

## Soft Power in Action: India's Diplomatic Approach in Afghanistan for Strategic Space

By

**Waseem Raja**

Research Scholar, Department of National Security Studies, Central University of Jammu

**Dr. Neeta Rani**

Associate Professor, Department of National Security Studies, Central University of Jammu

### Abstract:

This research paper is a subtle attempt to examine India's role as a donor in Afghanistan. It analyses India's motivations for providing aid to Afghanistan, explores the various sectors in which India has contributed and assesses the impact of its assistance on Afghanistan's development. Drawing from a comprehensive analysis of government reports, research papers, books and newspaper editorials, this research paper explores how India has navigated the complex geopolitical landscape of Afghanistan through non-military and cooperative strategies. The paper discusses the challenges faced by India in achieving reciprocity from Afghanistan and its implications. It also analyses the present context and India's stance in view of political change in Afghanistan. The paper sheds light on the complex dynamics of India's aid to Afghanistan prior to August 2021 and offers insights into the effectiveness of such assistance in promoting India's strategic interests. This paper examines how India uses its soft power in Afghanistan and looks at how effective this approach is, what challenges it faces and how it impacts India's strategic space.

**Key Words:** Afghanistan, India, Diplomacy, Political Change, Soft power, Strategic interests.

### Understanding the Context

India and Afghanistan have a long history of cultural, economic, and diplomatic ties. India's historical and cultural ties with Afghanistan have played a role in shaping its aid and assistance to the country. After the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, India played an active role in supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction and development (Basu, 2007). Afghanistan is India's main area of interest and participation in the region, reflecting both historical ties (a large portion of Afghanistan was formerly an area of the Mughal Empire) and the interplay of Afghanistan's fate with India's archrival, Pakistan. India has adopted a multifaceted strategy in Afghanistan. India is the fifth-biggest bilateral contributor

globally and the region's largest donor to Afghanistan, supporting the country's security objectives and opening up business opportunities for Indian firms (Campbell, 2013).

India's aid to Afghanistan has focused on post-conflict reconstruction and development (Barakat and Zyck, 2009). Historical trade links between India and Afghanistan have laid the foundation for economic cooperation in the present-day context. India has extended economic assistance to Afghanistan, focusing on infrastructure development, investment, and trade facilitation to boost Afghanistan's economy and regional connectivity. In accordance with the principles of UN goals of peace building, India's rehabilitation and development activities in Afghanistan are customised to the particular requirements and responsibility of the Afghan government and its citizens (Singh, 2017). The aid to Afghanistan is also driven by its strategic interests in the region, including countering terrorism, promoting stability and safeguarding its own security. The understanding of the needs of Afghanistan, shared heritage and strategic interests has guided India's efforts to support Afghanistan's reconstruction, development and capacity building. India's assistance to Afghanistan also includes cooperation in the areas of counterterrorism and security. Given their shared concerns regarding terrorism, India has provided training and equipment to Afghan security forces, aiming to enhance their capacity to combat terrorism and maintain stability. Recognizing the importance of energy security for Afghanistan's development, India has supported energy projects in Afghanistan, such as the construction of power transmission lines and the development of hydroelectric and solar power projects. These initiatives aim to address Afghanistan's energy needs and contribute to its economic growth. India's aid to Afghanistan is also linked to its broader regional connectivity initiatives. Projects like the Chabahar Port in Iran, which India has helped to develop, offer a route for trade and connectivity between India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, enhancing regional integration and economic cooperation (Omidi & Noolkar, 2022).

The Taliban, a fundamentalist party with a predominately Pashtun population, after fighting a twenty-year insurgency, regained control of Afghanistan in 2021. The Taliban have battled to offer the people of Afghanistan security, sufficient food, and economic opportunity as they have evolved from an insurgent force to a functioning administration (Maizland, 2022). In comparison to their former rule in Afghanistan, the Taliban now appear to be acting differently toward Afghans and the international community. Various regional players with their own unique agendas have openly or surreptitiously sided with the Taliban. As a consequence, the Taliban are gradually establishing themselves as a potent political force (Chowdhury, 2022).

Before August 2021, foreign aid accounted approximately 75% of Afghanistan's GDP. Since August 2021, the economy has declined by 20% to 30%. The Afghan economic condition is stabilising after a

lengthy period of free slide, but at a considerably lower level, people being left poorer and more susceptible to deprivation, hunger, and disease. There is no chance the economy will restart strong growth, much less reach pre-2021 levels, in the near future (Byrd, 2022). Twenty years after the Taliban's prior rule, Afghanistan's economy saw significant change. Its GDP increased from \$4 billion to \$19.8 billion between 2002 and 2020, according to the World Bank. The flood of foreign assistance into a highly centralised administration was responsible for this expansion. International help has been stopped since the Taliban took control, leaving the country's weak economy exposed (Pe'er, 2021).

Despite the political government changing after August 2021, India's policy towards Afghanistan is still driven by their long-standing friendship (EAM,2022). Despite the earlier strained relations with Taliban, India with its pragmatic approach has continued its aid and assistance to Afghanistan during the humanitarian crisis caused by floods and earthquake. India provided 40,000 metric tonnes (MT) of wheat overland via Pakistan in February 2022 and an additional 20,000 MT via Iran's Chabahar port in March 2023 to be distributed through the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP), as well as 45 tonnes of medical aid in October 2022, to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (The Wire, 2023), including, among other things, tonnes of disaster relief materials, anti-TB medications, 500,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, winter clothes, and important life-saving medications. After the devastating earthquake that occurred in June 2022, India sent 28 tonnes of immediate relief supplies (EAM,2022). The Taliban have praised India's union budget for 2023–2024 for making a special allocation for a \$25 million aid to development package for Afghanistan (ANI, 2023). According to reports, the Taliban have asked India to complete over 20 unfinished development projects for infrastructure across the nation (International, 2022). The major goal of Indian strategy in Afghanistan continues to be to establish reasonable, if not cooperative, ties with the Taliban. It is equally cautious to ensure that its engagements should not be interpreted as a diplomatic embrace of the Taliban or as its support of their abhorrent governance model. It engages with the government on its terms and continues to emphasise its commitment to ethnic minorities and women in Afghanistan (Kaura, 2023).

### **A Closer Look at India's Aid Efforts in Afghanistan**

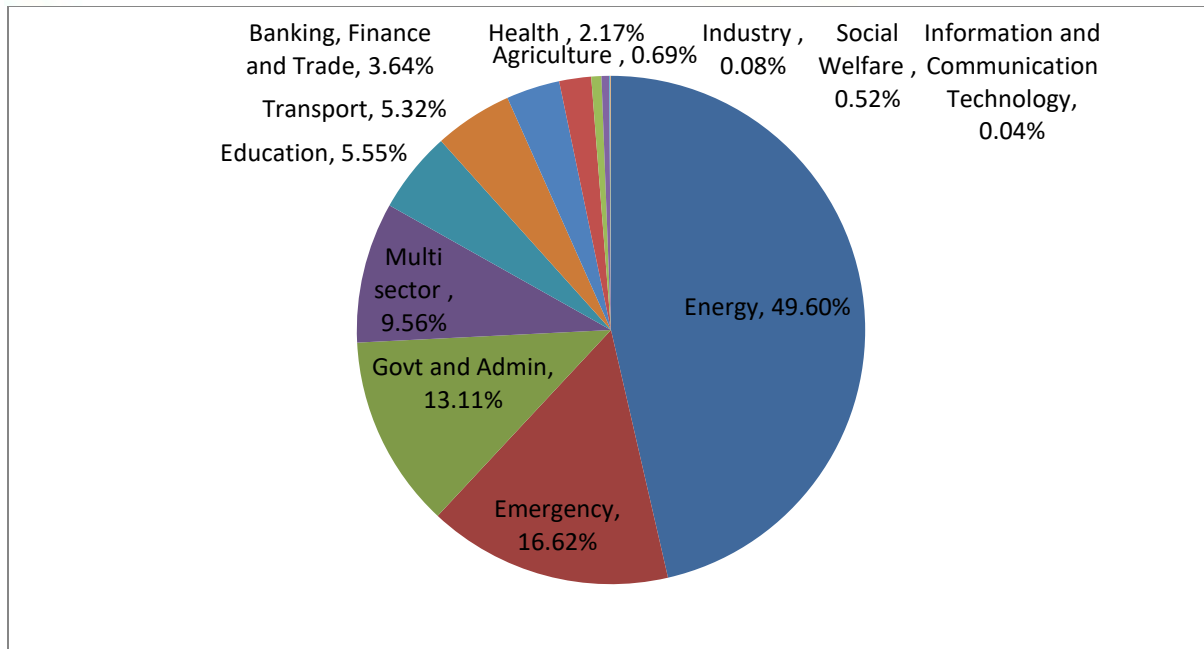
India's aid to Afghanistan has been substantial and wide-ranging, reflecting India's commitment to supporting Afghanistan's development and stability. India has undertaken projects worth US\$3 Billion in Afghanistan since 2001 (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2020). India has provided assistance in various sectors, including infrastructure development, education, healthcare, capacity building, and human resource development. Although functionally not a donor nation under the Bonn Agreement's parameters of 2001, India's financial assistance to Afghanistan stood at over US \$750 million by the end of 2006 (Basu,2007).

India has focused on Afghanistan's rehabilitation since September 11, 2001, offering funding for the development of roads and dams as well as fellowships for Afghan students. In response to a 2009 ABC/BBC/ARD poll, 74 percent of ordinary Afghans have a positive opinion of India (compared to 91 percent who have an unfavourable opinion of Pakistan), indicating that they have valued India's "soft" involvement in their nation (Blarel, 2012). When western governments reduced their force levels and development aid in Afghanistan in 2014, India's commitments to provide development assistance grew: USD 1.5 billion by 2014 and USD 2 billion by 2017 (Mullen, 2017). Aid to Afghanistan by India is guided by the principle of mutual cooperation, emphasizing long-term development, capacity building, and sustainable partnerships. India's efforts in various sectors have aimed to contribute to Afghanistan's stability, reconstruction, and self-reliance, reflecting India's commitment to supporting Afghanistan's development journey.

### **Economic Assistance and Infrastructure Development**

The economic assistance from India encompasses various sectors, including infrastructure, trade, investment, and capacity building. India has been involved in several infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan. The construction of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam in Herat province is a notable example. Completed in 2016, the dam provides irrigation, drinking water, and electricity to thousands of Afghans. Indian aid to Afghanistan has been extensive and has included the restoration of the Habibia School and the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health, as well as the inclusion of 274 buses for public transport, three aircraft for Afghan Ariana, the country's national airline, and 1 million tonnes of wheat as food aid. After that, India committed to spend \$12.5 million setting up cell phone facilities in 11 provincial capitals and providing 300 vehicles to the Afghan National Army, comprising 120 multi-utility vehicles produced by an Indian defence business called Mahindra Defence Systems (Price, 2004). In addition to being substantial and enormous, notably in purchasing power parity (PPP) variables, Indian development support to Afghanistan is also entirely grant-based and focuses on a range of sectors, as seen in figure 1 (Mullen, 2017). India has supported the development of small and medium enterprises in Afghanistan through initiatives such as the India-Afghanistan Small Development Projects (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2020). India has been involved in energy sector projects in Afghanistan, including the construction of power transmission lines and distribution networks like the construction of 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-khumri to Kabul and 220/110/20 kV sub-station at Chimtala (Singh, 2017). These projects aim to improve access to electricity, support economic activities, and enhance the quality of life for Afghan citizens.

Figure 1: Sectoral breakdown of Indian assistance to Afghanistan, 2006/07 to 2016/2017



Source: Indian Development Cooperation Research, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.

In political terms India has also contributed to the construction of the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul. Completed in 2015, the building is a symbol of democratic governance and serves as an important infrastructure asset for Afghanistan’s political processes. India has been involved in the restoration and preservation of cultural heritage sites in Afghanistan. One notable project is the restoration of the Stor Palace in Kabul (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2016). The restoration work aimed to preserve the historical and cultural significance of the palace, contributing to Afghanistan’s cultural tourism and national identity.

The 1680 km long TAPI pipeline, with a projected construction cost of US\$7.6 billion, has been the subject of protracted discussions with the Indian government. The TAPI project aims to move 30 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas from Turkmenistan’s natural gas reserves through Pakistan and Afghanistan to India (Campbell, 2013). These efforts aim to foster economic growth, self-sufficiency, and long-term development in Afghanistan, contributing to its stability and prosperity.

**Efforts on Capacity Building and Education Provisions**

India has been actively engaged in capacity building and education initiatives in Afghanistan to promote human resource development and enhance the country’s self-sufficiency. These efforts aim to strengthen institutional capacity, provide training opportunities, and improve educational infrastructure. India has offered scholarships and training programs to Afghan students and professionals in various fields. Afghan

students can receive scholarships from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to attend Indian universities for higher education (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2016). Indian diplomacy in the field of education places a high priority on the development of human resources and capacity building. According to the information that is currently accessible on the official web page of the Indian Embassy in Kabul, over 3500 Afghan nationals seek education and training each year, and more than 15,000 Afghan students study in India on a self-financing basis. Thus, India has contributed significantly to the growth of Afghanistan's both the private and public sectors by helping to create a vast pool of trained workers (Singh, et al., 2021). Construction and renovation of educational infrastructure in Afghanistan is also supported by India. This includes the establishment of schools, universities, and vocational training centres. For instance, the construction of the Afghan-India Friendship School in Kabul provides educational opportunities for Afghan children, contributing to improved access to quality education (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2021). In July 2020, India and Afghanistan signed 5 MOU's under High Impact Community Development Project (HICDP) implemented by Government of India related to reconstruction and renovation of Albironi University (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2020). India has organized various training programs (like Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme and Technical Cooperation Scheme of Colombo Plan) for Afghan professionals to enhance their skills and knowledge.

Educational exchange programs between Afghan and Indian educational institutions were also facilitated by India. These programs promote cultural understanding, knowledge sharing, and academic collaboration between the two countries. They provide opportunities for Afghan students and faculty members to study and conduct research in Indian universities (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2021). At the Indian Law Institute, India has trained Afghan judges and attorneys to support the rule of law. India has taught National Assembly Secretariat staff members at the Bureau of Parliamentary Study and Training on a variety of parliamentary procedures as part of its support for democracy. Journalists and representatives of news agencies were also given training (Singh, 2017). Establishment of ANASTU (Afghan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University) in Kandahar, which focuses on agricultural education and research, was also supported by India (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2015). The institution offers training opportunities, research facilities, and degree programmes to Afghan students and agricultural professionals. The ANASTU was created with India's assistance to support the development of agricultural science expertise. The university's establishment, equipment, and training have all been handled by the Indian Agriculture Research Institute (IARI). A number of Indian agricultural universities and institutes in India have started India-Afghanistan Agricultural Fellowship Programmes to support Afghan students and intellectuals in their pursuit of graduate-level studies and



research. At the Indian School of Mines in Dhanbad, there are about 50 Afghan students. This programme intends to develop and advance the technical labour force in Afghanistan's mining industry (Singh, et.al., 2021). A little over 1,300 Afghans have received training in a variety of sectors at Indian training facilities as part of India's active participation in capacity building. India has set up computer training facilities in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Pul-e-Khumri, and Jalalabad. It has also constructed a centre for developing skills initiatives in Kabul and plans to offer technical help to the women's vocational training centre in Bagh-e-Zanana, Kabul (D'souza, 2007).

### **India's Humanitarian Aid Efforts in Afghanistan**

India has been involved in providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, particularly in response to the country's humanitarian needs and challenges. It has provided emergency assistance and relief to Afghanistan during times of crisis and natural disasters. This includes the provision of food aid, medical supplies, and humanitarian assistance to affected communities. India has responded to various humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, including droughts, earthquakes, and conflict situations. In addition to a direct gift of one million tonnes of wheat in 2008, India has provided high protein biscuits to Afghan schoolchildren since 2003 through the World Food Programme's school-feeding programme (Meier & Murthy, 2011). In 2014, President Ghani, the newly elected leader of Afghanistan, reportedly cooled relations with India overall and deepened connections with the Pakistani government as a result of the transition of governments and shifting political landscape. However, despite this seemingly more distant relationship between India and Afghanistan, India's development aid to Afghanistan remained constant. India was eager to continue its involvement in Afghanistan as the West reduced its commitment to its security and development. India has frequently reassured Afghanistan since 2014 that it is a long-term development partner and that Prime Minister Modi has personally committed to supporting Afghanistan's growth (Mullen, 2017). In 2020, India donated 75000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2021). Its humanitarian aid efforts in Afghanistan aim to alleviate suffering, address immediate needs, and support the resilience and well-being of Afghan communities. Projects related to water supply and sanitation in Afghanistan was also supported by India. These initiatives focus on the construction and renovation of water infrastructure, installation of hand pumps, and provision of clean drinking water and sanitation facilities in rural and remote areas. It has extended support in emergency medical care to Afghan patients. This includes the provision of medical treatment, surgeries, and specialized healthcare services in Indian hospitals for Afghan individuals in need of critical medical assistance. India has also undertaken community development projects in Afghanistan aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of local communities. These projects include the construction of community centres, vocational training centres, and infrastructure development in rural areas. India has provided support in

disaster response and resilience building in Afghanistan. This includes capacity building in disaster management, training programs for first responders, and assistance in the establishment of emergency response systems. Thus India's aid has alleviated the suffering of Afghans to some extent.

### **India's Security Cooperation and Training Initiatives in Afghanistan**

India and Afghanistan were engaged in security cooperation to promote stability, counter terrorism, and enhance the security capabilities of Afghanistan. Afghanistan and India agreed to their first strategic agreement in October 2011. The arrangement included economical assistance as well as training for Afghan security forces (Javaid & Javaid, 2016). India has been involved in providing training and capacity building programs to Afghan security forces. This includes the training of Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) personnel in areas such as counter-terrorism, intelligence, logistics, and leadership development. By giving the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Police equipment and training, India is making a contribution to the security sector (Singh, 2017). India and Afghanistan have collaborated in the area of counter-narcotics to address the issue of drug trafficking, which poses security challenges to both countries (Bilateral meet between Indian and Afghan officials took place in April 2018 in this regard). India and Afghanistan have fostered military-to-military cooperation through joint exercises, training programs, and exchanges (Joint military exercise in Jodhpur Rajasthan in 2013 and Counter insurgency, counter terrorism with special emphasis on operations in "Built up Areas and Rural Areas") between their respective armed forces. India also gave Mi-24V helicopters to Afghanistan for counter terrorism capability (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2019). These interactions aim to promote interoperability, share best practices, and strengthen bilateral defence ties. India has actively participated in regional security initiatives involving Afghanistan. For example, India has been part of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, which aims to promote peace, stability, and economic development in Afghanistan through regional cooperation and dialogue. India's security cooperation with Afghanistan underscores its commitment to regional stability, the fight against terrorism, and the strengthening of Afghanistan's security forces. India's engagement in security cooperation demonstrates its commitment to supporting Afghanistan's security needs and contributing to regional stability.

### **Why India's Aid to Afghanistan?**

India and Afghanistan share deep cultural and historical connections, stemming from their historical interactions and shared cultural heritage. India's aid to Afghanistan can be driven by a desire to strengthen and preserve these connections, foster cultural exchanges, and promote mutual understanding. India's aid to Afghanistan is also motivated by humanitarian concerns, including addressing the needs of the Afghan people affected by conflict, natural disasters and economic challenges. India is concerned



about the security situation in Afghanistan and its potential impact on regional stability. By providing aid, India aims to contribute to Afghanistan's stability, prevent the resurgence of extremist groups and mitigate threats to its own security. Indian support for stabilising Afghanistan was viewed as essential to preserving Indian security and economic progress (Mullen, 2017).

Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, including significant reserves of oil, gas, and minerals. India's aid and engagement with Afghanistan is driven by its interest in accessing and developing these resources, which can benefit both countries economically. Afghanistan's strategic importance to India was increased by the fact that it served as the entry point to the Central Asian republics mineral and oil-rich nations (Basu, 2007). Afghanistan is a major producer of opium, and the illicit narcotics trade originating from the country poses significant challenges, including drug trafficking and addiction. India's aid to Afghanistan is motivated by its interest in addressing this issue and combating the drug trade, which has implications for regional stability and security. The aid also serves as a means to strengthen diplomatic ties and goodwill between the two nations. It provides opportunities for high-level exchanges, cultural interactions and cooperation on various regional and global issues, contributing to India's broader diplomatic objectives. India's aid to Afghanistan can be seen as a means to project its soft power and enhance its global image. By supporting Afghanistan's development and reconstruction, India aims to showcase its commitment to peace, stability, and humanitarian causes, which can positively influence its standing in the international community.

Geopolitical issues also influence India's assistance to Afghanistan. It enables India to consolidate its authority, counteract the influence of other neighbouring nations and position itself as a dependable partner for Afghanistan's growth. India was building itself as a regional force with aspirations to become a global power by the early 21st century as a result of a rising development assistance portfolio and a booming economy. In order to maintain economic growth and maintain its regional predominance, increased involvement with neighbouring nations was considered as essential (Mullen, 2017). India's aid to Afghanistan helps strengthen its strategic partnerships with other countries and regional organizations. It allows India to collaborate with international actors in promoting stability, reconstruction, and development in Afghanistan. Being in the natural backyard, Kautilyan realism (particularly Mandala theory) comes into play when India deals with Afghanistan, keeping in view the regional security implications. India's assistance to Afghanistan can be seen as a strategic move to counterbalance Pakistan's influence in the region. India and Pakistan have long-standing rivalries, and by providing aid and support to Afghanistan, India aims to strengthen its position and presence in a neighbouring country. Presently India's neighbourhood policy also goes in line with Kautilyan realism.

## **Outcomes of India's Aid to Afghanistan**

India's infrastructure projects in Afghanistan have had a positive impact on development of Afghanistan. It has generated goodwill and received widespread appreciation across the entire spectrum of Afghan Society. These projects include the construction of roads, highways, power transmission lines, and the Salma Dam. These have improved connectivity, facilitated trade, and enhanced access to basic services, contributing to Afghanistan's economic growth and socio-economic development. Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan is being reduced because to the assistance that India has offered for the construction of significant infrastructure, including power plants, transmission lines, schools, hospitals, and highways, including the Zaranj-Delaram highway. This is especially true for access to ports in the Indian Ocean (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009). India's assistance in capacity building and education has had a significant impact on Afghan individuals and institutions. Through scholarships, training programs and educational support, India has contributed to the development of skilled professionals, enhanced human resources and improved educational opportunities for Afghan students. This, in turn, has empowered individuals, promoted socio-economic growth, and strengthened institutional capacities in Afghanistan. In order to speed the development of these opportunities for Afghanistan to become a supplier and buyer market, India has merely sought to seize the chance to make large investments in the country's infrastructure (Basu, 2007). It is interesting that practically all of the national development pillars outlined in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy have been significantly aided by India's development assistance programmes for Afghanistan. In line with the principles of UN goals of peace building, India's reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan are thus customised to the particular needs and responsibility of the Afghan government and its citizens (Singh, 2017).

## **Socio Economic and Infrastructural Development**

Assistance in infrastructure development, including the construction of roads, highways, power transmission lines, and the Salma Dam, has contributed to improved connectivity, trade facilitation, and access to basic services in Afghanistan. Through scholarships, training programs, and educational initiatives, India has contributed to the development of skilled professionals, improved human resources, and enhanced educational opportunities for Afghan students. This has empowered individuals, strengthened human capital, and promoted socio-economic growth. India has provided assistance in agriculture and rural development, focusing on areas such as irrigation, crop productivity, and agricultural practices. These initiatives have aimed to enhance agricultural productivity, improve rural livelihoods, and promote food security in Afghanistan. In addition to construction (including telecommunications infrastructure) and logistics/transport, agribusiness, food processing, the carpet industry, and textiles

appear to offer particularly promising potential. So, in 2003, New Delhi and Afghanistan agreed to a preferential trade agreement, and in 2006, New Delhi hosted the second regional economic cooperation conference on Afghanistan (Basu, 2007). Aid given by India has contributed to fostering trade and economic cooperation between India and Afghanistan.

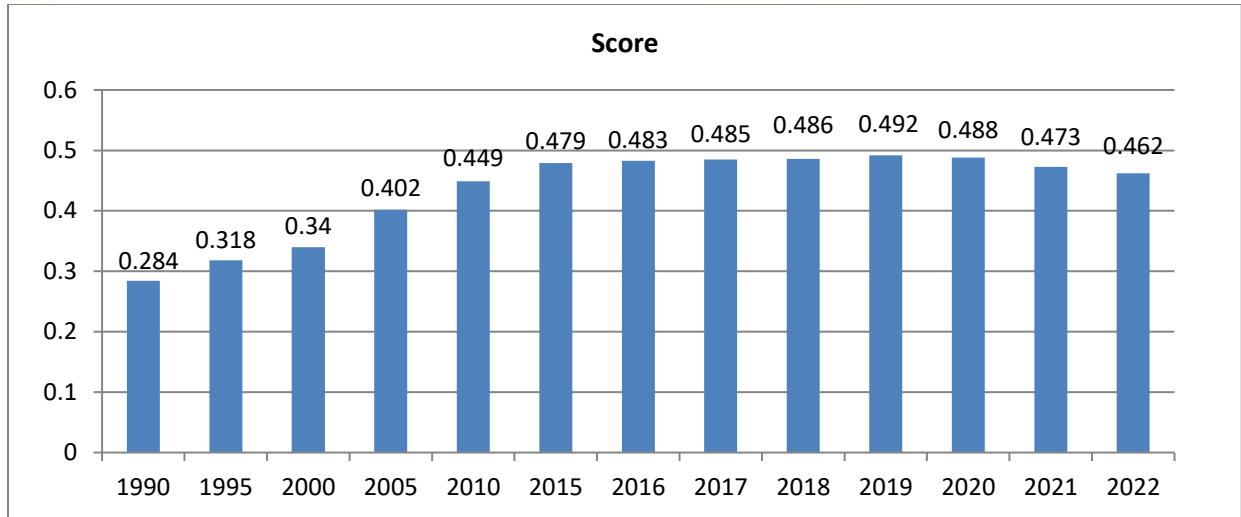
### **Governance and Institution Building**

The aid provided by India has supported the development and strengthening of democratic institutions (like Parliament) in Afghanistan. This includes assistance in areas such as electoral processes, parliamentary capacity building, and governance reforms. This includes training programs for civil servants, support for public administration reforms, and the establishment of administrative institutions. These initiatives have aimed to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of governance mechanisms in Afghanistan. It has contributed to the development of the rule of law and the justice sector in Afghanistan. It has included support for legal reforms, judicial capacity building, and the establishment of legal institutions. These efforts have aimed to enhance access to justice, promote the rule of law, and strengthen the legal framework in Afghanistan. India has supported anti-corruption initiatives in Afghanistan through capacity building, technical assistance, and sharing of best practices.

### **Human Development Indicators**

Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) in 2019 was 0.51; this is an improvement from the HDI of 0.3 in 1990. Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) score in 2019 was primarily influenced by the predicted years at birth (Puri-Mirza, 2022), as seen in figure 2. India's aid has contributed to improving health indicators in Afghanistan. India committed US\$ 5 Million (1 Million per year) to Afghan Red Crescent Society in 2015 for the treatment of Afghan children suffering from congenital heart disease under which 2328 Afghan children were treated (Embassy of India, Kabul, 2021). India's assistance in the education sector has had a positive impact on educational indicators in Afghanistan. By providing scholarships, supporting educational institutions, and facilitating capacity building programs, India has contributed to increasing literacy rates, improving access to quality education, and empowering Afghan youth. Through programs that promote income-generating activities, vocational training, and rural development, India has contributed to reducing poverty and enhancing socio-economic well-being. Through programs that focus on women's education, skill development, and entrepreneurship, India has contributed to enhancing gender equality, women's socio-economic participation, and empowerment.

Figure 2: Human development index in Afghanistan from 1990 to 2022



Source: United Nations Development Programme

### **Diplomatic and Soft Power Influence**

India’s humanitarian involvement in Afghanistan is a key component of its soft power approach. In order to compete with China, the strategy’s main objective is to limit Pakistani influence and maintain access to natural resources (Meier & Murthy, 2011). The diplomatic and soft power influence of India’s aid to Afghanistan has played a significant role in shaping bilateral relations, fostering regional stability, and projecting India’s image as a responsible global actor. India’s aid to Afghanistan has served as a crucial component of its bilateral relations with the country. By providing economic, development, and humanitarian assistance, India has deepened its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan. India is therefore pursuing a strategy of forging strong alliances with nations such as Afghanistan and others in order to enhance her status as a regional force, contain its archrival Pakistan, and constrict the emerging economic might of China( Javaid & Javaid, 2016). This assistance has helped build trust, fostered people-to-people contacts, and facilitated high-level exchanges between the two nations. India’s aid initiatives in Afghanistan have enabled the projection of its soft power. Through various assistance programs, such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and cultural exchanges, India has showcased its capabilities, values and goodwill to the Afghan people. This has helped in creating a positive image of India and generating goodwill among the Afghan population. India’s aid efforts in Afghanistan have enhanced its international reputation as a responsible and reliable partner in development cooperation. India’s aid initiatives in Afghanistan also contribute to regional integration and connectivity. Projects such as the Chabahar port development and the International North-South Transport Corridor have the potential to enhance trade, economic cooperation, and connectivity between Afghanistan, India, and other

countries in the region (Omidi & Noolkar, 2022). This regional integration fosters mutual benefits and strengthens India's influence in the region.

### **Challenges for India in achieving Reciprocity**

Reciprocity in foreign aid can be hindered by power imbalances between donor and recipient countries. Donors, especially those with greater economic and political leverage, may expect certain political or economic concessions in return for their assistance. This power dynamic can limit the recipient country's ability to negotiate on an equal footing and shape the terms of aid reciprocation (Burnell, 1997). Afghanistan has faced persistent security challenges and political instability, which have affected its ability to reciprocate aid effectively. Ongoing conflicts, insurgencies, and governance issues have hindered the country's capacity to implement development projects, meet donor expectations, and provide commensurate assistance to donors. Afghanistan's weak infrastructure and institutions pose significant challenges to achieving reciprocity in aid. Limited transport networks, inadequate governance structures, and corruption can hamper the effective utilization of aid resources and impede the country's ability to reciprocate assistance to donors.

Political instability in Afghanistan has been a significant challenge in the context of achieving reciprocity for India. The country has experienced decades of political turmoil, including the fall of the Taliban regime, the establishment of a new government, and ongoing conflicts. Afghanistan has witnessed frequent changes in its political landscape, including transitions of power, political rivalries, and governance issues (Rubin, 2002). These dynamics have disrupted aid coordination, hinder policy continuity, and create uncertainties that affect the country's ability to reciprocate aid effectively. Political instability has contributed to weak governance structures and widespread corruption in Afghanistan (Adel, 2016). The shifting political landscapes, weak governance, limited policy capacities, political interference and the complexities of peace processes create hurdles in establishing a stable aid environment conducive to effective reciprocation.

Afghanistan's strategic location has made it a theatre for regional and international rivalries. Different countries and actors have competing interests and geopolitical considerations, which has influenced its aid strategies and the level of reciprocation expected by India. The presence of multiple donors in Afghanistan has led to competition and fragmentation in aid efforts. Regional powers such as India, Pakistan, Iran, and China have vested interests in Afghanistan and have provided aid with the aim of advancing their own strategic goals (Tellis, 2010). These powers shape the aid landscape and influenced Afghanistan's ability to reciprocate aid based on their respective agendas and priorities. International organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, and various development agencies also play a role

in aid provision in Afghanistan. These organizations have their own agendas and priorities, which also influences aid reciprocation.

Security concerns and strategic interests play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of aid reciprocation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been a key focus in global counterterrorism efforts. India's provided aid to Afghanistan with the aim of promoting stability, countering extremist ideologies, and preventing the resurgence of terrorist groups (Dar & Kalis, 2013). Afghanistan's mineral resources, including rare earth minerals, copper, and natural gas, are of strategic interest to various countries (Yousaf, 2016). Aid provided by India with strategic interests in resource access also come with expectations for reciprocity in terms of favourable trade agreements, resource extraction rights or investment opportunities but security concerns and strategic interests shape the aid landscape in Afghanistan but the security concerns and strategic interests of multiple actors hampers reciprocation to India.

There are several constraints on Afghan capacity that affect the country's ability to reciprocate. Afghanistan faces significant challenges in terms of weak institutional capacity. This includes limited administrative capacity, inadequate governance structures, and a lack of skilled personnel. These constraints impede the country's ability to effectively plan, implement, and manage aid programs. Persistent security challenges, including ongoing conflict and instability, pose significant constraints on Afghanistan's capacity. Insecurity limits the reach and effectiveness of aid programs, making it difficult to provide services and support development initiatives in many parts of the country. Afghanistan's inadequate physical infrastructure, such as roads, power supply, and telecommunications, constrains the country's capacity to implement and sustain development projects. Insufficient infrastructure hampers the delivery of basic services, slows down economic growth, and undermines the effectiveness of aid programs.

### **Implications of the Imbalance in Reciprocity**

The imbalance in reciprocity between India's aid to Afghanistan and its strategic interests can have several implications. While India has provided substantial assistance to Afghanistan, the reciprocation in terms of advancing India's strategic interests has been limited. The imbalance in reciprocity may limit India's strategic influence in Afghanistan. Despite being one of the largest donors to Afghanistan, India faces challenges in translating its aid into significant strategic gains. This can hinder India's ability to shape the political, economic and security dynamics in Afghanistan in a manner that aligns with its interests. The imbalance in reciprocity may create space for rival powers to exert greater influence in Afghanistan. Competing actors, such as Pakistan and China, have actively pursued their strategic interests in Afghanistan, leveraging their geopolitical advantages (Ali et.al., 2020). India's limited reciprocation



may result in a vulnerability to rival influence, potentially undermining its long-term strategic objectives. The limited reciprocation of India's aid may result in reduced economic returns on its investments in Afghanistan. India has invested in various sectors such as infrastructure, education, and health, with the expectation of fostering economic cooperation and reaping benefits in terms of trade and resource access. However, without adequate reciprocation, India's economic gains may be constrained. The imbalance in reciprocity can have implications for India's security interests. Afghanistan's security situation directly impacts India's security environment, including the threat of cross-border terrorism and the potential spill over of instability. The imbalance in reciprocity can influence regional geopolitical dynamics. India's strategic interests in Afghanistan intersect with those of other regional powers, including Pakistan and Iran (Kaura, 2017). The perceived imbalance in India's reciprocation may affect its relations with these countries, potentially impacting broader regional dynamics and cooperation.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

India's aid to Afghanistan has played a crucial role in fostering development, promoting stability, and advancing its strategic interests in the region. Over the years, India has provided significant economic assistance, infrastructure development, capacity building, humanitarian aid, and security cooperation to Afghanistan. These efforts have contributed to the socio-economic development of Afghanistan, improved governance and institution-building, and enhanced human development indicators. However, there are challenges and constraints that India faces in achieving reciprocity and maximizing its strategic gains in Afghanistan. Political instability, regional rivalries, security concerns, and capacity limitations in Afghanistan pose hurdles to the effective implementation of India's aid programs. The imbalance in reciprocity, particularly in terms of strategic influence and economic returns, has implications for India's long-term interests in Afghanistan.

To address these challenges, India should continue its pragmatic approach by providing development assistance, strengthen security cooperation, and maintain robust diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. Supporting the peace process, balancing regional dynamics, and leveraging soft power resources are also crucial. Furthermore, India should coordinate its efforts with international partners and explore opportunities for economic integration and trade with Afghanistan. Overall, India's aid to Afghanistan is driven by a combination of humanitarian concerns, regional stability objectives, and strategic interests. While the path to achieving reciprocity and maximizing strategic gains may be challenging, India's sustained commitment and comprehensive approach can contribute to the stability, development, and peace of Afghanistan and the wider region. By addressing the constraints and pursuing a balanced and

inclusive strategy, India can build a mutually beneficial relationship with Afghanistan, enhance its own strategic influence, and contribute to regional security and prosperity.

## References

- Adel, E. (2016). Understanding and Explaining Corruption: A case study of Afghanistan.
- Ali, S., Naeem, M., & Khan, M. F. (2020). Great Games and Competing Interests of Regional and Extra-regional Players Competing Interests of Regional and Extra-regional Players. *EUROPEAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH*, 7.
- ANI. (2023, February 3). *Afghan Taliban government welcomes budget - The Economic Times*. The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/afghan-taliban-government-welcomes-budget/articleshow/97561107.cms>
- Barakat, S., & Zyck, S. A. (2009). The evolution of post-conflict recovery. *Third world quarterly*, 30(6), 1069-1086.
- Basu, P. P. (2007). India and post-Taliban Afghanistan: Stakes, opportunities and challenges. *India Quarterly*, 63(3), 84-122.
- Blarel, N. (2012). India's soft power: from potential to reality?. *India: The next superpower*, 28-33.
- Burnell, P. (1997). *Foreign aid in a changing world*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Byrd, W. (2022, August). One Year Later, Taliban Unable to Reverse Afghanistan's Economic Decline | United States Institute of Peace. United States Institute of Peace; USIP.
- Campbell, I. (2013). India's role and interests in Central Asia. *London: Saferworld*, 3.
- Chowdhury, D. (2022, July 19). Changing Political and Economic Dynamics in Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan | Geopolitical Monitor.
- D'souza, S. M. (2007). India's aid to Afghanistan: Challenges and prospects. *Strategic Analysis*, 31(5), 833-842.
- Dar, S. S., & Kalis, N. A. (2013). India's Strategic Response to War on Terrorism in Afghanistan, A Strategic Analysis. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI) Volume*, 2, 1-25.

Embassy of India, Kabul. (2015). Embassy /High Commission /Consulate General of India. <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0208?pr0>

Embassy of India, Kabul. (2016). Embassy /High Commission /Consulate General of India. <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0208?pr0>

Embassy of India, Kabul. (2019). Embassy /High Commission /Consulate General of India. <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0208?pr0>

Embassy of India, Kabul. (2020). Embassy /High Commission /Consulate General of India. <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0208?pr0>

Embassy of India, Kabul. (2021). Embassy /High Commission /Consulate General of India. <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0208?pr0>

Ganguly, S., &Howenstein, N. (2009). India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan. *Journal of International Affairs*, 63(1), 127-140.

International, A. N. (2022, December 1). *India May Restart 20 Stalled Projects In Afghanistan, Says Taliban: Report*. NDTV.Com; NDTV. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-may-restart-20-projects-in-afghanistan-taliban-3567520>

Javaid, U., & Javaid, R. (2016). Indian Influence in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 12.

Kaura, V. (2017). India's Aims in Central Asia and India-Afghanistan-Iran Triangular Relationship. *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 24(1), 23-41.

Kaura, V. (2023). *India-Taliban relations: A careful balancing act, driven by pragmatism* | Middle East Institute. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-taliban-relations-careful-balancing-act-driven-pragmatism>

Larson. (1998, January 1). *Exchange and Reciprocity in International Negotiations in: International Negotiation Volume 3 Issue 2 (1998)*. Brill. [https://brill.com/view/journals/iner/3/2/article-p121\\_2.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/iner/3/2/article-p121_2.xml)

Maizland, L. (2022, August 17). The Taliban in Afghanistan. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan>

MEA. (2022). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://mea.gov.in/Annual\\_Reports.htm?57/Annual\\_Reports](https://mea.gov.in/Annual_Reports.htm?57/Annual_Reports)

Meier, C., & Murthy, C. S. R. (2011). India's growing involvement in humanitarian assistance. *Available at SSRN 1789168*.

Mullen, R. D. (2017). India in Afghanistan: Understanding development assistance by emerging donors to conflict-affected countries. Stimson Center.

Omidi, A., & Noolkar-Oak, G. (2022). Geopolitics of chabahar port for Iran, India and Afghanistan. *South Asia Research*, 42(1), 21-39.

Pe'er, I. (2021, September 9). Afghanistan's economy under the Taliban: the challenges ahead - Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/afghanistans-economy-under-the-taliban-the-challenges-ahead/>

Price, G. (2004). *India's aid dynamics: from recipient to donor?*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Puri-Mirza, A. (2022, September 12). *Afghanistan: human development index 2019* | Statista. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1258672/afghanistan-human-development-index/>

Rhodes, C. (1989). Reciprocity in trade: The utility of a bargaining strategy. *International Organization*, 43(2), 273-299.

Rubin, B. R. (2002). *The fragmentation of Afghanistan: State formation and collapse in the international system*. Yale University Press.

Singh, B., Kaur, J., Sen, R. K., Singh, B., & Chattu, V. K. (2021). The double whammy of pandemic and war: A systematic review of India's education diplomacy to address educational inequities in Afghanistan. *Education Sciences*, 11(10), 651.

Singh, P.K. (2017). Peacebuilding Through Development Partnership: An Indian Perspective. In: Call, C., de Coning, C. (eds) *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60621-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60621-7_4)

Tellis, A. J. (2010). Implementing a Regional Approach to Afghanistan. *Is a regional strategy viable in Afghanistan*, 85-126.

The Wire. (2023b, March 7). *India Makes New Commitment to Supply 20,000 MT of Wheat to Afghanistan*. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-afghanistan-wheat-supply-new-commitment>

Venkatachalam, M., Nielsen, K. B., & Modi, R. (2022, September 30). *The politics of gifts and reciprocity in South–South Cooperation: The case of India’s Covid-19 diplomacy*. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9537805/>

Yousaf, S. (2016). Afghanistan’s Mineral Resource Potential: A Boon or Bane. *Journal of Current Affairs*, 1(1), 86-109.