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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Five Years of the Islamic Emirate: Afghanistan Still at a Fork in the Road

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IR**GS2**

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Five Years of the Islamic Emirate: Afghanistan Still at a Fork in the Road

 **The Hindu** 29 August 2026 **GS2**



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India has an embassy in Kabul and has accredited a Taliban-appointed diplomat in Delhi, but has not recognised the Islamic Emirate. Is that distinction between engagement and recognition intellectually honest, or a diplomatic fiction we maintain for convenience?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [The Hindu](#)

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Five years on, the Islamic Emirate has delivered the one thing Afghanistan had not seen in forty-seven years, which is quiet. It has done so by suspending the argument rather than settling it. A freeze is not a peace, and the bill for a postponed transition is paid with interest.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Afghanistan is the standing test case in GS2 for the difference between **engagement and endorsement**, and for how a state pursues interests with a government it does not recognise. It also carries India's neighbourhood policy, connectivity strategy through Chabahar, counter-terrorism concerns and the Central Asia question in a single file. The five-year mark makes it a high-probability essay and interview topic.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood; **bilateral**, regional and global groupings involving India or affecting India's interests; effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Afghanistan's modern instability is conventionally dated to the **Saur Revolution of April 1978** and the **Soviet intervention of December 1979**, which is where the editorial's figure of roughly **47 years of bloodletting** comes from, though on those dates the arithmetic to August 2026 is closer to 48. The sequence since is familiar: Soviet withdrawal in 1989, civil war among the mujahideen factions, the **first Islamic**

Emirate from 1996 to 2001, the American intervention after **9/11**, two decades of the internationally backed Republic, and the collapse of that Republic, the **historical** hinge of everything that follows, when the Taliban entered Kabul on **15 August 2021**.

The editorial's framing device is the distinction between **IEA 1.0 (1996 to 2001)** and **IEA 2.0 (2021 onwards)**. The first Emirate was recognised by only three states, sheltered al-Qaeda, destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001 and ended under bombardment. The second has behaved differently in measurable ways, and the editorial's argument is that these differences are real without being sufficient.

For India, the relevant history is one of heavy investment followed by abrupt exposure. India was among the largest regional donors to the Republic, having built the **Afghan Parliament building**, the **Zaranj to Delaram highway** and the **Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam)** in Herat, and having committed development assistance across all 34 provinces. In August 2021 India evacuated its embassy. It returned with a **technical mission in Kabul in June 2022**, hosted Foreign Minister **Amir Khan Muttaqi** in **October 2025**, announced the upgrade of the technical mission to a **full embassy**, and in **January 2026** accredited **Noor Ahmad Noor** as Chargé d'Affaires of the Afghan embassy in New Delhi, the first Taliban-appointed diplomat posted to India. Formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate has not been extended.

THE ANALYSIS

The editorial's core move is to refuse a single verdict, and that refusal is analytically correct.

Five years produce a record, not a judgment, and the record splits cleanly.

On the positive side, the transition did not become a massacre. The 2021 takeover was as chaotic as 1996, but the mass retribution widely forecast against former Republic officials, interpreters and security personnel did not occur at the predicted scale. Afghanistan is now **largely stable and secure** in the ordinary sense that a traveller can move between provinces, which was not true for most of the preceding two decades.

Second, the sanctuary question has moved. The territory long described as the badlands of transnational militancy, from which **al-Qaeda** planned the attacks of **11 September 2001** and drew two decades of American retribution onto both itself and the first Emirate, has under the current dispensation been formally denied to groups operating against other countries. For India this is the single most consequential commitment on the table, and it is also the one hardest to verify from outside.

Third, and least noticed, is the absorption of the returnees. An estimated **5.7 million refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran** over the five years. That is roughly **an eighth of Afghanistan's population** arriving into an economy already stripped of its aid base and its foreign reserves. The editorial's assessment is that the government managed this reasonably well while the influx deepened penury. Both halves of that sentence matter: administrative competence is real, and it has been deployed inside a shrinking economy.

Against this sits the freeze, which is where the editorial's title earns itself. The phrase *time-freeze* is precise. The Emirate has not resolved the question of what Afghanistan is to be; it has suspended it. There is no constitution in the ordinary sense, no representative process, and no mechanism by which the suspension could end other than by decision of the leadership in Kandahar. Most consequentially, the exclusion of women and girls from secondary and higher education and from most employment removes, year by year, the human capital that any future transition would need. A country that stops educating half its population is not standing still. It is falling behind at compound rates.

The strategic point for an Indian answer is that the freeze is what keeps recognition unavailable, and the absence of recognition is what keeps the economy frozen. Sanctions relief, access to the frozen central bank reserves and normal banking channels all run through recognition or something functionally close to it. So the humanitarian argument for engagement and the **normative** argument against it are locked together, which is precisely why states have converged on the awkward middle position India occupies.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

The timeline (historical):

- **April 1978:** Saur Revolution; **December 1979:** Soviet intervention
- **1989:** Soviet withdrawal; civil war follows
- **1996 to 2001:** first Islamic Emirate (IEA 1.0), recognised by only three states
- **March 2001:** destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas
- **11 September 2001:** al-Qaeda attacks; US intervention follows
- **15 August 2021** (historical): Taliban enter Kabul; IEA 2.0 begins
- **August 2026:** five years completed

Key figures:

- **Roughly 47 years** of continuous conflict, occupation and **insurgency**
- **5.7 million** refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran in five years
- Returnees as share of population: approximately **one-eighth**

India's engagement, in sequence:

- **June 2022:** technical mission reopened in Kabul
- **October 2025:** Foreign Minister **Amir Khan Muttaqi** visits India; India announces upgrade of the technical mission to a **full embassy**
- **January 2026:** **Noor Ahmad Noor** accredited as Chargé d'Affaires of the Afghan embassy in New Delhi

- **Formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate: not extended by India**

India's legacy development footprint in Afghanistan:

- **Afghan Parliament building**, Kabul
- **Zaranj to Delaram highway** (Route 606), linking to the Iranian border
- **Salma Dam / Afghan-India Friendship Dam**, Herat province
- **Chabahar port** in Iran, India's connectivity route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan

Institutions and instruments to cite:

- **United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)**
- **UN Security Council Resolution 2593 (2021)**: demanded that Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country or shelter terrorists
- **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)**: Afghanistan has held observer status since 2012, but its participation has been in **abeyance** since 2021 and the seat has not been extended to the Islamic Emirate; the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group is the standing regional format
- **Moscow Format Consultations** on Afghanistan
- **Doha Agreement (February 2020)** between the United States and the Taliban

Geography for Prelims:

- Afghanistan borders **Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China**
- The **Wakhan Corridor** separates Tajikistan from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and gives Afghanistan its short border with China
- The **Durand Line** is the disputed boundary with Pakistan, never accepted by any Afghan government

THE DEBATE

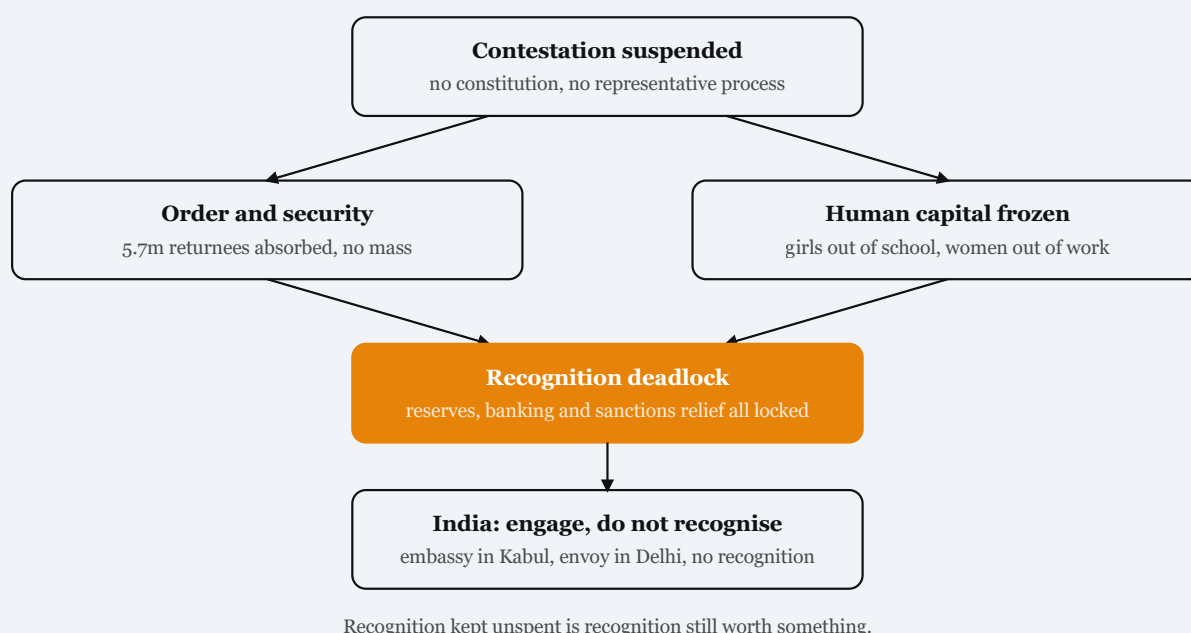
The case for engagement is that absence is not neutrality. India's withdrawal in 2021 did not reduce Afghanistan's importance to Indian security; it only removed India's ability to influence it, while Pakistan and China faced no such constraint. Presence secures intelligence, protects the residual development stake, keeps the Chabahar logic alive and gives India standing in regional formats. Recognition withheld while an embassy operates is not incoherent: it keeps a valuable **concession** in reserve.

The case against is that functional engagement drifts into normalisation without anyone deciding to normalise. Each **incremental** step, a mission upgrade here, an accreditation there, is individually defensible and cumulatively amounts to acceptance. Critics argue that India has extended most of

the practical benefits of recognition while retaining only its symbolism, and has received in return assurances on terrorism that no external party can verify.

The strongest counter to the editorial's own optimism is that the security gains are contingent on the freeze rather than independent of it. A polity is quiet when contestation is impossible. The test is not whether Afghanistan is calm in year five, but whether the arrangement survives a succession, an economic shock or a serious challenge from the **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)**, which remains the principal armed opponent of the Emirate and has no interest in the territorial assurances the Emirate has given.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



The security gain and the social freeze are not independent findings to be weighed against each other. They are two outputs of the same decision to suspend political contestation, which is why the recognition deadlock cannot be resolved by praising one and deploring the other.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable frame is **the difference between recognition, engagement and legitimization**, and it is one of the most reusable distinctions in GS2.

Recognition is a formal legal act: it accepts an authority as the government of a state, with consequences for treaties, assets, sovereign immunity and representation. **Engagement** is functional contact: missions, visas, trade, humanitarian delivery, intelligence liaison. **Legitimation** is a sociological outcome: whether an

authority comes to be treated as normal, regardless of what anyone formally declared.

States separate the first two deliberately, because recognition is a one-time concession that cannot be re-spent. What they cannot control is the third. Legitimation accumulates through practice, and it is exactly what critics of India's Afghanistan policy point to when they say the substance has been conceded while the form is retained.

Use the same three-way split on **Myanmar after 2021**, on **Syria**, on **Taiwan**, where the world does the reverse and engages functionally while withholding recognition on the other side of the ledger, and on **Palestine**, where recognition has been extended by many states without the functional attributes following. Once the distinction is in hand, a whole class of questions becomes answerable in a structured way rather than an opinionated one.

For an interview, the honest formulation is this: engagement without recognition is not hypocrisy, it is price discipline. It becomes hypocrisy only when the engagement is unconditional, because then the price is never actually charged.

WAY FORWARD

Keep recognition conditional and priced. Its value to the Emirate is precisely what gives India leverage; extended without conditions, it buys nothing and cannot be recovered.

Convert the counter-terrorism assurance from declaration into verification. UNSC Resolution 2593 already states the standard. India's interest lies in mechanisms, regional intelligence exchange and monitoring through the SCO Contact Group and the Moscow Format, rather than in restated commitments.

Sustain humanitarian and development delivery through channels that reach people rather than the treasury. Wheat, medicines and scholarships are both the right thing and the durable source of Indian goodwill in Afghanistan, which historically has survived every change of regime.

Hold the line on women's education as a stated benchmark rather than a private preference. It is the issue on which the international position is most united, and a benchmark abandoned quietly is a benchmark that will not be available later.

Revive Chabahar and the International North-South Transport Corridor as the connectivity answer. Afghanistan's economic normalisation and India's Central Asia access are the same logistical problem, and Chabahar is the only route to both that does not run through Pakistan.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

Connects to standing UPSC themes on **India and its neighbourhood**, **the effect of great-power withdrawal on regional security**, and **connectivity as strategy**, and pairs naturally with questions on Chabahar, the **INSTC** and the **SCO**.

Practice question: *“Engagement without recognition has become the default international response to unrecognised governments. Examine the strategic logic of this approach with reference to India’s Afghanistan policy since August 2021, and assess its sustainability.”* (250 words)

Sources: *The Hindu*, Ministry of External Affairs

Source: Five Years of the Islamic Emirate: Afghanistan Still at a Fork in the Road — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in *The Hindu*, the author argues that five years of the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan present a genuine binary rather than a verdict: the regime has delivered internal stability, prevented mass retribution and denied its territory to external operations, while freezing the country socially in a way that only postpones an eventual and unavoidable transition to modern norms.



SUPPORTING

- The IEA 2.0 transition in August 2021, though as chaotic as the 1996 takeover, spared Afghanistan the mass reprisals many predicted, and the country is now largely stable and secure after 47 years of war, occupation and insurgency.
- The territory long known as the badlands of transnational jihad, from which al-Qaeda planned the 9/11 attacks and drew two decades of American retribution, has under the current dispensation been formally denied to groups operating against other countries.
- An estimated 5.7 million refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran over five years, roughly an eighth of the national population, and the administration absorbed that influx without collapse, even as it deepened the country's poverty.
- These shifts from the ruinous conduct of the first Emirate between 1996 and 2001 have only partially mitigated international concern, because the freeze on the education and employment of women remains the central obstacle to normalisation.



COUNTER

Stability secured by the suspension of political contestation is not the same as stability, and a regime that has excluded half its population from secondary education and most employment has disabled the very human capital any future transition would require, so the current calm may be storing up a harder rupture rather than avoiding one.



WAY FORWARD

India should continue the calibrated approach of functional engagement without recognition: sustain humanitarian and development delivery, keep the Kabul mission and the accredited Afghan diplomatic presence in Delhi, press the counter-terrorism assurance through

verification rather than declaration, and align with regional partners on a common set of benchmarks so that recognition, when it comes, is priced rather than conceded.



MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

India's Afghanistan policy since August 2021 has moved from disengagement to functional engagement without formal recognition. Examine the strategic logic of this calibration, and assess the risks it carries for India's stated positions on terrorism and on the rights of women. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan completed five years in power in August 2026, its origin being the taking of Kabul on 15 August 2021. The intervening period has produced neither the collapse nor the normalisation that competing predictions anticipated, and India's policy has correspondingly moved from evacuation and disengagement to a calibrated functional engagement that stops short of recognition.

BODY

The record is genuinely binary. On security, the Emirate consolidated territorial control, avoided mass retribution against former Republic officials on the scale feared in 2021, and has formally denied Afghan territory to groups operating against other states, a commitment central to India's interest given the historical use of Afghan sanctuary by anti-India outfits.

It absorbed the return of roughly 5.7 million refugees from Pakistan and Iran, about an eighth of the population, without institutional collapse. Against this stand the exclusion of women and girls from secondary and higher education and most employment, the absence of any constitutional or representative process, and an economy dependent on humanitarian inflows.

India's calibration reflects this ambivalence. New Delhi maintained a technical mission from June 2022, hosted Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in October 2025, announced the upgrade of the Kabul mission to a full embassy, and accredited a Taliban-appointed Chargé d'Affaires, Noor Ahmad Noor, in January 2026, while withholding formal recognition.

The logic is that absence cedes the ground to Pakistan and China, and that leverage requires presence.

CONCLUSION

Engagement without recognition is a defensible position precisely because it keeps recognition available as a priced concession rather than a spent one. Its durability depends on whether the counter-terrorism assurance is verified rather than merely restated, and on whether India can hold the distinction credibly while the humanitarian and strategic case for deeper involvement grows.

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