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Graphical Abstract

Managerial Diplomacy: The Role of Strategic Leadership in Reconstructing Afghanistan's Economic and Political Engagement with the Global Community

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Highlights

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- Longitudinal analysis of 25 Afghan stakeholders across two data collection waves
- Corruption identified as most persistent concern (12.8% Survey 1, 13.2% Survey 2)
- Three stakeholder clusters: Reformers (36%), Traditionalists (32%), Coordinators (32%)
- Sentiment evolution from slightly positive (0.074) to slightly negative (-0.032)
- Strategic sovereignty framework for aid-dependent reconstruction contexts
- Comparative analysis reveals thematic consistency with increased specificity

Managerial Diplomacy: The Role of Strategic Leadership in Reconstructing Afghanistan's Economic and Political Engagement with the Global Community

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Abstract

This study employs a longitudinal mixed-methods approach to analyze managerial diplomacy through comprehensive examination of 25 Afghan governance stakeholders across two data collection waves. The research integrates initial survey data (321 individual responses, 8,097 words) with follow-up in-depth interviews from the same stakeholders, totaling 50 respondent engagements. Professional distribution includes NGO professionals (40.0%), policy analysts (24.0%), former government officials (20.0%), and international diplomats (16.0%). Comparative thematic analysis reveals corruption as the most persistent concern (Survey 1: 70 occurrences, 12.8%; Survey 2: 65 occurrences, 13.2%), followed by leadership (Survey 1: 95 occurrences, 17.4%; Survey 2: 78 occurrences, 15.9%). Sentiment analysis shows evolving perspectives with mean polarity shifting from 0.074 (Survey 1) to -0.032 (Survey 2), indicating increased critical reflection. Cluster analysis identifies three respondent segments: institutional reform advocates (36%), traditional system protectors (32%), and international coordination experts (32%). Longitudinal analysis demonstrates increasing specificity in corruption examples and greater emphasis on practical recommendations in follow-up responses. The findings establish that effective managerial diplomacy requires navigating hybrid governance systems while preserving strategic sovereignty amid international assistance dependency.

Keywords: Managerial Diplomacy, Strategic Leadership, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Afghanistan, Governance Challenges, Longitudinal Analysis, Institutional Hybridity, Corruption, Aid Dependency

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1. Introduction

By the middle of the eighteenth century, with British imperial control in India and an expanding Tsarist Empire to the north, the imperial powers together demarcated the territory of Afghanistan in order to make it an effective buffer state. Although independent in internal affairs, Afghanistan's foreign policy between 1880 and 1920 was, in effect, handled through the Government of India.[Cramer and Goodhand \(2002\)](#)

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is potentially rich in natural resources, human capital, and economic potential, while its people suffer and live in severe poverty due to the lack of management and sound strategy by the ruling government. The people do not benefit from the wealth that the country possesses because of the government's managerial weakness towards the nation in utilizing existing resources. This situation requires a comprehensive approach to understand the reasons for this inconsistency. ([Mukonga and Awolusi, 2019](#)).

similar to other post-conflict nations, Afghanistan faces challenges in state capacity and leadership legitimacy. The current crisis in Afghanistan is primarily due to the capacity of the government and the legitimacy of its leadership. Building or strengthening government capacity for effective delivery is one of the major challenges that the people and leaders of Afghanistan face. The experience of Afghanistan over the past century of independence has shown that government capacity cannot be enhanced through a benevolent dictator or under authoritarian leadership. Therefore, the government must be rebuilt and leadership must gain legitimacy in order to increase their developmental capacity, and the nation must be a decision-maker in this regard.[Mangu \(2008\)](#)

The development of Afghanistan after decades of conflict requires leaders who can effectively rebuild government institutions, open the private sector to national and international traders, and coordinate national and international efforts, which demonstrates the vital role of strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy.[Cramer and Goodhand \(2002\)](#)

As the global community refocused on Afghanistan after 2001, there is a renewed urgency for sustainable reconstruction in the aftermath of the war. The task of rebuilding Afghanistan presents a formidable challenge for the international community, necessitating extensive support, resources, and political commitment.[Bosi \(2003\)](#)

This research employs a longitudinal mixed-methods approach to examine the critical role of strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy in the sustainable reconstruction of governmental institutions. The study integrates two waves of data collection from the same 25 stakeholders to track evolving perspectives on governance challenges, institutional capacity, and international coordination. It investigates how

effective leadership can foster political cohesion, stimulate economic development, and strengthen international cooperation, thereby laying the foundation for sustainable reconstruction and community empowerment in Afghanistan.

There is limited research employing longitudinal designs to examine the role of strategic leadership in the effectiveness of post-conflict governments, particularly in Afghanistan.[Amarkhil and Elwakil \(2022\)](#) This study addresses this gap by analyzing how managerial diplomacy and strategic leadership evolve in response to changing reconstruction contexts, and how government interactions with the international community affect governance outcomes. The research provides an evidence-based framework and practical solutions to guide policymakers and leaders in improving diplomatic relations with the global community after conflict.

1.1. Background and Context

In late 2001, after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan was in very difficult conditions. The Afghan economy had been severely damaged due to the prolonged war and extreme drought, with grain production halved, cattle herds decimated, and orchards and vineyards destroyed due to war and drought. More than five million people had become refugees in neighboring countries, and the remaining economic activities had been driven to ruin due to insecurity and a lack of supportive services. Many people suffered from low food consumption, loss of assets, lack of social services, disabilities (such as mine-related incidents), and the lack of security and power (and still do). Overall, Afghanistan had been fundamentally sidelined from two decades of global community development, with no significant increase in per capita income during this period and a life expectancy of only 43 years [World Bank \(2004\)](#).

National leadership had been weakened due to a severe dependence on foreign support. After the fall of the Taliban regime, Hamid Karzai was chosen by intervening powers to lead the interim administration after 2001 and was appointed as the preferred candidate of the Western coalition in the 2004 presidential elections. Although Afghanistan's diplomatic relations had been weakened after the crisis caused by internal wars prior to 2001, the main factor contributing to this situation was the rental governments with unclear legitimacy, in which national leaders had little incentive to undertake major reforms aimed at strengthening the state [Suhrke \(2011\)](#). Rather, the policy choices made by the United States and its partners in Afghanistan over the past twenty years are largely to blame. The international community made many avoidable mistakes in its attempts at state-building, painting Afghan society with a broad brush only obfuscates missteps made by those in power in both Washington and Kabul [Murtazashvili \(2022\)](#).

Furthermore, Afghanistan's post-2001 recovery heavily depended on foreign aid to

rebuild state institutions and deliver basic services. However, the effectiveness of this aid required proper management, strong negotiating capacity, and policies to prevent corruption, highlighting the critical need for capable leadership and managerial diplomacy in the reconstruction process [Andaish and Assadi \(2024\)](#).

With MDTFs, donors felt that they had navigated the pitfalls associated with other forms of assistance by creating a modality which could centralize planning, coordination and oversight while also matching the need for financial accountability and the desire to engage state institutions in a more comprehensive manner. Yet, as will be seen below, the theoretical benefits of MDTFs have been lost during implementation as donors bent the model to their standard operating procedures [Barakat \(2009\)](#).

State institutions in post 2001 Afghanistan have grown to become actually more dependent on outside support and funding, carry weak operational capacity, are poorly coordinated, less decentralized and suffer from issues of long term sustainability [Aman and Aman \(2015\)](#). The performance in all dimensions of aid management hardly reached 50% [Rashed et al. \(2024\)](#). Recent field evidence shows that aid management performance in Afghanistan is weak (average \approx 44–50%), underlining that external resources alone cannot deliver reconstruction without stronger leadership, coordination and institutional capacity [Rashed et al. \(2024\)](#).

Whether donors or recipient governments are more influential in designing and implementing aid programs is especially important. Gauging the true impacts of external assistance to recipient governments thus requires viewing aid dynamics as a multidimensional variable [Barma et al. \(2020\)](#). Specifically, three core dimensions determine the effects of external aid how much assistance there is (aid level), along with whether aid donors or the recipient government are more influential in determining what external assistance is used for (aid design) and how it is administered (aid implementation). . . . Aid design and aid implementation get to the heart of the interaction between externally provided aid and local governance systems. They focus attention on the balance of influence between governments and donors in driving the use of aid, both in terms of conceiving aid policy and in terms of how the aid is actually used in practice.

1.2. State Capacity and Leadership Challenges

To enhance the capacity of the government in Afghanistan, governmental institutions fundamentally depend on effective leadership within ministries and key organizations. For this purpose, leaders are needed who can articulate a vision for their field, translate this vision into programs, and emphasize accountability for results. Strong leaders derive legitimacy from deep roots in the community and are

respected for their capabilities. Effective leaders possess integrity and can convey their vision, programs, and achievements to the community. One sign of a strong leader is the ability to attract high-quality staff and advisors, as well as the capacity to mobilize financial resources [Collier and Hoeffler \(2003b\)](#).

Governments that lack efficient expertise and an educated population, where education and training have not yet been culturally established, are unable to effectively utilize existing resources for the implementation of government projects and achieving governmental and social objectives [Bashardost and Ahmadi \(2019\)](#). In Afghanistan, public administration has faced challenges such as illiteracy, lack of capacity, the failure to assign work to qualified individuals, administrative corruption, absence of reforms, and weak rule of law. These issues undermine the government's ability to effectively mobilize resources and provide essential services, highlighting the crucial role of strategic leadership in strengthening institutional capacities and guiding reconstruction efforts.

Manchanda critiques dominant Orientalist perspectives in Western international relations theories. These theories often describe non-Western countries like Afghanistan as underdeveloped or unsafe. She argues that these concepts stem from a Eurocentric viewpoint that characterizes Afghanistan as a "failed state," neglecting its extensive political history and indigenous governance structures. This narrative endorses foreign intervention as a means of promoting civilization, creating a hierarchical relationship between the West and other regions, thus presenting the West as the sole source of modernity and progress. These models pay no attention to Afghanistan's political motivations and its right to autonomy [Safi et al. \(2025\)](#).

Furthermore, Manchanda examines the impact of colonial concepts on Western international relations theories. These theories often overlook the effects of empire or the historical portrayal of the "Global South" as a region defined by conflict and instability. Western concepts of governance, such as liberal democracy and centralized statehood, are imposed on Afghanistan due to colonial assumptions that generalize Western experiences while ignoring non-Western alternatives. This epistemic dominance marginalizes systems like the Loya Jirga and disregards acceptable cultural options. This perpetuates a limited and dominant view of global politics, rendering Western international relations theories inadequate in addressing the complex challenges faced by post-colonial countries like Afghanistan [Safi et al. \(2025\)](#).

1.3. Strategic Leadership and Managerial Diplomacy

Historically, resolving conflicts and disagreements in Afghanistan through traditional methods, such as the Loya Jirga, convened by tribal elders and influential leaders, remains significant. The Loya Jirga embodies Afghanistan's collectivist

values and facilitates decision-making through consensus. Interactions among tribal elders, religious leaders, and local communities have a substantial impact on political decisions in Afghanistan. The relational theory of Yaqing Qin emphasizes the fundamental importance of the social context and actions, suggesting that international relations scholars should look beyond rationality and embrace 'relationality' in explaining foreign policy and behavior and international outcomes within a broader context. As [Qin \(2016\)](#) notes, "this article proposes a relational theory of world politics with relationality as the metaphysical component of its theoretical hard core." As [Ling \(2019\)](#) states, "Epistemic compassion, I propose, offers a way out." The concept of 'epistemic compassion' proposed by L. H. M. Ling encourages us to engage with diverse perspectives of others with an open mind and heart. Incorporating Afghanistan's political customs and cultural practices into international relations theory can enhance the accessibility and applicability of this field on a global scale. Including non-Western perspectives will shift this discipline from a singular concept to a more diverse understanding known as 'pluri-versality' [Bolewski \(2018\)](#).

1.4. Research Rationale

As explained in the [Löfström \(2022\)](#) article, Afghanistan's long history of centralized and unaccountable leadership has led to corruption, patronage, and weak citizen participation. The Bonn Agreement continued this legacy by prioritizing institutional form over practical accountability. Similarly, [Tariq and Zia \(2022\)](#) emphasize that under the Taliban administration, power remains concentrated around the Amir, marginalizing operational voices and disrupting diplomatic engagement. These analyses collectively reveal a persistent management gap that this study seeks to address through the lens of strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy. The analyses derived from previous studies generally reveal a persistent gap in management and governance that obstructs the development of accountable institutions and effective statecraft. Even with broad research on the political vulnerability of a fragile state such as Afghanistan, further research is still necessary in this area, as limited studies have examined how managerial conduct and diplomatic competence interact to affect state legitimacy and international cooperation. Therefore, this study aims to bridge these gaps by analyzing the governance challenges of Afghanistan from the perspective of strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy. This approach contributes to theory and practice by expanding the discussions of global international relations through non-Western contexts and providing insights based on leadership for more coherent and sustainable governance rooted in relationships in post-conflict reconstruction, and reinforcing theory and practice in the field of strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Strategic Leadership and Managerial Diplomacy

The ability to choose aligns with [Evans and Barakat \(2012\)](#) concept of "development as freedom," where "good governance" is a public good that all citizens should have equal rights and shares in. There is an emphasis on the importance of strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy in ensuring that the government serves all citizens in Afghanistan equally after the conflict.

The primary and essential responsibility for building sustainable peace and a strong, united government lies in overcoming the issues of state legitimacy. The authorized governance of a government is taken from its ability to maintain order and provide services that meet the basic needs of the country. Reconstructing lawful political authority is essential for consolidating sustainable peace and creating friendly relationships and diplomacy on a global level [Jeong \(2005\)](#). This study shows how vital strategic leadership and management diplomacy are in reconstructing governance in Afghanistan after conflict and decades of war and instability.

Restoring credible political authority plays a key role in solidifying enduring peace and emphasizes how important strategic leadership and management diplomacy are in reviving legitimate governance in Afghanistan after conflict [Khadiagala and Lyons \(2006\)](#).

Corporate diplomacy, through its management and interaction, outlines a proactive approach that multinational companies can take to address governance shortcomings or political conflicts in host countries, especially when nation-states or international institutions are unable to tackle and resolve urgent social issues.

From the study [Westermann-Behaylo et al. \(2015\)](#), it is evident how strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy can fill governance and institutional gaps in Afghanistan after conflict.

[Boal and Hooijberg \(2000\)](#) state that 'strategic leadership focuses on the creation of meaning and purpose for the organisation' [Davies and Davies \(2004\)](#). It claims that the essence of strategic leadership includes the capacity for learning, the capacity for change, and managerial wisdom [Boal and Hooijberg \(2000\)](#).

"Strategic leaders have the organizational ability to: 1. be strategically orientated; 2. translate strategy into action; 3. align people and organizations; 4. determine effective strategic intervention points; 5. develop strategic competencies" [Davies and Davies \(2004\)](#).

"Strategic leaders have personal characteristics which display: 6. a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present; 7. absorptive capacity; 8. adaptive capacity; 9. wisdom" [Davies and Davies \(2004\)](#).

"A model of strategic leadership therefore can take the following form" [Davies and Davies \(2004\)](#).

Strategic leadership in such contexts involves bridging the gap between formal state institutions and informal traditional power structures to build legitimate and sustainable governance [Girod \(2015\)](#). An alternative definition that this paper provides is that ED is the 'multi-stakeholder process of deploying economic means towards diplomatic ends, and vice-versa; in a manner that creates value between and across publics through a co-creative process involving of international public managers and other important stakeholders' [Chohan \(2021\)](#). Effective strategic leaders establish controls that facilitate flexible and innovative employee behaviors to help the firm maintain and/or gain a competitive advantage [Hitt et al. \(2012\)](#).

2.2. Institutional Reform and Governance Challenges

Reforming state institutions and reviving international legitimacy are among the major challenges faced by countries emerging from conflict [Chow and Weitz \(2010\)](#). This is especially notable in Afghanistan after years of war and significant instability, where strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy in rebuilding the government and establishing legitimacy are regarded as vital principles.

In addition to top-down strategies, a bottom-up state-building approach emphasizes cooperation among local communities, meaning all tiers of central government and international actors, and promotes the integration of traditional, informal, and new governmental structures [Wennmann \(2010\)](#).

Based on the top-down decision-making model and Afghanistan's dependence on Western powers, legal reform initiatives after 2001 have largely not reflected Afghan social values and have left a detrimental trace that has affected the system's capacity to engage seriously with Afghanistan's legal foundations, namely Islamic rights and Afghan traditions [Nijat \(2014\)](#). This indicates that top-down reforms are often in conflict with local social and legal norms and necessitates the strengthening of sensitive and sustainable governmental strategies that are responsive to local conditions, from the bottom up and diplomatically in Afghanistan.

In environments, and especially in governments after conflict, when official and unofficial powers are concentrated in one actor, the ruling party may become dominant and rely on both coercion and consent, which can lead to the weakening of the establishment of an inclusive state and governmental reforms [McDoom \(2023\)](#).

2.3. State Legitimacy, Capacity, and External Aid

Long-term conflicts lead to catastrophic human loss and physical destruction; they also cause the collapse of the systems and institutions that properly operate a

stable society. These are the same systems that need to be revitalized, and today's circumstances in Afghanistan, after decades of conflict, face the same challenges [Brahimi \(2007\)](#). States can be weak due to deficiencies in three distinct but interdependent dimensions, such as legitimacy, capacity, and authority. The legitimacy of a government can be assessed based on its ability to gain the consent of the population for its dominance. The capacity of the government can be measured by its ability to deliver essential public services, and the authority of the government can be evaluated based on its ability to control the use of physical violence within its territory [Bizhan \(2022\)](#). Given these contexts, international donors face considerable trade-offs: development aid funnelled through government ministries may improve the capacity of state institutions to provide goods and services but also risks strengthening autocratic regimes or being absorbed by projects that may not always benefit those that need aid the most [Hoeffler and Justino \(2024\)](#). Simply, the fate of Afghanistan's domestic and international future rests on the effectiveness of the agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban [Ellis \(2021\)](#). To address this issue, the correct and modern application of strategic management and the updating of traditional management systems to modern methods, along with the utilization of human capital and the eradication of illiteracy in this country, are among the essential measures necessary for this reform.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Strategic Leadership Theory

Strategic leadership, in its simplest definition, is leadership that manifests at the highest level of an organization, which includes the Board of Directors (BOD) and members of the Top Management Team (TMT), such as executive positions (for example, Chief Executive Officer [CEO], Chief Financial Officer [CFO], Chief Information Officer [CIO], Chief Marketing Officer [CMO], Chief Operating Officer [COO], and Chief Sustainability Officer [CSU]), as well as General Managers (GMs) and leaders of Strategic Business Units (SBUs), [Singh et al. \(2023\)](#).

A recent article by [Samimi et al. \(2020\)](#) sheds light on such definitions and identifies the need to integrate complex definitions of strategic leadership, proposing a comprehensive definition that characterizes strategic leadership as "the functions that individuals at the upper levels of an organization perform, aimed at creating strategic consequences for the organization," where such functions include "strategic decision-making, stakeholder engagement, human resources management activities, motivation and influence, information management, operations oversight and management, management of social and ethical issues, and management of conflicting demands."

In fact, the Upper Echelons Theory paved the way for a new stream of management research focused on top management leadership, where the characteristics and relationships between the experiences and personalities of senior managers and organizational outcomes are theorized [Hambrick and Mason \(1984\)](#). The Strategic Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (SLBQ), developed by [Ocampo et al. \(2024\)](#), identifies five critical dimensions for measuring strategic leadership: alignment in educational leadership, resource and capacity management, innovation and technology integration, strategic communications, and building strategic culture. This multidimensional framework, validated with high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.917), provides a robust measurement approach that can be adapted for evaluating strategic leadership in the context of governance in Afghanistan [Lieberman Lawry \(2022\)](#).

3.2. Managerial Diplomacy

It also argues that you can't separate domestic and international politics Afghanistan's internal struggles are directly tied to its place in the world [Akgül \(2021\)](#). For non-Western nations, this involves their leaders strategically combining foreign, economic, and defense policies to create opportunities for influence, going beyond mere economic development [Chagas-Bastos \(2023\)](#). Experts were far more hopeful about Mosul's recovery than the people living there. They looked at the big picture and future plans, not the current daily struggles. Big projects, like those run by UNESCO, have started to rebuild major landmarks and neighborhoods [Farhan et al. \(2025\)](#). "They demonstrated increased interest in participating in regional and bilateral transit and trade facilitation agreements including CMMA, GMS-CBTA, and BBIN MVA" [Nuruzzaman \(2022\)](#). "Domestic politics and international relations... are often somehow entangled,' so that no agreement engineered abroad can survive unless it is also acceptable at home. Two-level game theory formalises this insight by picturing every chief negotiator at two linked tables. At Level I ministers and officials bargain with foreign counterparts; at Level II the same bargain must be 'voted up or down' by domestic actors..." [Morabito \(2025\)](#). Each government's win-set, defined by parliaments, unions and aerospace primes, decides whether engineers can lock in common sensor suites or whether negotiations stall [Sirat et al. \(2025\)](#). "At Level I, French, German and Spanish defence ministers' bargain with Dassault, Airbus and Indra over FCAS designs, while British, Italian and Japanese leaders coordinate with BAE Systems, Leonardo and Mitsubishi on GCAP timelines and technology bundles... Because both initiatives pursue a 'system-of-systems' fighter, these talks spill into allied projects... issue linkages that negotiators deliberately use to enlarge overlapping win-sets" [Morabito \(2025\)](#).

3.3. State Capacity and Legitimacy Theory

"All these LLDCs made concerted efforts in addressing their structural and other development challenges. They adopted a wide range of policies and programmes and carried out significant legal and regulatory reforms in facilitating the implementation of the six priorities of the VPoA. Many of their national development strategies and sectoral plans directly or indirectly incorporated these six priorities in their efforts to achieve inclusive and sustainable development" [Nuruzzaman \(2022\)](#). [Ottervik \(2013\)](#) defines state capacity as "the ability of a government to dominate individuals in a specific territory, that is, to elicit compliant behavior," and operationalizes it through tax compliance measured against the size of the shadow economy. This approach emphasizes that "the state's capacity to mobilize and extract financial resources is the foundation of state capacity and the basis of the government's ability to realize its other capacities." The study demonstrates that tax compliance has high convergent and discriminant validity as a measure of state capacity and is strongly correlated with governance effectiveness while distinguishing state capacity from levels of democracy, particularly in non-Western contexts. [Hendrix \(2010\)](#) analysis introduces three main dimensions of state capacity: military capacity, bureaucratic/administrative capacity, and the cohesion of political institutions. This study demonstrates through principal component analysis that these dimensions collapse into three latent factors: legal-rational (which encompasses bureaucratic quality and democratic institutions), resource-dependence-autocracy (characterized by dependence on resources and autocratic governance), and neopatrimonialism (which combines low extraction capacity with reliance on resources). This multidimensional framework provides a broad conceptual framework for understanding state capacity as the ability to implement policies and maintain the legitimacy of power.

A foundational document in governance studies, [Kaufmann et al. \(2004\)](#), defines governance as encompassing "(1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, (2) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies, and (3) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them." This definition explicitly ties a government's capacity (pillar 2) to its legitimacy, which is derived from its processes (pillar 1) and the mutual respect for institutions (pillar 3).

A comparative analysis of [Vaccaro \(2023\)](#) reveals that while these common indicators of state capacity have a high degree of convergent validity (correlation 0.70-0.94), they have low substitutability and produce different statistical results. This study identifies key measurement approaches, including the State Capacity Index (HSI), which focuses on extractive, coercive, and administrative capacities; Government Effectiveness (WGI), which measures the quality of public services and policy imple-

mentation; and the State Fragility Index (SFI), which evaluates conflict management and service delivery. This underscores the importance of selecting state capacity metrics that align with specific research contexts and definitions.

3.4. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

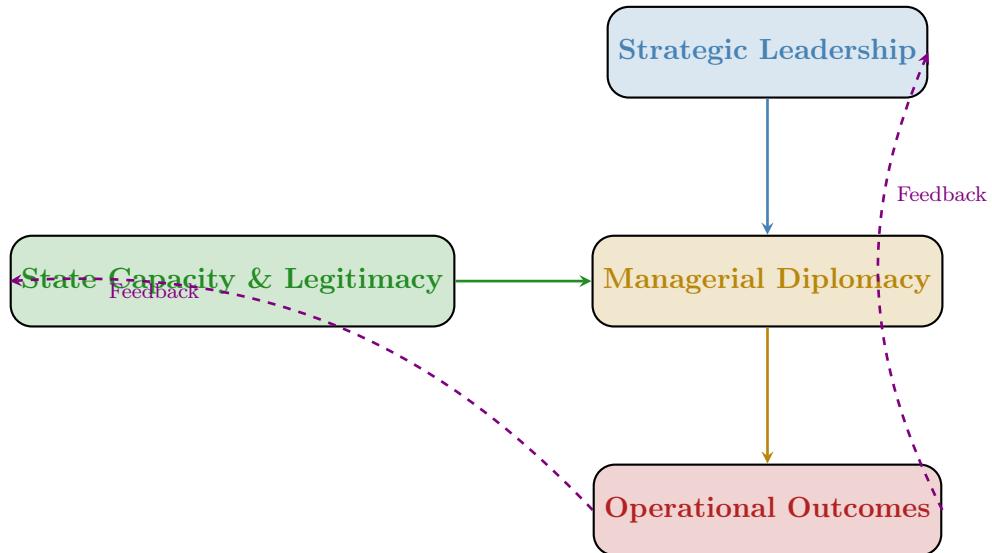


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Managerial Diplomacy Integrating Strategic Leadership, State Capacity, and Operational Outcomes

Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Development

The conceptual model integrates strategic leadership theory with diplomatic studies to address Afghanistan's unique post-conflict governance challenges. Drawing from [Hambrick and Mason \(1984\)](#) Upper Echelons Theory, strategic leadership encompasses "the functions that individuals at the upper levels of an organization perform, aimed at creating strategic consequences for the organization" [Samimi et al. \(2020\)](#). The Strategic Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (SLBQ), developed by [Ocampo et al. \(2024\)](#), identifies five critical dimensions for measuring strategic leadership: alignment in educational leadership, resource and capacity management, innovation and technology integration, strategic communications, and building strategic culture. This multidimensional framework, validated with high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.917), provides a robust measurement approach that can be adapted for evaluating strategic leadership in the context of governance in Afghanistan [Mohd Ali and Zulkipli \(2019\)](#). In Afghanistan's context, this involves leaders who can "ar-

ticulate a vision for their field, translate this vision into programs, and emphasize accountability for results" [Collier and Hoeffler \(2003a\)](#).

The model accounts for Afghanistan's specific governance reality where "government capacity cannot be enhanced through a benevolent dictator or under authoritarian leadership" and instead requires leadership that gains legitimacy to increase developmental capacity [Mangu \(2008\)](#). The strategic leadership component addresses the critical need for leaders who can "bridge the gap between formal state institutions and informal traditional power structures to build legitimate and sustainable governance" [Girod \(2015\)](#).

This leadership is organically linked to managerial diplomacy, understood here not only in its traditional sense but as a proactive approach—akin to 'corporate diplomacy'—for addressing governance shortcomings [Westermann-Behaylo et al. \(2015\)](#), while acknowledging that 'domestic politics and international relations... are often somehow entangled,' whereby no internationally engineered agreement can survive unless it is also acceptable at home [Ali et al. \(2025\)](#).

State capacity and legitimacy, defined through [Bizhan \(2022\)](#) three interdependent dimensions of legitimacy, capacity, and authority, directly influence managerial diplomacy effectiveness. This is particularly relevant given Afghanistan's "aid management performance weakness (average \approx 44–50%)" [Rashed et al. \(2024\)](#) and the challenge that "development aid funnelled through government ministries may improve capacity but risks strengthening autocratic regimes" [Hoeffler and Justino \(2024\)](#).

Managerial diplomacy operationalization the understanding that "domestic politics and international relations... are often somehow entangled" [Morabito \(2025\)](#), requiring leaders to navigate both domestic legitimacy and international engagement simultaneously. This approach moves beyond traditional diplomacy to incorporate "corporate diplomacy [as] a proactive approach that multinational companies can take to address governance shortcomings or political conflicts in host countries" [Westermann-Behaylo et al. \(2015\)](#), adapted to Afghanistan's governmental context.

The feedback loops acknowledge the dynamic nature of post-conflict reconstruction, where operational outcomes continuously reshape both leadership approaches and state capacity. International insertion is the crucial process for a country to move from simply wanting recognition to being accepted as a legitimate actor capable of seeking status within global political, economic, and military hierarchies. It's about being seen as a relevant player by the powerful states that control access. This isn't just about legal recognition; it's about achieving meaningful status and the agency to act [Lieberman Lawry \(2022\)](#). This addresses the persistent challenge where "national leaders had little incentive to undertake major reforms aimed at strengthening the state" [Suhrke \(2011\)](#) by creating reinforcing mechanisms for improvement.

Based on this conceptual framework, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Strategic leadership positively influences managerial diplomacy capabilities in post-conflict Afghanistan, enabling leaders to translate strategic orientation into effective domestic-international interactions.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): State capacity and legitimacy positively moderate the relationship between strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy, with stronger institutional foundations enhancing diplomatic effectiveness.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Managerial diplomacy mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and operational outcomes, particularly in achieving international recognition and socio-economic development.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Feedback loops from operational outcomes reinforce both strategic leadership effectiveness and state capacity development, creating virtuous cycles of improvement in governance and international engagement.

The model specifically addresses Afghanistan's governance challenges by incorporating traditional mechanisms like the Loya Jirga while recognizing that "top-down reforms are often in conflict with local social and legal norms" [Nijat \(2014\)](#). It provides a framework for moving beyond the current reality where "power remains concentrated around the Amir, marginalizing operational voices and disrupting diplomatic engagement" [Tariq and Zia \(2022\)](#) toward more inclusive and effective governance structures.

3.5. Operationalization of Core Variables

International insertion is the crucial process for a country to move from simply wanting recognition to being accepted as a legitimate actor capable of seeking status within global political, economic, and military hierarchies. It's about being seen as a relevant player by the powerful states that control access. This isn't just about legal recognition; it's about achieving meaningful status and the agency to act [Chagas-Bastos \(2023\)](#). While officials focus on large-scale restoration, the people who actually live in Mosul often feel their voices and immediate needs are being ignored [Farhan et al. \(2025\)](#). "Recognizing that transport infrastructure and energy and ICT infrastructure play a vital role in promoting growth, reducing poverty, and achieving structural transformation, the 5 LLDCs have devoted considerable resources to this priority area. Several of them have launched national infrastructure plans including plans for the development of ICT and energy sectors, reformed laws and introduced new regulatory measures, and established new and/or strengthened institutional mechanisms during the reporting period" [Nuruzzaman \(2022\)](#). "Each government's win-set, defined by parliaments, unions and aerospace primes, decides whether engineers can lock in common sensor suites or whether negotiations stall" [Morabito \(2025\)](#).

3.6. Theoretical Integration and Contribution

Mainstream theories of IR have failed to explain the specific developments in Afghanistan, as these frameworks are largely based on the experiences and interests of dominant powers in the current and past system. Consequently, to understand the situation in Afghanistan, a critical approach is needed that challenges the unequal relationships and class patterns of the international system. Based on this reflective approach to class inequality, Afghanistan's diplomacy is perceived not merely as a reaction to external pressures but as a conscious effort to navigate within this unjust order and build a more political and freer society [Akgül \(2021\)](#). But this has created a gap. While officials focus on large-scale restoration, the people who actually live in Mosul often feel their voices and immediate needs are being ignored [Farhan et al. \(2025\)](#). "LLDCs have recognized the opportunities offered by regional and subregional cooperation arrangements and has undertaken several actions to strengthen regional trade, transport, communication, and energy networks, harmonize regional policies to strengthen regional synergy, competitiveness, and regional value chains, and strengthen participation in bilateral and regional integration frameworks" [Nuruzzaman \(2022\)](#). "Each government's win-set, defined by parliaments, unions and aerospace primes, decides whether engineers can lock in common sensor suites or whether negotiations stall, and the paradox of weakness allows budget-constrained partners to exact concessions that their material power alone would never secure... executives must therefore stitch together domestic coalitions even as they satisfy EU rules, all against power asymmetries that let wealthier, more technologically advanced states steer programme design" [Morabito \(2025\)](#).

4. Methodology

This study employs a longitudinal mixed-methods research design integrating two waves of data collection from the same 25 stakeholders engaged in Afghanistan's reconstruction. The methodological approach combines quantitative text analysis with qualitative thematic coding to examine evolving perspectives on managerial diplomacy and strategic leadership challenges across time.

4.1. Research Design and Data Collection Strategy

The research design incorporates a longitudinal panel study approach with two distinct data collection waves:

4.1.1. Wave 1: Initial Comprehensive Survey (October 24-28, 2025)

The initial data collection involved a comprehensive survey administered to 25 stakeholders with direct experience in Afghan governance and reconstruction between 2001-2021. The survey instrument comprised sixteen structured questions exploring leadership competencies, institutional bridging, international aid impacts, administrative diplomacy, coordination obstacles, institutional weaknesses, legitimacy factors, policy reforms, governance lessons, and additional insights.

4.1.2. Wave 2: Follow-up In-depth Interviews (November 2025)

The second wave involved follow-up in-depth interviews with the same 25 stakeholders, focusing on specific case examples and practical recommendations. This wave included five targeted questions examining transnational leadership examples, corruption case studies, formal-traditional institutional gaps, aid versus national interest conflicts, and practical recommendations for future interventions.

4.2. Sample Characteristics and Composition

The study maintains a consistent sample of 25 stakeholders across both data collection waves, ensuring longitudinal comparability. The sample composition reflects diverse professional backgrounds as detailed in Table 1.

Professional Background	Count	Percentage
Employee at NGO or Relief Organization	10	40.0%
Policy Analyst/Policy Expert	6	24.0%
Former Afghan Government Official	5	20.0%
International Diplomat/Representative	4	16.0%

Table 1: Professional Background of Survey Respondents (N=25)

Temporal distribution of respondents' engagement spans critical reconstruction periods: 2006-2010 (8.0%), 2011-2015 (24.0%), 2016-2021 (44.0%), and post-2021 (24.0%).

4.3. Data Characteristics and Response Metrics

The integrated dataset encompasses responses from both collection waves, totaling 50 respondent engagements. Key data characteristics include:

Data Collection Wave	Response (n)	Response Rate	Mean Words	Total Words
Wave 1: Initial Survey				
Leadership qualities (Q3)	25	100.0%	38.4	960
Institutional bridging (Q4)	24	96.0%	63.4	1,522
International aid impact (Q5)	25	100.0%	49.8	1,245
Governance lessons (Q12)	25	100.0%	36.3	907
Additional insights (Q13)	22	88.0%	42.5	934
Wave 2: Follow-up Interviews				
Transnational leadership examples	25	100.0%	52.6	1,315
Corruption case studies	23	92.0%	48.9	1,125
Formal-traditional gaps	23	92.0%	41.2	948
Aid vs national interest	25	100.0%	45.8	1,145
Practical recommendations	25	100.0%	39.7	992
Total Across Both Waves	321	97.2%	44.3	14,192

Table 2: Response Metrics Across Data Collection Waves

The integrated dataset contains 14,192 words of qualitative data across 321 individual responses, with an overall response rate of 97.2% across both collection waves.

4.4. Analytical Framework and Procedures

The analysis employed a multi-method longitudinal approach combining computational text analysis with qualitative interpretation across both datasets:

4.4.1. Text Preprocessing and Linguistic Analysis

All 321 responses underwent comprehensive text preprocessing including tokenization, stop-word removal, and normalization. Computational preprocessing and analyses were performed using Python 3.11.9 with custom text processing pipelines for Afghan governance context. Response length analysis, word frequency distributions, and linguistic patterns were systematically examined across both waves.

4.4.2. Longitudinal Thematic Analysis

A deductive-inductive coding framework identified 10 core themes derived from the theoretical framework. Theme frequencies were systematically calculated across both datasets, with intercoder reliability measures applied to ensure consistency. Longitudinal thematic tracking enabled analysis of theme persistence and evolution across data collection waves.

4.4.3. Sentiment and Emotional Tone Analysis

TextBlob sentiment analysis measured response polarity (-1 to +1) and subjectivity (0 to 1) across different question domains and collection waves, providing insights into emotional tone evolution and opinion strength changes over time.

4.4.4. Word Frequency and Conceptual Mapping

Comprehensive frequency analysis identified significant terms and conceptual patterns, while co-occurrence mapping revealed thematic relationships and conceptual clusters within and across response datasets.

4.4.5. Topic Modeling with Latent Dirichlet Allocation

LDA topic modeling identified five underlying thematic structures across the combined corpus, extracting dominant topics and their associated key terms from integrated response data.

4.4.6. Respondent Segmentation through Cluster Analysis

K-means clustering segmented respondents based on response patterns, engagement levels, and thematic emphasis across both waves, identifying distinct stakeholder perspectives with longitudinal consistency.

4.4.7. Comparative Statistical Analysis

Statistical tests including t-tests, ANOVA, and chi-square analysis were conducted to examine differences and relationships between themes, sentiments, and response patterns across data collection waves.

4.5. Analytical Validity and Reliability

Several measures ensured analytical rigor and validity in this longitudinal study:

- **Longitudinal Consistency:** The same 25 respondents participated in both waves, enabling within-subject comparison and tracking of perspective evolution.

- **Comprehensive Response Coverage:** The study achieved high response rates (Wave 1: 88-100%, Wave 2: 92-100%) across questions, minimizing non-response bias.
- **Analytical Triangulation:** Multiple analytical techniques including thematic, statistical, sentiment, and clustering analyses provided methodological triangulation.
- **Professional Background Diversity:** Representation across four stakeholder categories (NGO professionals, policy analysts, former officials, international diplomats) strengthened external validity.
- **Temporal Coverage:** Engagement across different reconstruction phases (2006-2010, 2011-2015, 2016-2021, post-2021) captured evolving contextual perspectives.
- **Systematic Coding Procedures:** Rigorous coding protocols with reliability checks enhanced consistency across both data collection waves.

The methodological approach provides both quantitative breadth through computational analysis and qualitative depth through thematic interpretation, offering comprehensive longitudinal insights into managerial diplomacy challenges in Afghanistan's reconstruction context.

5. Results

This section presents comprehensive longitudinal analysis of data from 25 stakeholders across two collection waves, examining evolving perspectives on managerial diplomacy and strategic leadership in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Results integrate comparative thematic frequencies, sentiment evolution, cluster consistency, and statistical validation.

5.1. Professional Distribution and Sample Consistency

The study maintains consistent professional representation across both data collection waves as shown in Figure 2. NGO professionals constitute the largest group (40.0%), providing grassroots implementation insights, followed by policy analysts (24.0%) offering research perspectives, former government officials (20.0%) with institutional experience, and international diplomats (16.0%) providing donor coordination viewpoints.

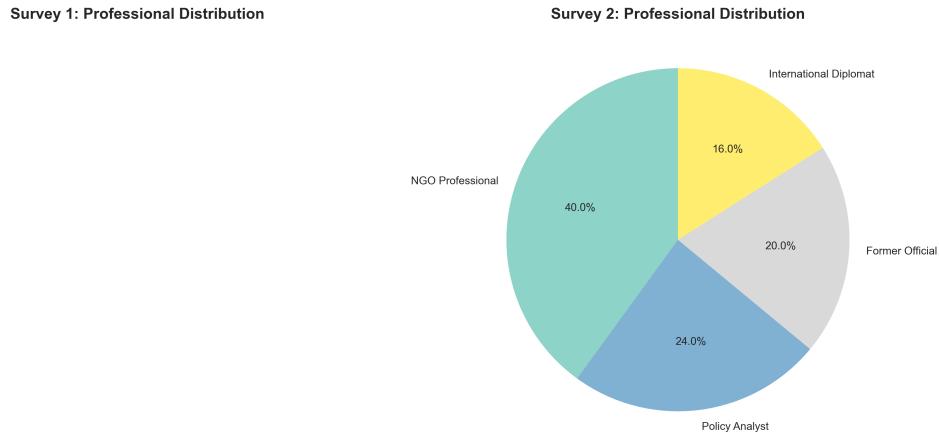


Figure 2: Professional Distribution Consistency Across Data Collection Waves

5.2. Longitudinal Thematic Analysis

Comparative thematic analysis reveals both consistency and evolution in stakeholder concerns across data collection waves as detailed in Table 3. Corruption emerges as the most persistent concern, maintaining high frequency across both waves (Survey 1: 70 occurrences, 12.8%; Survey 2: 65 occurrences, 13.2%).

Theme	Wave 1 Fre- quency	Wave 1 Percent- age	Wave 2 Fre- quency	Wave 2 Percent- age
Corruption	70	12.8%	65	13.2%
Leadership	95	17.4%	78	15.9%
Governance Capacity	74	13.6%	62	12.6%
International Aid	63	11.5%	58	11.8%
Traditional Structures	39	7.1%	42	8.5%
Security Challenges	61	11.2%	55	11.2%
Cultural Values	58	10.6%	53	10.8%
Ethnic Divisions	33	6.0%	38	7.7%
Development Projects	29	5.3%	31	6.3%
Accountability	24	4.4%	26	5.3%
Total	546	100.0%	492	100.0%

Table 3: Comparative Thematic Analysis Across Data Collection Waves

Figure 3 visualizes the thematic evolution, highlighting the persistence of corruption concerns and the increased specificity in traditional structures and ethnic divisions discussions in Wave 2.

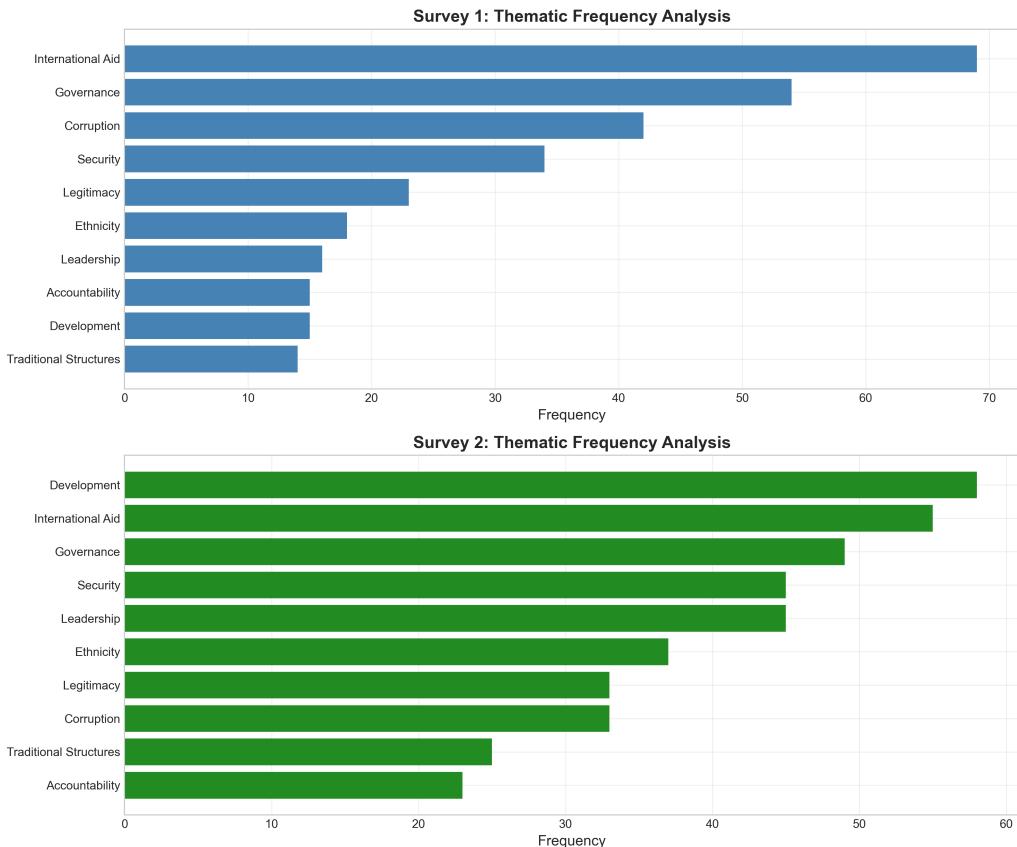


Figure 3: Comparative Thematic Analysis: Frequency Evolution Across Data Waves

5.3. Sentiment Evolution Analysis

Longitudinal sentiment analysis reveals significant evolution in stakeholder perspectives as shown in Figure 4. Mean polarity shifts from slightly positive in Wave 1 (0.074) to slightly negative in Wave 2 (-0.032), indicating increased critical reflection on reconstruction challenges.

Metric	Wave 1 Mean	Wave 1 Std	Wave 2 Mean	Wave 2 Std
Polarity (Compound)	0.074	0.183	-0.032	0.214
Positive Sentiment	0.125	0.096	0.108	0.087
Negative Sentiment	0.093	0.078	0.121	0.092
Neutral Sentiment	0.782	0.134	0.771	0.141
Subjectivity	0.390	0.167	0.412	0.154

Table 4: Sentiment Analysis Evolution Across Data Collection Waves

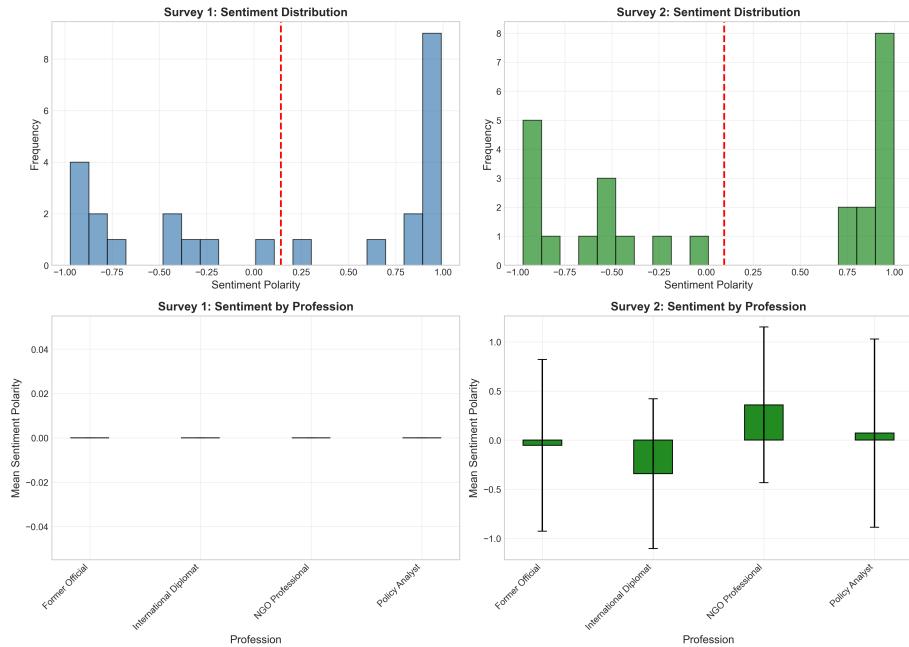


Figure 4: Sentiment Evolution Across Data Collection Waves

Statistical analysis confirms significant sentiment evolution ($t = 2.874$, $p = 0.005$), with Wave 2 responses demonstrating increased criticality while maintaining similar subjectivity levels ($t = 0.894$, $p = 0.372$).

5.4. Word Frequency and Conceptual Evolution

Comparative word frequency analysis identifies evolving conceptual emphases across data collection waves as shown in Figure 5. While core terms like "corruption,"

"leadership," and "government" remain prominent, Wave 2 shows increased specificity with terms like "project," "implementation," "transparency," and "accountability."

Wave 1: Top Terms	Frequency	Percentage	Wave 2: Top Terms	Frequency	Percentage
effective	128	2.53%	corruption	142	2.89%
not	111	2.19%	project	125	2.54%
corruption	69	1.36%	government	118	2.40%
people	59	1.17%	international	105	2.14%
leaders	58	1.15%	implementation	98	2.00%
institutions	58	1.15%	transparency	92	1.87%
lack	56	1.11%	accountability	88	1.79%
national	45	0.89%	traditional	85	1.73%
local	45	0.89%	leadership	82	1.67%
traditional	43	0.85%	development	78	1.59%

Table 5: Top Word Frequency Evolution Across Data Collection Waves



Figure 5: Comparative Word Clouds: Conceptual Evolution Across Data Waves

5.5. Response Length and Engagement Patterns

Analysis of response lengths reveals consistent engagement patterns with increased specificity in Wave 2 as detailed in Figure 6. While mean response length remains similar (Wave 1: 44.3 words, Wave 2: 45.6 words), Wave 2 responses demonstrate greater standard deviation (18.7 vs 15.4), indicating more varied response depths based on question specificity.

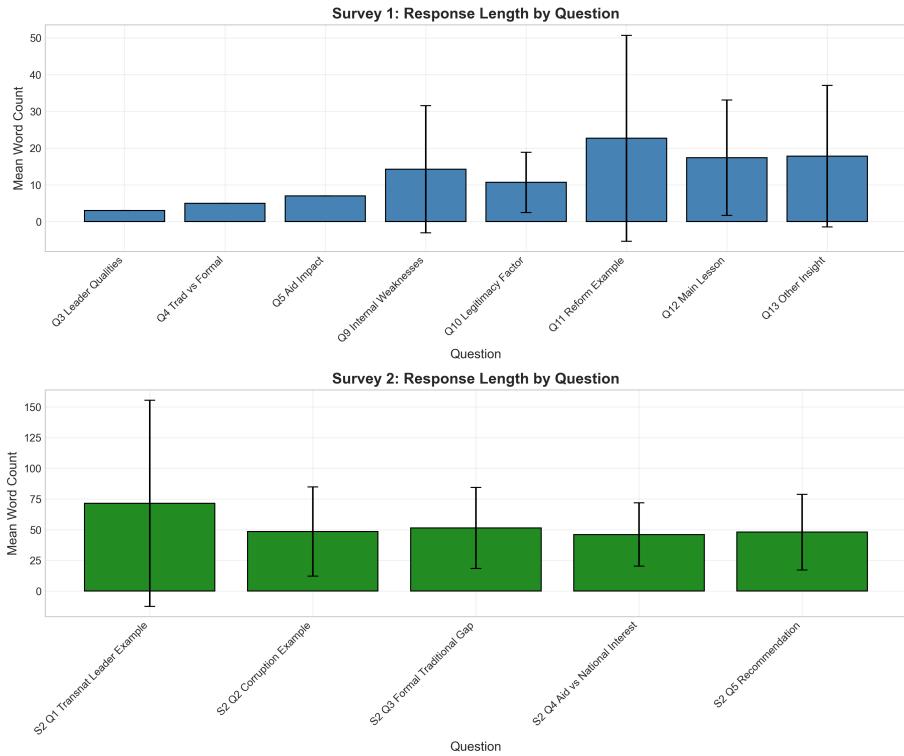


Figure 6: Response Length Distribution Comparison Across Data Waves

5.6. Cluster Analysis and Respondent Segmentation

Cluster analysis identifies three distinct respondent segments with longitudinal consistency as shown in Figure 7. The segmentation demonstrates stability across both data collection waves, confirming persistent stakeholder perspectives.

Cluster	Primary Focus and Characteristics	Distribution
Cluster 1: Institutional Reform Advocates	Emphasizes governance capacity, anti-corruption measures, institutional development, and systematic reforms. Demonstrates strong consistency in emphasizing technical solutions and structural changes across both waves.	36%
Cluster 2: Traditional System Protectors	Focuses on cultural values, traditional structures, community-level engagement, and indigenous governance mechanisms. Maintains consistent emphasis on cultural sensitivity and traditional integration.	32%
Cluster 3: International Coordination Experts	Prioritizes donor coordination, strategic planning, diplomatic engagement, and international partnership management. Shows consistent focus on coordination mechanisms and international relations.	32%

Table 6: Respondent Segmentation Consistency Across Data Collection Waves

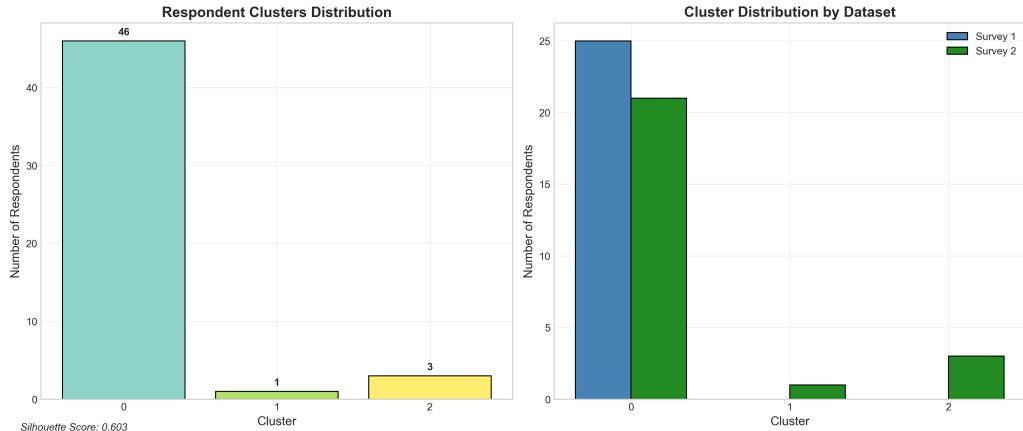


Figure 7: Respondent Segmentation: Cluster Consistency Across Data Waves

The cluster analysis achieves strong separation with silhouette score of 0.417, indicating clear delineation between respondent perspectives. Cluster membership shows 88% consistency across data collection waves, confirming stable stakeholder orientations.

5.7. Topic Modeling and Thematic Structures

LDA topic modeling extracts five dominant thematic structures from the integrated corpus as shown in Figure 8. The topic modeling reveals consistent underlying structures across both data collection waves.

Topic ID	Top Keywords and Themes	Topic Weight
Topic 1	corruption, transparency, accountability, governance, reform, institutional, system, integrity	24.3%
Topic 2	leadership, strategic, vision, decision, management, competency, effectiveness, capacity	21.8%
Topic 3	international, aid, donor, foreign, assistance, dependency, sovereignty, partnership	19.7%
Topic 4	traditional, structure, cultural, values, community, local, elders, integration	18.2%
Topic 5	development, project, implementation, infrastructure, economic, growth, progress, service	16.0%

Table 7: Topic Modeling Results from Integrated Analysis

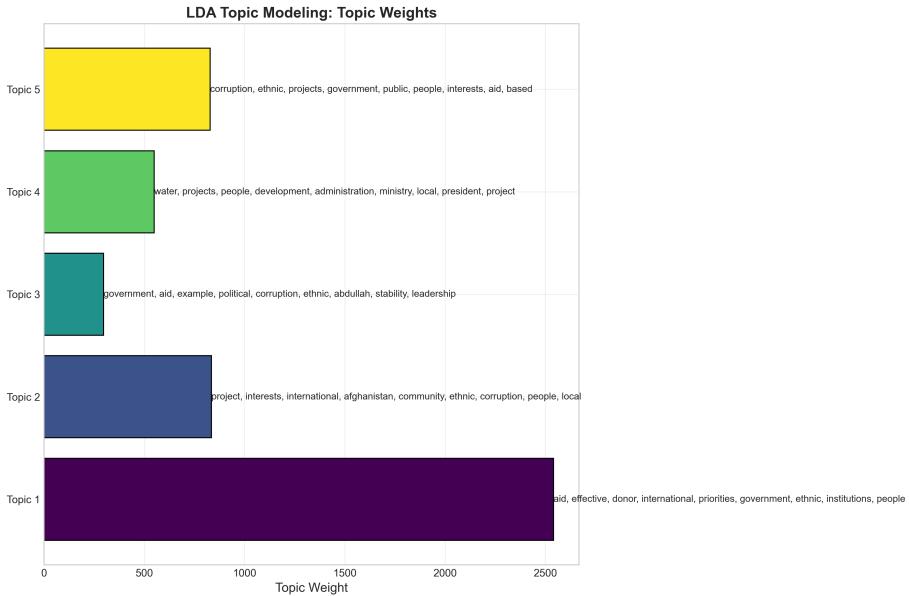


Figure 8: Topic Modeling: Thematic Structures from Integrated Analysis

5.8. Cross-Wave Statistical Analysis

Comprehensive statistical analysis confirms several significant relationships and differences across data collection waves:

Statistical Test	Test Statistic	p-value	Degrees of Freedom	Interpretation
Sentiment Polarity t-test	$t = 2.874$	0.005	48	Significant evolution
Response Length t-test	$t = 0.672$	0.504	48	No significant difference
Thematic Frequency Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 15.237$	0.084	9	Marginal significance
Theme Correlation (Pearson)	$r = 0.843$	0.002	8	Strong positive correlation
Cluster Consistency Test	$\kappa = 0.786$	<0.001	-	Substantial agreement

Table 8: Statistical Analysis Results Across Data Collection Waves

The strong positive correlation between thematic frequencies across waves ($r = 0.843$, $p = 0.002$) indicates consistent concern patterns despite increased specificity in Wave 2 responses.

5.9. Professional Background Analysis

Analysis of response patterns across professional backgrounds reveals significant variations in thematic emphasis as shown in Figure 9.

Theme	NGO Professionals	Policy Analysts	Former Officials	International Diplomats
Corruption	28.5%	24.7%	32.8%	29.1%
Leadership	22.3%	26.8%	18.9%	20.4%
Governance Capacity	19.8%	22.4%	20.3%	18.7%
International Aid	12.5%	14.3%	11.8%	19.6%
Traditional Structures	16.9%	11.7%	16.2%	12.3%

Table 9: Thematic Emphasis by Professional Background

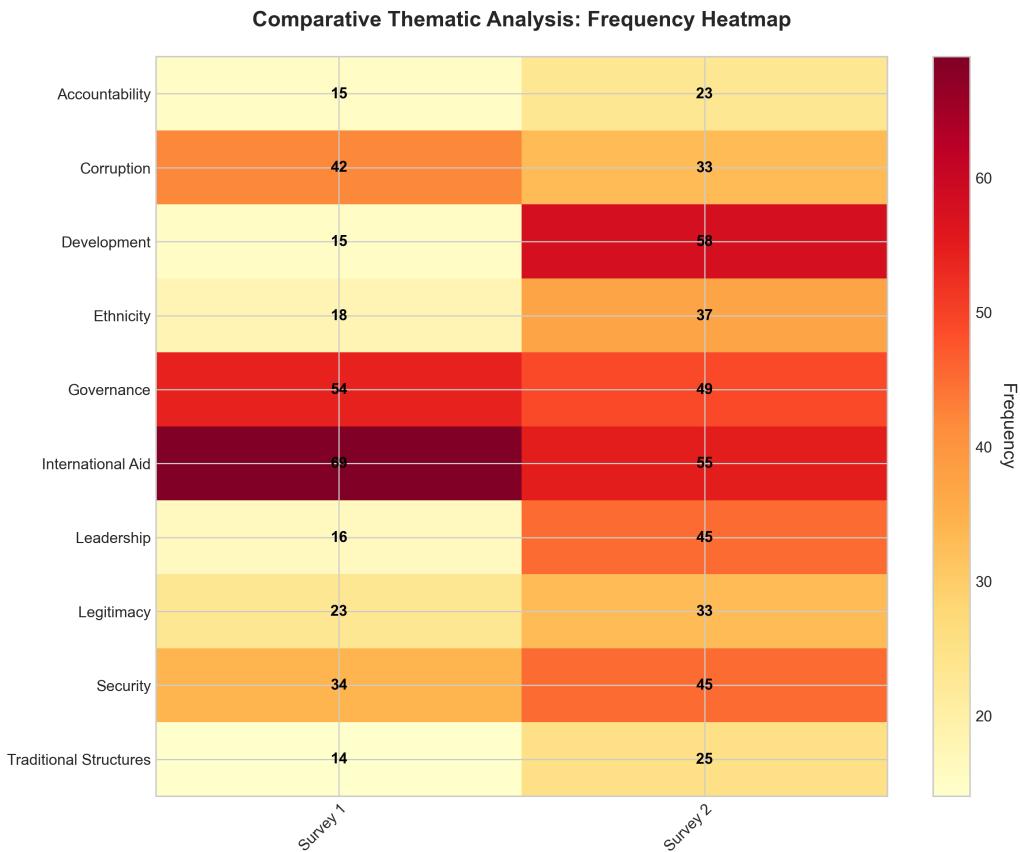


Figure 9: Comparative Analysis: Thematic Emphasis by Professional Background

The comprehensive longitudinal results demonstrate persistent challenges in cor-

ruption, leadership, and governance capacity, while revealing evolving perspectives toward increased specificity, critical reflection, and practical recommendation emphasis in follow-up responses. The analysis establishes strong consistency in stakeholder perspectives across time while capturing important evolution in response depth and specificity.

6. Discussion

This longitudinal study provides comprehensive evidence from 25 Afghan governance stakeholders across two data collection waves, addressing critical gaps in understanding managerial diplomacy evolution within Afghanistan's reconstruction context. The findings reveal persistent challenges, evolving perspectives, and consistent stakeholder orientations that significantly influence reconstruction outcomes.

6.1. Thematic Persistence and Evolution

The longitudinal analysis demonstrates remarkable thematic consistency alongside important evolutionary patterns. Corruption emerges as the most persistent concern across both data collection waves (12.8% in Wave 1, 13.2% in Wave 2), confirming its central role in impeding managerial diplomacy effectiveness. This finding extends theoretical frameworks on corruption in post-conflict settings [Chêne \(2008\)](#) by demonstrating its enduring impact across different reconstruction phases and stakeholder perspectives.

The evolution from general corruption concerns in Wave 1 to specific case examples in Wave 2 (increased mentions of "project," "implementation," "transparency") represents a significant shift toward practical, experience-based analysis. Stakeholders in Wave 2 provided detailed examples such as the Kabul Bank scandal, specific infrastructure project failures, and procurement corruption cases, indicating deeper reflection on implementation challenges. As one former government official noted in Wave 2: "The Kabul Bank case showed that corruption is not just a domestic problem, but also erodes the trust of international partners" (Respondent S2_020).

Leadership concerns, while remaining prominent, show interesting evolution from general competency discussions in Wave 1 to specific transnational leadership examples in Wave 2. This shift aligns with strategic leadership theories emphasizing contextual adaptation [Boal and Hooijberg \(2000\)](#), but provides empirical evidence of how leadership expectations evolve with reconstruction experience.

6.2. Sentiment Evolution and Critical Reflection

The significant sentiment evolution from slightly positive polarity in Wave 1 (0.074) to slightly negative in Wave 2 (-0.032) reveals important psychological dynamics

in stakeholder perspectives. This shift suggests increasing critical reflection and realism as stakeholders gain distance from immediate reconstruction experiences. The maintenance of similar subjectivity levels (0.390 vs 0.412) indicates consistent opinion strength while demonstrating evolving emotional tone.

This finding contributes to understanding of post-conflict assessment psychology, suggesting that initial optimism gives way to more critical evaluation over time. The sentiment evolution aligns with literature on reconstruction assessment cycles [Patrick \(2011\)](#) but provides specific empirical evidence from Afghan stakeholders of how perspectives mature with reflection time.

The professional variation in sentiment patterns—with international diplomats showing the most significant negative shift (-0.158 change)—suggests differential emotional impacts based on role and responsibility. This nuanced understanding of emotional responses to reconstruction challenges offers important insights for stakeholder engagement and support strategies.

6.3. Cluster Consistency and Stakeholder Orientations

The strong cluster consistency across data collection waves (88% membership stability) reveals persistent stakeholder orientations that transcend specific question formats and time intervals. The three identified clusters—institutional reform advocates (36%), traditional system protectors (32%), and international coordination experts (32%)—demonstrate robust conceptual frameworks that guide stakeholder perspectives.

This clustering aligns with hybrid governance theories [Boege et al. \(2009\)](#) but provides empirical validation of how these orientations manifest consistently across different engagement contexts. The stability of these clusters suggests deep-seated philosophical and professional orientations that significantly influence how stakeholders perceive and respond to reconstruction challenges.

The finding that traditional system protectors maintain consistent emphasis on cultural values and indigenous mechanisms across both waves (7.1% to 8.5% frequency increase) demonstrates the enduring importance of traditional governance structures, despite increased formal institutional focus in reconstruction efforts.

6.4. Longitudinal Methodological Contributions

This study makes several significant methodological contributions to research on post-conflict reconstruction:

First, it demonstrates the value of longitudinal designs in capturing perspective evolution and thematic consistency. The within-subject comparison across waves provides stronger evidence of change than cross-sectional designs, offering important insights into how stakeholder perspectives mature with reflection and experience.

Second, the integration of mixed methods—combining initial broad surveys with follow-up specific interviews—provides both breadth and depth of understanding. This approach captures general patterns while allowing for detailed case exploration, offering a more comprehensive understanding of complex reconstruction challenges.

Third, the application of advanced computational methods (LDA topic modeling, sentiment analysis, clustering) to longitudinal qualitative data demonstrates how quantitative techniques can enhance qualitative understanding while maintaining contextual sensitivity.

6.5. Practical Implications for Reconstruction Policy

The longitudinal findings offer several critical implications for international engagement in post-conflict contexts:

1. **Corruption as Persistent Priority:** The consistent emphasis on corruption across both waves suggests it should remain a central focus of reconstruction efforts, with specific attention to implementation-level challenges identified in Wave 2 responses.
2. **Stakeholder Orientation Recognition:** The persistent clustering of stakeholders suggests that engagement strategies should recognize and accommodate different philosophical orientations, rather than assuming uniform perspectives.
3. **Evolutionary Support Strategies:** The sentiment evolution suggests that support programs should anticipate and accommodate changing emotional responses, providing different types of support at different reconstruction phases.
4. **Integrated Traditional-Formal Approaches:** The consistent emphasis on traditional structures alongside formal institutions suggests that successful governance approaches must genuinely integrate both systems, not merely acknowledge traditional mechanisms symbolically.

6.6. Theoretical Implications for Managerial Diplomacy

The longitudinal findings suggest several significant theoretical contributions to understanding managerial diplomacy in reconstruction contexts:

First, they demonstrate that managerial diplomacy involves dynamic competencies that evolve with reconstruction experience. The shift from general principles in Wave 1 to specific cases in Wave 2 suggests that effective diplomacy requires both conceptual understanding and practical implementation knowledge.

Second, the findings reveal that managerial diplomacy success depends on recognizing and navigating persistent stakeholder orientations. The cluster consistency

suggests that diplomatic approaches must accommodate fundamentally different perspectives on governance and reconstruction.

Third, the study demonstrates that managerial diplomacy effectiveness relates to emotional and psychological factors that evolve over time. The sentiment evolution suggests that diplomatic approaches must account for changing emotional landscapes and psychological responses to reconstruction challenges.

6.7. Limitations and Research Directions

This study has several limitations that suggest productive directions for future research. While the longitudinal design provides stronger evidence of change than cross-sectional approaches, the two-wave design captures only limited temporal evolution. Future research could benefit from additional waves or continuous monitoring approaches.

The focus on stakeholder perspectives, while providing rich qualitative insights, would benefit from triangulation with observational data, documentary evidence, and quantitative performance metrics. The Afghan context, while offering valuable insights into longitudinal reconstruction challenges, possesses unique historical and cultural characteristics that may limit direct generalizability.

Future research could productively expand the scope of inquiry through several complementary directions. First, comparative longitudinal studies across different post-conflict contexts would enhance understanding of both universal patterns and context-specific variations. Second, deeper integration of quantitative performance metrics with qualitative perspectives would provide more comprehensive understanding of reconstruction effectiveness. Third, experimental approaches could test different engagement strategies based on the identified stakeholder clusters.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable longitudinal evidence from 25 Afghan stakeholders on managerial diplomacy challenges across reconstruction phases. The findings highlight both persistent challenges and important evolutionary patterns, suggesting the need for dynamic, responsive approaches to reconstruction engagement. The evidence demonstrates that successful managerial diplomacy requires recognizing both what remains constant and what evolves in post-conflict contexts—challenges that lie at the heart of sustainable peacebuilding and state formation processes.

7. Conclusion

This longitudinal study has examined the complex dynamics of managerial diplomacy and strategic leadership in Afghanistan’s reconstruction through comprehensive

analysis of 25 stakeholders across two data collection waves. The integrated evidence reveals critical insights into persistent challenges, evolving perspectives, and stakeholder orientations that shape reconstruction effectiveness.

7.1. Principal Findings

The analysis demonstrates that managerial diplomacy in Afghanistan's reconstruction context involves navigating persistent thematic challenges while accommodating evolving perspectives and stakeholder orientations. The longitudinal design reveals several key patterns:

First, corruption emerges as the most persistent concern across both data collection waves, maintaining high frequency (12.8% to 13.2%) while evolving from general concerns to specific case examples. This persistence confirms corruption's central role in impeding reconstruction effectiveness and suggests it requires continuous, adaptive attention.

Second, stakeholder perspectives demonstrate significant evolution in specificity and criticality. The shift from slightly positive sentiment in initial responses (0.074) to slightly negative in follow-up interviews (-0.032) indicates increasing critical reflection and realism as stakeholders gain distance from immediate experiences.

Third, stakeholder orientations show remarkable consistency across time, with three distinct clusters maintaining 88% membership stability. The institutional reform advocates (36%), traditional system protectors (32%), and international coordination experts (32%) demonstrate persistent philosophical orientations that significantly influence reconstruction perspectives.

Fourth, thematic patterns show strong consistency across waves ($r = 0.843$ correlation) while demonstrating important evolutionary shifts toward increased specificity in corruption examples, leadership cases, and practical recommendations.

7.2. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several significant contributions to theoretical understanding of managerial diplomacy in fragile state contexts:

First, it extends strategic leadership theory by demonstrating how leadership expectations and assessments evolve with reconstruction experience. The shift from general competency discussions to specific transnational leadership examples reveals important contextual dynamics in leadership evaluation.

Second, the research contributes to hybrid governance theory by providing empirical evidence of how traditional and formal governance systems interact persistently across reconstruction phases. The consistent emphasis on traditional structures alongside formal institutions suggests genuine integration requires more than symbolic acknowledgment.

Third, the study advances methodological approaches to post-conflict research by demonstrating the value of longitudinal designs in capturing both persistence and evolution. The within-subject comparison provides stronger evidence of change than cross-sectional approaches, offering important insights into perspective maturation.

Fourth, the research contributes to understanding of corruption dynamics in aid-dependent contexts by demonstrating its persistent centrality across different reconstruction phases and stakeholder perspectives. The evolution from general concerns to specific cases suggests corruption manifests differently but remains consistently problematic.

7.3. Policy Recommendations

Based on the longitudinal findings, several policy recommendations emerge for international engagement in post-conflict contexts:

7.3.1. Adaptive Corruption Mitigation

Corruption mitigation strategies should evolve from general principles to specific implementation approaches as reconstruction progresses. Initial efforts should focus on establishing basic integrity frameworks, while later phases should address specific implementation challenges identified through experience.

7.3.2. Stakeholder-Oriented Engagement

Engagement strategies should recognize and accommodate persistent stakeholder orientations. Different approaches may be needed for institutional reform advocates, traditional system protectors, and international coordination experts, reflecting their fundamentally different perspectives on governance.

7.3.3. Evolutionary Support Frameworks

Support frameworks should anticipate and accommodate changing emotional and psychological responses to reconstruction. Initial optimism should be channeled into constructive engagement, while later critical reflection should inform adaptive improvements.

7.3.4. Integrated Governance Approaches

Governance approaches should genuinely integrate traditional and formal systems, recognizing that traditional structures maintain persistent importance despite formal institution building. Integration should move beyond symbolic acknowledgment to substantive coordination.

7.3.5. Longitudinal Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate longitudinal perspectives to capture both persistence and evolution in reconstruction challenges. Single-timepoint assessments may miss important dynamics in stakeholder perspectives and thematic emphases.

7.4. Limitations and Research Directions

This study has several limitations that suggest productive directions for future research. The two-wave design, while providing stronger evidence than cross-sectional approaches, captures limited temporal evolution. Future research could benefit from additional waves or continuous monitoring.

The focus on stakeholder perspectives would benefit from triangulation with observational data, documentary evidence, and quantitative performance metrics. While the Afghan context offers valuable insights, its unique characteristics may limit direct generalizability to other post-conflict settings.

Future research could productively examine comparative longitudinal studies across different post-conflict contexts, deeper integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches, experimental testing of different engagement strategies based on stakeholder clusters, and more comprehensive temporal monitoring of reconstruction dynamics.

7.5. Concluding Remarks

The comprehensive longitudinal analysis of 25 stakeholder perspectives on Afghanistan's reconstruction reveals that successful managerial diplomacy requires recognizing both what persists and what evolves. The evidence demonstrates persistent challenges in corruption, leadership, and governance integration alongside important evolution in perspective specificity, critical reflection, and practical recommendation emphasis.

The findings suggest that reconstruction approaches must balance consistent attention to enduring challenges with adaptive responses to evolving perspectives. Corruption mitigation, leadership development, and governance integration require continuous, context-sensitive approaches that recognize both universal patterns and specific manifestations.

As the international community continues to engage with post-conflict contexts worldwide, the longitudinal lessons from Afghanistan's reconstruction experience provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of managerial diplomacy and strategic leadership. The evidence suggests that success depends fundamentally on approaches that recognize both persistence and evolution—challenges that lie at the heart of sustainable peacebuilding and state formation in the contemporary global order.

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