

Surpassing the Hindu-Kush: Trilateral Imperatives and Contemporary Diplomacy in the India-Russia-Iran Afghan Constellation

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the distinct diplomatic modalities of the India Russia-Iran troika with respect to the Afghan constellation, and their impact on regional security and the opportunities they seek to withhold. Russia employs technical diplomacy focused on infrastructure-centric statecraft, including labour migration and digital projects. India utilizes soft power through extensive humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, investing nearly \$3 billion in development projects. Iran exercises coercive leverage via water rights disputes, and military posturing. The critical research gap identified is how these divergent methodologies, each rational individually, create a fragmented security architecture that undermines coordinated responses to converging threats like the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, thereby compromising regional stability. Writing in early 2026, the analysis confronts a transformed or rather evolved ++landscape: Russia became the first country to formally recognize the Taliban government (July 2025) and since has commenced defence ministry level cooperation. India upgraded its Kabul mission to a full embassy and received Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi in New Delhi (October 2025), with engagement accelerated by Operation Sindoor. Iran has deported approximately 750,000 Afghans, made a FM level visit to Kabul on water issues (January 2025), yet remains the only Troika member to not recognize the IEA. The paper argues that Russia's recognition and mediation role, India's development legitimacy, and Iran's border leverage now constitutes a more powerful potential coalition than at any point since 2021, but that translating this structural convergence into managed coordination, requires deliberate institutional effort.

1. Introduction

The fall of democracy in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's resumption of power, fundamentally restructured Afghanistan's regional diplomatic environment. Three states with historic stakes in the region and especially Afghanistan India, Russia, and Iran, they found themselves compelled to re-engage a government, which none initially recognized, but in a security environment none could afford to ignore. Their interactions have been loosely grouped under the label of 'India-Russia Iran troika.' Writing in early 2026, this paper examines what that arrangement looks

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like almost five years post-Taliban engagement, a geopolitical transformation that

includes Russia's formal Taliban recognition, India's "strategic" diplomatic upgrade and Taliban rapprochement, and Iran's hardline diplomacy, via flooding already crooked Afghani institution with migrants. What security reflections do we look at? What opportunities for complementary engagement does Troika present, and what structural challenges prevent it from functioning as a coherent security mechanism?

The paper addresses the following question: *To what extent do the divergent diplomatic modalities of India, Russia, and Iran in post- 2021 Afghanistan present opportunities for regional stability, and what challenges do these divergences create for coordinated security governance?*

This formulation holds both dimensions deliberately in view. The paper resists the temptation to cast the troika as purely dysfunctional, whilst honestly assessing the structural barriers to coordination

The argument proceeds in five analytical steps: establishing a comparative framework (section 2); examining each state's modality in turn (sections 3-5); assessing collective security implications, identifying both opportunities and challenges, with specific focus on ISIS-K and the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict (section 6); and proposing pathways toward managed coordination (section 7)

2. Conceptual Framework: Diplomatic Modalities and the Troika

Diplomatic modalities can be conceptualised along a spectrum from coercive leverage to soft power engagement, with technical diplomacy, characterised by functional, non-political cooperation, creating structural dependencies- occupying an intermediate position. The India-Russia-Iran troika exemplifies this spectrum: Russia's approach is infra-focused technical diplomacy; India's modality represents the soft power end, characterised by what scholars describe as a 'non-military, non coercive and co-operative' approach; and Iran's methodology centres on coercive leverage through water rights and border pressure.

Two theoretical traditions ground this analysis. Neo-classical realism explains why states facing broadly similar systematic pressure- U.S withdrawal, Chinese BRI expansion, ISIS-K growth, have nonetheless adopted divergent diplomatic instruments. Distinct unit-level variables account for the divergence: Russia's 'Afghan syndrome' from the 1979-89 Soviet-Afghan War and its Central Asian sphere ambitions; India's strategic autonomy doctrine and non-alignment instinct; Iran's revolutionary ideology combined with acute water insecurity. Complex interdependence theory, associated with Keohane and Nye, complements this by foregrounding the significance of non state actors, refugee flows, narcotics trafficking, and economic ties that purely state centric analysis would undervalue.

Research indicates that despite shared membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS, India, Russia, and China did not coordinate their development or security approaches in Afghanistan even during the 2001-2021 period of ostensibly shared interests. The post-2021 landscape has not substantially altered this pattern. The critical analytical question, is therefore not merely whether divergence exists, it demonstrably does. But what it means for opportunities and challenges in

Afghanistan’s regional security architecture.

Table 1: Comparative diplomatic Modalities of the India-Russia-Iran Troika (post-2021)

Dimension	Russia (tech)	India (pragmatic)	Iran (coercive)
Primary Instrument	First state to recognize Taliban; labour migration; 4G infrastructure; \$7bn Trans Afghan Railway; mediation role in Paf-Afg conflict	Humanitarian aid; scholarships; embassy upgrade; high-level engagements; support during Pak-Afg conflict	Helmand water dispute; Fathemeyoun Brigade; mass deportations
Strategic Objective	Economic influence; counter Chinese dominance; Central Asian sphere; establish as mediator for its great power status	Counter Pakistan backed militants; counter China/Pakistan; Chabahar connectivity; accelerating rapprochement driven by India Pakistan rivalry	Immediate water security; boarder stability; counter ISIS-k; regional leverage over taliban’s trade routes

Financial Commitment	USD 1.9m/year; bilateral trade \$1bn, projected to cross \$3bn (2025)	USD 81m/year (USD \$3bn total)	Leverage based; minimal direct aid
Time	Long term	Long term;	Short term

Horizon	integration; paradigm shift from technical to full recognition	accelerating rapprochement driven by Indo-Pak rivalry	coercive pressure; assumes Taliban won't stay in power
Theoretical Basis	Realist pragmatism; now full diplomatic recognition; emerging defence partnership	Soft power theory + pragmatic realism, "enemy's enemy" logic	Coercive diplomacy; hydro hegemony

3. Russia's Evolving Modality: From Technical Diplomacy to Full Recognition

Russia's engagement with Afghanistan has undergone the most dramatic evolution among the three troika members since 2021. What began as cautious technical diplomacy, has culminated in a paradigm shift: on 3 July 2025, Russia became the first country in the world to formally recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a legitimate government of the country. This recognition, and the subsequent acceptance of the Taliban's ambassadorial credentials in Moscow on 16th January 2026, and defence ministry-level talks on 28 January 2026, marks a fundamental transformation in Russia's modality. The underlying strategic calculation remains consistent with competition with China, ISIS-K containment, commercial interest, and historical legacy rehabilitation, but the instruments have shifted from functional

technical engagement to full-spectrum diplomatic and an emerging military partnership.

3.1 From “Just” Normalisation to Full-on Recognition and Military Engagement

The trajectory of Russian engagement has been interesting to follow as it went from a deliberate escalation, flowering into a complete paradigm shift. First and foremost, the Russian Supreme Court removed the Taliban from its terrorist organisation list in April 2025. Then, a bilateral labour migration agreement was reached at St. Petersburg International economic forum (June 2025), aiming to expand the number of Afghan workers in Russia from approximately 100 to 1,000 (notably, a segment of Afghan workers may be channelled into Russia's military-industrial sector) this is in addition to the Trans-Afghan railway project.² Then,

²'Russia and Uzbekistan Sign Agreements to Launch Trans-Afghan Railway Project' (kun.uz, 9 April 2025) <[https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/04/09/russia-and-uzbekistan-sign-agreements-to-launch-trans-afghan-railway-](https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/04/09/russia-and-uzbekistan-sign-agreements-to-launch-trans-afghan-railway) on 3 July 2025, Russia became the first country in the world to formally recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the legitimate government, declaring the Taliban an "objective reality" and its "ally in countering terrorism."³ Analysts at the Carnegie Endowment characterised the move as primarily symbolic, aimed at restoring Russia's image as a global agenda-setter, rather than driven by concrete economic benefits.⁴

3.2 Infrastructure-Centric Statecraft

Russian Railways (RZhD), alongside Uzbekistan Railways, formalised an agreement in April 2025 for the \$7 billion, 1,700-kilometre Trans-Afghan Railway linking Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, it would not be wrong to say that this is the most ambitious infrastructure commitment of any troika member in the post-2021 period.⁵ Russian company NTC Protei has installed 4G mobile communication systems in four Afghan provinces. Russia is additionally exploring oil and gas extraction in northern Afghan provinces, particularly following Afghanistan's annulment of a Chinese contract.

3.3 Opportunities and Challenges

Russia's modality presents a specific and the most unique opportunity within the troika: its willingness to engage the Taliban at an official level in the most official fashion which it has done by being the only one in the troika to have formally recognized the IEA (Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan and its ability to offer concrete economic inducements, gives it a form of transactional (economic) leverage that neither India nor Iran currently possesses at comparable scale.

Still, the challenge is that Russia's recognition remains primarily a great-power signalling exercise, as Carnegie analysts noted, rather than a guarantee of reliable partnership

project> accessed 1 March 2026; 'Trans-Afghan Railway: Will Uzbekistan Develop the Kandahar Route?' (The Diplomat, 17 April 2025) <<https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/trans-afghan-railway-will-uzbekistan-develop-the-kandahar-route/>> accessed 1 March 2026.

³ Al Jazeera, 'Russia Becomes First Country to Recognise Afghanistan's Taliban Government' (Al Jazeera, 3 July 2025) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/3/russia-becomes-first-country-to-recognise-afghanistans-taliban-government>> accessed 1 March 2026; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'Russia Is the First Country to Recognize Afghanistan's Taliban Government. Why?' (Carnegie Endowment, July 2025) <<https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/russia-afghanistan-new-government?lang=en>> accessed 1 March 2026; International Crisis Group, 'Russia Becomes First State to Recognise Taliban as Rightful Afghan Government' (Crisis Group, 4 July 2025) <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/alr/asia-pacific/afghanistan/russia-becomes-first-state-recognise-taliban-rightful-afghan-government>> accessed 1 March 2026.

⁴ibid.

⁵(n 2).

or trilateral leadership.⁶ Russia's security services remain internally ambivalent about the Taliban's counter-terrorism commitments-the Supreme Court only suspended rather than fully struck down the Taliban's terrorist designation, leaving scope for reversal.⁷ Most critically, Russia's competition with China for influence in Afghanistan remains its primary strategic orientation, rather than complementarity with India and Iran. Russia's recognition may paradoxically incentivise China, and then others, to follow suit, potentially eroding Russia's first-mover advantage without producing coordinated security governance. Withal, it is not just a move to show that they are anti-West, it is also providing them with economic leverage, more possibilities to engage with diplomatically as well as those aforementioned.

4. India's Soft Diplomacy

India's policy toward Afghanistan is a great example of what a dedicated soft power strategy is; defined primarily by its non-military and non-coercive character, focusing on humanitarian aid, infrastructure development, and long-term capacity building.⁸ India's cumulative development assistance is valued at over USD 3 billion across more than 500 projects in all 34 Afghan provinces, establishing it as the leading non-Western bilateral donor during the 2001–2021 period, this trend is likely to continue (as so has been the case so far).⁹

4.1 Strategic Infrastructure and Humanitarian Engagement

India's infrastructure projects serve dual purposes: fostering Afghan economic connectivity whilst generating political goodwill. Afghanistan is landlocked, so it requires assistance via foreign ports for connectivity, this is where India comes in, the Pak-Afghan relations have been deteriorating on a steep slope and the Zaranj-Delaram Highway-218 kilometres constructed by India's Border Roads Organisation-provides not an ersatz but a better

(and critical) alternative trade route connecting Afghanistan to Iran's Chabahar port, reducing

⁶(n 3).

⁷ Al Jazeera, 'Russia Suspends Ban on Taliban' (Al Jazeera, 17 April 2025) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/17/russia-suspends-ban-on-taliban>> accessed 1 March 2026. Note: the Russian Supreme Court 'suspended' rather than fully abolished the designation under a 2024 law permitting suspension by court order.

⁸ Siddharth Varadarajan, 'India's Afghanistan Policy: Non-Coercive Engagement and Strategic Autonomy' (2022) 44(2) Strategic Analysis 112.

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India-Afghanistan Relations' (MEA, October 2025) <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Afghanistan_Relations.pdf> accessed 1 March 2026.

landlocked Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistani transit.¹⁰ The Afghan–India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam), a USD 275 million hydropower and irrigation project in Herat province generating 42MW of electricity, and most importantly, though a symbolic gesture but the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul was built by the GOI –symbolising India's commitment to democratic state-building—are among the most visible emblems of this engagement.¹¹

Following the Taliban's return to power, India has still maintained humanitarian engagement by intentionally distinguishing support for the Afghan people from formal recognition of the de facto government. India has supplied over 50,000 metric tons of wheat through the UN World Food Programme and approximately 2,500 additional tons by 2025.¹²

Also provided medical assistance, including a 30-bed hospital in Kabul, an Oncology Centre, a Trauma Centre, and five Maternity Health Clinics in border provinces, this all has been the cornerstone or the very first instances of foundation of post-2021 engagement.¹³ India's scholarship programme, offering up to 1,500 places annually for Afghan students in Indian institutions (resumed via e-scholarships in 2023), represents a long-duration investment in people-to-people ties.¹⁴

4.2 Strategic Calculus

India's investments are driven by a blend of humanitarian commitment and clear strategic logic.¹⁵ Counterterrorism is the primary motivation: preventing Pakistani-backed militant groups from using Afghan territory as a staging ground against Indian interests in Kashmir. Geopolitical balancing is the secondary driver-sustaining Indian presence counters Pakistan's strategic depth calculations and limits Chinese BRI expansion. The Chabahar Port investment, to which India has committed over USD 200 million, is the key instrument for bypassing Pakistan whilst accessing Afghan and Central Asian markets.¹⁶ Bilateral trade grew

¹⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'India-Afghanistan Development Partnership' (MEA) <https://www.mea.gov.in/uploads/publicationdocs/176_india-and-afghanistan-a-development-partnership.pdf> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Indian Council of World Affairs, 'Breaking the Ice: India's First Ministerial Engagement with the Taliban' (ICWA, 2025) <https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=12941&lid=7908> accessed 1 March 2026.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ (n 10).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

40-fold between 2001 and 2021, with Afghanistan becoming a significant exporter of agricultural products to India.¹⁷

4.3 Opportunities and Challenges

India's soft power modality offers the most significant opportunity within the troika framework. Its unmatched development presence and popular legitimacy among the Afghan population, cultivated over two decades, provides a form of ground-level influence that Russia's technocratic engagement and Iran's coercive posture cannot ever replicate. India's humanitarian field presence generates real-time situational awareness that, if channelled toward a shared security architecture, would constitute an underutilised intelligence and diplomatic asset for the troika.

The structural challenge is equally clear. The non-military character of India's engagement leaves its investments and personnel exposed in a volatile environment with limited means of direct protection.¹⁸ More significantly, India's soft power methods are not coordinated with the more technical or coercive approaches of Russia and Iran, producing a fragmented regional response despite overlapping security concerns.¹⁹ India's participation in the Quad and its alignment with the US-led security framework creates geopolitical friction with Russia and Iran that constrains trilateral strategic coordination, a structural tension not easily resolved through goodwill alone.

5. Iran's Coercive Leverage: Water Rights and Military Posturing

Iran's approach to Afghanistan is characterised by a coercive approach based on that contrasts sharply with both India's soft power and Russia's technical diplomacy. Iran employs water rights disputes and military posturing as primary instruments of statecraft, creating a dynamic of asymmetric pressure that reflects its acute resource insecurity and immediate security imperatives.

5.1 Hydro-Hegemonic Statecraft

¹⁷ (n 9).

¹⁸ Harsh V Pant and Kartik Bommakanti, 'India's National Security: Challenges and Dilemmas' (2019) 95(3) *International Affairs* 835.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

Iran's most potent coercive tool centres on transboundary water resources, particularly the Helmand and Harirud river basins. Iran has systematically transformed water management into an instrument of diplomatic pressure. Historically, Iran and the Soviet Union signed a treaty in 1926 for equal utilisation of the Harirud River, explicitly excluding upstream Afghanistan-establishing a precedent of downstream unilateral action.²⁰ In 2004, Iran and Turkmenistan jointly inaugurated the Doosti Dam on the Harirud River without consulting Afghanistan; with a storage capacity of 1.25 billion cubic metres, this dam supplies 50 percent of Mashhad's domestic water requirements.²¹ Iran further constructed multiple dams on the Kashafrud River (a Harirud tributary) and built a 150 km pipeline to divert water unilaterally.

Tensions escalated markedly when the Kamal Khan Dam became operational in 2021, prompting Iran to accuse Afghanistan of violating the 1973 Helmand River Treaty. Scholarly analyses indicate Iran reportedly equipped the Taliban to interfere with the construction of the Pashdan Dam (which was 85 per cent complete at the time of the 2021 takeover) and supported anti-government groups targeting the Salma Dam.²² Iran additionally uses the status of approximately 4.5 million Afghan refugees as a coercive lever, threatening forced repatriation to pressurise the Taliban administration on water concessions.²³

5.2 Military Posturing and Border Security

Iran complements its water coercion with calculated military posturing. Iranian border guards have allegedly engaged in violent, punitive actions against Afghan migrants attempting irregular entry, through illegal and informal means, these punitive actions range from incidents of torture to incidents leading to fatal shootings.²⁴ An armed incident in May 2023-directly linked to water-sharing disputes was proof of Iran's willingness to deploy hard power. Iran's primary security concern remains ISIS-K, which it views as a direct threat to its territorial integrity. This has led to a shift from the historical enmity between Iran and the Taliban (the two were near-war in 1998) towards a degree of functional engagement, as Iran seeks to position itself as a regional security actor and mitigate any cross-border threats whatsoever.²⁵

²⁰ Alexander Krstic, 'A Review of Hydro-Hegemonic Dynamics on the Transboundary Harirud River Basin: 2001-Present' (2022) 14(21) *Water* 3442 <<https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/14/21/3442>> accessed 1 March 2026. ²¹ *ibid.*

²² (n 20).

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Soufan Center, 'IntelBrief: Iran and the Taliban Clash' (Soufan Center, 8 June 2023)

5.3 Opportunities and Challenges

Iran's modality presents a specific, if underappreciated, opportunity within the troika. Its shared 950-kilometre border with Afghanistan, and its role as host to an estimated 3.8-5 million Afghan refugees and migrants gives it great leverage over the Taliban's behaviour on security and border issues. Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi visited Kabul in January 2025 to discuss water issues and broader trade relations, reflecting a recognition on both sides that coercive pressure has limits and that bilateral economic cooperation may be limited but possible.²⁶ This pragmatic Pollyana (practical yet optimistic) outreach, even while water disputes remain structurally unresolved, shows a transactional, almost barter-like diplomatic capacity that could, if redirected toward shared security goals, play a very productive role in trilateral engagement or whole troika arrangement.

As insinuated above, the main structural challenge is that Iran's coercion actively poisons and sullies the multilateral trust necessary for coordinated security action. Iran deported approximately 750,000 Afghans by end-2024 (which exacerbated the Shia-Sunni divide, which in turn also hurt the chances for any diplomacy), and has still not formally recognised the Taliban government or the IEA, hence endangering the water pact. US and EU sanctions on Iran constitute a further structural barrier: they prevent participation in international financial mechanisms for Afghan reconstruction and reinforce Iran's preference for bilateral, coercive approaches. Iran's revolutionary foreign policy posture also places it in geopolitical alignment against the Western-oriented frameworks within which India increasingly operates, limiting the political space for institutionalised tripartite cooperation.

6. Fragmented Approaches and Regional Security: Opportunities and Challenges

The divergent diplomatic methodologies of the troika have produced a fragmented regional security architecture. Two developments since late 2025 have dramatically sharpened both the costs of that fragmentation and the urgency of coordination: Russia's full diplomatic

in Shooting at Iran-Afghan Border' (Al Jazeera, 28 May 2023) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/27/clash-on-iran-afghan-border-kills-at-least-three>> accessed 1 March 2026.

²⁶ Al Jazeera, 'What Caused Deadly Afghan-Iran Border Clashes? What Happens Next?' (Al Jazeera, 31 May 2023) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/30/what-caused-deadly-afghan-iran-border-clashes-what-happens-next>> accessed 1 March 2026.

recognition of the Taliban (July 2025), and Pakistan's military strikes on Afghan territory in

February 2026. This section assesses both dimensions- the challenges these fragmentations create and the spaces of opportunity that have opened.

6.1 The Challenge: Coordination Failure, ISIS-K, and the Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict

The most acute pre-existing challenge arising from the troika's divergent modality has been the collective failure to address ISIS-k. The group demonstrated growing transnational reach, executing mass casualty attacks against Russia and Iran's interests. The February 2026 Pakistan-Afghan military conflict has now added a second, structurally distinct challenge: the risk of open interstate war drawing all three troika members into reactive, bilateral postures that further crowd out collective security governance.

Member	Current Modality	CT/Security Focus	Primary Coordination Gap
Russia	Technological modality	Bilateral CT	Connectivity issues; negative image due to Soviet operation
India	Coercive modality	Counter Pak militancy; Chabbar connectivity	Formal recognition withheld, limiting security cooperation
Iran	Hard modality	Counter ISIS; resource leverage	Hard confrontations, escalating resource flashpoint

The Pak-Afghan conflict has exposed the troika's respective positions with peculiar clarity. Russia called for an immediate ceasefire and offered to mediate, its unique position as the only state to formally recognize the IEA government. India condemned the strikes and affirmed Afghan sovereignty, consistent with the India-Taliban rapprochement accelerated by Operation Sindoor. Iran was conspicuously silent in the initial period, but later surprisingly

supported the Taliban due to its own conflicts with Pakistan.

6.2 The Opportunity: Convergence Under Pressure

The same events that have sharpened the challenge have also created genuine new opportunities. Russia's full Taliban recognition-the first by any state-has produced an official diplomatic infrastructure that, for the first time, allows coordinated multilateral engagement at governmental level. India's accelerating Taliban rapprochement, driven by the India-Pakistan rivalry, has brought its interests into closer alignment with Russia's. The February 2026 Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict has, perhaps counterintuitively, created a shared platform: all three troika members have reason to prevent Afghan state collapse, all three oppose Pakistani dominance of the Afghan political space, and all three face the prospect of a destabilised, radicalised Afghanistan on their strategic perimeter.²⁷

The troika's inadvertent complementarity has deepened. India's development infrastructure maintains Afghan civilian governance capacity, preventing the state collapse that would most benefit ISIS-K. Russia's formal recognition provides the only extant bilateral security channel with the Taliban government. Iran's coercive border posture, whatever its bilateral costs, has limited cross-border militant activity along the southwestern frontier. These remain parallel rather than coordinated effects, but the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict has produced a shared strategic shock that may provide the political will to formalise them.

A diplomatic infrastructure for trilateral dialogue already exists in embryonic form. Russia has previously expressed interest in including India and Iran in extended troika formats on Afghanistan,²⁸ a trilateral ministerial meeting was held in 2021,²⁹ and Russia's mediation offer in the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict has demonstrated that it sees itself in a trilateral security broker role. This nascent platform does not need to be created from scratch-it requires political will to formalise, not structural invention.

²⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Pakistan: Responding to the Militant Surge on the Afghan Border' (ICG Report 354, 27 February 2026) <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/pakistan-afghanistan/354-pakistan-responding-militant-surge-afghan-border>> accessed 7 March 2026; CSIS, 'Why Did Pakistan Announce "Open War" Against the Taliban?' (CSIS, 28 February 2026) <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-pakistan-announce-open-war-against-taliban>> accessed 7 March 2026; Atlantic Council, 'While the Iran Conflict Continues, the Afghanistan Pakistan Crisis is Only Getting Worse' (Atlantic Council, 5 March 2026) <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/while-the-iran-conflict-continues-the-afghanistan-pakistan-crisis-is-only-getting-worse/>> accessed 7 March 2026.

²⁸ (n 3).

²⁹ Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 'A New Opening: Russia Officially Recognises the Taliban Regime' (OSW, 9 July 2025) <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-07-07/a-new-opening-russia-officially-recognises-taliban-regime>> accessed 1 March 2026.

7. Towards Managed Coordination: Pathways Forward

The very much recent events of 2025-2026 have both raised the stakes of troika fragmentation and created new structural opportunities for coordination. Russia's recognition of the Taliban, India's diplomatic upgrade, and the Pakistan-Afghanistan military conflict have collectively created a geopolitical inflection point at which managed coordination is more achievable and more urgent than at any point since 2021. Be it India's strategic foreign policy upgrades, which both complements the troika but also endangers it with competing alignments such as India's participation in the Quad. The goal is therefore not grand strategic harmonisation but functional cooperation in specific, tractable domains where interests demonstrably converge.

Institutionalising Trilateral Dialogue- The nascent Moscow Format trilateral platform should be formalised into a dedicated Trilateral Security Working Group under the SCO umbrella, mandated to facilitate regular, focused dialogue on shared threats, beginning with ISIS-K threat mapping and counter-narcotics intelligence sharing. Russia's prior expressions of interest confirm the political feasibility of such a step. Even if not to that extent, then still there's a need for a formalised consultative process (which would serve immediate crisis management purposes whilst building the institutional habit of coordination) or the formalization of India-Russia-Iran Trilateral Dialogue on Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict, perhaps by upgrading the erstwhile Moscow format as the recent February 2026 Pakistan Afghanistan conflict has created an immediate practical need for trilateral coordination: all three states have an interest in a stable Afghan government, an end to Pakistani military strikes, and prevention of the state collapse that would follow Taliban military defeat. This is where interests converge, and functional cooperation is to be emphasized upon.

Linking Infrastructure to Security. Security protocols and intelligence-sharing agreements could be embedded within major infrastructure projects in which all three states have economic stakes, notably the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Incorporating security cooperation within economic projects provides political cover, and creates mutual incentives for follow-through that purely security-focused arrangements lack.

Transforming Water Coercion into Technical Cooperation. Iran's water security concerns-the underlying driver of its coercive leverage-could be channelled into a multilateral water management framework under UN or SCO auspices, involving Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asian riparian states. Converting the Helmand and Harirud disputes from bilateral coercive instruments into subjects of technical cooperation would remove a persistent source of bilateral tension whilst addressing Iran's legitimate resource security interests.

Connecting Humanitarian Aid to Stability. India's humanitarian and reconstruction

programmes should be more explicitly linked to regional stability goals, with communication channels established to share field intelligence with security implications for Russia and Iran. India's unmatched ground-level presence in Afghanistan is a currently underutilised resource that a trilateral security framework could leverage.

8. Conclusion

The engagement of the India-Russia-Iran troika with Afghanistan has reached an inflection point. Writing in early 2026, the analysis confronts a transformed landscape: Russia has become the first state to formally recognise the Taliban government and is now engaged in active defence ministry cooperation and mediation of the Pakistan-Afghanistan military conflict; India has upgraded its mission to a full embassy and received the highest-level Taliban delegation since 2021; and Pakistan has struck Afghan territory in a military escalation that all three troika members have reason to oppose. The central dilemma identified at the outset of this paper—that common threats do not automatically generate common responses when national strategies are divergent—now coexists with an unprecedented set of structural incentives for coordination.

What remains constant is the asymmetry of modalities. Russia now wields the instrument of full diplomatic recognition, combined with infrastructure statecraft and an emerging defence partnership. India combines deep development legitimacy with an accelerating pragmatic alignment with the Taliban government, driven by the India-Pakistan rivalry. Iran deploys coercive leverage: water, deportations, and border posturing. Each modality is individually rational; collectively, they still produce a fragmented architecture. The February 2026 Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict demonstrated this with painful clarity: three separate foreign policy responses to a single shared strategic threat.³⁰

The path forward requires converting the structural shock of 2025-2026 into institutional momentum. Russia's recognition and mediation role, India's development infrastructure and popular legitimacy, and Iran's border leverage constitute three

³⁰ (n 27).

complementary assets that, if coordinated within even a modestly institutionalised trilateral framework, would constitute a significantly more effective regional security architecture than the sum of their current bilateral parts. This evolution from fragmented competition toward managed coordination is both analytically necessary and strategically urgent for the long-term stability of Afghanistan and the broader security of South and Central Asia.³¹

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