The enduring nexus demonstrates how sustained collaboration between intelligence agencies and militant networks can create a persistent, adaptable, and resilient system capable of influencing both warfare and governance, with long-term consequences for regional peace and stability.¹⁹

The entrenchment of the Haqqani Network within the Taliban–ISI nexus has had direct consequences not only for Afghanistan's internal dynamics but also for regional actors, particularly India. From the early 2000s, India sought to project soft power in Afghanistan by investing in infrastructure, education, and health, thereby emerging as one of the largest regional donors to post-Taliban reconstruction. Yet this presence became a consistent target of Haqqani operations, carried out with what many intelligence assessments described as covert ISI facilitation.²⁰ The most visible demonstrations of this hostility were the high-profile attacks on Indian diplomatic missions. In July 2008, a suicide bombing outside the Indian Embassy in Kabul killed over fifty people, including senior Indian officials, and was widely attributed to the Haqqani Network.²¹ A similar attack followed in 2009, while consulates in Jalalabad, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif were also besieged in subsequent years.²² These incidents underscored a calculated strategy: to undermine India's diplomatic footprint and deter its developmental engagement in Afghanistan. Beyond the immediate human and material costs, the attacks forced New Delhi to recalibrate its posture, strengthening security at missions and limiting the scale of its personnel deployment.

The psychological effect of these operations was equally profound. By striking symbols of India's civilian and diplomatic presence rather than purely military assets, the Haqqani Network conveyed a message that no foreign actor could operate in Afghanistan without tacit acceptance from Pakistan's security establishment.²³ This reinforced the logic of Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, wherein the denial of Indian influence in Kabul was seen as essential to preventing strategic encirclement. The ISI, in cultivating the Haqqanis as instruments of calibrated coercion, thus sought to impose clear boundaries on the scope of India's involvement in Afghanistan.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Pant, H. V., & Bommakanti, K. (2019). India's Afghan dilemma: Assessing the role of the Haqqani Network. *Strategic Analysis*, 43(6), 521–534.

²¹ Gall, C. (2008, July 8). Suicide bombing at Indian embassy in Kabul kills dozens. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/08/world/asia/08afghan.html>

²² Fair, C. C. (2014). Pakistan's strategic culture and implications for India. *India Review*, 13(1), 73–95.

²³ Riedel, B. (2011). *Deadly embrace: Pakistan, America, and the future of the global jihad*. Brookings Institution Press.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

The enduring influence of the nexus has also constrained India's options in the post-2021 context. With the Taliban back in power and Haqqani leaders occupying key government positions, India faces the dilemma of engaging with a regime in which the very actors responsible for orchestrating attacks on its personnel now wield formal state authority.²⁴ Sirajuddin Haqqani's position as Interior Minister places Indian diplomacy in an especially precarious position: while humanitarian aid and limited contacts have continued, the political cost of deeper engagement with a Haqqani-dominated regime remains a significant obstacle.

In this way, the Haqqani Network exemplifies how the ISI–Taliban partnership has been operationalized not only in terms of battlefield effectiveness but also as an instrument of **regional power projection**. By systematically targeting Indian influence, the nexus reshaped the balance of external involvement in Afghanistan, privileging Pakistan's interests while denying India a secure foothold.²⁵ The result has been a narrowing of India's strategic options, leaving its Afghan policy vulnerable to the enduring dynamics of the ISI–Haqqani–Taliban relationship.

In conclusion, the operational entrenchment of the Haqqani Network within the ISI–Taliban nexus illustrates how insurgent groups can transcend their militant origins to become decisive actors in both governance and regional geopolitics. By combining tactical violence with political integration, the Haqqanis have not only secured the Taliban's internal dominance but also extended Pakistan's strategic leverage in Afghanistan. For India, their role has been particularly consequential, transforming Afghanistan into an arena of asymmetric contestation rather than cooperative engagement. This enduring triadic relationship underscores the paradox of contemporary Afghan politics: while it has enabled the Taliban's consolidation of power, it has simultaneously perpetuated insecurity, hindered international legitimacy, and entrenched regional rivalries. The nexus thus remains both the guarantor of Taliban resilience and a structural barrier to lasting peace and stability in South Asia.

Regional Security Consequences for India— Past and Present

India bore the brunt of the ISI–Taliban nexus from the very beginning of the Taliban's rise to power. After the fall of Kabul in 1996, New Delhi was forced to close its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan, leaving the Northern Alliance as its only channel of engagement.²⁶ This period represented India's diplomatic isolation from Afghanistan, as Pakistan entrenched itself as the Taliban regime's principal external patron. The absence of formal ties with Kabul curtailed India's regional ambitions and raised fears that Afghanistan would serve as a sanctuary for anti-India

²⁴ International Crisis Group. (2022). *Taliban governance: The Haqqani Network's influence*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org>

²⁵ United Nations Security Council. (2022). *Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban and associated individuals and entities*. UN Doc. S/2022/419.

²⁶ Paliwal, A. (2017). *My enemy's enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the US withdrawal*. Oxford University Press.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

groups.²⁷ The closure of diplomatic avenues symbolized not only the loss of influence but also a significant narrowing of India's regional options at a time when Pakistan was actively consolidating its role as Afghanistan's gatekeeper.

The consequences were particularly visible in the intensification of militancy in Kashmir. Training camps in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan provided sanctuary to groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), both of which maintained close ties with Pakistan's intelligence establishment.²⁸ The 1999 hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814, which culminated in Kandahar under Taliban protection, highlighted the direct threats emanating from the nexus.²⁹ For Indian policymakers, this incident was not merely an act of terrorism but a symbol of how the ISI–Taliban alignment could operate in tandem to undermine Indian security.³⁰ Combined with a rise in cross-border infiltration in Kashmir during the late 1990s, these developments reinforced the perception in New Delhi that Pakistan was using Afghanistan as a western front in its proxy conflict with India.

The post-2001 period did little to fundamentally change this reality. Even as Pakistan declared itself a partner in the U.S.-led “war on terror,” the ISI quietly sheltered Taliban leaders in Quetta and Peshawar, enabling the movement to regroup and sustain a resilient insurgency against NATO forces.³¹ U.S. intelligence reports and academic studies repeatedly confirmed that Pakistan's “double game” allowed Taliban leaders to operate from Pakistani soil with relative impunity, strengthening their capacity to wage war in Afghanistan.³² For India, this was particularly alarming, since the same networks that facilitated the Taliban's resurgence were also linked to anti-India groups. Although New Delhi cautiously re-engaged with Afghanistan after 2001 through reconstruction aid, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic outreach, the shadow of ISI patronage over the Taliban limited the scope of India's influence.³³ Thus, despite an apparent geopolitical shift after 9/11, the operational logic of the ISI–Taliban nexus remained largely intact.

²⁷ Pant, H. V. (2009). India in Afghanistan: A test case for a rising power. *Contemporary South Asia*, 17(3), 315–331.

²⁸ Fair, C. C. (2014). *Fighting to the end: The Pakistan Army's way of war*. Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Rashid, A. (2000). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.

³⁰ Rubin, B. R. (2002). *The fragmentation of Afghanistan: State formation and collapse in the international system*. Yale University Press.

³¹ Tellis, A. J. (2021). *Pakistan and the Afghanistan conflict*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

³² Coll, S. (2004). *Ghost wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden*. Penguin.

³³ Paliwal, A. (2017). *My enemy's enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the US withdrawal*. Oxford University Press.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 introduced a new phase of uncertainty. On one hand, the movement has clashed with Pakistan over issues such as the Durand Line and Islamabad's demands to curb the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), raising hopes in India that Taliban–Pakistan ties may be weakening.³⁴ On the other hand, Pakistan's influence endures through powerful factions such as the Haqqani Network, which maintains long-standing ties with the ISI and occupies key positions in the Taliban's interim government.³⁵ For India, these contradictions present both risks and limited opportunities: while Taliban–Pakistan tensions may create diplomatic openings, the persistence of ISI-linked networks continues to pose direct threats to Indian security interests, particularly in Kashmir and in the safety of Indian assets inside Afghanistan.³⁶

taken together, these developments demonstrate why the ISI–Taliban relationship constitutes more than a tactical alignment; it is a structural challenge for India's security. In political science, a structural challenge refers to a problem that is deeply embedded in the institutions, geography, and strategic behavior of states, making it resistant to short-term shifts in policy.³⁷ The ISI–Taliban nexus fits this description precisely: it is rooted in Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, sustained by decades of intelligence and militant linkages, and reinforced by Afghanistan's geographic role as Pakistan's buffer against India. Even when Taliban–Pakistan ties come under strain, the networks created under ISI patronage continue to shape the security environment in ways that constrain India's strategic options.³⁸ This enduring pattern underscores that the challenge is not episodic but structural—persistent across regimes, wars, and diplomatic cycles. For India, recognizing the structural nature of the ISI–Taliban nexus is critical to crafting a long-term security strategy.

Conclusion

The trajectory of the ISI–Taliban nexus underscores that Pakistan's role in Afghanistan has not been episodic but deeply entrenched. From the Taliban's emergence in the mid-1990s, when Pakistan's intelligence services provided critical support to their consolidation of power, to the post-2001 insurgency sustained through cross-border sanctuaries, the nexus has repeatedly

³⁴ Tellis, A. J. (2021). *Pakistan and the Afghanistan conflict*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

³⁵ Fair, C. C. (2014). *Fighting to the end: The Pakistan Army's way of war*. Oxford University Press.

³⁶ Pant, H. V. (2009). India in Afghanistan: A test case for a rising power. *Contemporary South Asia*, 17(3), 315–331.

³⁷ Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.

³⁸ Paliwal, A. (2017). *My enemy's enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the US withdrawal*. Oxford University Press.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

undermined India's strategic interests.³⁹ India's diplomatic isolation in the late 1990s, the intensification of militancy in Kashmir, and incidents such as the IC-814 hijacking all reveal the extent to which this alignment directly compromised Indian security.⁴⁰ Even after 9/11, when the Taliban's fortunes fluctuated, Pakistan's covert patronage allowed the group to survive, proving that the nexus was not dependent on international recognition but on the structural role Pakistan had carved for itself in Afghanistan.⁴¹

This persistence highlights why the ISI–Taliban relationship is best understood as a structural challenge for India. In international relations, structural challenges refer to enduring problems embedded in geography, state strategies, and ideological linkages, which cannot be resolved through temporary diplomatic maneuvers.⁴² For India, this means that even shifts in Taliban policy or strains in Taliban–Pakistan relations do not fundamentally alter the security environment shaped by decades of ISI patronage.⁴³ The durability of militant networks, the ideological affinities fostered through Pakistan's madrassa system, and the strategic logic of Pakistan's "depth" doctrine ensure that the nexus continues to constrain New Delhi's options in Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Recognizing this structural dimension is crucial if India is to move beyond reactive measures and develop a long-term approach that addresses both the regional power balance and the ideological ecosystems that sustain militancy.

³⁹ Paliwal, A. (2017). *My enemy's enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion to the US withdrawal*. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁰ Rashid, A. (2000). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.

⁴¹ Tellis, A. J. (2021). *Pakistan and the Afghanistan conflict*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁴² Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.

⁴³ Fair, C. C. (2014). *Fighting to the end: The Pakistan Army's way of war*. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Pant, H. V. (2009). India in Afghanistan: A test case for a rising power. *Contemporary South Asia*, 17(3), 315–331.