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**TWO DECADES OF PARTNERSHIP: AN ANALYSIS OF
AFGHANISTAN–INDIA RELATIONS (2001–2021)**

- Saifurahman Fayiz¹ & Naido Ashok²

Abstract

This research examines the relationship between India and Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, with a focus on social interaction, political participation, and India's development assistance in Afghanistan. The study, employing a qualitative, descriptive research approach, relies on secondary data from academic journals, books, theses, publications of international organisations, and official government sources in Afghanistan and India. To identify key trends in bilateral collaboration, the data underwent thematic and qualitative content analysis. The findings indicate that India has become a significant development partner of Afghanistan by investing in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and institutional capacity-building, thereby enhancing Afghanistan's ability to govern and deliver public services. The research also reveals that while strengthening bilateral diplomatic ties, India's development-oriented strategy increased its political legitimacy and soft power among Afghan residents. The study concludes that, since 2001, India-Afghanistan relations have been characterized by strategic collaboration, developmental cooperation, and people-to-people interaction, all of which have significantly contributed to Afghanistan's development and reconstruction efforts. The analysis provides significant insights into how development diplomacy affects long-term bilateral relationships in post-conflict contexts, despite constraints related to the reliance on secondary data and the exclusion of developments after 2021.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India and Afghanistan Relations, Strategic Partnership, Infrastructure and Social Development, Soft Power Diplomacy, Development Assistance.

¹Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India.

²Retired Professor, Department of Political Science, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India.

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Introduction

Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan and India had one of the longest-lasting and most strategically important bilateral alliances in South Asian geopolitics. India reappeared as a key political partner in Afghanistan's state-building and governance processes after the first Taliban administration fell and the Bonn Agreement was signed in 2001. Over the course of two decades, the relationship evolved from post-conflict diplomatic re-engagement to a formal strategic partnership, characterised by high-level diplomatic encounters, institutionalised political dialogue, and symbolic state-building initiatives. This section examines critically the development, institutional underpinnings, difficulties, and legacy of Afghanistan-India political relations during this time (Behuria, 2016; ISAS, 2013).

Historical Background and Restoring Political Relationship

After being cut off from Afghanistan for almost five years during Taliban administration (1996–2001), the post-9/11 geopolitical shift gave India a clear chance to rebuild diplomatic ties with the country. Due to its close ties to Pakistan and acceptance of anti-Indian insurgent networks, India saw the Taliban rule as hostile. It had no diplomatic representation in Afghanistan during that time (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009).

India's persistent backing of the anti-Taliban political coalition, which subsequently served as the foundation of the Afghan political leadership after 2001, influenced its strategic orientation during this transition. Many members of this coalition assumed significant positions in the interim and transitional governments following the fall of the Taliban regime, which helped create a favourable political climate for India's return (Rashid, 2008).

In December 2001, India formally re-entered Afghan politics during the Bonn Conference. The meeting established a framework for constitutional governance and an interim authority, laying the groundwork for Afghanistan's post-Taliban political structure. India's involvement demonstrated its support for Afghanistan's democratic transition, territorial integrity, and sovereignty (Rubin, 2002).

Political links were further reinforced when Hamid Karzai was named interim leader. Early trust-building and frequent high-level diplomatic contact throughout the early years of the new Afghan state were facilitated by Karzai's familiarity with Indian political culture and institutions (CENJOWS, 2022).

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This study aims to examine the nature and development of the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and India from 2001 to 2021. The study examines explicitly how Afghanistan's growth and development over the past 20 years have been influenced by India's institutional support, political involvement, and development assistance. The research aims to analyse the breadth, efficacy, and strategic importance of this cooperation in a post-conflict state-building context by evaluating India's contributions across key areas, including governance, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and capacity-building.

Literature Review

The following is an overview of the relations between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which were established in 1950. Both countries maintain diplomatic relationships. Based on a centuries-old cultural alignment, a close relationship between the peoples of the two countries was established (Paliwal, 2017). The relationship between India and Afghanistan began with the goal of stability, rooted in their historical cultural ties. According to Sachdeva (2016), India's development efforts in Afghanistan started in 2002. The study suggests that increased Indian involvement could support Afghanistan as it addresses significant economic, political, and security challenges during its transition period. The Soviet military intervention, which unsuccessfully tried to establish a communist regime, resulted in over a million fatalities and led to five million Afghans, mostly escaping to neighbouring nations, becoming refugees. Pakistan's backing of a strict Taliban government in Afghanistan also had widespread negative consequences, including a significant role in the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The World Bank reports that aid to Afghanistan in 2010-2011 totalled approximately USD 16 billion, roughly equivalent to the country's nominal GDP. Since 2002, India has been actively involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction, pledging about USD 2 billion in assistance. These projects have spanned the country and focused on road building, power transmission, hydroelectric power, agriculture, telecommunications, education, health, and skill development. Moreover, the government of India has consistently maintained a positive and significant relationship with Afghanistan in all situations. According to Pant (2012), another study determines the shifting pathway of the Indian government's policy toward Afghanistan since 2001. The author stated that the relations between Afghanistan and India are rooted in the depths of history. However, British India geographically separated these two countries, but the friendship is forever. When the USSR

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invaded Afghanistan, India accepted communist rule in Kabul. However, even as the Taliban took over Kabul, India was pursuing its relations with Anti theTaliban Northern Alliance. In addition, Indians attended the Bonn Conference and voted for establishing a post-Taliban government headed by Hamid Karzai after several months of Taliban rule. Moreover, India undertook a series of political initiatives to safeguard its interests. These included training Afghan Security Forces, fostering ongoing collaboration with Iran and Russia, and formalizing the engagement through the Strategic Partnership Agreement.

Afghanistan and India, 2001-02: Reestablishment of Diplomatic Relations Following the Taliban. The period from 2001 to 2002 is remembered as the turning point in India-Afghanistan relations, signalling the onset of a historically dramatic restoration of diplomatic ties that had been put on hold after the Taliban regime came to power. The broader international intervention in Afghanistan paved the way for greater cooperation between the two nations over the following decades. Re-establishment was marked by accelerated diplomacy, significant Indian support for restoring Afghanistan, and the strategic positioning of two in the new Afghan state without the Taliban (Rundfunk, 2001).

After the 9/11 attacks, in the US-led war in Afghanistan, India got a chance to build its relationship with Afghanistan. The U.S. has installed an interim government, with Hamid Karzai as President in Kabul, following the toppling of the Taliban. For India, Hamid Karzai was a trusted old friend, and it was an opportunity to create a rehabilitation program. The opportunity arose after Afghanistan underwent a brief period of Taliban rule. A natural partner for India to align its interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan, and the ties between India and Afghanistan in more ways than one. Since then, New Delhi has effectively adopted a "soft power"-based approach, focusing on civilian sectors rather than security or military issues in Afghanistan. It was achieved through the instant upgradation of India's representation in Afghanistan from a Liaison Office to a full-blown Embassy in 2002. India played an active role in the Bonn conference and came to the mediation of a post-Taliban governing and political authority in Afghanistan. Thereafter, India's primary objective in Afghanistan was to lend its support to the Afghan government (established under the Bonn Agreement of 2001) and to facilitate a political process there. India has its stakes in Afghanistan driven by economic and strategic motives. The annual reports of the Ministry of External Affairs, 2001-2021, clearly outlined that one of India's foreign policy priorities was to strengthen the trends

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of cooperation, friendship, and trust with countries in India's extended neighbourhood, based on old civilizations and historical ties as well as strong contemporary relevance. Southeast Asia, the Gulf, and the Indian Ocean Region share a common interest with India in promoting peace, stability, and development in this region. This led the then National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government to sincerely attempt to be heard near and far in its larger neighbourhood encompassing East and Southeast Asia as well as the oil kingdoms of West Asia (Ganguly, 2013).

Objective of the study

This study aims to examine the nature, extent, and outcomes of the relationship between Afghanistan and India over the two-decade period from 2001 to 2021. India became one of Afghanistan's most reliable political and developmental allies throughout this time, which is characterized by the country's post-Taliban reconstruction, democratic experimentation, and eventual political collapse. The main topics of analysis encompass political ties, institutional cooperation, development diplomacy, security cooperation, and regional geopolitical constraints that shape the relationship.

Research Method

Research Design

This study examines the relationship between Afghanistan and India from 2001 to 2021, employing a qualitative and descriptive research design. The method is exploratory and concentrates on the developmental, social, and political facets of bilateral collaboration in a post-conflict setting. Since the study emphasizes policy interpretation, diplomatic activities, and development efforts rather than quantitative measurement, a qualitative design is appropriate.

Sources of Data

All of the secondary data included in the study was gathered from reliable sources. These include reports from international organizations, such as the World Bank and UN agencies; scholarly books; PhD theses; peer-reviewed journals; and official publications of the Indian government and Afghan institutions (before 2021). Using a variety of sources improves trust and facilitates data triangulation.

Data Collection Method

The researcher used policy papers, strategic agreements, development reports, and scholarly works related to Afghanistan-India relations, which were subjected to systematic document

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analysis to gather data. Relevant and credible documents published between 2001 and 2021 were chosen; non-authoritative sources were not included.

Data Analysis Technique

To analyze the gathered data, the study used qualitative content analysis. Information was arranged according to major themes, including support for governance, education, healthcare, political collaboration, and development assistance. This thematic approach enables meaningful analysis of India's contribution to Afghanistan's development and reconstruction.

Validity and Reliability

Relying on official documents and peer-reviewed literature, with cross-verification across sources, ensured reliability. By maintaining consistency in research objectives, data analysis, and theoretical frameworks such as development diplomacy and soft power, validity was reinforced.

Ethical Considerations

No human volunteers were used because the study is entirely dependent on secondary data. By following APA 7th edition norms and properly citing sources, ethical standards were upheld, guaranteeing academic integrity and preventing data fraud.

The Limitations of the Study

The study is confined to the years 2001–2021 due to the lack of source data. Developments after 2021 are not thoroughly discussed. However, a solid basis for analysis is provided by the widespread use of trustworthy secondary sources.

The Afghanistan and India Relationship (2001-2021)

Political and Diplomatic Engagement (2001–2021)

India moved quickly to re-establish full diplomatic ties with Afghanistan after the Bonn Agreement in December 2001, reopening its embassy in Kabul following a five-year closure during the first Taliban government. One of the longest-lasting and most complex bilateral political alliances in South Asia during the post-Cold War era began with this diplomatic re-engagement. According to Behuria (2016) and Rubin (2013), India's early and conspicuous political commitment to Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction was based on both historical linkages and strategic calculations aimed at supporting a stable, sovereign, and democratic Afghan state.

- **Establishing a Diplomatic Presence**

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India maintained a continuous diplomatic presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, with consulates located in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif. Compared to the majority of regional and extra-regional entities, this broad diplomatic presence was remarkable, demonstrating India's long-term political commitment beyond mere symbolic participation. In addition to supporting development collaboration, these consulates acted as political conduits for subnational interaction with Afghan provincial authorities (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009). Even in times of increased insecurity, India's diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan placed a strong emphasis on maintaining political stability. India maintained its reputation as a trustworthy political partner by refusing to reduce its diplomatic presence despite numerous attacks on its diplomatic facilities, notably the bombings of the Indian Embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009 (Pant, 2011).

- **High-Level Leadership Diplomacy and Political Involvement**

The core of Afghanistan-India ties at this time was high-level political exchanges. Afghan officials have consistently placed a high priority on India as a strategic political ally, reflecting both practical factors and ideological alignment. President Hamid Karzai made over fourteen trips to India between 2002 and 2014, an exceptionally high frequency in bilateral diplomacy that demonstrated the strength of political confidence between the two countries (Behuria, 2016). In-depth conversations about democratic government, constitutional development, counterterrorism, regional connectivity, and Afghanistan's place in South and Central Asia took place during these non-ceremonial trips. Having studied in Shimla, Karzai's personal familiarity with India facilitated informal diplomacy and helped bridge cultural and bureaucratic divides, thereby enhancing political coordination at the highest levels (Rubin, 2013). Indian prime ministers also showed strong political participation. The Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) was signed in October 2011 as a result of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visits to the United States in 2005 and 2011. As Afghanistan's first official strategic alliance with any nation, this deal was historic since it demonstrated previously unheard-of levels of political trust (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2011).

- **Political Coordination Mechanisms and Strategic Partnership Agreement**

Through organized processes, such as frequent high-level discussions, strategic

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dialogues, and collaborative working groups, the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement formalized and strengthened political cooperation. In terms of politics, the SPA gave India a formal role in Afghanistan's long-term political development while committing both nations to respect for sovereignty, democratic principles, and regional stability (Pant, 2016). To maintain continuity even after leadership changes, the agreement also established a Partnership Council, co-chaired by the foreign ministers of both nations. This institutionalization elevated the connection between Afghanistan and India to a long-term political partnership, distinguishing it from more sporadic donor-recipient exchanges (Behuria, 2016).

- **Engagement Across Political Transitions in Afghanistan:** India maintained strong ties with Afghanistan over several administrations while skillfully navigating the country's complex political changes. India worked with both President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah throughout the National Unity Government era (2014–2020) to maintain political stability and balance. During this time, Afghan authorities made high-level visits, with an emphasis on security cooperation, governance reform, and strengthening international support amid dwindling Western involvement (Pant, 2016). While avoiding overt meddling in domestic affairs, this dual-track diplomacy demonstrated India's flexible political approach by acknowledging Afghanistan's internal power-sharing issues. India's reputation as an impartial and helpful ally was enhanced by this strategy (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009).
- **Afghanistan's International Legitimacy and Multilateral Support:** India has continuously backed Afghanistan's international legitimacy through diplomatic channels. It backed Kabul's efforts to integrate into South Asian regional institutions and promoted Afghanistan's participation in regional forums, including the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process. Additionally, India supported Afghanistan's positions in international organizations, including demands for continued support and collaboration in the fight against terrorism (Rubin, 2013). Additionally, India was able to project soft power and normative influence by focusing on democratic governance and civilian-led development, despite its non-military political participation, which contrasted with the securitized tactics employed by many international actors (Pant, 2011). Overall, political and diplomatic engagement between Afghanistan and India

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from 2001 to 2021 was characterized by high institutional density, leadership-level trust, and normative alignment around democratic governance. However, the partnership's inability to withstand Afghanistan's internal collapse highlights the limits of bilateral diplomacy in the absence of resilient domestic political institutions.

- **Political Relations Across Presidential Transitions: The Karzai Era (2002–2014)**
- The Karzai administration marked the beginning of the political relationship between Afghanistan and India. Strong interpersonal ties, regular diplomatic contacts, and the progressive institutionalization of cooperation frameworks characterized this period. India has consistently supported Afghanistan's constitutional development, democratic processes, and international diplomacy (Behuria, 2016).
- **The Ghani–Abdullah Period (2014–2021): Political ties with India persisted under President Ashraf Ghani, but they increasingly reflected** the worsening security situation in Afghanistan. Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah continued to regularly interact with Indian leadership, particularly regarding capacity-building, security sector development, and governance reform (Lowy Institute, 2020). During this time, pragmatic governance and security coordination, including agreements on police training and administrative reform, replaced symbolic diplomacy as the primary form of political cooperation (PIB, 2017).

Institutional Frameworks and Governance Support

Between 2001 and 2021, India's engagement with Afghanistan extended far beyond infrastructure development and diplomatic relations, with a focus on institution-building, governance reform, and state capacity enhancement. This strategy aligned with India's overarching foreign policy goal of bolstering regional security and South-South cooperation, while also supporting a secure, democratic, and independent Afghanistan (Pant, 2019).

- **Constitutional and Democratic Institution Building:** Afghanistan began a complex process of state rebuilding after the Bonn Agreement (2001), which included creating democratic institutions and drafting a new constitution. India provided technical assistance and advisory support, while Indian legislative officials and constitutional specialists participated in informal discussions and talks with their Afghan counterparts (Behuria, 2016). The construction of the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul, completed in 2015 at an estimated cost of USD 90 million, is one of India's most prominent and symbolic contributions. The edifice, which was fully funded by

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the Indian government, was meant to serve as both infrastructure and a representation of representative government and democratic sovereignty. The project demonstrated India's dedication to Afghanistan's institutional legitimacy and democratic path (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2016).

- **Parliamentary Cooperation and Legislative Capacity:** In addition to providing physical infrastructure, India has worked to strengthen Afghanistan's legislative institutions. The Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training (BPST) in India routinely arranged exposure trips, study visits, and training programs for Afghan lawmakers and parliamentary personnel. To assist Afghan parliamentarians in adapting democratic norms to their national context, these programs focused on legislative procedures, committee structures, budget oversight, and parliamentary ethics (Saran, 2017). Although academics point out that structural issues, including political divisions and security restrictions, prevented the full institutionalization of democratic norms, such cooperation helped professionalize Afghanistan's parliamentary procedures (Barfield, 2010).
- **Civil Service and Bureaucratic Capacity Building:** India's substantial investments in developing human capital through professional training and education were a pillar of its support for governance. Every year, India provided thousands of fully funded training slots for Afghan nationals in various fields, including public administration, finance, audit, rural development, information technology, and disaster management, under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program (MEA, 2020). By 2020, over 65,000 Afghan nationals, including civil professionals, diplomats, engineers, physicians, and educators, had completed training or education in India. The long-term institutional ties between the two nations were strengthened by this extensive capacity-building program, which produced a group of Afghan professionals familiar with Indian administrative procedures, governance standards, and institutional frameworks (Pant & Joshi, 2018).
- **Diplomatic, Judicial, and Security Sector Training:** Additionally, India strengthened Afghanistan's legal and diplomatic institutions. Afghan diplomats were trained in international law, multilateral diplomacy, negotiating techniques, and consular services at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in New Delhi. In a similar vein, Afghan judges, prosecutors, and legal professionals received training from

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Indian institutions, particularly in areas such as administrative justice, commercial law, and constitutional interpretation (MEA, 2019). In the areas of security and governance, India provided training in rule of law, community policing, and counter-drug administration to Afghan police officers and administrative officials. These programs demonstrated a civilian-oriented security assistance strategy, intending to bolster governance rather than militarisation, even as India refrained from direct military combat involvement (Mohan, 2014).

- **Governance Support as a Soft Power Strategy:** Many academics view India's institutional involvement in Afghanistan as a soft power tactic that prioritizes local ownership, legitimacy, and trust-building over the use of coercive influence. In contrast to certain external actors, India strengthened its state authority and administrative capacity by directing the majority of its aid through the Afghan government rather than through alternative structures (Chaudhuri, 2014). In large part due to its obvious contributions to public institutions, education, and governance, public opinion surveys routinely ranked India as one of Afghanistan's most favoured foreign partners (Asia Foundation, 2019). This favourable impression strengthened India's diplomatic legitimacy and influence within Afghan political circles.

Limitations and Structural Difficulties

India's governance aid was hampered by structural and contextual factors, including ongoing insecurity, political unrest, corruption, and inadequate enforcement capabilities inside Afghan institutions, despite its substantial institutional support. Numerous studies contend that although India made a significant contribution to capacity-building, Afghanistan's internal coherence and wider political settlement were still necessary for these institutions to survive (Rubin, 2020). The fall of the Afghan government in August 2021 highlighted the vulnerability of institutions that receive external support, posing significant challenges for the literature on the boundaries of institutional support in fragile and conflict-affected governments.

High-Level Political Engagement and Leadership Diplomacy

The maintenance of political ties between Afghanistan and India was largely dependent on leadership diplomacy. Between 2002 and 2014, President Hamid Karzai made 14 official visits to India, demonstrating an exceptional level of political engagement rarely seen in bilateral relations (Behuria, 2016). These visits represented Afghanistan's political

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convergence with India, strengthened strategic confidence, and facilitated easier coordination on governance and regional concerns. Visits by Indian prime ministers further enhanced the friendship. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits in 2015 and 2016 focused on democratic symbolism and institutional support through historic projects, such as the Salma Dam and the Afghan Parliament building, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visits in 2005 and 2011 highlighted India's long-term political commitment (Drishti IAS, 2023; PIB, 2016). Prime Minister Modi's 2015 speech to the Afghan Parliament was particularly significant, as it reaffirmed India's political narrative of cooperation based on national sovereignty, constitutional governance, and democratic principles (ForumIAS, 2023).

Regional Constraints and Strategic Challenges

Afghanistan-India political relations remained hampered by external factors despite their close bilateral ties. According to Ganguly and Howenstein (2009), Pakistan perceived India's growing political influence in Afghanistan as a strategic danger, which resulted in diplomatic opposition and indirect security threats against Indian interests. The Taliban's comeback after 2014 severely limited the Afghan government's capacity to carry out political accords outside of major cities. The efficacy of frameworks for political cooperation was constrained by dual governance realities: state power in urban areas and insurgent influence in rural ones (Barfield, 2021). Furthermore, broader trilateral political cooperation was constrained by worries about regional escalation and Pakistan's sensitivities, even though the United States generally supported India's developmental role (NDU Press, 2012).

Infrastructure Diplomacy and Political Symbolism

The extensive infrastructure support provided by India served as a kind of political diplomacy. The Salma (Afghan-India Friendship) Dam symbolized the tenacity of political cooperation in the face of security obstacles, while the Afghan Parliament building reflected India's support for democratic institutions. Gateway House (2021). These initiatives established long-term symbolic capital within Afghan state institutions and strengthened India's political credibility in the country. By establishing interpersonal connections and familiarity at the elite level, educational and cultural exchanges further enhanced political relations (EOI Kabul, 2020).

Collapse of the Political Partnership in 2021

Two decades of organized political cooperation came to an abrupt end with the Taliban's restoration to power in August 2021. India's withdrawal of its consulates and embassies

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signalled the end of official diplomatic relations and highlighted the vulnerability of political frameworks that receive external backing to abrupt regime change (BBC, 2021; GMF, 2021). The breakdown demonstrated the vulnerability of state-building initiatives reliant on foreign assistance and revealed underlying flaws in Afghanistan's political institutions (Rashid, 2021).

Conclusion

An unusual instance of ongoing bilateral involvement between a regional power and a vulnerable post-conflict state is the political connection between Afghanistan and India from 2001 until 2021. Ultimately, the partnership was unable to withstand Afghanistan's internal political breakdown, despite achieving significant milestones in institutional growth, diplomatic coordination, and symbolic state-building. This case highlights the importance of institutional depth, domestic political legitimacy, and regional consensus in sustaining long-term political alliances in conflict-affected areas for academics studying South Asian politics and international affairs.

Development Assistance as Political Strategy

A key component of India's political and strategic engagement from 2001 to 2021 was its development assistance to Afghanistan, which demonstrated a conscious move towards development diplomacy as a foreign policy instrument. India became one of Afghanistan's biggest regional donors and one of the top five bilateral contributors overall during the post-Taliban reconstruction period, with cumulative pledges exceeding USD 3 billion (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2020). India's strategy prioritized civilian-led development, institutional improvement, and people-centric projects, portraying development assistance as a tool for political legitimacy and influence, in contrast to the military-driven interventions of some external actors (Barfield, 2021).

Development Assistance as a Soft Power Instrument

Many academics describe India's aid strategy as an exercise in soft power projection, aimed at bolstering Afghanistan's sovereign institutions and gaining public trust, rather than relying on coercive influence (Nye, 2004; Pant, 2019). India purposefully refrained from direct military action, focusing instead on visible, socially significant development initiatives that addressed essential necessities such as power, water, transportation, healthcare, and education. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, numerous surveys ranked India among Afghanistan's most trusted foreign partners, demonstrating that this strategy enhanced India's

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reputation among the country's inhabitants (Asia Foundation, 2019). As a result, development assistance served as both an economic and political legitimacy-building tool, enhancing India's diplomatic stature among Afghan society and political elites.

Flagship Infrastructure Projects and Political Significance

Alongside their developmental objective, India's massive infrastructure projects had overt political symbolism.

1. Salma (Friendship between Afghanistan and India) Dam

One of India's most ambitious development projects in Afghanistan was the 2016 opening of the Salma Dam in Herat Province, which was subsequently dubbed the Afghan–India Friendship Dam. The dam, which cost over USD 300 million, produced approximately 42 megawatts of hydroelectric power and irrigated more than 75,000 hectares of agricultural land (MEA, 2016). Beyond its economic significance, the dam represented resilience in the face of security threats, long-term political commitment, and India's readiness to invest in Afghanistan's productive potential rather than provide immediate assistance (Behuria, 2016). In contrast to aid approaches that prioritize humanitarian aid, the project also strengthened India's reputation as a partner in self-reliant development.

2. Zaranj–Delaram Highway and Regional Connectivity

The Zaranj significantly aided Afghanistan's regional integration through the Delaram Highway, which India constructed for approximately USD 150 million. The roadway increased Afghanistan's trade autonomy and decreased reliance on Pakistan for transit access by connecting it to Iran's Chabahar Port (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009). From a political and strategic standpoint, the highway strengthened Afghanistan's economic sovereignty while advancing India's broader regional connectivity objectives. According to analysts, this project demonstrated that development aid served geopolitical goals without resorting to overt militarisation, enabling India to use economic statecraft to balance regional rivalry (Pant & Joshi, 2018).

3. Power Transmission and Urban Infrastructure

Additionally, India made considerable investments in power transmission lines, especially the Pul-e-Khumri–Kabul energy line, which greatly enhanced the capital's access to electricity. Such initiatives were politically significant to the Afghan government, as reliable power was essential for public service delivery, industry, and governance (Rubin, 2020). Roads, public buildings, and municipal services are examples of urban infrastructure

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development that increased the Afghan state's capabilities and visibility in essential population centres, bolstering the political legitimacy of governments that came into power after 2001.

Social Sector Development and State–Citizen Relations

India provided extensive social-sector development aid, coordinating political collaboration with improvements in human development metrics. Along with hospitals, clinics, and community health centres spread throughout several provinces, thousands of schools were built or refurbished with Indian assistance (MEA, 2019). Notably, India backed medical missions in Afghanistan and provided free medical care to tens of thousands of Afghan patients in Indian facilities. With Indian support, Afghan authorities demonstrated concrete service delivery, thereby improving state-citizen relations (Chaudhuri, 2014). From the standpoint of political economics, researchers contend that these initiatives enhanced social legitimacy, especially in urban and semi-urban regions where government performance was expected to be stronger (Barfield, 2010).

Strategic Competition and Regional Signalling

In the backdrop of regional rivalry with Pakistan and the changing roles of China, Iran, and the United States, India's development assistance also served as a kind of strategic signalling. India established itself as a non-threatening yet significant regional actor by focusing on high-impact civilian programs, avoiding direct conflict while advancing its long-term strategic goals (Mohan, 2014). According to some observers, India's larger goal of being acknowledged as a responsible regional force dedicated to stability, reconstruction, and South-South cooperation was influenced by its development footprint in Afghanistan (Pant & Joshi, 2018).

Security and Strategic Cooperation

Although India avoided direct military involvement, it provided non-lethal security assistance, training for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), and strategic advisory support. Security cooperation intensified after 2014 as international troops began withdrawing and Taliban violence increased. India trained Afghan military officers in its defence institutions and supplied helicopters, transport vehicles, and logistical equipment. These measures reflected a cautious but deliberate political strategy to support Afghan sovereignty while avoiding regional escalation, particularly with Pakistan (NDU Press, 2012).

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Education Infrastructure and Human Capital Development

Between 2001 and 2021, education was a key component of India's development aid to Afghanistan. India made significant investments in the construction, renovation, and equipping of schools across several Afghan regions because it recognized that education was essential to the establishment of a post-conflict state. Thousands of Afghan students were able to pursue higher education in India thanks to these efforts, which were supplemented by teacher training programs, curriculum support, and scholarship programs (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2020).

The majority of India-supported schools were built in metropolitan and semi-urban areas, where public education was in high demand and a strong state presence was necessary to rebuild popular trust in the government. India's initiatives helped rebuild institutional legitimacy and human capital by enhancing the Afghan government's capacity to deliver basic education services, especially among young people who had been denied formal education throughout decades of violence (Barfield, 2010). By exposing a generation of Afghan professionals to Indian academic institutions, educational aid also fulfilled a long-term political purpose by strengthening interpersonal relationships and maintaining diplomatic goodwill (Pant, 2016).

Tens of thousands of Afghan professionals, civil servants, and students were able to obtain training in India through capacity-building programs within the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) framework and scholarship programs under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). By 2020, Afghanistan had become one of the largest recipients of Indian educational aid, underscoring the strategic importance of education in India's Afghanistan policy (MEA, 2020).

Healthcare Facilities and Public Health Support

Another important aspect of India's civilian-led assistance approach was the development of healthcare. India assisted in the construction and modernization of clinics, hospitals, and diagnostic facilities, particularly in Kabul and other major cities. One of the most prominent initiatives was the Indira Gandhi Children Hospital in Kabul, which came to represent India's humanitarian efforts and dedication to public health in Afghanistan (PIB, 2016). India not only developed infrastructure but also provided Afghan physicians and nurses with specialized training, medications, and medical equipment. Frequent medical missions from India provided specialized care and capacity-building in fields such as trauma care,

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paediatrics, and cardiology. In a post-conflict setting, these interventions addressed crucial gaps in service delivery and significantly improved Afghanistan's limited healthcare capacity (Rashid, 2018). By enabling the Afghan government to demonstrate tangible improvements in its citizens' daily lives, healthcare assistance has played a crucial role in governance. India's aid indirectly increased public trust in Afghan government institutions, especially in urban and semi-urban areas where healthcare expectations were higher, since access to basic healthcare is widely acknowledged as a key indicator of state effectiveness (Rotberg, 2004).

Community Infrastructure and Local-Level Development

India carried out hundreds of Small Development Projects (SDPs) throughout Afghanistan, focusing on community-level infrastructure, including rural roads, drinking water systems, sanitary facilities, vocational training centres, and local government buildings, in addition to large-scale national initiatives. To ensure alignment with community needs and government development priorities, these projects were carried out in close consultation with local Afghan authorities (MEA, 2019). Projects involving community infrastructure had a clear social and political impact. SDPs strengthened the Afghan government's ability for local governance while also boosting India's reputation as a trustworthy development partner by producing rapid, noticeable outcomes at the local level. This strategy strengthened the social compact between the state and its citizens, especially in areas where there had previously been little or no government presence (Brinkerhoff, 2010). Significantly, India's inclination toward non-militarised, civilian-led aid reduced local opposition and shielded development projects from political backlash. In contrast to donor approaches that mostly relied on military defence, local communities generally embraced India's projects, improving social acceptance and sustainability (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009).

Discussion

One of the most extensive and long-standing bilateral alliances in South Asia's post-conflict state-building is that between Afghanistan and India, which lasted from 2001 to 2021. The results of this study demonstrate that India's involvement with Afghanistan extended far beyond traditional diplomacy, evolving into a multifaceted relationship that encompassed institutional strengthening, political support, development assistance, and people-to-people ties. Shared democratic goals, regional security concerns, and India's strategic goal of assisting a stable and independent Afghanistan all influenced this relationship.

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Following the Bonn Agreement (2001), India continued to engage diplomatically with Afghanistan, demonstrating its sustained commitment to the reconstruction of the Afghan state. A level of political trust that is unusual in bilateral relations is evident in the regularity of high-level visits, especially during the Karzai presidency. This partnership was further solidified in 2011 with the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, which provided a formal framework for strategic coordination, governance cooperation, and political dialogue. These structures enabled India to make a positive contribution to regional stabilization efforts while also enhancing Afghanistan's international legitimacy.

India's focus on institution-building proved important for governance. The goals of state-building were closely associated with support for Afghanistan's parliament, civil service, judiciary, and electoral institutions. While capacity-building programs under the ITEC framework enhanced administrative and human capital inside Afghan institutions, the construction of the Afghan Parliament building represented India's normative commitment to democratic governance. These initiatives enhanced governance capabilities, especially at the central level, but due to ongoing security issues, their effects varied by region.

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As a key component of India's involvement, development assistance served as a tactical instrument of soft power. India's more than USD 3 billion in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and community development projects improved Afghanistan's ability to provide services as well as its political standing. Initiatives like the Zaranj–Delaram Highway, the Salma Dam, and urban power transmission networks reinforced state presence and connectedness and had real political and economic benefits. Similarly, India's support for community infrastructure, schools, and hospitals strengthened the linkages between development assistance, political legitimacy, and governance capacity, enabling the Afghan government to deliver public goods clearly. This, in turn, promoted state-citizen trust, especially in urban and semi-urban areas. The cooperation faced structural constraints despite these successes. Persistent corruption, inadequate local governance, unstable elections, and a deteriorating security situation hindered the viability of governance improvements. Although

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India's development-led strategy was successful in boosting institutional capacity and goodwill, it was unable to completely offset Afghanistan's structural weaknesses or the effects of the Taliban insurgency. The fragility of externally funded state-building initiatives in the absence of long-lasting domestic political stability and security was finally exposed by the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021.

Comparatively speaking, Afghanistan's situation is similar to that of other emerging and post-conflict nations, where foreign development aid enhances institutional capacity in the short term but struggles to sustain long-term political stability in the absence of strong domestic ownership. However, India's involvement is notable for its non-intrusive, civilian-led strategy, which contrasts with militarised interventions and provides important insights for development diplomacy in vulnerable governments. All things considered, the connection between Afghanistan and India from 2001 to 2021 shows how persistent political involvement, development aid, and institutional support can significantly contribute to growth and governance in a precarious situation. The two-decade alliance provides significant insights into the role of intermediate powers in post-conflict reconstruction and regional diplomacy, even as its sudden termination highlights its shortcomings.

Findings and Conclusion

Findings

1. Political Relationship between Afghanistan and India (2001–2021)

The results of the literature review indicate that Afghanistan and India's political ties between 2001 and 2021 were characterized by institutionalization, strategic depth, and continuity. India quickly restored diplomatic ties with Afghanistan after the Bonn Agreement (2001) and remained a political force there for 20 years. High levels of mutual trust and political alignment were demonstrated through high-level political involvement, including regular presidential visits, strategic discussions, and ministerial exchanges.

A significant milestone was reached in 2011 with the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), formalizing long-term political cooperation, support for governance, and strategic coordination. The fact that Afghanistan chose India as its first strategic ally shows that India's involvement is seen as dependable and non-interventionist. Afghanistan's international legitimacy was enhanced through political collaboration, particularly with India's diplomatic support in regional and global forums. The scholarship, which emphasises

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sovereignty, democratic ideals, and Afghan-led administration, generally supports the view that India served as a stabilising political partner rather than a coercive state.

2. Social and People-to-People Relations

The literature also shows that social ties and interpersonal interaction provided a solid basis for collaboration between Afghanistan and India. The two nations' sociocultural ties were reinforced by scholarships, medical diplomacy, cultural collaboration, and educational exchanges. Under government-funded initiatives, thousands of Afghan students attended Indian institutions, building elite networks and fostering long-term human capital development that extended beyond official diplomatic channels.

Strong public goodwill among Afghan civilians was generated by India's soft power, grounded in shared cultural affinities, linguistic familiarity, and historical linkages. India's reputation as a kind development partner was improved via medical visas, free or heavily discounted healthcare services at Indian hospitals, and community-level involvement. At both the elite and grassroots levels, these social exchanges strengthened political trust and helped create long-lasting bilateral ties.

3. Infrastructure Development and Economic Connectivity

The literature's key conclusion is that India's development aid was carefully matched to Afghanistan's infrastructure and connectivity requirements. Between 2001 and 2021, India committed more than USD 3 billion, making it one of Afghanistan's biggest regional contributors. Prominent initiatives, including the Salma (Afghan–India Friendship) Dam, the Zaranj–Delaram Highway, and electricity transmission lines to Kabul, have enhanced regional connectivity, increased energy availability, and promoted economic integration. By improving access to Iran's Chabahar Port in particular, these infrastructural developments improved Afghanistan's internal unity and lessened its economic isolation. The literature repeatedly demonstrates that infrastructure development has served as a political tool, enhancing state authority and governance visibility in key locations, while also acting as an economic intervention.

4. Health Sector and Hospital Development

Afghanistan's potential for social development and governance was significantly enhanced by India's support to the country's health sector. Access to healthcare services was enhanced, especially in urban and semi-urban regions, via Indian-funded clinics, hospitals, and health

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education initiatives. Additionally, India helped address human resource shortages in the Afghan health sector by providing medical training and capacity-building to Afghan health professionals.

Medical diplomacy, such as treating Afghan patients in Indian hospitals, strengthened the relationship between political legitimacy and development assistance and improved mutual goodwill. According to the research, better healthcare delivery supported broader governance goals by shaping public perceptions of the state's efficacy.

5. Education, Schools, and Human Capital Development

One of the primary pillars of India's relationship with Afghanistan has been education. India supplied educational resources, taught teachers and administrators, and assisted with the building and renovation of schools. Long-term scholarship programs, professional training initiatives, and physical infrastructure significantly enhanced human capital development. The results indicate that by investing in Afghanistan's future administrative, political, and technical leadership, educational aid enhanced the sustainability of governance. To achieve inclusive development goals, education-related cooperation has also improved gender inclusion, particularly through programs and scholarships targeting Afghan women.

Conclusion

According to the study's findings, the connection between Afghanistan and India from 2001 to 2021 offers a unique example of strategic cooperation focused on development in a precarious, conflict-affected environment. India's involvement integrated development aid, social connectedness, and political diplomacy into a cohesive, primarily civilian-led framework. Social interactions and people-to-people ties strengthened long-term bilateral goodwill, while the political relationship was based on confidence, institutionalised cooperation, and respect for Afghan sovereignty.

Particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, India's contributions to Afghanistan's infrastructure, healthcare, and education sectors have a quantifiable effect on growth, service delivery, and governance capacity. In addition to providing humanitarian aid, development assistance served as a tool for bolstering institutional stability, public confidence, and state legitimacy. However, results also show that the viability of post-2001 state-building initiatives was constrained by structural governance flaws, ongoing instability, and political fragmentation despite their significant achievements.

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The sudden fall of the Afghan government in 2021 highlights the shortcomings of development and governance changes funded by outside parties when there is no long-term political stability and security at home. However, India's two-decade involvement offers crucial insights for development diplomacy, highlighting the importance of non-militarised aid, institutional capacity-building, and people-centred collaboration in vulnerable nations. All things considered, the partnership between Afghanistan and India from 2001 to 2021 is a noteworthy case study in regional cooperation, illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of a development-led foreign policy in post-conflict reconstruction.

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