

O HERALDO

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A diplomatic opening in Afghanistan in a time of turmoil

It is a development laden with geopolitical implications. India's special envoy Anand Prakash met with Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Kabul on Sunday to discuss bilateral ties, trade cooperation, and regional stability. While on the surface this may appear to be a routine diplomatic interaction, the timing and context of the meeting elevate its significance immensely – especially in the wake of the horrific terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22, which left 26 people, mostly tourists, dead.

This meeting marks a quiet but deliberate recalibration of India's regional diplomacy, and potentially a signal that New Delhi is exploring deeper engagement with the Taliban regime, even while withholding formal recognition. With tensions running high between India and Pakistan over the Pahalgam attack, India's outreach to Kabul takes on a strategic edge.

There are several layers to the importance of this meeting.

First, it represents a continuation of India's cautious but persistent re-engagement with Afghanistan. Since withdrawing its diplomats in August 2021 after the Taliban's return to power, India has slowly re-established its presence, notably through a "technical team" deployed to the Kabul embassy in June 2022. This visit by Prakash builds upon that tentative resumption of relations and signals India's recognition of Afghanistan's strategic role in regional stability – despite its ongoing insistence on an inclusive Afghan government and zero tolerance for terrorism emanating from Afghan soil.

Second, the Pahalgam attack casts a long shadow over this meeting. Although the official read-out did not confirm whether the terror attack was discussed, the subtext of India's recent diplomatic moves is impossible to ignore. Pakistan, long accused by India of providing safe haven to terrorist groups, now finds itself further isolated diplomatically as India builds rapport with a neighbour that also shares a troubled relationship with Islamabad. Afghanistan's own condemnation of the Pahalgam attack earlier this week strengthens the narrative that regional states, including the Taliban regime, are increasingly united in their opposition to terrorism – regardless of ideological differences.

Third, the economic dimension of this meeting cannot be overlooked. Afghanistan's acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, emphasised opportunities for Indian investment in infrastructure and trade, calling for the normalisation of visa processes for businessmen, students, and patients. This appeal for economic engagement aligns with India's longstanding development-oriented approach in Afghanistan, where it has historically invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Prakash, for his part, reaffirmed India's willingness to resume stalled projects and explore new investments.

This economic angle carries mutual benefits. For Afghanistan, struggling under sanctions and limited international recognition, Indian investment could offer much-needed relief and legitimacy. For India, strengthening economic ties helps anchor its influence in the region and counters Chinese and Pakistani efforts to dominate Afghan reconstruction and trade routes.

Moreover, the meeting saw mutual agreement on increasing people-to-people contact and facilitating official and business delegations. This is critical. At a time when Afghanistan remains diplomatically isolated and India faces growing security threats, fostering greater connectivity between the two populations could serve as a bridge for longer-term peace and stability. It may also offer an opportunity to reassert India's soft power in a country where it has traditionally enjoyed goodwill.

Strategically, India's engagement with the Taliban can be seen as part of a broader regional repositioning. With Pakistan's credibility diminished in the eyes of many due to its ambiguous record on terrorism, India is signalling that it will not allow itself to be boxed into a corner. By engaging the Taliban – cautiously and pragmatically – India asserts its autonomy in foreign policy and sends a message that its outreach will be guided by national interest, not ideology.

At the same time, India must tread carefully. The Taliban regime remains unrecognised by most of the international community for valid reasons, including human rights concerns and lack of political inclusivity. Any deeper engagement must be balanced with continued pressure on Kabul to adhere to international norms and prevent its soil from being used for terrorism against any nation.

Still, the significance of this meeting is clear: it is a timely diplomatic overture in a region riven with tension. In the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, it reflects India's resolve not to be paralysed by violence or provocation. Instead, it is choosing to expand its diplomatic toolkit, re-engage its neighbours, and pursue stability through dialogue and development.

This may not be a pivot, but it is a purposeful step – a recognition that the road to regional peace may run through the very regimes once seen as untouchable. In diplomacy, timing is everything. And right now, India's outreach to Afghanistan couldn't be more significant.



ROHIT SINHA

The Balcão effect: How small choices shape Goa's big future

There is a quiet truth about Goa that we often miss in our debates about development and preservation. The infrastructure around us is not something that simply happens to us. It is a mirror reflecting the choices we make as a society. The roads we complain about, the vanishing public spaces we mourn, the increasingly hostile streets we navigate—these are not accidents. They are the logical outcomes of countless individual decisions to withdraw from shared life.

Walk through any Goan village today and you will notice a subtle but profound shift. The traditional *balcão*, that open-air porch where neighbours once gathered to exchange news, argue politics or simply watch the world go by, is disappearing. These weren't ornamental features of a home; they were the social operating systems of our villages. Without needing grand ideas about "community," community happened – because architecture demanded it.

Today, those *balcões* are disappearing, and with them, something intangible but vital is slipping through our fingers. Houses have turned their faces away from the street. Porches have moved to the backyard, hiding life behind high walls. We live in private enclaves with gated driveways designed for maximum privacy. The village itself – once a series of open invitations – has become a scattering of isolated private fortresses. This architectural shift is not just about aesthetics. It signals a deeper retreat from community life.



The architecture of old Goa created the possibility of public life. Low boundary walls meant you could exchange a quick word across a hedge. Shaded, narrow lanes meant walking was natural because trees offered cover. The consequences of this retreat reveal themselves in our shared public infrastructure. When we stop sitting on our front steps, streets become mere thoroughfares rather than social spaces. When we choose cars over walking, authorities respond by widening roads at

the expense of sidewalks and shade trees. When we no longer linger in public markets, those local markets shrink or vanish.

Contrast that with today's development patterns, where villages are being redesigned for cars instead of people. Wide roads slice through neighbourhoods. Trees are chopped down to make room for wider carriageways. Pedestrians are left clinging to crumbling shoulders, if they can even walk at all. "Connectivity" now means how fast you can drive, not how deeply you are woven into the life of your community.

This is not a conspiracy. It is simple cause and effect. A community that no longer uses its commons will find those commons eroded—not out of malice but neglect.

The costs of this disengagement are both tangible and intangible.

Start with the social fabric. The *balcão* was more than architectural flair. It was a daily exercise in democracy. Casual interactions with neighbors, even those we might disagree with, fostered tolerance and compromise. Sociologists call these middle-ring relationships—the layer between intimate friends and strangers—and they are essential for healthy societies. Without them, we risk becoming a collection of isolated individuals, disconnected from the people next door. As public life collapses, public tolerance collapses with it.

Then there are the economic consequences. Compare the vibrant, pedestrian-friendly streets of old Panjim, where shops, cafés and homes spill onto sidewalks, with the car-centric sprawl of newer suburbs. The former nurtures small businesses and chance encounters. The latter demands parking lots and fast-moving traffic. When streets become mere conduits for cars, they cease to be places where community life unfolds.

And finally, the ecological toll. More asphalt means less shade, hotter microclimates and increased reliance on private air conditioning—a vicious cycle that further drives people indoors.

Meanwhile, the surge of second homes and short-term rentals further hollows out what little remains of the commons. These homes rob villages of real neighbors. A second home or holiday home doesn't vote in the local panchayat. Without the mundane rhythms of daily life, community cannot regenerate

itself.

And yet, we remain confused about why Goa feels different.

If all we ask from public authorities is better roads, then all we will get is more roads – at the cost of everything else. If our only vision for public infrastructure is faster throughput for private cars, then trees will fall, local markets will hollow out, and eventually, the very streets we loved for their life and slowness will be sacrificed to vehicular traffic.

It is no accident that the best neighborhoods in the world – the ones we romanticise on holidays – prioritize pedestrian life over vehicular life. Places like Alfama in Lisbon, Marais in Paris, or even Fort Kochi in Kerala – are all designed around the human scale. These places share a common insight. Infrastructure is not neutral. It encourages certain behaviors and discourages others. Wide roads invite speeding cars. Narrow, shaded streets invite strolling neighbors.

One of the most overlooked tools we have to rebuild community life is architecture itself. What if Goa began encouraging what we can call community-positive architecture? Imagine offering tax breaks, fast-track approvals, or other incentives for designs that prioritize openness over fortification – low or porous boundary walls, front-facing *balcões* or verandahs, shaded sidewalks, windows and doors that engage the street rather than retreat from it. Financially rewarding openness, instead of hiding, could nudge private choices back toward collective good.

If Goa wants to retain what is special about it, we have to make different choices. This isn't about banning cars or freezing villages in amber. It's about understanding the forces we set in motion through our personal habits, our architectural choices, our demands of the state. We can continue down the path of isolation, watching as our public realm withers from disuse. Or we can reinvest in the choices and spaces that make community possible.

The Goa we love was never just a collection of scenic spots. It was a way of living together. If we want to preserve that spirit, we must be willing to inhabit it.

The infrastructure we get will always reflect the community we are. What do we want ours to say?

(The author is a strategy consultant and writer living in Goa)

people's *edit*

POPE FRANCIS: THE SHEPHERD WHO TOUCHED SOULS

GLEN FERNANDES

The world stands still in a quiet moment of sorrow, as we bid farewell to Pope Francis who walked gently but carried immense grace. In his smile, we saw warmth. In his words, we heard wisdom. In his life, we witnessed the Gospel come alive—not in grand speeches, but in simple gestures, honest prayers and tireless service to the least of our brothers and sisters.

A man of simple robes but a rich heart, he taught us that greatness lies not in titles but in tenderness. His papacy was not just a reign—it was a journey of love, humility and relentless compassion. He stood with the poor, embraced the outcast, welcomed the refugee and reminded us all that the Church's most beautiful walls are the arms of Christ, open wide for everyone. He taught us that "the name of God is Mercy." He asked us not just to go to Church but to be the Church for others—to carry hope to the streets, to listen deeply and to love without borders.

One of the books that made a deep impact on me is "Lead with Humility" by Jeffrey Krames. It reflects the life and teachings of Pope Francis. The book shows how he led not by power but by service. Not from a throne but from the ground—among people, especially the poor and the forgotten. He said, "The Church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners." That line stayed with me. His words still echo in our hearts. His humble footsteps continue to guide many.

Pope Francis was not just a pope, but a living testimony of God's love in motion. He chose the path of simplicity, walking with ordinary people, listening without prejudice and loving without condition. He was a pilgrim of peace, a global shepherd who crossed borders and oceans to meet the people where they were—embracing the forgotten, comforting the broken and uniting the world through faith and dialogue. He officially declared 2025 as a Year of Jubilee and called the Christians to become "Pilgrims of Hope."

Though he has left this world, his spirit will never leave us. His earthly mission is complete, but his legacy lives on—in churches, in streets, in the hearts of the faithful and the searching alike. And now, as heaven welcomes him, we can almost hear the tender voice of the Lord saying: "Well done, good and faithful servant. come, enter into the joy of your Master." (Matthew 25:21)

Here are some beautiful and inspiring quotes by Pope Francis:

Who am I to judge?/The Church is a field hospital after battle./ A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just/ God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy./Sin is more than a stain. Sin is a wound; it needs to be treated, healed. / Find new ways to spread the word of God to every corner of the world. "Let us protect with love all that God has given us!"

Tourists return to Pahalgam

It is heartening to note that Pahalgam, hit by terror that cost 26 lives, appears to have bounced back with tourists, who wanted to enjoy summer vacation in Kashmir valley, having reportedly stuck to their travel plans. It is learnt that the scenic place which is known as "Little Switzerland" was opened to tourists a couple of days after Tuesday's attack. However Baisaran meadows, where the actual attack took place, remains closed and rightly so as a mark of respect to those killed in the terror attack. After a lull for a few days, hundreds of foreign and domestic tourists reportedly strolled on the streets of Pahalgam bringing back a sense of normalcy.

This has hit hard the plans of the terrorists who would have wanted to see normal life disrupted in one of the favourite tourist spots in the country. The tourists have shown exemplary grit and courage in order not to cancel their travel plans to Pahalgam after the attack.

The main aim of the terrorists is to create panic and fear in the minds of the tourists so that they cancel their travel plans which will lead to a fall in income of the local business community. But this was not to be since normalcy appears to have been restored in the locality.

The renewed footfalls of tourists brings hope and tears down the specter of unemployment for locals who mostly depend on

tourism. People should not be intimidated by the evil designs of the terrorists.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

Cosmetic retribution and shifting blame

For the past one week, the government has worked ceaselessly to prevent Indians from asking pointed, logical questions about the security and political failures that allowed six terrorists to gun down 26 innocent people in Pahalgam. These failings are manifest, the government spent the past five years claiming that terrorism had vanished thanks to its decision to abrogate Article 370 in August 2019.

Then it crowed that its 'surgical strikes' on terror launch pads in Pakistan had broken the backbone of extremists. To paint a picture of 'all is well', it allowed tourists to visit a vulnerable, vehicularly inaccessible meadow without the presence of even rudimentary security cover.

None of this absolves the terrorists of their crime of course, but the prime minister's complacency can't also be wished away. This government tried to cover its failures first by blaming India for not being patriotic enough. "Until 140 crore Indians don't make nationalism and patriotism their supreme duty

letterstotheeditor

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Termites of Pakistan

Pahalgam terror attack is an act of cowardice in which innocent tourists were killed. People who do not want peace to return to Kashmir are behind the crime. Tourism is the lifeline of Kashmir's economy. Attacking tourists is not just an assault on lives, it's an attack on livelihoods. Pakistan is a state sponsor of terror and a designation of Asim Munir and Shahbaz Sharief as terrorists. The only difference is that terrorists live in caves and these persons live in palace.

Even Pakistan defence admits that it had long history of backing and supporting and training and funding these terrorist organizations. Pakistan is a home for number of terrorist groups. If Pakistan terrorists have behaved like Hamas, then India should behave like Israel and finish these Hamas like terrorists. After so much economic mayhem in Pakistan, they have still not learned any lesson. Extremists will continue to exploit fragile and violence-prone states because of links between local extremists and terrorist groups. Though infiltration from Pakistan and Bangladesh is of great concern in the form of illegal migrants pose a more serious threat to the nation. It is a time to wipe out Pakistan terror network like Israel did

to Hamas in Gaza. It's time for revenge! India must teach a lesson which will send shivers through the spine of those perpetrating and executing. The security forces should identify, track and punish every terrorist, their handlers and their backers.

K G Vilop, Chorao

Valley carnage is a targeted massacre

What happened in Pahalgam last Tuesday will be etched in the memory of the Kashmir valley for years to come. It pains me a lot that in the lap of the snow-capped majestic mountains of the beautiful valley of Kashmir, an act of disgusting and spine-chilling bloodshed unfolded, as some heartless gunslingers opened fire without mercy, and without any humanity, indiscriminately targeting both locals and tourists. In mere moments, lives were lost, families shattered, and a region already fatigued by decades of suffering was left in shock once again. The Pahalgam carnage was not just an attack, but was a targeted massacre; a deliberate attempt to instill fear, fuel division, and weaponise religion. And perhaps most dangerously, to pit communities against one another. I would like to ask these mindless man-slayers one simple question: "Do the bullets that tore through the bodies of the 26 civilians know whether they are Hindus or Muslims?"

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai