

THE EURASIAN TRIPLE IN AFGHANISTAN:

Implications of an India-Iran-Russia Troika

in a post-2021 Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to analyse the implications of a proposed regional bloc in Eurasia, between India, Iran and Russia – hereby referred to as the ‘Troika’ – in the context of the strategic stabilisation of Afghanistan’s political climate in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, stemming from the US retreat in August 2021. Afghanistan, thus, becomes a vital arena for regional powers to pose as legitimate alternatives of power, in a highly polarised political world. With the strengthening of infrastructure projects and trade aspirations between the three countries, there is higher potential for protecting regional security, keeping check on narcotics and weapons proliferation, and curbing cross-border terrorism. Through the methods of literature and policy reviews, in-person interviews, and surveys, we have argued that the Troika, in a future world, can become a safety net for the members in the bidirectional context of conducting domestic and global affairs. For India, this forum serves as a means of checks and balances in the context of three actors – Pakistan, China and the US; for Iran, it is fundamental for smoother economic cooperation in the wake of mass-protests against stagnating economic policy decisions, and Russia has sought to visualise aspirations in Asia beyond the Central Asian Republics. Finally, for Afghanistan, the Troika offers a medium of enhancing inclusivity and stability in internal socio-economic, political and security affairs in a post-democratic regime.

Key words: Afghanistan post-2021, Regional Power Transition, Strategic Autonomy, The Eurasian Triple, Regional Security Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical stratosphere of the Eurasian arena – née the globe at large – has been undergoing a significant number of alterations since the 2021 NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. This marked the end of an era which was defined with two decades of military presence of Western nations, shifting the centre of regional decision-making from Washington to key regional players. The transformation saw acceleration when Moscow removed the

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Taliban from its official terrorist designation list in 2025³, green lighting the scope for a

broader regional realignment toward pragmatic engagement with Kabul.

Nations that once viewed the Taliban solely through a security lens are now compelled to interact with the regime as the de facto authority, reflecting the nature of global political shifts. Simultaneously, the renewal of dormant tensions along the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan highlights the delicate nature of the current order of affairs⁴, underscoring the relevance and time-sensitive urgency for regional actors – including India, Iran and Russia – to prevent Afghanistan from sliding once again into intensive instability.

In this continuously evolving context, a trilateral alignment emerging out of practicality often has been gaining momentum. Described as a regional “Troika” between India, Russia, and Iran, each country has approached Afghanistan with differentiated but converging aspects, which is what binds their interests, which contrast their outlook upon the Taliban in the pre-takeover world. Moscow perceives a stable Afghanistan as indisputable to protecting and securing the core and boundaries of the Central Asian Republics and subsequently preventing the spread of extremist ideology and practices as well as narcotics trafficking toward its southern periphery. As a neighbour of Afghanistan sharing a magnificently long border, Iran prioritises border security as its paramount incentive, followed by the efficient and effective management of shared resources between them such as the Helmand River, and the further preserving of its long-standing role as a regional transit gateway linking South Asia with West Asia. Meanwhile, Indian outlook towards Afghanistan is donned with a critically intensive link in aspirations for the application of its wider connectivity strategy to detour geopolitical constraints imposed by Pakistan and maintain access to the markets and energy resources of Central Asia through initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor⁵(INSTC).

The emerging alignment is a reflection of a broadly ideated pursuit of strategic autonomy and consolidation of regional powers in Eurasian context in a rapidly shifting multipolar order. Instead of strict adherence with Western-dominated frameworks or that of the expanding influence of China’s China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, India, Russia and Iran are reshaping Afghanistan’s prospective decades through a prism of regional mechanisms that prioritise connectivity, security, and diplomatic engagement simultaneously. In this vision, Afghanistan is not a battleground for great powers to exploit for national interests, rather, a potential land bridge linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, as the core of heightened tensions. Despite their shared interest in a stable Afghanistan, the long-term goals of these three nations, be it counterterrorism, border management or energy access and economic integration,

³ Kabulov Z, 'Statement on the Delisting of the Taliban from the National Registry of Terrorist Organizations' TASS News Agency (Moscow, 17 April 2025)

⁴ The Hindu Bureau, Afghanistan- Pakistan “Open War”: Iran, Russia, China call for Dialogue, Offer Mediation Amidst Conflict, The Hindu (Chennai, 27 February, 2026)
[tps://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghanistan-pakistan-conflict-open-war](https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghanistan-pakistan-conflict-open-war)> accessed 1st March, 2026

⁵ High-level Iran-Russia Talks Set North–South Corridor on Path to Operation' Tehran Times (Tehran, 16 December 2025)

there is rarity in perfectly corresponding alignment. This paper therefore seeks to examine the role played by this trilateral partnership in the context of Kabul’s evolving political and

economic climate in the midst of the decade, as well as the upcoming years. We also have sought to analyse its economic, security and diplomatic dimensions to determine whether this cooperation can produce lasting regional stability or remains a temporary convergence of strategic convenience.

METHODOLOGY

This study has attempted to employ a qualitative single-case study research design in order to examine the lobby of emerging diplomatic arrangement between India, Russia, and Iran—referred to in this paper as the Troika. The unit of analysis that has been adopted for this purpose is the trilateral cooperation mechanism between these three countries as a unified entity of diplomacy and strategy. The intention behind the same is that the operations designated as paramount in the evolving geopolitical climate of Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific in a wider picture. A qualitative approach has been selected instead of its alternatives since contemporary geopolitical developments are given shape primarily by state intentions, long-stranding national interests, diplomatic signaling, and strategic calculations, which cannot be sufficiently captured through quantitative indicators by themselves. Moscow's policy shifts toward the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the 2026 tensions along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border are indicators that illustrate how curated narratives, official documentations, and strategic messaging reveal more about state behaviour than statistical data can do in the context of research that is aimed at a direction as the one adopted

The study is guided by a theoretical framework which has combined Neorealism and Strategic Autonomy. From the perspective of the former, states cooperate primarily to advance their security and economic interests within an anarchic international system. Thus, the arrangement of cooperation between India, Russia, and Iran can be rightfully interpreted as a pragmatic alignment. It has been driven by a series of shared concerns regarding regional stability, pursuit of interest, trade connectivity and counterterrorism mechanism rather than ideological convergence. This can be understood from face value of the unorthodox lobby which has been conceived in a crucial political turmoil. Keeping the same in mind, the concept of strategic autonomy is applied especially to India's foreign policy behaviour—conducted while being guided supremely by national policy—that has been adopted as of late. Strategic autonomy helps in explaining how India maintains cooperative pragmatic relations with Russia and Iran while simultaneously engaging in partnerships with Western powers, showcasing commendable development in the conduct of foreign policy affairs. These frameworks as a unified front provide a prismatic lens through which the Troika's policies can be interpreted as interest-based coordination, rather than formal alliance building⁶.

⁶ Taneja K, 'Afghan Common Ground in India -Russia Relations' (Observer Research Foundation, 24 September 2025)

To engage in and enhance empirical validity, we have employed the research of a triangulation method for data collection. This has combined three primary categories of sources. First and foremost, a primary source analysis has been conducted through official diplomatic communications such as press releases and policy statements issued by the ministries of foreign

and external affairs of India, Russia, and Iran. This has been enhanced by the addition of joint communiqués from trilateral meetings and other relevant United Nations Security Council statements on Afghanistan and regional security of South and Central Asia.

The secondary sources that have been put to use include reports and policy briefs from established think tanks and research institutions, including the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in India, the Russian International Affairs Council in Russia, and the Stimson Centre in the United States. These sources provide carefully formulated interpretations and analytical context that are supplementary to the aforementioned primary diplomatic documents.

Thirdly, media monitoring has been used in order to capture the rapidly evolving and modifying developments through reputable international news outlets— while keeping in mind the significance of using diverse news agencies as required in the context of the three primary stakeholders— including Tehran Times, TASS, and The Hindu. This take on the research methodology enables the study to integrate real-time developments and maintain analytical and research relevance in a fast-paced geopolitical environment of the contemporary world.

Moreover, the research has engaged with comparative policy mapping, analogises and contrasts the regional policies proposed and circulated in India, Russia, and Iran before the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan with their policy propositions in current context. This comparison helps to identify key policy pivot points. In turn, this showcase the transformations of regional security concerns, trade initiatives, and geopolitical competition which have shaped the evolution of the trilateral cooperation.

Irrespective of efforts to ensure methodological robustness, the study also acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the paramount aspects of security cooperation, particularly in terms of intelligence sharing among India, Russia, and Iran related to extremist organisations such as Islamic State – Khorasan Province, remain classified, and out of reach for public research. As a consequence, the analysis relies primarily on publicly available diplomatic and analytical sources, which can censor the full picture. Second, the geopolitical climate in and around Afghanistan remains highly volatile and flammable, especially in relation to boundary tensions involving regional actors and bordering neighbours. Because the research captures developments up to early 2026, interpretations and conclusions are bound to keep evolving as new diplomatic initiatives or security developments emerge and transform the role played by stakeholders and their counterparts. As researchers, recognising these limitations helps in

Taneja K, 'Afghan Common Ground in India -Russia Relations' (Observer Research Foundation, 24 September 2025)

maintaining transparency and accountability, while ensuring that the study remains grounded in primarily verifiable and credible sources.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in 2021 reshaped its geopolitical landscape

dramatically and quickly, that neighbouring powers have had no choice but to adjust to. This vacuum that has been created is historically filled by either rival powers or friendly successor states.⁷ Afghanistan thus becomes a pivot state in a shifting Asian order, testing the ability of non-Western actors to stabilise it. Iran, India, and Russia share core interests in preventing this security vacuum.⁸ They favour Afghanistan to be stable, without export of terrorism to hostile regimes on their borders.⁹ For Moscow and Tehran, this is a continuation of a decades-long struggle against Islamist militancy; for instance, the 1990s were defined by the threat of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) spilling into the Russian “near abroad” via Afghan sanctuaries.¹⁰

The 2021 withdrawal was accompanied by a critical caveat: the absence of a reliable successor to the US. This fact is supremely important as it forms the backbone of the cooperation between these three countries. Iran, India and Russia advocate for an “Afghan Solution by Asians for Asia”. This is currently being done via the Moscow Format and can further be strengthened under the proposed Troika framework. Historically, the relationship between India and Russia regarding Afghanistan was characterised by intelligence-sharing mechanisms designed to counter common security challenges, particularly during the initial rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. As the Taliban re-emerged in 2021, it made a revival of these ties necessary. This factor of modernisation in India-Russia relations led to the status of a “Privileged Strategic Partnership”. As of the time of drafting, New Delhi maintains de facto functional engagement with Afghanistan, having hosted its acting Foreign Minister. This suggests that New Delhi would like to explore these ties without formally recognising them.¹¹

Russian foreign policy has long championed a multipolar international order, as it viewed the US military presence in Eurasia as a “distracting factor” that acted as an impediment in bilateral cooperation between Moscow and New Delhi.¹² The removal of this factor has allowed both nations to reconcile their interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Previously, India and Russia pursued divergent interests in Central Asia (it was understood that Russia was protective of its sphere of interest). However, the current environment has enabled a synergy that allows

⁷ Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, ‘Iran’s Continuing Interests in Afghanistan’ (2014) 37 *The Washington Quarterly* 139 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926214>>. accessed 2 March, 2026

⁸ Charles E Ziegler, ‘Filling the Void Left by Great-Power Retrenchment: Russia, Central Asia, and the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan’ *Central Asia*.

⁹ Kutty (n 1).

¹⁰ Mohammad Taghi Jahanbakhsh and Parisa Shah Mohammadi, ‘Iran’s Perspective on the Evolving’. ¹¹ Raj Sharma, “‘Afghanistan Factor’ in India –Russia Relationship’ (2023) 79 *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* <<https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284231203325>>.

¹² Ivan Safranchuk and Alexandre Knyazev, ‘Russia -India Cooperation on Post-American Afghanistan’ (2023) 16 *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 235 <<https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-235-250>>.

for more effective collaboration – the shared threat of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has made the need for a stable buffer state crucial. This realignment is further solidified by their shared interest in a stable Afghan State that does not act as a breeding ground for ‘transnational terrorism’. Additionally, Russia became the first major power to formally recognise the Taliban regime on 3 July 2025.

When we discuss Iran as a part of this Troika, we acknowledge that it is Afghanistan’s most

important (but largely understudied) neighbour. In the years since the September 2001 attacks, it is often forgotten that Iran was an early supporter of the Invasion of Afghanistan. Tehran had long been wary of the Taliban and the raft of Sunni Islamist extremists it had aided and abetted. It played an extremely constructive role during the Bonn Process, which produced Afghanistan's constitution, including the emphasis upon democracy and support for the military invasion, Operation Enduring Freedom. The two states share a 921 km border with western Afghanistan. Although they have not fought a war in the last two centuries, and territorial disputes over Afghanistan's western provinces of Herat, Nimroz, and Helmand were settled in 1872, they have had issue-based rivalries over conflicting economic interests, shared river waters (Helmand River water-sharing treaty of 1973), and treatment of ethnic and sectarian minorities in Afghanistan. Approximately one-fifth of Afghanistan's population is Shia – a focal point for contemporary Iran, which views itself as the guardian of the Shia. During the 1980s, Iran's Afghan policy was centred on the creation of an "ideological sphere of influence" by organising and revitalising Afghan Shias. For Afghanistan, its neighbour is almost directly responsible for the Troika. Iran has the logistics and resources to offer transit as well as border security, two factors that the Troika can benefit from.¹³

WHAT IS IN IT FOR THE MEMBERS?

Each of the three members of the Troika have clearly defined motivations. These combine immediate security concerns with long-term geoeconomic aspirations. The following passages analyse what factors make the Troika framework worthwhile for India, Iran and finally, Russia.

India's Strategic Autonomy and the policy of 'Cautious Engagement'

Historically, Indian sentiments towards Afghanistan has been that of a gateway to Soviet controlled Central Asia, as well as that of a key player in conducting relations with Pakistan. Sociopolitical stability in the country also ensured that terrorist activities and narcotic proliferation do not trickle into India, especially in the heightened state of Kashmir. The conditions of the contemporary Islamic Emirate indicate that Afghanistan has become a delicate matter for India to handle within a strategic space dedicated to the scenario of US withdrawal. India's 'soft power' approach in post-9/11 Afghanistan became null and void overnight in the face of the overthrow of the civilian-led Ashraf Ghani government. For New Delhi, it has been a long-standing policy of disengagement and disapproval of extremist Islamist militancy, which insulated Indian aspirations in the resurrection of the Taliban state.

¹³ Kutty (n 1).

As the biggest investor in Afghanistan post-9/11 with over \$3 billion, India had found herself in a disadvantage once again in finding a stronghold in the development of Afghanistan.

However, India's approach has significantly varied from the last term that the Taliban had held. Although India has not formally recognised the Taliban government as the legitimate one, India continues to streamline its projects with and in Afghanistan. As of recent dialogues held between the External Affairs ministries of both the countries in New Delhi in October 2025, India pronounced its aim of engagement in the development cooperation projects in healthcare,

infrastructure and capacity-building. The inauguration of the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor has been another milestone, with objectives of connecting and enhancing direct bilateral trade and commerce. The ‘soft power’ initiative that India had adopted, has continued into the Taliban regime although with certain due constraints. India perhaps perceives the highlighted relevance of its projects as an extension of humanitarian aid, rather than as direct conduct of inter-state affairs with a militant group. Moreover, as Indian ambition to emerge as a key global player beyond regional politics in South Asia augments, Afghanistan serves as the ideal arena to showcase its capabilities as a leader and problem-solver, citing geographical proximity, and historical and cultural ties.

For New Delhi, emphasising Afghan sovereignty and development – with respect to roads, dams, schools – is seen as a means to security. India’s approach to the post-2021 Afghanistan can be viewed as a strategy described as “pragmatic recalibration”. Having invested nearly \$3 Billion in infrastructure, education as well as humanitarian aid (between 2001 and 2021), India was faced with the prospect of total marginalisation following the takeover. Thus, we saw the application of “cautious engagement”, by the reopening of a technical mission in Kabul in June 2022 to oversee aid delivery. This mission focused on “people-centric” assistance. By including the provision of 50,000 tons of wheat and essential medicines, India reinforced its historical ties with the Afghan people.¹⁴

By 2025, Indian engagement of Afghanistan had matured into a strategy that attempts to balance humanitarian perspectives with active security guarantees. The October 2025 visit of Taliban’s Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi marked the first high-level political contact since the takeover. In these discussions, India emphasised the importance of an inclusive government and the prevention of terrorist activities on Afghan soil.¹⁵ This has displayed New Delhi’s policy of “engagement sans recognition” in a new light. By maintaining its democratic credentials and strategic autonomy, India has managed to protect its interests from both the West and its Eurasian partners. Today, India sees connectivity to this region in the form of “network security”. New Delhi sees the Chabahar Port and the INSTC as key for access to

¹⁴ ‘Foreign Policy Watch: India -Afghanistan - Civildaily’ <<https://www.civildaily.com/story/foreign-policy-watch-india-afghanistan/>> accessed 5 March 2026.

¹⁵ ‘India Participates in the Fourth Meeting of the Moscow Format Consultations’ (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*) <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35900/India_participates_in_the_fourth_Meeting_of_the_Moscow_Format_Consultations> accessed 23 February 2026.

Afghanistan. The foreign policy here is extending towards security, economic and political objectives.¹⁶

Iran’s Economic Necessity and the Importance of Border Security

In Afghanistan, Iran finds a critical neighbour, whose stability is inextricably linked to its own domestic security, as well as economic survival. Afghanistan currently ranks as Iran’s fourth largest export destination, with trade in non-oil commodities reaching \$1.6 billion in early 2025. A key point to note here is that Tehran has aligned with Washington on certain stability

goals with respect to Afghanistan – namely, no Taliban Sanctuary, anti-drug efforts. However, its engagement with the Taliban is subtly driven by the need to counter the “maximum pressure” campaign from the US. The onset of the US-Israel-Iran War of March 2026 is an example of a novel strategy of ‘coercive diplomacy’ employed by the US. The assassination of former Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei represents another significant challenge to Iran’s regional aspirations. After this strategic decapitation of its head of state, Iran will look for stability in its home region as a non-negotiable. Afghanistan matters here. Iran supports repatriation, reflecting its stake in counter-narcotics and border security. It is also paying “special attention” to [Afghan] Shiites, for it perceives their welfare as its responsibility. This too has its own challenges.¹⁷

The Iran-Afghanistan Relationship has ebbed and flowed. The water-sharing dispute of the Helmand (Hirmand) River is a point of contention. Successive Afghan governments have severely restricted water flow into Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan province. This has resulted in devastating droughts and local unrest. The Helmand Treaty of 1972 did little to bring stability. On another note, the security threat posed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) has forced an uncommon convergence between Iran and Afghanistan, as both have come to view the group as a “common enemy”.¹⁸ To manage these risks, Iran has invested \$3 billion in a 300-kilometer concrete wall along the border, aiming to curb narcotics trafficking and the influx of undocumented refugees.¹⁹

Russia’s Post-Soviet Aspirations for Regional Hegemony

In the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR, Russia has sought to rebuild its status to what it once was. Russia’s enduring pursuit of regional influence is consistent with its history as the dominant power of the erstwhile USSR. Russia’s primary interest in Afghan lands is the

¹⁶ ‘Joint Statement Following the 23rd India - Russia Annual Summit (December 05, 2025)’ (*Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*) <<https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40410>> accessed 23 February 2026.

¹⁷ Kutty (n 1).

¹⁸ ‘Iran’s Growing Engagement of the Taliban: Strategic Necessity vs Opportunity’ (*MP-IDSA*) <<https://idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/irans-growing-engagement-of-the-taliban-strategic-necessity-vs-opportunity>> accessed 23 February 2026.

¹⁹ ‘Grievance and Flawed Governance in Iran’s Baluchestan | International Crisis Group’ (19 August 2025) <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/250-grievance-and-flawed-governance-irans-baluchestan>> accessed 5 March 2026.

prevention of regional instability that could spill over to the strategic Central Asian Republics (CARs). Moscow views this as its “soft underbelly”. Russian Policy clearly distinguishes between The Taliban, whose objectives are localised, and the ISKP, whose “Khorasan Philosophy” seeks to bring the CARs into its foray. The Islamic State explicitly threatens Russian interests. This distinction might be the reason why Russia has effectively recognised the regime in July 2025. President Vladimir Putin described the Taliban as “allies in the fight against terrorism”, especially following the Crocus City Hall attacks in Moscow – which accelerated the delisting of the Taliban’s status as a terrorist organisation. The post-Soviet hangover of Russia and its thirst for perpetuating regional hegemony has skewed its view of what terrorism looks like.

Institutionally, Russia has utilised the “Moscow Format” as its primary vessel for hosting regular consultation with regional powers on coordinating on Afghan stability. By championing the move to integrate the Taliban into regional security frameworks, Moscow aims to minimise Western military presence in the region and assert its own role as the indispensable stakeholder in this settlement. This strategy (though unwelcoming to New Delhi) also includes room for a measure of outreach to Islamabad, by tapping into its linkages with the Taliban to ensure transition of power that benefits Russian security priorities. As of March 2026, this policy might not be fruitful, as Afghanistan and Pakistan are slowly slipping into a conflict over the Durand Line.²⁰

INSTC AND CHABAHAR PORT IN THE GEOPOLITICS OF CONNECTIVITY

Corridor Route	Current Status (2025-2026)	Logistical Milestones

²⁰ Rajorshi Roy, ‘Russia’s Growing Outreach to Pakistan: Should India Be Concerned?’ (*South Asian Voices*, 29 June 2021) <<https://southasianvoices.org/russias-growing-outreach-to-pakistan-should-india-be-concerned/>> accessed 5 March 2026.

Western Route (via Azerbaijan)	Hindered by sanctions and the unfinished Rasht-Astara rail link.	Continued focus on "fast tracking" the Rasht-Astara connection.
Eastern Route (via Central Asia)	Fully operational; transit volumes tripled in 2023-2024.	2 million tons of cargo delivered in 2024; cargo train link from Moscow to Tehran.
Caspian Route	Underutilized but targeted for expansion to 35 million tons.	Focus on increasing maritime capacity in the Caspian Sea.

A defining stand of the Troika is its push for a multimodal connectivity project that bypasses traditional old-world routes and reduces dependence on Western logistics. This is evident from

the plans for the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the development of the Chabahar port.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

The INSTC is a 7,200 km network that shifts between ship, rail, and road routes, to ultimately facilitate the movement of goods between the Indian Ocean and the Baltic Sea via Iran and Russia. By 2025, the corridor had seen significant operational updates. In November 2025, a cargo train originating north of Moscow arrived in Tehran within 12 days— displaying the corridor’s efficiency and effectiveness compared to the Suez Canal route. Recent geopolitical tensions may have completely uprooted these equations, but the remarkable speed of transport is undeniable.

Chabahar Port and the “Afghan Bridge”

One of the most strategic, and indeed the most important points of the INSTC is the Chabahar Port. The development of the Shahid Beheshti Terminal at the port is central to India’s ambition of accessing Central Asian markets while cleverly bypassing Pakistan. In 2024, India inked a ten-year contract with Tehran to upgrade the port’s facilities, paving the way for larger investments. The potential connectivity that Chabahar can offer is expected to receive a major boost when the railway link connecting Chabahar to Zahedan is commissioned this year. This will eventually link to the Khaf-Herat railway in Afghanistan.²¹

In February 2025, Herat welcomed the first transit train from India via the Iranian rail network. This has marked a historic shift in Afghan trade dynamics. For the Taliban, the use of Chabahar and transit corridors reduces the reliance on Pakistani Ports – which are frequently closed due to political tensions.²² This “Afghan Bridge” allows for the revitalisation of the India Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor and the restoration of formal ties by focusing on Afghan agricultural exports and Indian humanitarian aid. It is important to note that with respect to Chabahar port, India claims to have already made the required payments well before the April 2026 deadline and is positioning itself away from the plan due to heavy US sanctions on Iran, and the latter’s strained relationship with the former and Israel (both strategic partners for India).

NAVIGATING TALIBAN THROUGH INCLUSIVITY AND LEGITIMACY

The Troika has a glaring challenge in front of it: the nature of the Taliban Regime. While the group has established “total control” through a “general amnesty” and the “Contact Commission”, it lacks domestic legitimacy and international recognition. The Contact Commission, mainly created to facilitate the return of former Afghan officials, is viewed by analysts as a strategic move to portray an image of conciliation, without yielding any actual power. The ambiguous nature of Taliban governance has led to a “split” in the region. While Russia has formally recognised the Taliban, India and Iran continue to use the ‘prospect of recognition’ as leverage to push for a more inclusive system. The 2024 “Propagation of Virtue

and Prevention of Vice Law” which codifies the formal restriction of women’s rights, has further complicated the situation, forcing the Troika framework to balance their strategic interest with the “moral compromise” of engaging with such an extremist entity. It is no doubt in the conscious mind of New Delhi, that working with an anti-feminist organisation like the Taliban is surely to ensue unrest at home.²³

Issue Area	Taliban Positioning	Troika Response/Pressure Point
Governance	Mono-ethnic “Emirate”; exclusion of non-Taliban workforce.	Demands for a “truly inclusive and representative” government.

²¹ OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, ‘INSTC Eastern Corridor: India’s Gateway to Central Asia’ ([orfonline.org](https://www.orfonline.org)) <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/instc-eastern-corridor-india-s-gateway-to-central-asia>> accessed 5 March 2026.

²² Admin, ‘Importance of Iran as Transit Territory’ (*News Central Asia (nCa)*, 6 January 2026) <<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2026/01/06/importance-of-iran-as-transit-territory/>> accessed 5 March 2026.²³ Kutty (n 1).

Human Rights	Systematic exclusion of women from education and workforce.	International condemnation; conditional aid and engagement.
Security	Claims of “General Amnesty”; limited control over ISKP.	Verification of amnesty implementation; joint counter-ISIS operations.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND MULTIPOLARITY

While the Troika positions the Eurasian Triple as a standalone force in the region, its activities are increasingly seen as an integration into broader Eurasian institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the expanded BRICS forum (known as BRICS+). These organisations are also serving as “alternative platforms for cooperation” in the quest to challenge the Unipolar World Order the US seeks to perpetuate.²⁴([g30](#))([g32](#))

Regional Stability via the SCO

Established in the summer of 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has evolved from its focus on Central Asia and embraced its status as a Eurasian institution. For New Delhi, SCO membership maintains its ‘multi-vector foreign policy’ – by allowing it to engage with Russia and China while simultaneously maintaining its partnership with the West. The SCO continues to strengthen its geopolitical gravity by onsetting a strategic expansion – as seen by the inclusion of Iran in 2023. However, the SCO faces a significant challenge: trying to balance the varied interests of its members – particularly the rivalry and disputes of India and China.

The World De-Dollarized through BRICS+

The addition of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to BRICS in 2024 has significantly enhanced the bloc’s influence over global energy and financial systems. For the Troika, BRICS+ provides a mechanism for "financial diversification" and the reduction of dependence on the US dollar²⁵. The agreement between India and Russia to use national currencies for bilateral trade is a direct

²⁴ Emil Avdaliani, ‘The SCO: Expansion Drive in an Unstable World’.

²⁵ Bhattacharjee K, ‘U.S. Tariff Threat Puts India -Iran Ties, BRICS Plan Under Strain, The Hindu, New Delhi (13 January, 2026) accessed February 27, 2026

reflection of this trend.³ This shift is essential for Iran and Russia to bypass Western sanctions and for India to secure its energy supplies.²⁶

GAPS IN RESEARCH AND THE WAY FORWARD

The existing literature and policy reviews on the India-Iran-Russia Troika in Afghanistan provide a comprehensive overview of the current geopolitical shifts. Nevertheless, several significant gaps remain. Identifying these gaps is crucial for future inquiry and policy formulation. Fortunately, existing literature notes a gap: despite shared high-level goals, there is little on-the-ground Troika institution. Policy reports suggest a need for “confidence-building measures around ... economic cooperation” and more transparent frameworks. So far, India’s engagement (mostly through bilateral aid and Chabahar) and Russia’s (through the Moscow Format and talks with the Taliban) have not coalesced into a single mechanism.

Research Gaps that Have Been Identified

1. **Factionalism inside Taliban and External Engagement:** While internal divisions within the Taliban (e.g., between the Kandahar-based leadership and the Kabul-based Haqqani network) are noted, there is limited research on how these factions separately interact with the Troika members. Understanding these sub-national dynamics is essential for predicting the stability of regional agreements.

2. **The Impact of the “Middle Corridor”:** The emergence of the “Middle Corridor” (bypassing Russia and Iran) as a Western-backed alternative is gaining traction. Research is needed to analyse how this competing route might dilute the strategic leverage of the India-Iran-Russia Troika and affect the long-term viability of the INSTC.
3. **Climate Change and Water-Sharing Efficacy:** While water disputes are identified as a flashpoint, there is a lack of deep technical analysis on the future impact of climate change on the Helmand River’s flow. Future studies should focus on science-based management and international mediation as tools for conflict resolution in this arid region.
4. **The Role of Sub-State Actors and Private Enterprise:** Most current research focuses on state-to-state relations. There is a need for studies on the role of private logistics companies, energy firms, and traders in operationalizing the INSTC and the Chabahar Port, particularly in the face of secondary sanctions.

Suggested New Areas for Study

1. **“Digital Sovereignty” in Eurasia:** Research into the development of a “Eurasian Cloud”, or shared digital infrastructure between the Troika members could provide insights into how they aim to protect their sensitive information from Western dominance.

²⁶ Alireza shaikh Mohamadi and Sakineh Hashemi Sakineh, ‘Iran and the Emerging New World Order: A Strategic Realignment towards SCO and BRICS’ (2021) 13 Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs <<https://doi.org/10.22034/irfa.2024.417861.1212>> accessed 5 March 2026.

2. **A Moral Price to Pay:** A comparative study of the long-term impact of “cautious engagement” on the democratic credentials and global standing of countries like India could provide a new dimension to International Relations theory.
3. **Post-Sanctions Russia-Iran Collaboration:** Analysing the potential for a deeper, permanent military-industrial complex between Moscow and Tehran following the expiration of UN Resolution 2231 oversight.
4. **Afghanistan as a “Critical Minerals” Hub:** With the global shift toward green energy, the potential for India and Russia to collaborate on extracting rare earth minerals from Afghanistan via the INSTC remains an understudied but potentially game-changing area.

CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE

The India-Iran-Russia Troika in post-2021 Afghanistan represents a sophisticated regional response to the collapse of the Western-led security order. By combining India’s soft power and infrastructure expertise, Iran’s geographic centrality and economic necessity, and Russia’s military-security hegemony, the Troika offers a “safety net” for its members in a highly polarized world. The strategic stabilization of Afghanistan is not merely a regional concern; it is the cornerstone of a broader Eurasian realignment that prioritizes “strategic autonomy,” “multipolarity,” and the development of independent connectivity corridors like the INSTC.

As of March 2026, the India–Russia–Iran triple has evolved from a tentative geopolitical alignment into an indisputable entity in the course of balancing in regional crisis management, marking a shift from the historical “Great Game” toward a model of regional responsibility. As a wholly non-Western security framework, the triple is a representation of one of the first attempts by regional powers to stabilise

Afghanistan without direct U.S. or NATO involvement. This is step toward prioritising pragmatic concerns, such as countering ISIS-K and enhancing economic security and connectivity through the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)– especially in the context of disagreements with the Taliban’s domestic policies. Its strategic relevance has become particularly evident during the Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict, where the Troika functions as a diplomatic buffer, illustrated by the February 27, 2026 joint call for dialogue by Russia and Iran, positioning the axis as a crucial firewall against wider regional escalation.

Russia’s official recognition of the Taliban in July 2025 further accelerated this shift, prompting India and Iran to pursue de facto normalisation and reshaping international engagement with Kabul. Economically, Afghanistan has begun transforming from a “landlocked trap” into a transit hub, especially through the upgraded Turgundi–Herat railway that links Russian grain flows with Indian manufactured goods, while a rouble–rial–rupee trade ecosystem offers partial insulation from Western sanctions. Although uncertainties remain, particularly surrounding Iran’s internal political transition in 2026, the institutional frameworks of the Moscow Format and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation help sustain policy continuity. In this emerging multiplex world order, the Troika’s strategy of Eurasian integration and India’s de-hyphenated engagement with Kabul suggest that connectivity, rather than military intervention, is becoming the primary instrument of security, effectively replacing the “War on Terror” paradigm with a new regional logic of “*connectivity as security*.”

However, the path forward is fraught with systemic challenges. The “unflattering reality” of the Taliban regime, characterized by its non-inclusive governance and regressive social policies, remains the primary obstacle to full regional integration. Furthermore, internal disputes over water and the complex “Pakistan factor” continue to test the cohesion of the Troika. Ultimately, the success of this “Eurasian Triple” will depend on its ability to transform Afghanistan from a “high security risk” into a sustainable “bridge” that links the resource-rich heartland of Eurasia with the burgeoning markets of South Asia.

In the realm of the fiery security breach and gaining momentum in enriching the corridor of India, Iran and Russia, intelligence synchronisation has been underway in destabilising terrorist elements such as the likes of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to prevent traction in places of interest to the triple – Kashmir, Caucasus and Central Asia. The balancing act between Taliban recognition for furthering the scope of geopolitical engagement while ensuring that extremism is not exported is a matter of a series of carefully curated diplomatic decisions.

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