

India's Aid Strategy in the Heart of Asia: Outcome and Prospects

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The paper provides a thorough analysis of India's aid strategy towards Afghanistan since 2001, including its development, distinguishing traits, and broader geopolitical significance. It contends that rather than engaging in any kind of military action, India has taken a clearly development-oriented approach, concentrating on civilian reconstruction, institution-building, and the provision of people-focused services. The study emphasizes India's reliance on soft power, long-term developmental partnerships, and non-conditional assistance as the fundamental pillars of its engagement by placing its model alongside those of the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and major multilateral organizations. It also examines the strategic reasons for India's engagement, such as the need to secure access to Central Asian markets and energy resources, stabilize the region, and counterbalance Pakistan's influence. The paper argues that India's aid strategy in the Heart of Asia represents a form of strategic developmentalism, wherein development assistance functions simultaneously as a tool of capacity-building and a non-coercive instrument of regional influence. The results demonstrate that, despite being constantly put to the test by political unrest, ongoing security risks, and conflicting regional actors' aspirations, India's development cooperation has improved its diplomatic visibility and soft-power influence in Afghanistan. The study concludes that the future effectiveness of India's aid engagement will depend on its ability to integrate development assistance with broader regional strategies, including multilateral cooperation, alternative connectivity routes, and selective institutional partnerships.

Keywords: India-Afghanistan relations, Aid Diplomacy, International Negotiation, Taliban

Introduction

India and Afghanistan shared long historical, cultural and political contacts. Prior to the partition of Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan was a neighbor of undivided India and had a history of close links with Indian people and vice versa. Following the 1947 partition, India was unable to maintain immediate contact with Afghanistan and had to depend on Pakistan to preserve traditional ties. The geographical location of Afghanistan has made the country most vulnerable state in terms of hosting the great games of politics among super and atomic powers like U.S.A, China, Russia, India, Pakistan and Iran. For

nearly forty years, the area has served as a platform for political contests. As a trading route connecting Central, West, and South Asia, Afghanistan, situated at the intersection of three strategically important regions, it is also known as the “Heart of Asia” because it lies at the geographical, cultural, and geopolitical center of the continent. It has historically linked civilizations, trade routes, and empires across Asia. Today, it continues to symbolize Asia’s interconnectivity and its vulnerabilities, a nation whose peace and stability are vital to the security and prosperity of the entire region (Barfield, 2010). India strived to establish a presence in Afghanistan since its independence. India’s first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru signed the Friendship Treaty on January 4, 1950, for establishing excellent relations between India and Afghanistan, giving humanitarian aid for Afghanistan's growth (Raghavan, 2010).

India adopted South-South Cooperation model which inspired its foreign policy objectives for cooperating the neighboring countries. Both nations promoted the ideas of Non-Aligned Movement and cooperation among newly independent states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. An essential part of India’s development diplomacy, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme was established in 1964 to institutionalize SSC ideas. The program's goal was to share training, technology, and skills with other developing nations (Khanna, 2025). As a result, India started changing its SSC paradigm from moral solidarity to strategic partnership through development assistance during the 1990s as a consequence of economic liberalization and rising international prominence. As an indication of confidence in its administrative, educational, and technological capacities, India's foreign policy increasingly employed development assistance as a diplomatic tool. India's SSC policy was institutionalized in 2012 with the setting up of the Ministry of External Affairs' Development Partnership Administration (DPA). After 2001, this approach was operationalized in Afghanistan, which represents one of India's most thorough implementations of SSC principles in a state afflicted by conflict. Thus, India's assistance to Afghanistan is a modern manifestation of soft power and strategic partnership through development as well as a continuation of its historical foreign policy principles (Sachdeva, 2020). India has become one of Afghanistan's biggest regional donors after the Taliban rule toppled in 2001, contributing more than US\$3 billion in development aid. India's aid strategy abandons political conditions in favor of Afghan-led and Afghan-owned development, in contrast to Western donors. But there are some limitations to India's involvement. Although it has gained a lot of support for its humanitarian, non-military approach, concerns about its efficacy, sustainability, and strategic results still exist. In order to fill these gaps, this study critically evaluates how well India's aid strategy has met its geopolitical and developmental goals in the context of Afghanistan's changing political landscape.

This study examines India's development diplomacy with Afghanistan starting in 2001 using an exploratory qualitative methodology. The study is based on a triangulation of data sources, including secondary academic literature, official government publications, and quantitative aid figures from international organizations. India's aid strategy is positioned in relation to the strategies of other significant regional and global players using a comparative analytical framework.

India's Aid Strategy: The Theoretical Perspectives

Foreign aid in international relations is considered as tool of diplomacy, In general it was given by the developed nations to the developing or under-developing nations in the forms of loans and grants. It has been traditionally considered a means of expanding the economy which tends to come with a political agenda of alliances and other diplomatic interactions with nations that receive it. In international politics, national security is still a constant source of concern. Following World War II, the practice of donor countries providing help to recipient countries was established. The United States of America developed the European Recovery Programme, formerly known as the Marshall Plan, in 1948 to provide foreign aid to the western parts of Europe. It rose to popularity during the Cold War. The U.S. assisted its allies for competing the USSR during the Cold War. Even after the Soviet Union disintegrated, the United States' aid program was crucial for maintaining or increasing its geopolitical influence, especially in the Middle East (Saran, 2014). The term "foreign aid" originated from Overseas Development Assistance. Foreign aid has evolved as a consequence of a many events, including decolonization, and the advent of globalization. It started out as a short-term Cold War diplomatic tool and has since developed into a nearly universal standard by which wealthy nations are required to provide financial support to developing nations. Contrary to popular belief, aid programs differ widely in terms of their funding, objectives, beneficiaries, and applications. Scholars of International Relations have made an attempt to rationalize its objectives (Williams, 2023).

According to the realist thinkers like Hans J. Morgenthau and George Liska, foreign aid as an instrument of national interest, security, and power projection. States provide aid not out of altruism, but to secure geopolitical advantages and counter rival influence. From this standpoint, India's aid policy is primarily motivated by security concerns and regional balance of power. It seeks to counter Pakistan's influence and deny Islamabad "strategic depth" in Afghanistan (Ahmed & Ahlawat, 2024). Its political influence and intelligence presence close to Pakistan's western border are strengthened by its reconstruction projects. India assures alternate trade routes that avoid Pakistan and connect to Central Asia through projects like the Zaranj-Delaram Highway and Chabahar Port. China's regional aspirations under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are also restrained by India's development assistance. Although realism providing insight into India's geopolitical calculations and strategic goals; it fails to effectively represent the non-military and humanitarian nature of India's assistance. India does not employ aid coercively or impose political conditions, in contrast to previous realist powers. Beyond power projection, it has made significant investments in healthcare, education, and interpersonal relationships.

Foreign aid is seen by liberalism as a way to advance democratic governance, peace, and interdependence. In order to achieve stability, it places a strong emphasis on international cooperation and institutional strengthening. Since India's aid seeks to advance institutional stability, human capital development, and economic recovery, it closely adheres to liberal ideals. India demonstrates a cooperative, multilateralism perspective by participating in multilateral forums like the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process, the Bonn Agreement, and UNAMA. Through community-level initiatives, its aid projects

enhance local governance and are inclusive and participatory. The cooperative and developmental aspects of India are apprehended by the liberal framework, but the strategic selectivity of India's aid is underestimated. India's projects frequently have two goals: they secure influence and promote development. Furthermore, India's strategy is mostly bilateral rather than institutionally multilateral in the liberal sense (Zurcher, 2017).

According to constructivism, a state's identity, norms, and values are reflected in foreign aid rather than only its material interests. States engage in a way that reflects how they want to be viewed by others and how they see themselves. Constructivist reasoning is evident in India's aid efforts in Afghanistan. India aligns its aid with the ideals of South-South Cooperation (SSC), which promote equality, reciprocity, and non-interference, because it views itself as a postcolonial, growing democratic and a responsible regional power. In contrast to Western donors, its aid argument stresses "partnership, not patronage," projecting moral credibility. India's normative identity as a peace-promoting player is strengthened by its non-conditional and non-military aid, which raises its moral position and soft power in international politics.

Despite political dangers, India continues to provide humanitarian aid after the Taliban returned in 2021, which further exemplifies norm-based action motivated by humanitarian solidarity rather than *realpolitik*. Although constructivism does excellently of explaining India's soft power diplomacy and values-based assistance ideology, it generally minimizes strategic pragmatism. Despite this, India's aid nonetheless serves real security and geopolitical objectives. Rational power concerns coexist with India's identity-driven diplomacy (Hall, 2019). India's strategy in Afghanistan is therefore best explained by constructivism. India's self-constructed character as a peaceful, democratic, and responsible regional power shapes its diplomacy in addition to its institutional design and economic strength. India's approach to Afghanistan is a kind of development diplomacy that aims for influence through cooperation, attractiveness, and moral statecraft. It is based on constructivism and realist pragmatism.

Nature of India's Aid Programme

Afghanistan has required significant humanitarian aid and rehabilitation since the events of 2001 as well as the demise of the Taliban regime. The nation has been getting assistance from development partners and nearly forty-seven different nations. India is one of those nations which are providing aid to Afghanistan. India therefore aims to preserve its diplomatic ties and goodwill with Afghanistan through the provision of foreign aid. As one of the biggest bilateral donors to Afghanistan, India has given \$3 billion in aid since 2001 (Fayez, 2012). This assistance is being provided in the context of a South-South Cooperation (SSC) which is a development philosophy that emphasizes solidarity, partnership, and mutual benefit among developing nations, rather than conditional or hierarchical aid relationships. It is rooted in the principles of non-interference, mutual respect, demand-driven assistance, and capacity-building. India's SSC framework positions aid as an instrument for empowerment rather than dependency. By presenting itself as a non-coercive development partner, India avoided the political fallout of military intervention and set itself apart from Western donors dominated by the OECD-DAC framework. India's legitimacy was strengthened in Afghan society and among regional actors who were skeptical of Western agendas as a result of this

normative positioning. This development backing comprises three key instruments: grant assistance, lines of credit, and technical partnership. India's development assistance and help to Afghanistan tends to concentrate on three key areas: capacity building, economic and technical cooperation and support, and community development projects. In contrast to the conditional and tied aid provided by Western countries, India gives unconditional aid to Afghanistan in the form of lenient grants and loans (Pant & Passi, 2017).

Foreign aid from India does not promote a culture of dependency in recipient country as advocated by the traditional foreign donors. Additionally, because Indian assistance projects follow a demand-driven methodology and identify sectors for investment and development collaboration, the beneficiary has autonomy (Kumar, 2022). The two main industries in these sectors; energy and transportation what determine how far South Asia can expand overall. India's South Asian aid strategy is centered on giving beneficiaries access to capital resources, technical expertise, capacity building, and other resources to help them optimize their export potential in their primary industries. There is no doubt that, India has made ample contributions to minor development projects, electricity generation infrastructures as well as capacity building in Afghanistan. Moreover, India has strategic interests that coincide with Afghanistan's long-term stabilization. One of the most prominent and important projects is the 218-kilometer Zaranj-Delaram road, which links the landlocked Afghanistan connecting of Chabahar port of Iran (Roychoudhary, 2013). This road provides an alternative route from Iran to Central Asia, thereby reducing Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan. To deal with India's energy needs, Neo-liberals emphasize its significance of connecting Afghanistan being an alternative route to enormous energy resources in the Heart of Asia. With this goal in mind, New Delhi could be perceived as seeking to build up ties with Central Asian Republics (CARs). It granted a US\$17 million grant to Tajikistan for the reconstruction of a hydroelectricity project, and it concluded an accord with Turkmenistan for a pipeline for natural gas that will pass via Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghan government obtains an overwhelming amount of Indian aid, which is integrated with regional needs. However, the majority of Western aid has reimbursed to the countries that provided them due to the "phantom" aid phenomena. India's extensive support program, supplied directly to the Afghan government, has the objective to boost Afghan participation at both the political and community levels (Panda, 2016).

India's Aid to Afghanistan

Afghanistan's path to acquiring foreign aid was complicated. Because of the political implications, nations worldwide have been obliged to contribute relief to Afghanistan. In the 1980s, there was a major influx of migrants to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan. However, the enormous number of refugees created a vacuum for Afghanistan to receive foreign aid. The aid's basic aim was to support the Mujahedeen and refugees in the war against the former Soviet Union (Pant, 2010). Therefore, the financial assistance had limited to do with building up or improving Afghanistan's capacities or institutions. Because virtually everyone was involved in the war or assimilating to their fresh beginnings as refugees, there was practically not enough time to oversee or assuring that the funds were spent properly. The decision of employing Jihadi commanders as beneficiaries and distributors of donations primarily constructed

the door to misuse of funds but also gave training for such people to supervise NGOs that ultimately perform activities for Afghanistan in the state. Following the USSR's occupancy of Afghanistan from 1978 to 1989, the global community was concerned conquering the war rather than the progress of Afghanistan as a whole (Fair, 2014). With the demise USSR in 1991, aid tactics had shifted to a constructive orientation. In addition, the UNO and various other organizations performed initiatives for development mainly within remote Afghanistan. Internationally organizations expressed concern with the fact that they should prioritize their endeavors in rural areas as it was easier to work there compared to the cities. But the Taliban captured Afghanistan in the year 1996 (Sharma, 2009). However, interactions with India were cut off from this point on till 2001, after the Taliban, sponsored by Pakistan, got a firm grip on the country's government. Since the Taliban was defeated in 2001, ties between both countries restored. India supported, encouraged, and equipped the Northern Alliance in its campaign against the Taliban. The partnership has been revived not only in the diplomatic, economic and political, but also through India's constant attempt at reaching towards the people via aid policy. In this Afghanistan, India serves as "most trusted ally and all-weather friend." Once the Taliban rule was overthrown in 2001, India assisted the efforts through the international community to reconstruct Afghanistan (Sinha, 2020). India embraced the opportunity to swiftly re-enter Afghanistan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It participated the UN-sponsored Bonn conference as an observer. India participated as well at the November 16, 2001, and December 6, 2001, meetings in New York City of the coalition of twenty-one countries for Afghanistan, the meetings sponsored by the United Nations. Afghanistan's socio-political and humanitarian issues were subject to discussion. After that, India emerged Afghanistan's fifth-largest donor and actively aided in the country's restoration after the war wrecked it (D'Souza, 2017). After the Bonn Meeting, the Indian government immediately provided a sum of \$100 million for Afghanistan rebuilding; over the following twenty years, it offered over \$ 2 billion.

India's economic aid to Afghanistan had two primary objectives, according to scholar Rani D. Mullen. The first was to try to maintain the democratic government in place by halting the establishment of a fundamentalist regime in Kabul. India's security and economic success are seen as dependent on its assistance in preserving Afghan stability. Second, India is creating opportunities for itself to become a regional giant with ambitions to become a global power through its growing economy and expanding development assistance program. It was believed that strengthening its regional power and guaranteeing economic growth required closer ties with its neighbors (Mullen, 2017). The Bonn talks' political delegation presented India's political agenda in Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai was elected and the Indian economy had regained momentum and was starting to expand at double-digits. Meanwhile, India's aid and development in Afghanistan were increasing steadily. In Afghanistan, India had the financial means to pursue its regional and national strategic objectives. India devised a new plan to promote diplomatic ties with Afghanistan after the Taliban were defeated in 2001. India assisted in the reconstruction of Afghanistan after 2001 by employing the "soft power" diplomacy. Since 2001, practically all Indian projects in Afghanistan have been carried out in conformity with the requirements and requests of the

Afghan government. India aids in development and humanitarian causes. The humanitarian sector includes health care, social welfare, education and training for public servants. Infrastructure, communication, road construction, democratic institutions, hydropower projects, and dam construction were the primary areas of development, mainly for the establishment of institutions and economic growth. India has mostly invested in the mining, agricultural, energy, capacity building, and infrastructure sectors in Afghanistan because they have been prioritized for the Afghan government (Dutta, 2018). At the contrary, foreign assistance contributors in Afghanistan who have offered aid through diplomatic missions, local rehabilitation groups, or other means of delivery have been delayed by a lack of financial arrangement, high level of corruption, and the Afghan government's tardy participation. Each of the projects was carried out in partnership with the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) and in accordance with the Afghanistan National Development Planning, with an emphasis on community ownership of assets.

The Government of India finished many projects in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2007. Social development comprises shipments for emergency humanitarian relief, school renovation, educational kits, donation of desks and benches, literature, medicines and the installation of restrooms. Infrastructure development includes the supply of buses and vehicles, aircrafts, solar electrification and construction of transmission lines. The emphasis was also on the establishment of strengthening capacities such as training to teachers in schools, doctors, diplomats, technology and information experts, skill development, sewing machine supply, banking, and so on. Economic development centered on deep well drilling, the agricultural sector, and the setting up of warehouses for cold storage, among other things. Reconstruction contributions include those deposited to the Afghan budget for government and the World Bank-managed Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund. Scientific up-gradation and technology emphasized on the reconstruction of information systems, telecommunications, television satellites, the establishment of common infrastructure for service, television studios, transmitters, and television relay centers (Ellis, 2000).

India has concentrated predominantly on technology, infrastructure, and capacity-building initiatives for total development of people, covering social development such as education and healthcare. In the year 2010, India remained the biggest regional investor to Afghanistan, in the end of 2011, with the ratification of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, India reinforced its allegiance for the democratic governance. After the agreement, former PM Manmohan Singh announced in a joint statement to the press with Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President that "India will continue to stand by the citizens of Afghanistan until they strive for taking accountability for the nation's leadership and stability post the expulsion of international troops in 2014. (Sachdeva, 2018) "This agreement dedicated India to maintaining an ongoing relationship with Afghanistan, especially endorse for building Afghan infrastructures institutions, schooling, and assistance with technology, in addition to the commitment aimed at making the nation autonomous across different areas. NATO member states reduced their military presence and financial assistance in Afghanistan in 2014. India increased the amount of development aid it provided from \$1.5 billion in 2014 to \$2 billion in 2017. The Afghan Parliament building was inaugurated in December 2015 by Afghan

President Ashraf Ghani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Afghanistan received the Parliament building as a gift from India, demonstrating its support for democratic principles. By constructing a parliament building in Afghanistan, India demonstrated its strong belief in the country's ability to govern itself democratically. In addition, there is another Indian-sponsored project. The following year, 2016, saw the opening of the Salma Dam. Although it was a multipurpose dam, it was primarily utilized for land irrigation and electricity production. The name of this dam is the India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam. Through cooperation between the public and private sectors, India has given Afghanistan significant development assistance. (Chandra, 2017)

It was entirely grant-based and encompassed a wide range of industries. Over two million Afghan students receive vitamin-fortified biscuits every day from Indian humanitarian aid, which also includes free pharmaceutical and clinical service delivery to over 30,000 Afghans nationwide and expedited visa processing for Afghans seeking medical treatment in India. In conjunction with the United Nations Organization, the World Food Programme (WFP), New Delhi has created several schools and a mid-day feeding system, which has served as an essential factor in increasing enrollment (Kumar & Singh, 2019). Notwithstanding challenges with logistics from Pakistan, India managed to bring the proposal into effect by sending 250 thousand tons of grain to Afghanistan at an Indian seaport to ensure that it could be transported via Pakistani port at Karachi to Afghanistan. When the Chabahar port opened in 2016, India committed to export one million metric tons of wheat to Afghanistan as part of the India-Afghanistan-Iran Trilateral Pact. This was a big stride forward in India's Afghanistan reach for the first time, a cargo to Afghanistan evaded Pakistan. The development of a 218-kilometer highway connecting Delaram to Zaranj, which allows Afghanistan accessibility through the Chabahar Port in Iran, at a modest cost of US\$135 million, was a huge accomplishment for India (Kanwal, 2013). This roadway links the Iranian border with Afghanistan's ring road, and from the Iranian side, it leads to the Chabahar Port, which is being constructed with India's support, offering a distinct option for exporting from and supplying into Afghanistan. India has also supported Afghanistan via affordable, unorthodox projects that have helped the Afghan government while generating huge appreciation for India. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative, started in the year 1964, served as one of the inexpensive assistance for development programs to Afghanistan that Mullen expected would have a lasting effect. The initiative includes the stationing of Indian experts in foreign countries, the offer of advisory services, the provision of equipment, academic trips, and economical English training and education to Afghan officials and learners. Since India has made it simple for Afghans to obtain visas in order to receive medical and educational services, many Afghan students who are supported by the government and private sector are able to continue their education in India. During the American occupation, the ITEC program provided educational grants to numerous Afghan students, trained millions of Afghan public servants, and supported a dozen job-training programs, despite the ease with which visas could be obtained. Under the P.M. Narendra Modi government, India's aid strategy in Afghanistan from the year 2014 onwards demonstrated both a continuation of earlier commitments and the progress of a more strategically sophisticated approach.

Although the fundamental components of India's developmental engagement remained rooted in soft power, capacity building, and infrastructure development, the country signified a radical move toward integrating aid policy with regional connectivity and strategic leadership. Despite its ambitious scope, India's aid initiatives during this period were hindered by Afghanistan's worsening security situation and shifting global dynamics. As the Taliban intensified their war and the US initiated negotiations that led to the 2020 Doha Agreement, India faced growing uncertainty regarding Afghanistan's political future (Scott, 2016). India's experience during this period thus highlights the paradox of using aid as a foreign policy tool in unstable geopolitical environments: while it can promote goodwill and institutional capacity, it cannot assure political continuity or strategic stability in the absence of a safe and cooperative regional environment.

Two decades of investment in Afghanistan's democratic and developmental infrastructure were quickly reversed when India shuttered its embassy and removed all of its diplomats following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. At first, India took a wait-and-watch approach, concentrating on humanitarian and security issues while keeping no formal communication with the Taliban government. Development projects were put on hold, but humanitarian relief was quickly restored. New Delhi sent more than 50,000 tonnes of wheat, medications, vaccinations, and earthquake relief materials via UN channels despite closing its embassy in Kabul. It continued to provide educational scholarships and interacted with Taliban delegates in Kabul through technical teams, demonstrating a practical approach to humanitarian assistance without political acknowledgment (MEA, 2022). However, when ties between Islamabad and Kabul worsened due to cross-border issues, New Delhi was compelled to gradually reevaluate its strategy due to expanding Chinese interests and growing concerns over Pakistan's influence. Through mid-2022, India had progressively reinstated a technical mission in Kabul, primarily to oversee humanitarian relief and enable trade, medical support, and refugee rehabilitation. In the years that followed, India gradually improved ties with the Taliban by giving visas to a select group of Taliban officials, engaging in trust-building backchannel diplomacy, and eventually allowing the Taliban to appoint representatives in Indian cities like Hyderabad and Mumbai (Haider, 2025).

In late 2024 and early 2025, prominent Indian officials had public meetings with Taliban commanders, marking the highest level of government outreach since the Taliban's comeback. Important conversations were placed in Delhi and Dubai between Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri. In October 2025, India reversed its isolationist tactics and partially lifted the Taliban's diplomatic isolation by reopening its embassy and upgrading its technical mission to a diplomatic one in Kabul. India has taken a practical "engagement without recognition" stance against the Afghan government. Despite not giving the Taliban regime *de jure* legitimacy, India is attempting to preserve its power and safeguard its national interests in Afghanistan.

India's Aid Programme in Comparison to Other Donor Countries

Afghanistan has emerged as a significant draw for foreign aid and also military and security forces, with an estimated US\$286 billion in aid. According to the World Bank, Afghanistan received US\$77 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA)

between the years 2001 and 2021. Afghanistan has also received the most expensive international peacekeeping force mandated by the United Nations. Between 2002 and 2013, a total of US\$ 62 billion in funding for Afghanistan's reconstruction was pledged at a series of donor conferences. Between 2002 and 2005, approximately US\$62 billion was released for projects and actions for development. Afghanistan has been faced a number of conflicts ranging from instability, proxy wars, militancy, drug proliferation and so on (World Bank, 2021). It is also on the geographical fault lines in Asia between West-South and Central Asia and has a history of conflicts. Thus, there are multiple actors involved in Afghanistan with diverse interests constantly clashing with each other and sometimes bonding with each other adding to its existing antipathy.

The United States of America remained a largest donor in Afghanistan due to its primary interests. The U.S. started its military campaign in Afghanistan following the events of 9/11. The total US expenditure on military was 825 billion dollars and 130 billion dollars on reconstruction projects from the years 2001 to 2020 that brought the total cost 955 billion dollars close to estimated 1 trillion dollars. While the US attempted to establish democratic institutions in Afghanistan, its major focus remained on military operations in the country (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2021). As a result of the Taliban's ascent, Afghan institutions that lacked support and organization disintegrated. The "good Taliban" groups that might be open to dialogue, while the "bad Taliban" are involved in terrorism or who oppose peace initiatives. This was the US military and diplomatic strategy. The complex relationships between so-called moderate and extremist groups persisted, and this narrative oversimplified the complex realities of Taliban factions. India, on the other hand, rejected dialogue with the Taliban between 2001 and 2020 in favor of giving development aid to the elected Afghan government and state institutions. India has called for an inclusive peace process that is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, that prioritizes the protection of women's rights, minorities, and sovereignty, and that maintains political power should not be shared with terrorist organizations (Kaura, 2023,). In February 2020, US President Joe Biden signed a deal with the Taliban that called for a complete troop withdrawal in 2021, regardless of the outcome of peace talks or Taliban behavior. The Afghan government fell quickly as a consequence of the hasty withdrawal, and the evacuation of Kabul descended into chaos. In response, India voiced concern, urged continued support for Afghanistan, and warned of the repercussions of a state ruled by the Taliban.

The United Kingdom gave Afghanistan the most bilateral official development assistance (ODA) in Asia up until 2020. Afghanistan has been high on Britain's foreign and economic agenda since its involvement in the US-led invasion in 2001. In 2001, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair mentioned three objectives: bringing to justice those responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks; dismantling the terrorist network run by Osama Bin Laden; and action against the Taliban regime that supports him. The UK directed NATO combat actions at its height through 2014 and deployed a UK force level of 9,500 personnel (Chin, 2018). At the commencement of military operations in 2001, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair indicated that the UK was undertaking action on three fronts: military, diplomatic and humanitarian. Afghanistan became the fifth-largest recipient of UK bilateral ODA in 2002 and remained in the top six from 2003 until 2005,

rising to third in 2008 and second in 2010. In the period since 2015, Afghanistan has generated less attention in the UK, as other national security priorities have come to the fore. However, the UK remains a significant contributor (Dorney, 2015). There were large number of UK troops deployed to NATO's Resolute Support Mission and it has one of the largest and most active diplomatic efforts.

Russia was not supportive of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001; they were not against the operation. In fact, soon after the Taliban seized control of the capital of Afghanistan in November 2001, Russia established a diplomatic presence in Kabul. They did provide military assistance to the Afghans. Between 2002 and 2005, Russia provided 30 million dollars, training and logistical aid, to the Afghan National Army (ANA). Since 2001, Moscow's eye towards Afghanistan has been largely consumed by the United States and NATO actions, along with increasingly greater roles for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China. They provided Afghanistan 40 tanks and 12 military helicopters. Military assistance to Afghanistan has been continuing since 2002, and includes Afghan military training, gear, and logistical services totaling \$30 million per year, plus humanitarian relief. Russia was the 18th largest donor to Afghanistan in 2006 (Allison, 2013). Russia has also conducted a number of military exercises in the region and is supportive of Central Asian nation's efforts to secure their borders. To ensure that Central Asia and Russia do not see a rise in extremist groups, Russia over the past years has been in talks with the Taliban. It hosted the Taliban for multiple rounds of talks even though the group is officially classified as a banned terrorist organization in Russia, making any association with it a potential crime. Nonetheless, the talks have allowed Russia to maintain channels of communication with the Taliban. Russia launched the "Moscow Format" consultations on Afghanistan in 2017 (Katz, 2018). The initial consultations were excluded India for its Afghan-led, Afghan-owned policy and not to engage with any terrorist outfit. Therefore, Russia focused on Afghanistan's immediate neighboring countries which are directly impacted by security threats, particularly Pakistan, China, Iran, and the Central Asian republics. Later, Russia recognized the importance of India's role in Afghan stability, given its substantial development aid and regional influence. Therefore, India included in subsequent consultations and became a regular participant from the second meeting onwards reflecting the expanded agenda and the need for broader regional consensus. On September 29, 2023 the 5th meeting of the Moscow Format consultations on Afghanistan was held at the Russian city of Kazan (The Hindu, 2023). Apart from the permanent members of the format, the representatives of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey attended the meeting as guest of honor. Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi was also part of discussion. Russia does not stop the Taliban from participation in different Moscow-led events. The Moscow Format of dialogue is most important forum for the engagement with the Taliban by the fact that all key regional countries and current regime in Afghanistan came together to discuss the way forward for the nation and take certain positive initiatives for the existing Afghan authorities.

China is worried about the spread of extremist ideas and activism from Afghanistan and across its own borders particularly into its western territory, Xinjiang. This area is home to a Uyghur population; a predominantly Sunni Muslim Turkic ethnic

group of approximately ten million people (Huasheng, 2014). China has made a security contribution to Afghanistan since 2001. Its aid commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction has been a very modest from 2001 to 2013 US\$250 million. Beijing was disinterested in rebuilding Afghanistan and transforming its political structures and social patterns like the Western countries. China refrained from participating in international efforts in Afghanistan from the year 2002 to 2012. But it kept close contacts with the government of Afghanistan. China prioritized economic considerations and utilizing Afghanistan's rich natural resources. Beijing signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations with Afghanistan in the year 2006. In the successive year Chinese companies, Jiangxi Copper and Metallurgical Corporation of China obtained 3 billion dollars contract for extracting copper from Logar Province in Afghanistan particularly from Mes Aynak mines. It was considered as a big deal made by China with Afghan government for its economic interests (Shinn, 2015, pp. 231-252). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, aims to enhance regional connectivity and infrastructure, positioning Afghanistan as a strategic crossroads for routes between South, Central, and West Asia. Which aimed to enhance commerce and investment in Afghanistan? It has prompted widespread concern regarding so-called "debt trap" diplomacy.

However, Afghanistan is not yet heavily indebted to China, the structure and aims of BRI contracts pose risks of overreliance, strategic leverage, and financial instability if borrowing increases dramatically. India's strategy avoids debt and focuses on "soft power" development, standing in contrast to China's riskier, loan-based BRI model that has raised concerns of debt entrapment and loss of Afghan sovereignty. Apart from that China was the first major nation to accept the Taliban's envoy Assadullah Bilal Karimias ambassador in December 2023, marking a significant step toward quiet normalization rather than open recognition of the regime. It has kept its embassy in Kabul and made sure that diplomatic activities continue there while closely coordinating with other regional players such as Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. In October, 2023 Taliban showed keen interest to be component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and sent a technical team to Beijing for 'better understanding' the issues in the way joining initiatives. The Taliban approved \$ 216 million Chinese investment project for an industrial park outside Kabul in April, 2022. This project is expected to host 150 factories. Beside this China Afghan Mining Processing and Trading Company announced \$ 350 million in various sectors including making of a cement factory, power generation and public health (The Diplomat, 2022).

Iran has been particularly concerned in combating Sunni extremism in the context of Islamic ideology. Following a strategy of propagating and strengthening relationships with Shia communities across the world, Iran has consistently made its foothold in Afghanistan, particularly with the assistance of Hazara community. Tehran have a worst relationship with the United States, and its strategic presence in Afghanistan is a major cause of concern. The role of Tehran was influential at the Bonn Conference in December 2001, when Iranian officials convinced the members of Sunni Tajik dominated United Front (UF) to accept the proposed composition of the new transitional government under Hamid Karzai in the support of US policy. Consequently, the establishment of multi-ethnic and sectarian Islamic Afghan government that included Mujahideen leaders but had

a Pashtun leadership caused by this unprecedented Iran-US cooperation. Iran pledged to contribute 570 million dollars to Afghanistan at Tokyo Conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan in 2002(Kutty, 2014). It also provided 100 million dollars at London Conference in 2006.Iran emerged as ninth biggest non-Western nation to pledge assistance approximately 1000 million dollars for Afghanistan in one decade since 2001 following the dismantle of Taliban regime. However, Iran's resentment towards the United State led it to continuously support the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. Iran aspires to establish an economic influence in Afghanistan with the ultimate objective of becoming a major strategic crossroads for the movement of goods and services linking the Far East, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Iran has met directly with the Taliban numerous times since 2021, concentrating on border security, counterterrorism cooperation, and drug trade regulation. Despite these interactions, Iran opted for incremental normalization over full recognition of the Taliban regime in order to maintain influence and prevent upsetting its local audience and foreign allies (Saikal, 2021).

Outcome of India's Aid Strategy in Afghanistan

New Delhi's long-term regional objectives are strengthened by a number of strategic, political, economic, and soft-power advantages obtained by India's determination to support Afghanistan's development through its foreign aid policy. Fundamentally, India believes that its own security depends on a stable and secure Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been at the center of conflicting regional interests ever before the Taliban regime fell in 2001, and its internal instability has frequently influenced South Asia's broader security dynamics. In order to help the Afghan state function more efficiently and withstand extremist pressures, India is investing in the country's reconstruction, whether it is through means of the construction of public facilities, roads, power infrastructure, or educational, medical, and administrative institutions.

In addition to promoting regional peace, a stronger Afghan government is in accordance with India's counterterrorism objectives because a weak or split Afghanistan may once again serve as a refuge for terrorist organizations (Zazai, & Rahmani, 2024). India may encourage a safer neighborhood without engaging in direct military actions by using this developmental method. India's capacity to thwart Pakistan's long-standing quest for "strategic depth" in Afghanistan is another significant benefit. Pakistan has been attempting for decades to limit India's influence in the nation and safeguard its western border by installing a friendly government in Kabul. In addition to limiting Islamabad's capacity to exploit Afghan territory as a political buffer, a stronger and more independent Afghanistan would also reduce the space available to anti-India militant organizations, who have historically flourished during times of turmoil in Afghanistan. At the same time, China's expanding influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and its strong ties to Pakistan are countered by India's development-oriented engagement. By presenting itself as a reliable and trustworthy alternative, India keeps the area from completely falling into a sphere of influence dominated by China and Pakistan. In essence, India's aid strategy in Afghanistan concurrently restricts Pakistan's influence, thwarts China's strategic expansion, enhances regional security, advances its connectivity objectives, and fortifies its reputation as a soft power (Dutta, 2019). Ordinary Afghans appreciated India's development-focused strategy, which gave New Delhi a pacifist but effective means of

retaining control. India has established great goodwill that is difficult to ignore or reject through high-impact initiatives including the construction of the Afghan Parliament, the Salma (Afghan–India Friendship) Dam, and the Zaranj–Delaram expressway. Through such efforts, India is able to increase credibility with Afghan officials and the community at large, which makes it more difficult for Pakistan to control political power without seeming to impede Afghanistan's advancement (Chaudhuri, 2018).

India now has a greater say in discussions regarding Afghanistan's political future, peace initiatives, and development aspirations as a result of securing a significant diplomatic space there. India's soft power and reputation abroad have been greatly enhanced by its development aid to Afghanistan. India has opted for a people-focused, developmental route, in contrast to several great powers that have relied on military intervention or coercive techniques. India is now one of Afghanistan's most respected and trusted foreign allies because to this strategy (Nanda, 2011). Deep and enduring interpersonal ties that go well beyond formal diplomacy have been established by Indian hospitals, scholarship programs, vocational training, agricultural assistance, and civil service capacity-building. Such goodwill is particularly essential since it tends to endure political shifts in Kabul, guaranteeing that India will continue to be a recognized partner no matter which administration takes office. India's wider identity as a growing soft power and a responsible regional leader dedicated to humanitarian and developmental ideals rather than force is strengthened by the perception of it as a non-intrusive, charitable actor involved in true state-building (Sharma, 2016). The long-term effects of India's soft-power and development-focused engagement in Afghanistan since 2001 were demonstrated by Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's October 2025 visit to India. While many other external actors faced political restrictions or credibility gaps, New Delhi was able to maintain diplomatic acceptability even after the Taliban regained control because to its longstanding reputation. The visit indicates Kabul's recognition of India's demonstrated contribution to development and its desire to expand global alliances, particularly in light of strained ties with Pakistan and growing dependence on China (The Indian Express, 2025). In order to strengthen bilateral commercial and economic connections, Afghanistan's commercial Minister, Alhaj Nooruddin Azizi, traveled to India in the same month. This was a reflection of India's continued practical engagement with Kabul during the Taliban regime.

Formalizing trade agreements, such as reopening direct air freight corridors, designating commercial attachés, and reviving a joint Trade & Industry Committee to promote more regular and seamless trade, was the main focus of his visit (Reuters, 2025). Afghanistan's top priority were expanding market access for exports including minerals, handicrafts, and agricultural products as well as exploring possibilities in which India could invest in important industries like infrastructure development, hydropower, and mining. Afghanistan is a key gateway to Central Asia, a region rich in economic potential and energy resources. India is attempting to secure alternate routes to Central Asia that avoid Pakistan, which has continuously refused transit access, by investing in vital Afghan infrastructure, especially transport routes that lead to Iran's Chabahar Port (Bhatia, 2020). By lowering reliance on ordinary avenues, these initiatives strengthen India's strategic sovereignty and open the door to more extensive future trade, energy, and mining cooperation.

For instance, India's long-term goal to secure essential mineral resources through development-led partnerships and accumulated goodwill is seen in its interest in the Hajigak iron ore deposits. The long-term strategic and economic potential of India's participation in Afghanistan is still significant, despite the fact that the country's insecurity has hindered several commercial projects (Thakkar, 2021). In terms of diplomacy, India's sustained engagement in Afghanistan has given it significant clout in regional and international debates concerning the nation's future. India has gained credibility and respect in forums established by key powers like the United States, Russia, Iran, and numerous international organizations by continuously contributing to Afghanistan's rehabilitation. Because of its prominence, India is able to contribute significantly to discussions on peace talks, counterterrorism initiatives, and long-term development plans. India's ethical credibility and political legitimacy are further enhanced by its consistent support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process (Kronstadt, 2020). Furthermore, India's involvement in Afghanistan demonstrates its capacity to take on significant South Asian development and humanitarian obligations. This bolsters its case for a more prominent place in international organizations, such as a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, in addition to reaffirming its regional leadership (The Hindu, 2021). Finally, but similarly crucially, India's development aid has contributed to the creation of long-lasting social and cultural ties that will influence Afghan perspectives for many years to come. Many Afghan students have sought healthcare in Indian hospitals, and thousands have attended Indian institutions to further their studies. These opportunities foster strong interpersonal ties and a feeling of familiarity that are difficult to break due to changing political conditions. All things considered, there are numerous interrelated and reinforcing benefits to India's assistance with Afghanistan's growth. India's security environment is directly improved by a stable Afghanistan, which also helps counteract competing regional influences, strengthens India's soft-power image, creates new chances for connectivity and commerce, and increases New Delhi's diplomatic clout on the international scene. In this way, development cooperation has evolved into a strategic instrument that enables India to further both its own national interests and humanitarian goals. As a result, one of the most important areas of Indian foreign policy in the years following 2001 is Afghanistan.

Conclusion

India's post-2001 reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan represent a singular chapter in contemporary international relations. It is a strong conviction in the superiority of cooperation over dominance. India, which has its own history as a peaceful, postcolonial democracy, viewed Afghanistan as a nearby ally committed to mutual stability rather than as a distant benefactor. India became one of Afghanistan's most significant regional partners after the Taliban were overthrown, contributing more than \$3 billion to the reconstruction of hospitals, roads, schools, and dams. This effort was unique not only because of its size but also because of its attitude. India's aid had no political prerequisites, in contrast to Western aid, which was frequently coupled with military objectives. It was run by civilians, concentrated on what Afghans claimed they needed, and was motivated by the South Cooperation concept, which is a philosophy of cooperation among poor countries. We could employ a few different perspectives to comprehend why India took

this course. One way to look at it is in terms of identity, since India views itself as a country that supports equality and noninterference, and its actions in Afghanistan are consistent with those ideals. Another viewpoint emphasizes practical peacebuilding, which is the conviction that by bolstering Afghanistan's institutions and economy, a more peaceful region is created for all. A third perspective emphasizes development diplomacy, protecting trade lines, limiting the influence of competitors, and guaranteeing its own security. There is no conflict between these motivations they actually merge together.

India deliberately deviated from the norms of great countries by opting not to send troops and instead concentrating on developing civilian infrastructure. India gained a unique type of trust and moral authority through this soft power strategy, which distinguished it from both the harsh rivalries of its neighbors and Western military efforts. This approach, of course, encountered several obstacles. Projects were continuously hampered by Afghanistan's never-ending cycle of bloodshed and political unrest. India had to close its embassy and halt its development efforts after the Taliban took back control in 2021, which was a devastating setback. However, India swiftly adjusted. In a matter of months, it was quietly reestablishing a technical presence in Kabul and shipping shiploads of wheat, medicines, and vaccines through the United Nations. Today's Afghanistan offers a fresh riddle. India's space for direct, official engagement has decreased with the Taliban in power, China growing its economic clout, and Pakistan retaining its sway. However, this exact circumstance demonstrates the longstanding relevance of the foundation that India established. It now faces the difficulty of fostering that goodwill without official diplomatic relations through ongoing humanitarian assistance, scholarships, and cultural linkages. India's two-decade effort in Afghanistan will be regarded as a potent example of how development, fueled by cooperation rather than force, can be a long-lasting vehicle for peace if it can successfully manage regional tensions while assisting the Afghan people.

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