



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Why do «neighbouring» powers help? India, China, Russia, and their approaches to development in 2001–2021 Afghanistan

[version 2; peer review: 4 approved with reservations, 1 not approved]

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Abstract

The paper identifies the development approaches of China, India, and Russia towards 2001–2021 Afghanistan, and investigates the complex mechanism of their impact on international relations in the region of wider Central Asia. The main finding is that only India has tried to incorporate Afghanistan into its regional economic initiatives. For China and Russia, Afghanistan has been a ‘troubled neighbour’, and they acted as free riders benefiting from the US security and economic presence there, regardless of their claims. Despite its minor activity in Afghanistan, China is becoming the most dominant actor in the region by cooperating with Pakistan. Therefore, India tended to balance Chinese and Pakistani cooperation in the region by providing huge funding to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Russia was increasingly limiting its activity, both in Afghanistan and the region, and tried to balance the influence of other powers by diplomatic means. The article also proves that, despite their membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and their association in the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Group, emerging donors in fact did not cooperate for Afghanistan’s development, and also did not try to compete with Western donors in this regard.

Keywords

Afghanistan, China, India, Russia, development, neighborhood policy, Central Asia

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REVISED Amendments from Version 1

Thank you for your valuable comments and suggestions, which have helped improve the quality and clarity of this article. Below is a summary of how each of your points has been addressed:

1. The Introduction has been revised to incorporate the concept of *economic statecraft* as the primary conceptual framework. A short discussion of its relevance to foreign aid and development financing has been added, and appropriate references to foundational and recent literature on economic statecraft (e.g., Baldwin, 1985; Blackwill & Harris, 2016) are now included.
2. The entire manuscript has undergone a thorough proofreading process. Issues related to grammar, punctuation, syntax, and stylistic consistency have been corrected.
3. A rationale for focusing on RIC Framework has been added.
4. The Methodology section now explicitly states the qualitative techniques used.
5. The sentence about Beijing's fear of U.S. use of ETIM has been revised. A reliable source is now cited, and speculative phrasing has been removed to ensure academic rigour.
6. The concluding analysis regarding India's motivations has been reworked. Instead of framing India's role as primarily countering China, the revised version now emphasises India's intent to provide an alternative to Pakistan's military-political focus, particularly through soft power and statebuilding efforts.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

The use of development aid has recently become an important instrument of economic statecraft. The use of aid for foreign policy objectives appears to be a legacy of the Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union (USSR) when the recipient country was supposed to fall into the donor's sphere of influence. As the USSR collapsed, the US became the predominant donor spending more than \$48 billion on aid annually including nearly \$5 billion for Afghanistan¹. The leading US role as a global aid provider, however, is becoming increasingly contested due to the rapid economic growth of the so-called emerging donors². Countries like China, India, and Russia attempt to contest Western donors by offering recipients alternative development approaches which have been described as the "silent revolution in development aid"³.

Development aid not only helps its recipients to avoid humanitarian crises and economic downturns but also induces them to take certain actions beneficial to the donor⁴. Provided on a non-repayable basis and aimed at developing the recipient country, it is therefore a secure instrument of foreign policy⁵. One of the countries where donors attempt to achieve their foreign policy objectives using development aid is Afghanistan which ranks among the world's least developed countries due to decades of wars and insurgencies. Limited capacity for autonomous economic development has resulted in permanent dependence on development aid which, in some years of the period under review, represented nearly half of Afghanistan's GDP^{6,7}.

The territory of Afghanistan constitutes a frontier for numerous rising powers, thus an area where they can expand their influence on 8. For China, India, and Russia activity in their "neighbourhood" has recently become the utmost foreign policy objective, and marks an important step towards global power status⁹⁻¹¹. As Afghanistan is perceived as part of the neighbourhood for each of the above-mentioned donors, it becomes the area of the so-called "shared neighbourhood", where emerging donors may simultaneously pursue their policies¹².

The paper is based on the assumption that development aid provided by China, India, and Russia has been one of the most important instruments of their foreign policy towards Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021¹³. Accordingly, the first aim of the paper is to identify development approaches applied by China, India, and Russia towards Afghanistan. This allows the paper to define the place and role Afghanistan has played for emerging donors and to assess their capacity for providing adequate development policy. The second aim addresses the rationale behind emerging donors' approaches, allowing for the discovery of the complex mechanisms they used for neighborhood development. The last aim of the paper is to determine how development approaches applied by each donor influenced the dynamics of international relations in the wider region of Central Asia¹⁴.

Theoretical approach

As previously mentioned, development aid for Afghanistan has become an important instrument of the foreign policies of China, India, and Russia. It serves as an example of economic statecraft – that is, a foreign policy strategy that allows states to achieve strategic objectives through economic tools. David A. Baldwin offers the most systematic academic analysis of this concept in his book *Economic Statecraft*. Baldwin argues that economic activities such as development aid, trade, investment, and sanctions are not solely driven by business rationale, but can also serve as foreign policy instruments¹⁵. The instruments of economic statecraft can be divided into two categories: inducements (positive) and sanctions (negative). Examples of inducements include financial and development aid, the forging of trade agreements, debt relief, and investments. Examples of sanctions include asset freezes, the imposition of embargoes and duties, export controls, and individual and sectoral listings.

By using inducement measures – like development assistance, countries – especially global and regional powers, tend to influence other countries in order to shape their foreign policies. An analysis supporting this idea can be found in the work of Peter J. Schraeder, Steven W. Hook, and Bruce Taylor, authors of the article *Clarifying the Foreign Aid Puzzle: A Comparison of American, Japanese, French, and Swedish Aid Flows*. They concluded the following:

- Aid was not motivated by altruism, as official declarations claimed, and was rarely spent on those most in need (in some cases, wealthier countries received more funding).

- Aid was channeled to countries that aligned with the donor's values (such as democracy and free markets), culture, economic interests, or ideological objectives (i.e., fulfilling foreign policy goals).
- Aid was aimed at supporting allies (particularly in the cases of France and the United States).
- There was an increasing focus on trade-related aid projects¹⁶.

Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman draw attention to the exploitation of asymmetries created by globalization and interdependencies. According to them, states (usually Western states, especially the USA) are able to take control *over key nodes in global networks*, namely institutions that are essential for the proper functioning of the state in a globalised world¹⁷. An example of this is the global financial system, dominated by the United States. The use of these interdependencies for foreign policy purposes is called *weaponized interdependence* and this contributes to the fact that other countries (especially emerging powers) are trying to develop independence from these networks by building alternatives out of fear of abuse from the main players in the system, like the USA¹⁸.

Accordingly, some countries tend to create parallel institutions and platforms that enable a higher level of independence in their foreign policies. The most prominent examples is the Russia-India-China (RIC) framework, which indicates a strategic cooperation between Russia, India, and China. It does not constitute a formalized manifesto or policy, but rather an umbrella term for various informal platforms aimed at fostering cooperation between these emerging powers. Several publications by prominent authors have focused on RIC framework. For example, *The Russia-India-China Trio in the Changing International System*, by Chen Dongxiao and Feng Shuai observes a power shift in Eurasia in favor of RIC countries¹⁹. Another article, *India's Multi-Alignment Management and the Russia-India-China (RIC) Triangle* by Frank O'Donnell and Mihaela Papa, notes India's approach to institutionalized cooperation in the area of RICs, of which the counter-terrorism agenda is a central element, especially in the context of strained relations with Pakistan²⁰. However, the evaluation of the RIC framework is not conclusive. In *Russia-India-China: New Challenges and Opportunities* Vladimir Petrovsky emphasizes the role of RIC in promoting a multipolar world order. In *New Order for Old Triangles? The Russia-China-India Matrix* Bobo Lo highlights growing asymmetries in their individual relationships²¹.

The RIC framework has occasionally been invoked by these states in relation to Afghanistan, particularly regarding *post-ISAF exit responsibilities of these three countries, on being immediate neighbour of Afghanistan and victims of terrorism and drugs trafficking emanating from Afghanistan*²². Although emerging donors define their neighbourhood slightly differently, Afghanistan is the only country considered to be such an area for all: China, India, and Russia. Beijing defines its neighbourhood in geographical terms as countries bordering Chinese

territories, and its activity there is motivated by: the securitization of Chinese peripheries, maintaining economic growth, and limiting US influence in the region²³. India's neighbourhood policy was announced in 2014 under the name of "Neighbourhood First"²⁴, and is focused on the South Asian region and the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), including Afghanistan²⁵. The main objectives of India are, similarly to China's, infrastructure development, security cooperation, and boosting trade²⁶. In the case of Russia, the definition of its neighbourhood is related to the territories of the former USSR²⁷. Notably, strong ties are being maintained with member countries of two Moscow-led organisations: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia tends to perceive them as an exclusive zone of influence, and countries that border members of these alignments are also considered by Moscow as part of its extended neighbourhood.

Methods

In the first part of the analysis, the development strategies that India, China, and Russia used in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 are identified. By using an inductive approach, any activity aimed at development in Afghanistan during 2001–2021 would be identified by investigating primary sources, and supplementary, secondary sources if they cover development projects. Primary sources used in the article are (i) official news releases, legal acts, and reports published by the governments of China, India, and Russia; (ii) news releases published by Afghan press agencies and media; (iii) a dataset of Chinese development projects built by AidData; and (iv) official documents published by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The search strategy for case studies (i.e. development projects) was based on purposive sampling, i.e., only projects having certain characteristics were chosen like: India, China, or Russia as financing or implementing country, the contribution to Afghanistan's development, 2001–2021 time frame, the actual implementation of the project, and accessibility of information. Case studies chosen for the analysis were inclusive in the sense that projects were selected regardless of their goal, sector, or target group. The analysis was conducted between May 2021 and February 2022.

Accordingly, I used two research techniques. The first was a case study approach: I selected specific development projects (case studies) sponsored by China, Russia, and India in Afghanistan (2001–2021) based on purposive sampling. I then analyzed these cases individually and comparatively to find patterns. The second research technique was content analysis: I examined documents (official releases, reports, datasets) to extract information about the projects — their goals, financing schemes, sectors, etc. I then systematically categorized and interpreted this information to identify patterns and regularities.

In the paper, I define development aid broadly, as all activities: projects, programmes, grants, investments, loans or trade-related tools that are aimed at "promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, improving governance, expanding access to health care and education, promoting stability in conflict regions,

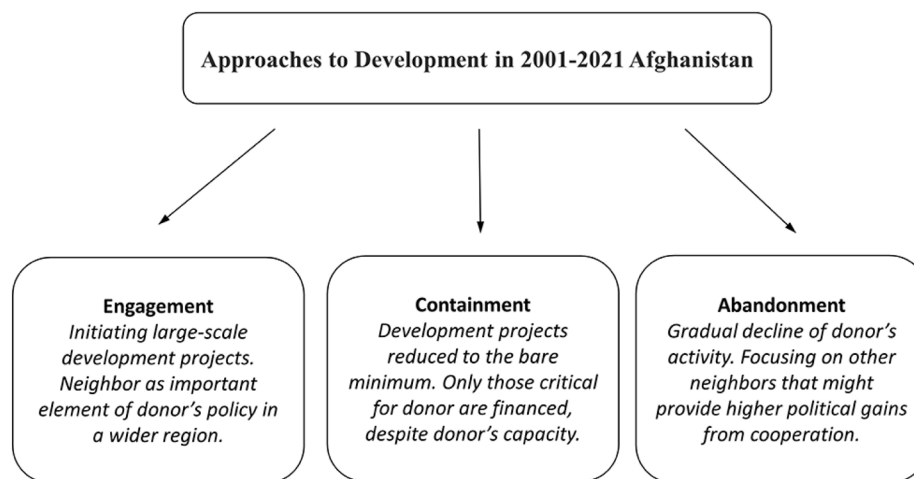
countering terrorism, promoting human rights, strengthening allies, and curbing illicit drug production and trafficking”²⁸. The reason for the broad definition is that emerging donors define development aid differently, use various reporting standards, and keep some of the information on development projects confidential. Moreover, I focus on the projects that were actually carried out, as a significant number of development projects announced by emerging donors are never implemented. Donors’ declarations of aid are usually made during official meetings, and are often part of negotiations, or aimed at promoting the sponsor as a committed donor. Another misleading practice is to classify all the activities carried out by the donor, considered as an investment or as a project sponsorship, despite the fact that the financing party may differ. Furthermore, development projects of China, India, and Russia are performed by various institutions. Thus, all development projects launched or supported by the government, or any governmental entity like a state-owned company, are included in the analysis.

Subsequently, by revealing the regularities and patterns of the above-mentioned development projects, I indicate the development approaches each donor used in Afghanistan (Figure 1). This can be achieved through a systematic and comparative analysis. Firstly, data on development projects that were implemented or funded in Afghanistan during 2001–2021 by China, India, and Russia was collected. Secondly, the projects were categorized based on financing scheme, sector sponsored, and goals set by the donor. Thirdly, qualitative analysis was performed in order to identify patterns and regularities within these projects. This stage is aimed at providing detailed characteristics of the projects, identification (and interpretation) of their objectives and expected outcomes, and situating development projects in the context of domestic and foreign policy of Afghanistan.

In the second part of the research, using the method of structured, focused comparisons²⁹, I analyse three variables that largely affected China’s, India’s, and Russia’s development approaches towards 2001–2021 Afghanistan. This allows the paper to envisage complex mechanisms for the neighbourhood’s development applied by emerging donors. These variables are:

- Relations between emerging donors and the US. During the 2001–2021 period, the US was acting as the main economic and military power in Afghanistan, and was mainly responsible for development there. China, India, and Russia could have been concerned as the US was active in an area considered by them as a neighbourhood.
- Relations between emerging donors. Afghanistan is an area of the “shared neighbourhood” for China, India, and Russia, i.e., an area where these countries can cooperate, compete or coexist³⁰. Therefore, a specific donor may determine its activity in Afghanistan considering the activity of another donor. For example, the introduction of a major project by donor A may cause a reaction, and the introduction of a competing project by donor B.
- Relations between emerging donors and Afghanistan. Although each donor seeks to increase its importance in its neighbourhood, some neighbours are prioritised by donors e.g. for economic reasons or strategic location at the expense of another. On the other hand, donors may limit their activity in countries where there is a security threat.

There were several difficulties encountered during the research process. Among the key issues was the lack of transparency



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Figure 1. Model approaches to Afghanistan’s development that could have been adopted by China, India, and Russia. Source: author.

by emerging donors such as China, India, and Russia, who often withhold detailed information about their development activities. The study also highlights misleading practices, including the frequent announcement of projects that are never implemented and the blurred distinction between development aid and investment. Furthermore, divergent reporting standards among donors make it difficult to compare projects consistently.

Results

The development activity of China, India, and Russia in Afghanistan during 2001–2021 should be divided into four main categories according to the financing scheme: ODA-like projects³¹, contracted works, investments, and trade flows. ODA-like is the most numerous group of projects carried out by emerging donors. In the paper, nearly 78 ODA-like projects were identified and analyzed: 41 sponsored by China, 27 by India, and 9 by Russia. It is important to note that a single development project may include several activities in different sectors. Therefore, the number of projects should not be taken as the sole determinant in assessing development cooperation. Contracted works were primarily focused on infrastructure construction. There were six contracts analyzed in the paper: four carried out by Russian companies, and two by Chinese firms. Investments were comparatively fewer: two projects for each donor. Chinese and Indian investments focused on natural resources, while Russia's investments were in the real estate sector. In the analysis of trade flows, India exhibited a distinct advantage, maintaining the highest trade volume with Afghanistan throughout the 2001–2021 period.

Emerging donors' approaches to development in 2001–2021 Afghanistan

China: security aid, and failed investments

China's ODA-like contributions to Afghanistan averaged just over US\$8 million per year between 2001 and 2021³², with a slight increase after 2013, when Kabul supported the One China principle, assured Beijing that it would fight the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)³³, and joined the China-led security forum: Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM)³⁴. In fact, the security-related project was the most expensive that China had completed in Afghanistan, which differentiated it from other emerging donors. In the Wakhan Corridor, Beijing funded a US\$85 million training centre for the Afghan Mountain Brigade³⁵. The construction of the base suggests that China prioritised security cooperation, which falls into the larger context of its regional security policy aimed at the protection of Xinjiang and Chinese infrastructure projects in Afghanistan's neighbourhood: post-Soviet Central Asia and Pakistan³⁶.

Other ODA-like projects, numbering about 40, were small-scale activities (usually worth about US\$1 million), which do not constitute a sign of a coherent strategy. The most numerous category of projects was reinforcing the central institutions of the Afghan government. China supported the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the Bakhtar News Agency, the Parliament, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by providing equipment and training personnel³⁷. The second category of ODA-like projects

was humanitarian aid, through which China provided food, tents, medicine, or responded to natural disasters³⁸. The third category concerned education, and was implemented rather for soft power purposes. China built several schools including the China-Afghan Friendship School, bought equipment for several other schools and the Confucius Institute³⁹, and sponsored around 500 scholarships for Afghan students annually⁴⁰. The fourth category was the provision of medical aid, like sponsoring a US\$3.6 million renovation of the Jamhuriat Hospital in Kabul, offering US\$600,000 in training for 20 doctors, purchasing US\$4 million worth of ambulances, and sending 700,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine during the COVID-19 pandemic⁴¹.

The modest and scattered ODA-like projects contrast with the funding allocated by Chinese companies in the form of investments. Foreign inward investments, especially those in natural resources, were expected to become an engine of Afghanistan's development⁴². Natural resources were of the greatest interest to Chinese entities, with the key investments including the extraction of oil at Sar-e Pol, and copper from the Mes Aynak mine. However, no oil or copper was mined, while preparatory work cost over US\$300 million, and Afghan political figures and Chinese businesspeople involved in the project faced embezzlement charges⁴³. Despite its large scale, the aforementioned investments were not coordinated by the government in Beijing, but the Chinese entities operated independently, pursuing their business strategies without regard to security concerns or the lack of local workers⁴⁴. Nevertheless, these investments were used by Beijing to drive a narrative of extraordinarily high investment in the development of Afghanistan⁴⁵.

Apart from investments, China's other commercial activity was infrastructure contracts, which should be valued at US\$899 million⁴⁶. Although the contracts contributed to development, they were strictly profit-oriented as the funding was provided by international organisations, Western countries or the Afghan government itself, and the Chinese entity simply carrying out the works for profit. For example, constructed by a Chinese company 111-mile highway between Dara-I-Suf and Yakawlang, connecting the north and south of the country, was sponsored by the Asian Development Bank at the cost of US\$205 million⁴⁷; and a 31-mile road in Wardak Province was sponsored by the Italian government by providing US\$50 million⁴⁸.

The peripheral role that 2001–2021 Afghanistan played for China in the region is also reflected in the trade logistics. Despite the two countries sharing a border and China's worldwide leading role in trade, no direct land connection between them was established, and a majority of goods were traded through Pakistan or Uzbekistan. A factor that could have potentially increased trade turnover was Beijing's extension of the zero-tariff preferences to almost 300 Afghan products in 2006⁴⁹. However, between 2001 and 2021, Afghan exports to China increased from US\$160,000 (2001) to US\$54 million (2020) and Chinese exports from US\$50 million (2001) to US\$500 million (2020), placing Afghanistan as the least important Chinese trading partner in the region⁵⁰.

India: trade-oriented development, and statebuilding

India was the principal non-Western donor in terms of the ODA-like funds provided to Afghanistan. Over the period 2001–2021, it averaged a minimum of US\$81 million per year⁵¹. The amount increased until 2015 to US\$152 million when Afghanistan became the second most important recipient of Indian development aid; and has been decreasing since 2015 which could be linked to the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and Ghani's foreign policy oriented toward Pakistan^{52–54}. However, changes in the value of funding have not affected India's strategy, which has been consistent throughout the period, and was based on the implementation of ODA-like projects in four complementary pillars of infrastructure construction, education, statebuilding, and humanitarian assistance.

The premise of the first pillar, completed in 2019, was to create a logistics network enabling the transportation of goods between India and Afghanistan by modernising the infrastructure. The so-called India–Iran–Afghanistan corridor was expected to boost the productivity of the Afghan economy, and to increase trade volume between these countries. The Iranian port of Chabahar became the focal point of this strategy as the shortest route between India and Afghanistan—running through Pakistan—was obstructed by Islamabad for political reasons. India invested in Chabahar to which goods were transported from Indian ports by sea, and then by Iran to the Afghan border town of Zaranj. Transportation was then made to the Herat–Kandahar highway, which India connected to Zaranj by funding a 124-mile road. The construction of the road made it possible to transport goods to almost every place in Afghanistan, reducing the travel time on this route from thirteen hours to two, generating almost a tenfold increase in the volume of trade⁵⁵.

Alongside transport infrastructure, India sponsored the construction of technical infrastructure to facilitate the development of enterprises and production for export. An example of this type of infrastructure project was the reconstruction of one of the largest dams in Afghanistan, the Afghan-India Friendship Dam worth US\$275 million, enabling an increase in the agricultural production of an area of over 70,000 hectares⁵⁶ or the construction of 126 miles power line supplying energy from power plants in northern Afghanistan to Kabul⁵⁷. Indian infrastructure projects have been carried out almost exclusively by Indian state-owned enterprises, including those specialising in work in fragile areas such as the Border Roads Organisation, currently part of the Indian Armed Forces⁵⁸.

Infrastructure development was complemented by projects falling under the second pillar, education. For each donor, the most important tool for building social capital was to provide scholarships for Afghan youth to study at universities in the sponsoring country. This allowed the donors to increase their soft power, as the recipients of the scholarships later formed Afghan elite. Among emerging donors, India has been a leader in awarding as many as 1,500 scholarships per year⁵⁹. Other typical donor activities include the establishment of

technical and agricultural universities such as the Kandahar Agricultural University created with Indian funds⁶⁰ or projects related to children's education, such as the School Feeding Programme, under which India provided bakery products to 2 million students as an incentive to study⁶¹. A standout among other emerging donors was India's strong support for vocational education, including women's training. The Self-Employed Women's Association, a non-governmental organization co-sponsored by the Indian government, has trained more than 3,000 women, providing them with technical education in industries related to food processing, garment sewing, jewellery making, and sales^{62,63}. The lack of craftspeople seemed to be an enormous development obstacle since donors had to employ workers from abroad to complete aid projects. Owing to these projects, trained people have been able to contribute to the development of Afghanistan by working in the private sector or further aid projects.

The third pillar of India's strategy for Afghanistan's development between 2001 and 2021, statebuilding, was to foster the creation of secular state institutions. India focused on training personnel essential to the functioning of the country by providing short-term training for Afghan ministerial-level officials, lawyers, doctors, judges, businesspersons, and military officers, including women^{64,65}. Complementary to the training of Afghan elites, India sponsored works related to the symbols of Afghan national identity: the construction of a complex of buildings for the Afghan parliament, the renovation of the Stor Palace, a symbol of Afghan statehood, and support for the renovation of the historic district in Kabul⁶⁶.

Under the fourth pillar, India provided humanitarian aid, mainly medical support. Each year, thousands of Afghans travel to India to seek professional treatment⁶⁷. Indeed, India has become one of Afghanistan's most important partners in terms of health care. In addition to the policy of encouraging medical tourists from Afghanistan to come for treatment at Indian clinics through visa facilitation, India has helped to create medical infrastructure on the ground. Health centres and medical missions in major Afghan cities were built, and medical supplies for thousands of patients were provided⁶⁸.

The funds allocated by the Indian government under the ODA-like financing scheme prevailed in the approach of Indian aid to Afghanistan, making commercial development financing negligible. Approximately 100 companies, mostly from the service sectors, have invested in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, with an estimated value of around US\$25 million^{69,70}. The largest Indian investment was supposed to be the Bamyān iron ore mine developed by a consortium led by the state-owned Steel Authority of India Limited, but the investment did not come to fruition⁷¹.

The modest Indian investments in Afghanistan, however, have not affected trading. As early as 2003, a preferential trade agreement reducing tariffs and other trade barriers between India and Afghanistan was signed⁷². Afghanistan's exports to India increased from US\$12.2 million (2001) to US\$499 million

(2020) and were dominated by agricultural products, which was in line with India's strategy where Afghanistan was a supplier of agricultural products to India's rapidly growing population⁷³. Meanwhile, India's imports into Afghanistan have increased from US\$21 million (2001) to US\$855 million (2020), and the most important in its structure were textiles, processed foods, stimulants like coffee or tobacco, and medicines, of which India was the largest supplier to Afghanistan⁷⁴. The reduction of administrative barriers to trade combined with the implementation of the ODA-like projects mentioned above has resulted in a 40-fold increase in trade between 2001 and 2021, placing India as one of Afghanistan's top trading partners.

Russia: attempt to use the USSR's legacy for profits

Among the emerging donors examined, Russia seems to be the least active, spending on ODA-like projects averaging US\$1.9 million annually⁷⁵. The small value of Russian aid to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 reflects Afghanistan's position in Russia's development policy. Only countries with strong political ties to Russia: Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Tajikistan (members of the CSTO), Nicaragua (recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and Ossetia), Cuba, Syria, or North Korea – may expect a sizable amount of aid. The strategy of Russian ODA-like aid provided to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 was based on ad hoc projects, which can be divided into three groups: mitigation of natural disasters, implementation of anti-drug projects, and usage of soft power tools like education and culture. Russia's ODA-like projects were usually implemented in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, and Kabul. These regions are of strategic importance for Russia because of their proximity to the Russian sphere of influence: post-Soviet Central Asia, including Moscow's lead CSTO member, Tajikistan. Before the USSR's collapse, these provinces were Moscow's immediate neighbourhood, thus the main focus of Soviet pro-development activity⁷⁶.

As mentioned earlier, Russia's activity in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 could be divided into three main groups. The first focused on the alleviation of the adverse consequences of natural disasters, like sending humanitarian aid (food and medical supplies) to the northern cities of Mazar-i-Sharif and Fayzabad^{77,78}. Within the second group, the most significant anti-drug project was the implementation of agricultural development programs under the auspices of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, so that local farmers would not find it profitable to grow narcotic plants⁷⁹. In addition, Russia funded anti-drug training facilities, and Russian officers trained their peers on how to fight drug production⁸⁰. Projects belonging to the third group, education and culture were the largest in terms of the funding amount provided. Based on relatively small but still present pro-Russian sentiment, they attempted to increase Russian soft power in Afghanistan. The reconstruction of the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Kabul, completed in 2019, was the largest ODA-like project of this type⁸¹. Furthermore, like other donors, Russia tried to maintain pro-Russian sentiments among the elites by increasing the number of scholarships year by year given to Afghans for studies in Russian universities, reaching a record high of 560 in 2020⁸².

Post-Soviet infrastructure accounts for nearly one-third of Afghanistan's major industrial facilities, and some of the most remarkable buildings such as Kabul University, and Kabul's Mikrorayon, remain among the most modern in the country⁸³. The scale of the damage to infrastructure has been so great that, despite massive international aid, Kabul has been unable to find the resources to build new facilities, so repairs to the old infrastructure became a necessity. Western companies have been unable to renovate this infrastructure due to the lack of know-how, offering construction of new and more expensive installations instead⁸⁴. Extensive experience and know-how allowed Russia to be a potentially more reliable partner for rebuilding Afghanistan's post-Soviet infrastructure than other countries. Aware of its advantages Russia created a list of 142 post-Soviet infrastructure projects that it could reconstruct⁸⁵. Despite efforts to persuade Western donors to invest in reconstruction projects carried out by Russian companies, Moscow did not succeed entirely⁸⁶. Russian companies have carried out contract works only in a few projects where the funding party was a Western donor or an international organization⁸⁷. For example, the USSR-built Naghlu hydropower plant in Kabul province was upgraded by the Russian company Technopromexport, with funding of US\$38 million provided by the international Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund⁸⁸. Another important project was the modernization of the Salang Tunnel, a key link between Kabul and the northern provinces, also funded by Western countries.

Despite attempts, Russian investments have not played a significant role in Afghanistan's development^{89,90}. Russia's business elites believed that investments in Afghanistan were exposed to too much competition from the US, so they preferred neighbouring post-Soviet states of Central Asia, which are as rich in natural resources as Afghanistan, and have closer political ties to Moscow⁹¹. Besides the US, China was successfully competing for Afghanistan's natural resources with Russia, for example by winning a tender for copper extraction from Mes Aynak⁹². Among other unsuccessful Russian investment attempts, mostly located in the north of Afghanistan, are oil and gas extraction from deposits in Sheberghan and nearby provinces, gold extraction at Shamti near the Tajik border, reconstruction of the chemical industry at Mazar-i-Sharif, or cement plants at Pul-i-Khumri⁹³. Despite the failure, right after the Taliban takeover, Russia started talks on investments in these projects⁹⁴. Russia's statements on its participation in pro-development activities in Afghanistan should therefore be treated more in terms of creating a narrative of substantial aid to Afghanistan and Russia's significant role in the region.

Afghanistan's minor role for Russia is also evidenced by the low trade turnover despite Russia's establishment of a most-favoured-nation clause for Afghan products⁹⁵. Amounting to US\$2.6 million in 2001, imports from Afghanistan remained virtually the same in 2020 at US\$3.4 million⁹⁶. The reasons for this can be explained by the substitute goods that Russia can buy in other Central Asian countries. Exports from Russia to Afghanistan, i.e. mainly fuels, construction materials, and machinery and equipment, increased from US\$7.7 million (2001) to US\$151 million (2020)⁹⁷.

What factors shaped the aid approaches of emerging donors?

Relations between emerging donors and the US

The post-9/11 war on terror contributed to the transnational cooperation, particularly between the United States and Russia, but ultimately this cooperation did not endure. Originally based on the transport of US equipment to Afghanistan via Russia, American activity began to expand boldly in post-Soviet Central Asia⁹⁸. US facilities there began to alarm Russia and China, which perceived this presence as a threat to their regional power status. Particularly strong was the Russian reaction as the US was seen by Moscow as the major obstacle to enhancing Russia's global role, and a usual competitor since the Cold War⁹⁹. This resulted in pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy, directly expressing their dissatisfaction with the American presence, and its influence on security in the region¹⁰⁰, like criticising for inadequate protection of Afghanistan's northern borders resulting in drug smuggling to Russia¹⁰¹.

Despite criticism and dissatisfaction regarding US activity, China and Russia have benefited from US military activity. By improving security in 2001–2021 Afghanistan, the United States limited the expansion of terrorist organizations in the wider region of Central Asia. China has been concerned about the activities of terrorist groups operating in Badakhshan: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and Uighur militias, which had the potential to destabilize Xinjiang. For Moscow, northern Afghanistan has been the main shipping route of opioids flooding into Russia, and a place of radical Islamic militias activity having the potential to destabilise the Russian exclusive zone of influence: Central Asia, and Russia later on [102](#). Therefore, in exchange for enhanced security, emerging donors were able to accept the US presence in their neighbourhood. As China officially tried not to engage its troops in conflicts and stabilisation missions abroad, and Russia remembered its defeat in the 1979–1981 war, they were not willing to compete with the US in the field of military aid¹⁰³.

The fluctuations in amounts spent on development aid by China were also connected with the US presence in the region. The main reason for the Chinese limited presence was the unwillingness to compete with the US over Afghanistan, and having no political connections with political parties or figures which could advocate for Chinese influence there. Another argument against the Chinese engagement there, was the close US ties with the government, which deterred broader Chinese involvement¹⁰⁴. However, reinforcement of the Taliban caused by reduced US military activity was perceived by Beijing as having adverse effects on the security in Xinjiang. Thus, the value of Chinese aid since 2014 began to slightly increase, especially in security-oriented project in Badakhshan. Another factor encouraging Chinese presence in Afghanistan was the fact of removal of ETIM from the US list of terrorist organizations. Beijing accused the United States of applying double standards and using the delisting for its own interests, even while promoting counterterrorism efforts¹⁰⁵.

Among the emerging donors analysed, the convergence of interests with the United States in Afghanistan was greatest in the case of India. Firstly, both India and the US sought to balance the economic and military rise of China¹⁰⁶. Secondly, they wanted to reduce the significance of conservative Islam in Afghanistan, which was the indirect cause of military intervention in Afghanistan. What is more, India views conservative Islam as a tool used by Pakistan to increase its influence in the region¹⁰⁷. And lastly, both considered secular governments in Kabul as a stabilizing factor for the whole region. As a result, the US and India's approaches to development in Afghanistan were similar, i.e. based on statebuilding, capacity building, and social capital increasing. As the prospects for India's Afghanistan policy were closely tied to US activity¹⁰⁸, including its development approach, the security situation caused India's aid to Afghanistan halved since 2014¹⁰⁹ due to the risk that Indian projects would be used by the Taliban for purposes that are inconsistent with India's developmental approach.

Relations between emerging donors

Russia's main policy objective was to not allow any country to achieve dominating status on the territory of former USSR countries, claimed by Russia as its exclusive zone of influence¹¹⁰. Since 2001–2021 Afghanistan does not belong to this zone, the presence of other emerging donors was acceptable for Moscow. However, the security threat from Afghanistan made Russia alter its stance. Apart from security aid projects in Afghanistan, China built a network of border facilities in Russia-lead CSTO member state: Tajikistan, and many other projects under the Belt and Road Initiative in post-Soviet Central Asia countries. Moreover, India was establishing the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), where Afghanistan could have been one of the transit countries on the way from India to post-Soviet Central Asia. Russia, due to financial constraints, was unable to offer a competitive development plan for the region. Thus Russian inability to challenge India and China in terms of economy, resulted in attempts to balance their influence in order to prevent either of them from dominance in the region¹¹¹. To achieve so, Moscow used tools that do not require significant financial resources, such as multilateral forums like BRICS and SCO, diplomatic tools, or a narrative of being a military superpower.

India's proactive development approach towards Afghanistan stemmed from Chinese and Pakistani influence in the region. The construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reduces India's importance in the region by creating the shortest route linking Central Asia to the Indian Ocean while generating economic growth in Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, has been seen by India as allied with the Taliban and was accused by New Delhi of using conservative Islam to increase its role in the region¹¹². To minimize the influence of China and Pakistan, India pursued a comprehensive development strategy for Afghanistan. Infrastructure investments were intended to bring Afghanistan into India's economic integration project thereby limiting the importance of China. In turn, statebuilding and education efforts were meant to limit

the role of conservative Islam¹¹³. Moreover, the “model of long-lasting democracy” where different ethnic and religious groups could peacefully coexist promoted by India in Afghanistan^{114,115}, was aimed at curbing the Pakistan-backed Taliban movement.

Relations between emerging donors and Afghanistan

Russia and China treated 2001–2021 Afghanistan primarily as a threat, which was demonstrated by their ODA-like activities, which were mostly security-related aid projects performed in Afghanistan’s northern frontiers. Afghanistan differs from other Chinese neighbours due to the exceptional number of terrorist groups hostile to China operating there, like ETIM, ISKP, or Uighur militias. For Beijing, these groups have had a destabilising effect on the perturbed Xinjiang province. Thus, China’s neighborhood approach towards Afghanistan was primarily domestically driven, aimed at securing its borders¹¹⁶. A similar mechanism can be seen in Russia’s case. The risk of terrorism spillover to the states of Central Asia, which is Russia’s direct sphere of influence, may deteriorate the security in Russia. For both China and Russia, Afghanistan is also one of the main sources of drug smuggling, which has been an alarming social issue, particularly in Russia.

Afghanistan did not fit into China’s regional strategy, especially in the context of developing large economic projects. China has been pursuing BRI and CPEC in countries with better locations for transit logistics, larger and wealthier populations, and—in the case of Central Asia—a richness of natural resources. To improve regional security Beijing was eager to cooperate with any government in Afghanistan¹¹⁷, however, the obstacle was the Kabul government’s dependence on the US¹¹⁸. As a result, Beijing maintained parallel dialogues with the Taliban, negotiating about Uighur militants and the protection of Chinese workers¹¹⁹.

Apart from the terrorist threat and drug trafficking, the memory of the 1979–1989 war was an important factor limiting Russia’s activity in Afghanistan. Russia perceives the conflict as one of the USSR’s collapse causes, thus the end of its superpower status. Consequently, an “Afghan syndrome” developed among Russia’s political and business elites, making them reluctant to become deeply involved in Afghanistan^{120,121}. Difficulties in pursuing an active policy in Afghanistan may have also resulted from the polarised perception of Russia in Afghan society. On the one hand, the society has a negative attitude towards Russia, bearing in mind the 1979–1989 war (49% of respondents), and the other developments from the Soviet era are noticeable (35% of respondents)¹²².

India, unlike Russia and China, was the most important among emerging donors between 2001 and 2021. Its policy was mainly shaped by the need to contain the growing influence of China and Pakistan and to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a source of regional instability¹²³. Unlike Russia and China, India used a broad range of socio-economic instruments to achieve its goals. However, Afghanistan was merely one of several

potential routes connecting India to post-Soviet Central Asia and Russia. The year 2014 proved to be a turning point when India’s activity in Afghanistan significantly declined. In addition to the reduced US presence, Ghani’s Pakistan-oriented foreign policy jeopardised Indo-Afghan relations. Nevertheless, out of the emerging donors, India enjoyed the most positive views among the Afghan society, which perceived India as a leader in Asia¹²⁴.

Another issue related to Kabul–New Delhi relations is the context of Pakistani foreign policy. Islamabad tends to prevent the emergence of a strong, India-friendly Afghan government, which could pose a threat to Pakistan’s western border and increase India’s influence in the event of a potential India–Pakistan conflict¹²⁵. Moreover, Pakistan accuses India of interfering in its domestic affairs, especially in regions bordering Afghanistan, such as Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas¹²⁶. Therefore, India’s growing presence in Afghanistan — including numerous development and state-building projects — may be seen by Pakistan as an attempt to reorient Afghanistan’s foreign policy in a more pro-Indian direction.

Conclusions

Development aid appeared to be used by emerging donors in 2001–2021 Afghanistan mainly to show their ostensible commitment rather than to make a substantial contribution to development. Only India made an effort to integrate Afghanistan into its regional economic strategy. However, Afghanistan did not receive the leading role as a transit country on India’s way to post-Soviet Central Asia, but a more stable Turkmenistan was granted this role. Moreover, the presence of India was vitally connected with its efforts to balance China and Pakistan in the region, thus the Indian approach can be described as ‘Engagement’, though not exclusively. Afghanistan was not a priority for Chinese regional policy, since it was not included in initiatives such as the BRI or CPEC, and China’s development approach was grounded in combating terrorist spillover mostly in countries with little US presence like Tajikistan, thus the ‘Containment’ approach would apply. ‘Abandonment’ defines the Russian approach most accurately, because Russia did not perceive political benefits in providing development aid nor implementing a long-term development perspective, due to the lasting memory of the 1979–89 war and its inability to compete with other donors there.

Development approaches used in Afghanistan demonstrate the capacity of each donor to influence their respective neighbourhoods, undermining the status quo in the wider region of Central Asia. Benefiting from its economic strength, China has been pursuing an increasingly assertive foreign policy in the region¹²⁷, which has made it a regional development facilitator, despite its ‘Containment’ approach in Afghanistan. Although Moscow sought to restore its status from the Soviet golden age by preventing other powers from operating in the former USSR’s territory¹²⁸, other emerging donors boldly established border protection infrastructure on the Tajik side of the Afghan–Tajik border. By preventing the spillover of instability from Afghanistan, India and China were infringing

on Russia's exclusive sphere of influence. The aforementioned construction of interregional infrastructure by India and China connecting the countries of the region (INSTC, BRI, CPEC) has additionally undermined Russia's dominance in Central Asia. This demonstrated that Russia was unable to create a competitive and innovative vision of economic development, both in Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Therefore, Moscow seems to allow India and China to balance each other by using multilateral organisations like the SCO¹²⁹, and it maintains its perception as a regional leader through low-cost soft power tools, and the historically established notion of being a major military power.

Although China, India, and Russia are widely analysed under the RIC framework, and their membership in the BRICS and the SCO is noted, their development aid to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 was directed bilaterally, which challenges the opinion that relations between them are based on cooperation. The SCO and the BRICS are perceived as forums of South–South cooperation, including development partnerships¹³⁰. However, these institutions have not been used to coordinate development efforts made by emerging donors in Afghanistan, or even more broadly in the wider region of Central Asia. Development approaches for Afghanistan thus became an instrument for China, India, and Russia to protect their particular interests. The image of emerging donors having a development approach alternative to Western

countries is widely circulated¹³¹. As the example of Afghanistan shows, the development approaches of emerging donors, especially those of Russia and China, were of minor importance to Afghanistan's development between 2001 and 2021. Moreover, Western development projects conducted in Afghanistan and the US military presence made Afghanistan more stable which directly benefited emerging donors.

As the analysis of donors' development approaches has shown, among the determinants of their activity in 2001–2021 Afghanistan was the US presence, which was the main security and aid provider there. The withdrawal of troops from the US-led coalition and the subsequent seizure of power by the Taliban began another chapter in the turbulent history of Afghanistan. This time, however, emerging donors neighbouring Afghanistan seem to be the main ones responsible for its development. Their past development activities could indicate that Afghanistan would not become the centre of their activity. However, many depend on the stability of the Taliban government, and its ability to manage the country so Afghanistan might become a stable place for the activity of its "neighbours".

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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 129. Russia's balancing attempts are not always successful as China tends to create its own mechanisms like QCCM.
 130. Cooperation, and competition between BRICS' and SCO's countries is a subject of discussion. On the one hand, it is argued that countries of the BRICS are effectively cooperating at the international level to undermine the Western-centric institutions like WTO rounds, see e.g. Hopewell K: **The BRICS—merely a fable? Emerging power alliances in global trade governance**. *Int Aff.* **93**(6): 1377–1396. Others points out that in the context of development these countries have not yet built a single coherent platform, and their vested interests are an obstacle to the notion of challenging the overthrow of the Western-centric world order, see e.g. Fahimul Quadir, 'Rising Donors and the New Narrative of 'South-South' Cooperation: what prospects for changing the landscape of development assistance programmes?', *Third World Quarterly* **34**:2, 2013, 321–338.
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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ? ? ✗ ?

Version 2

Reviewer Report 31 July 2025

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Kingsley Chukwuka Ezechi

Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Nigeria

This is an interesting article that has strong publication merit. However, there are a few suggestions I have to strengthen it.

First, the speculative remark of aid being a legacy of Cold War rivalry between the US and Russia should be recorded as a fact with sources (see Graebner, N [1959]. Foreign aid: A strategy of cold war OR Nastos https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/prism/prism_8-4/prism_8-4_101-119_Natsios.pdf?ver=2020-06-12-101119-517). Also development aid can be both repayable (loans) and non-repayable (grants) to develop recipient countries, depending on the terms. This should be noted by the author.

The designation of the author of the RIC development approach to be that of abandonment, engagement and containment respectively at the concluding part of the article is great. it however, did not define what these are in the introduction to give readers insight into what those terms could mean for the development approaches of the emerging donors. A sentence each for these terms in the introduction or earlier in the article will suffice. This is quite important.

The last paragraph of the author's concluding remark portrays the US as having abandoned Afghanistan as the emerging donors "seem to be the main ones responsible for its development". This does not reflect the reality on the ground as the US post-withdrawal has provided almost \$3.62billion in aid to Afghanistan from 2022 - 2025. Inclusion of this should provide some nuance in the conclusion and recommendation for future studies (See SIGAR - <https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Quarterly-Reports/2025-04-30qr-f1.pdf>).

In summary, the paper is a good one, with potential for future studies. The incorporation of the above observation, I believe, can further strengthen the paper.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: US-Afghanistan Relations in the 21st century.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 18 July 2025

<https://doi.org/10.21956/stomiedintrelat.19266.r29189>

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Ejaz Hussain 

Lahore School of Economics, Lahore, Pakistan

This could be an interesting study with the potential to contribute to the literature on international interventions and state-building. However, in its current form, the manuscript suffers from several fundamental weaknesses that significantly limit its academic value. These issues are detailed below.

First, the manuscript does not pose any clear research questions in either the abstract or the introduction. This is a serious shortcoming. A scientifically grounded inquiry must begin with focused research questions that guide the selection of theory, the methodological approach, and the structure of the analysis. In the absence of such questions, the paper lacks analytical direction and coherence.

Second, the study does not present a comprehensive or critically engaged literature review. While

some relevant sources are cited, the author does not systematically situate the study within the broader academic debates on state-building, foreign interventions, or Afghan political development. The discussion of literature remains largely descriptive and lacks the analytical depth expected in a peer-reviewed publication.

Third, although the manuscript references certain theoretical ideas and key texts, it remains unclear which specific theory underpins the study. More importantly, the paper does not demonstrate how any theory has been consistently or meaningfully applied to the analysis. This leaves the reader uncertain about the conceptual framework and its relevance to the research topic.

Fourth, the proposed “model” is conceptually vague and methodologically weak. In the section where the model is introduced, the author suggests that particular approaches “could have” been adopted by relevant actors. This speculative framing does not constitute proper model building. Moreover, it is not evident whether this model is tested, applied, or connected to any form of data. The manuscript lacks any clear content analysis, case study design, or empirical grounding to support the proposed framework.

In conclusion, the manuscript lacks the basic components of a scientific research design. It is predominantly descriptive, with no defined methodology, no articulated research questions, no applied theoretical lens, and no systematic data analysis. As such, it does not meet the scholarly standards required for publication in an academic journal.

I therefore recommend rejection in its current form. The author is encouraged to revise the manuscript thoroughly, beginning with a well-defined research focus, a clearly chosen and consistently applied theoretical framework, a rigorous literature review, and an empirically grounded methodology.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

No source data required

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Civil-military relations, Comparative politics, Politics and Foreign policy of South Asia, International political economy, BRI

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 03 June 2025

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Biplab Debnath 

Tripura University, Agartala, India

The manuscript titled "Why do neighboring powers help? India, China, Russia, and their approaches to development in 2001-2021 Afghanistan" is a comparative analysis of the developmental approaches of India, China and Russia towards Afghanistan during the above-mentioned period of study. The author, commendably, have gone beyond a descriptive comparison of the developmental approaches, to highlight the political and strategic aspects of economic diplomacy and the manner in which such diplomacy effects and is affected by relations among the donors, between donors and recipients, and donors with major external actors (in this case the USA). The writing is lucid, methodologically sound, and the chosen country-cases as well as the overall subject-matter of the manuscript is relevant in the context of the inter-linkage between economic and strategic linkages in geo-politics of the region.

Saying that, the author may look in the few points mentioned below which may enhance the overall quality of the manuscript.

Firstly, the period of study of the manuscript is from 2001 to 2021. Saying that, beginning from 2021 there have been significant developments in Afghanistan, none more significant than the Taliban takeover following the complete US withdrawal in the second half of 2021, which had significant ramifications not just on the geo-politics of the region by also the manner in which regional and extra-regional countries (including the three mentioned in the study) engaged with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. In this context, the author may include a paragraph mentioning the relevance of the study (i.e. understanding developmental approaches of the three countries) even from a contemporary geo-political context. Such a linkage may provide a better justification for this study and avoid the problem of relegating the study in complete isolation from the current geo-political developments in Afghanistan.

Secondly, while the author has engaged with numerous primary and literatures, the literatures engaged in the theoretical section seems inadequate and unstructured. For instance, more thematic literatures on economic statecraft rather than too many details from single literature (as done in reviewing Schraeder, Hook and Taylor's work) can enhance the quality of literature review in bring out the theoretical proposition. More importantly, the author may include literatures on economic diplomacy/political-strategic aspects economic diplomacy of India, China and Russia,

that may place the manuscript in a better context.

Thirdly, the author has mentioned about medical aid in the category of ODA-like projects as an approach to development. Since 2020, with the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, nations have been using medical assistance to deal with COVID-19 as a diplomatic tool of engagement. In this context, the author may provide a comparative analysis of medical aid provided by the three countries towards Afghanistan (may be in the form of helping in evacuations, medical supplies, vaccines) as humanitarian/political/diplomatic tool. While the data on medical aids as given in the manuscript might have included aids emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic, dealing with this aspect separately may provide more rigor to the aspect of medical aid as an approach to development.

Fourthly, the author has concluded that the development approach of India, China and Russia is that of engagement, containment and abandonment. While the author has given a rationale for these approaches in the conclusion, these three terms has not been adequately defined in any part of the paper except in the conclusion (and very briefly in a diagram). Infact, the author may start the study with a proposition underlining these three concepts and their adoption by the three countries. The author also may also point that these three approaches are not like watertight compartments and a country's development approach may overlap between engagement, containment and abandonment (a point which is made by the author in the context of China in the conclusion). Such propositions at the beginning of the study may put the instances of development approach of the three countries mentioned in the study in a better perspective.

Overall, as mentioned in the beginning, the manuscript is well written and relevant. However, incorporation of the above suggestions may further enhance the quality of the manuscript.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Interational Relations, Politics and Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 14 December 2023

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Pranay Kotasthane

The Takshashila Institution, Pune, India

The descriptive details in this article are excellent. But the conclusions, especially related to India's role, need further investigation.

For example, the author claims "India tended to oppose Chinese efforts by providing huge funding to Afghanistan to balance Chinese influence." The evidence for this claim is unconvincing.

However, in my understanding, the primary motivation for India's involvement is to offer an alternative to Pakistan's strategy of focusing on military and political areas.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Afghanistan - India relations

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 27 September 2023

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Raj Verma

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, Shanghai, China

In the Introduction, maybe better to discuss economic statecraft and employ it as the conceptual framework. There is a lot of literature on economic statecraft, so it should not be difficult to add.

Needs thorough proof reading for punctuation, grammar and syntax.

The author has not justified or provided a rationale for studying India, China and Russia in Afghanistan. The author can justify this through the Russia-India-China or the RIC framework. The author can say that the study will focus on Russia, India and China in Afghanistan because they are a part of RIC framework.

Maybe the author can write a paragraph each for the neighbourhood policies of the three countries specifying the interests of each of the three countries in Afghanistan. Basically, the author needs to provide reason why each country wanted to provide aid etc to Afghanistan. The three countries have similar but also different interests in Afghanistan.

It would be better if the author explicitly states which qualitative research techniques were used and how. Did the author face any difficulties? Are there any limitations of research?

'Beijing was afraid that the USA might use ETIM in order to weaken China' – need reference for this. This is mere speculation without a reference.

It would be better if the author can restructure the paper. As it reads, it is not coherent with some paragraphs more suitable in other sections. Also need to change the order of the sections to make it more engaging for the reader and provide a better flow.

End notes: 111 and 112. 112 can be incorporated in 111. The same pattern should be followed throughout the paper.

The literature/sources is/are dated in some cases. More recent literature should be used.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: India and China's foreign and security policies, Asian security issues, India-China-US-Russia-Pakistan relations, Quad and IR theory.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.
