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Managerial Diplomacy: Strategic Leadership in Reconstructing Afghanistan's Global Economic and Political Engagement

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how managerial diplomacy and strategic leadership shape Afghanistan's post-conflict engagement with the international community, focusing on leadership competencies, institutional integration, and the influence of international aid on domestic policy autonomy.

Research Methodology: This study employed a qualitative stakeholder-based approach involving 21 Afghan governance experts surveyed between October 24 and 28, 2025, with 20 valid responses retained. Participants included NGO professionals, former government officials, policy analysts, and international diplomats. Data were analyzed through systematic text preprocessing, frequency analysis, and thematic coding across six thematic domains.

Results: The findings identify leadership legitimacy, cross-ethnic representation, and institutional hybridity as central governance priorities. Corruption and aid dependency emerged as major barriers to sustainable reconstruction, each appearing in more than half of the coded concept instances.

Conclusions: Effective managerial diplomacy requires strategic leadership that integrates traditional and formal institutions, coordinates international donor relationships, and safeguards domestic policy autonomy and national sovereignty.

Limitations: The limited sample size, reliance on stakeholder perspectives, and single-country context restrict the generalizability of the findings.

Contributions: This study proposes a novel Hybrid Strategic Leadership and Managerial Diplomacy Framework, integrating institutional legitimacy, leadership competencies, and aid autonomy to explain governance and diplomatic effectiveness in post-conflict settings.

Keywords: *Aid Dependency, Governance, Institutional Hybridity,Managerial Diplomacy, Strategic Leadership*

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1. Introduction

Afghanistan occupies an unusual place in the study of international relations and public management. For nearly two centuries the country has been treated less as an autonomous actor than as a buffer between competing empires, its domestic institutions shaped as much by outside interests as by

internal choice (Cramer & Goodhand, 2002). That inheritance did not disappear when the Taliban regime fell in late 2001. It resurfaced in a different form, as international donors, coalition governments, and multilateral agencies attempted to rebuild a state whose formal institutions had been hollowed out by decades of war, and whose informal institutions, the jirga system chief among them, continued to carry more everyday legitimacy than anything Kabul could offer (Justin & Verkoren, 2022).

The central puzzle this paper addresses is not whether Afghanistan needed international assistance after 2001; virtually every serious account agrees that it did. The puzzle is why so much of that assistance failed to translate into durable governance capacity, and what kind of leadership might have produced a different outcome. Existing diagnoses tend to fall into two camps. One blames donor behavior, pointing to poorly targeted aid, weak coordination among agencies, and a preference for visible short-term projects over patient institution-building (Ocran, 2023; Besada & Akintola, 2023). The other blames domestic political economy, particularly a pattern of rentier governance in which national leaders had little incentive to pursue reforms that might threaten their own position (Suhrke, 2011). Both diagnoses are plausible, and neither is complete on its own. This paper argues that a third lens, managerial diplomacy, helps connect the two by treating leadership itself as the variable that mediates whether external resources strengthen or weaken domestic institutions.

Managerial diplomacy, as used here, describes the practice by which leaders in fragile or post-conflict states manage the interface between domestic governance and international engagement, translating foreign assistance and diplomatic relationships into locally legitimate outcomes rather than allowing external actors to dictate the terms of reconstruction. The concept borrows from corporate diplomacy scholarship, which frames diplomatic behavior by multinational firms as a proactive response to governance gaps that neither states nor international institutions can fill alone (Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein, & Fort, 2015). Applied to a post-conflict government, the same logic suggests that leaders who fail to actively manage donor relationships, rather than simply receiving aid, risk losing the very sovereignty that aid was meant to help them rebuild.

Afghanistan post-2001 trajectory illustrates this risk starkly. The economy had been devastated by war and drought, grain production had collapsed, and life expectancy stood at only forty-three years by the early 2000s (World, 2004). International intervention chose Hamid Karzai to lead an interim administration and later favored him in the 2004 presidential election, a process that gave the new government international backing but arguably weakened its domestic legitimacy from the outset Suhrke, 2011. Subsequent scholarship has been careful not to place blame solely on Afghan actors; the policy choices made in Washington and other donor capitals over two decades did as much to shape outcomes as anything decided in Kabul (Murtazashvili, 2022).

Aid dependency compounded the legitimacy problem. Multi-donor trust funds were designed to centralize planning and improve accountability, yet in practice donors bent the model to their own procedures, eroding the very coordination benefits the funds were meant to deliver (Barakat, 2009). More recent assessments of aid performance in Afghanistan health sector describe management effectiveness hovering between forty and fifty percent, a figure that underscores how far external resources alone are from producing functioning institutions (Rashed, Shabanikiya, Alizamani, Jamali, & Kokabisaghi, 2024). Broader research on aid to fragile states reaches a similar conclusion, namely that donor support channeled through weak ministries can simultaneously build capacity and entrench autocratic tendencies, a tension that has no easy resolution (Hoeffler & Justino, 2024).

At the same time, a growing body of international relations scholarship has begun to question whether Western frameworks are even capable of describing Afghanistan governance realities on their own terms. Critics argue that labeling Afghanistan a failed state reflects a Eurocentric assumption that centralized, liberal statehood is the only legitimate form of governance, an assumption that marginalizes indigenous mechanisms such as the Loya Jirga (Safi, Momand, & Safi, 2025). Relational approaches to world politics offer an alternative starting point, treating social context and ongoing relationships, rather than abstract rational actors, as the proper unit of analysis in foreign policy

behavior (Qin, 2016). The concept of epistemic compassion extends this logic further, urging scholars to engage unfamiliar governance traditions with openness rather than judgment (Ling, 2019).

The scale of destruction facing Afghanistan in 2001 is easy to state in numbers and harder to convey in full. More than five million refugees had fled to neighboring countries, agricultural output had halved, and basic services had effectively ceased to function in large parts of the country (World, 2004). Rebuilding required not only physical infrastructure but a functioning state apparatus capable of raising revenue, delivering services, and maintaining a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, three dimensions that scholars treat as the core components of state capacity and legitimacy (Bizhan, 2022). What followed was two decades of external engagement that, in retrospect, achieved uneven results. State institutions grew more dependent on outside funding rather than less, remained poorly coordinated, and struggled with long-term sustainability even as billions of dollars flowed into the country (Aman & Aman, 2015). Analyses of the aid relationship consistently emphasize that the balance of influence between donors and recipient governments, not simply the volume of aid, determines whether external assistance strengthens or undermines local governance capacity (Barma, Levy , & Piombo, 2020).

This study sits at the intersection of these debates. It asks how strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy interact to shape Afghanistan governance outcomes, drawing on the direct testimony of practitioners who worked inside or alongside the reconstruction effort. In doing so, it aims to move discussion beyond abstract debates about aid effectiveness toward a grounded account of what stakeholders themselves believe leadership requires in a divided, aid-dependent, post-conflict setting.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Strategic Leadership and Managerial Diplomacy

Good governance, understood as a public good to which citizens hold equal claim, depends on leadership capable of translating that principle into practice across ethnic and regional divides (Evans & Barakat, 2012). Restoring legitimate political authority is widely treated as the foundation on which sustainable peace and productive international relationships are built (Jeong, 2005; Khadiagala & Lyons, 2006). Corporate diplomacy scholarship extends this idea into the private sector, describing how multinational firms sometimes step into governance gaps that neither national governments nor international institutions can fill on their own (Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein, & Fort, 2015). Strategic leadership itself has been defined as a function performed at the highest levels of an organization aimed at generating deliberate strategic consequences, encompassing decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and the management of conflicting demands (Samimi, Cortés, Anderson, & Herrmann, 2020). More recent empirical work on strategic leadership under conditions of disruption similarly frames it as requiring dynamic capability and adaptive capacity rather than static command authority (Weber & Tarba, 2024).

Boal and Hooijberg foundational account of strategic leadership emphasize the capacity for learning, the capacity for change, and managerial wisdom as its defining features (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). Strategic leaders, in this tradition, must translate strategy into action, align people and organizations, and identify effective points of intervention, while personally exhibiting a productive dissatisfaction with the status quo and the absorptive capacity needed to process new information (Davies & Davies, 2004). Bridging the gap between formal state institutions and informal traditional power structures is itself treated as a leadership task, one central to building governance that citizens regard as legitimate (Girod, 2015). Economic diplomacy research adds a further dimension, describing the deployment of economic means toward diplomatic ends as a co-creative process involving public managers and other stakeholders rather than a one-directional transfer of resources (Chohan, 2021). Effective strategic leaders, in parallel management scholarship, also establish organizational controls flexible enough to sustain innovation even under resource constraint (Hitt, Haynes, & Serpa, 2012).

2.2 Institutional Reform and Governance Challenges

Countries emerging from conflict face a common challenge in reforming state institutions while simultaneously trying to rebuild international legitimacy, and Afghanistan experience after two

decades of war illustrates the difficulty in unusually sharp relief (Chow & Weitz, 2010). Bottom-up approaches to state-building, which emphasize cooperation among local communities and the integration of traditional, informal, and modern governmental structures, are frequently proposed as a corrective to purely top-down reform (Wennmann, 2010). Yet legal reform in Afghanistan after 2001 largely followed a top-down model shaped by Western donors, leaving a system that struggled to engage seriously with Islamic legal traditions and customary practice. Where official and unofficial power becomes concentrated in a single actor, as has occurred under Taliban rule, the resulting government tends to rely on a mixture of coercion and limited consent that actively works against inclusive institutional reform (McDoom, 2023).

Recent comparative work on hybrid governance elsewhere in the Global South reinforces these findings. Studies of negotiated statehood in South Sudan describe hybrid governance not as a temporary phase preceding full state consolidation but as a durable arrangement in which traditional and formal authorities continuously renegotiate their respective jurisdictions (Justin & Verkoren, 2022). Analyses of institutional friction in hybrid systems of authority similarly find that governance failures often stem less from an absence of rules than from unresolved contradictions between formal and informal logics operating simultaneously (El, 2026). These dynamics closely parallel Afghanistan own experience of failed bridging between jirga structures and formal ministries.

2.3 State Legitimacy, Capacity, and External Aid

Long-term conflict does not merely destroy physical infrastructure; it dismantles the institutional systems that a stable society depends on to function, and Afghanistan post-2001 reconstruction has had to rebuild both simultaneously (Brahimi, 2007). State weakness can be traced to deficiencies across three interdependent dimensions, namely legitimacy, capacity, and authority, with legitimacy resting on popular consent, capacity on the ability to deliver services, and authority on the ability to control the use of force within a defined territory (Bizhan, 2022). International donors, facing these deficiencies, confront a genuine trade-off: channeling aid through government ministries can strengthen state capacity, but it can equally entrench autocratic tendencies or be diverted toward projects that do little for the people who need help most (Hoeffler & Justino, 2024). Systematic reviews of aid effectiveness across highly fragile states, including Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan, report that aid has often failed to improve governance or build durable capacity precisely because these trade-offs were not managed with sufficient care(Ocran, 2023).

The fate of Afghanistan domestic and international future ultimately rests on whatever arrangement the government of the day reaches with rival power centers, whether the post-2001 republic negotiating with insurgents or the Taliban administration negotiating with the international community (Ellis, 2021). Addressing this reality requires more than technical capacity-building; it requires modernizing traditional management systems, expanding human capital, and confronting illiteracy as a structural barrier to effective governance.

2.4 Strategic Leadership Theory

Strategic leadership is most simply defined as leadership exercised at the highest level of an organization, encompassing boards of directors, top management teams, and senior executives across functional domains (Singh, Lim, Jha, Kumar, & Ciasullo, 2023). A comprehensive definition characterizes it as the set of functions performed by individuals at the upper levels of an organization to produce deliberate strategic consequences, spanning decision-making, human resource management, information management, and the handling of competing demands (Samimi, Cortés, Anderson, & Herrmann, 2020). Upper Echelons Theory, one of the field's foundational contributions, argues that organizational outcomes reflect the characteristics, experiences, and personalities of senior managers rather than purely structural or market forces (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This premise is directly relevant to fragile states, where formal institutional checks are weak and individual leadership characteristics therefore carry disproportionate weight in shaping outcomes.

Contemporary research on strategic leadership under conditions of geopolitical tension and technological disruption extends this theory by emphasizing organizational ambidexterity, the ability

to balance exploration and exploitation simultaneously, as a marker of resilient leadership (Prayag, Chowdhury , Spector, & Orchiston, 2023). Measurement tools developed for organizational resilience in health and public service settings likewise stress that resilient leadership must be validated empirically rather than assumed from position alone (Ratliff, Chen, & Wallace, 2025). Conflict-intelligent leadership research adds a further behavioral dimension, proposing that leaders facing multifront crises must combine integrative complexity with systems thinking to avoid destabilizing the organizations or missions they are responsible for.

2.5 Managerial Diplomacy

Domestic and international politics cannot be neatly separated, and Afghanistan internal struggles have always been entangled with its position within a broader regional and global order (Akgül, 2021). For leaders of non-Western states, this entanglement requires strategically combining foreign policy, economic policy, and security policy to create room for influence that goes beyond simple economic development (Chagas-Bastos, 2023). Two-level game theory captures this dynamic formally, picturing chief negotiators bargaining simultaneously at an international table with foreign counterparts and a domestic table where the resulting agreement must be accepted by local constituencies before it can hold (Morabito, 2025). Applied to post-conflict Afghanistan, this framework helps explain why agreements reached with international donors so often failed to survive contact with domestic political realities, since the win-set available to Afghan negotiators was narrower than donors typically assumed.

2.6 State Capacity and Legitimacy Theory

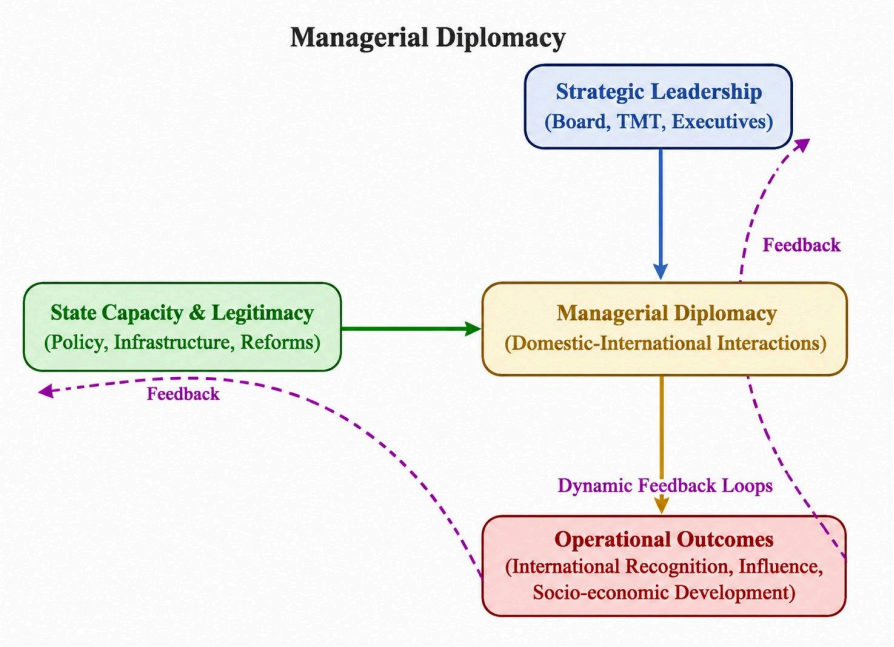


Figure 1. Conceptual model of managerial diplomacy integrating strategic leadership, state capacity, and operational outcomes

Figure 1 state capacity has been operationalized in different ways across the literature, from tax compliance as a proxy for a government's ability to extract resources (Vaccaro, 2023), to multidimensional frameworks distinguishing military capacity, bureaucratic capacity, and the cohesion of political institutions (Bizhan, 2022). A foundational definition of governance ties a government's institutional capacity directly to the legitimacy it derives from transparent selection processes and mutual respect for the institutions that structure economic and social life (Kaufmann, Kraay , & Mastruzzi, 2004). Comparative measurement research finds that common indicators of state capacity. correlate strongly with one another yet produce meaningfully different results depending on which dimension of capacity a given index emphasizes, underscoring the need to select metrics carefully when applying these frameworks to a case as complex as Afghanistan (Vaccaro, 2023).

2.7 Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

The conceptual model developed for this study integrates strategic leadership theory with diplomatic studies to address Afghanistan distinctive post-conflict governance challenges. Strategic leadership, understood through Upper Echelons Theory, is positioned as the starting point of the model, encompassing the board, top management team, and executive functions of government (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Based on this framework, four hypotheses guided the analysis are:

H₁: Strategic leadership has a positive influence on managerial diplomacy capabilities, enabling leaders to translate strategic orientation into effective domestic–international interactions

H₂: State capacity and legitimacy positively moderate the relationship between strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy, such that stronger institutional foundations enhance diplomatic effectiveness

H₂: Managerial diplomacy mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and operational outcomes, particularly international recognition and socioeconomic development

H₄: Feedback from operational outcomes reinforces both leadership effectiveness and state capacity development over time, creating virtuous cycles of improvement when the relationships function effectively, and vicious cycles when they do not

The model's practical relevance depends on recognizing that top-down reform efforts frequently conflict with local social and legal norms, and that governance concentrated around a single authority figure marginalizes operational voices and disrupts diplomatic engagement, a dynamic clearly visible under both the pre-2021 republic and the current Taliban administration

(Mosamim, 2026).

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, stakeholder-centered design combined with structured frequency analysis of open-ended survey responses, an approach well suited to capturing practitioner perspectives on a governance problem that resists simple quantification.

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

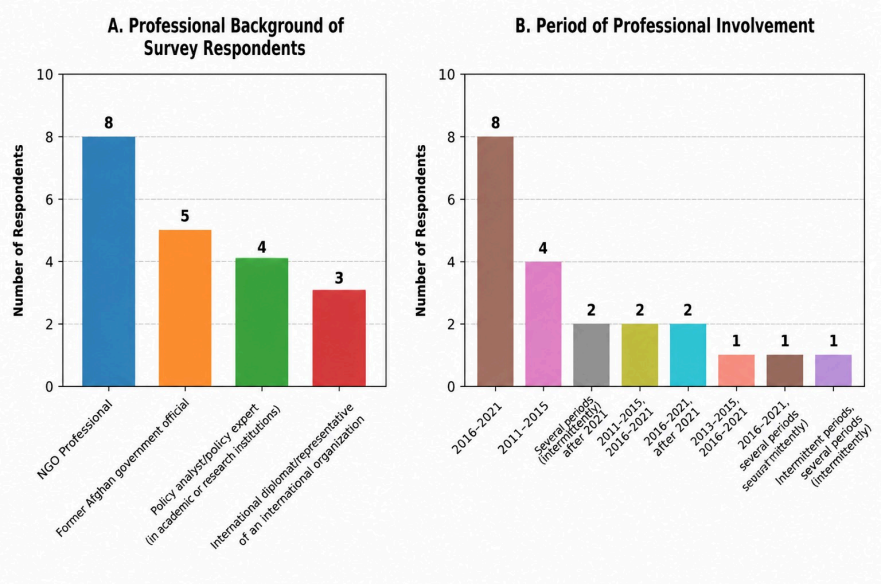


Figure 2. Demographic profile of survey respondents showing professional backgrounds and periods of involvement in Afghan affairs

Figure 2 shows the structured survey instrument was administered to twenty-one professionals with direct experience of Afghan governance between 2001 and 2021, conducted between October 24 and 28, 2025. After data cleaning, twenty complete responses were retained for analysis. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling across four professional domains directly relevant to reconstruction: NGO professionals, drawn from relief and development organizations with field implementation experience, made up thirty-eight percent of the sample; former Afghan government officials, who served in state institutions during the reconstruction period, made up twenty-four percent; policy analysts based in academic and research institutions specializing in Afghan affairs made up nineteen percent; and international diplomats or representatives of international organizations made up fourteen percent. Most respondents reported active involvement between 2016 and 2021, with a smaller cluster active between 2011 and 2015, and several respondents describing intermittent engagement across multiple periods.

3.2 Survey Instrument and Variables

The instrument comprised thirteen questions organized around three core dimensions of managerial diplomacy. Leadership competencies were probed through questions on essential leadership qualities, strategic decision-making, and vision articulation. Institutional dynamics were probed through questions addressing the interaction between government structures and traditional systems, coordination mechanisms, and institutional capacity. International engagement was probed through questions on aid effectiveness, diplomatic relations, external partnership management, and accountability. Response rates exceeded ninety percent across all analyzed questions, an unusually high figure for expert surveys of this kind, suggesting strong stakeholder investment in the topic.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

All open-ended responses underwent a four-stage text analysis protocol. The first stage involved preprocessing, including case normalization, punctuation removal, and tokenization. The second stage involved content cleaning, removing stop words and focusing on substantive terms of four or more characters while handling missing responses appropriately. The third stage applied frequency analysis using count-based methods to identify dominant concepts across the dataset. The fourth stage applied thematic coding, sorting concepts into governance domains covering leadership, corruption, institutional capacity, and traditional systems. In total, the analysis identified eight hundred forty-seven unique concept instances across one hundred nineteen stakeholder responses.

Quantitative validation accompanied the qualitative coding. Response rates and completion metrics were calculated for each question, along with average response length and its standard deviation, concept frequency distributions, and thematic category weightings. Data integrity checks corrected duplicate professional categories, a fixed random seed of forty-two was used for quote sampling to ensure reproducibility, and a complete run log documented every analytical decision and category correction made during the process. Together, these steps allow the analytical procedure to be replicated in full from the original dataset.

4. Results and Discussions

This section presents the empirical findings, organized around survey response patterns, leadership competencies, institutional bridging, international aid impact, and coordination challenges. This study offers empirical evidence from twenty Afghan governance stakeholders addressing gaps in understanding managerial diplomacy within fragile state contexts. The findings reveal complex interactions between leadership capacity, institutional architecture, and international engagement that together shape reconstruction outcomes.

4.1 Survey Response Patterns and Data Characteristics

Response rates exceeded ninety percent across every question domain, but the depth of response varied considerably by topic, as summarized in Table 1. Institutional bridging questions produced the most extensive responses, averaging seventy-two point eight words, which suggests that stakeholders held complex, multi-part views on how traditional and formal institutions interact. Coordination obstacles, by contrast, produced the most concise responses, averaging eleven point eight words, a

pattern that likely reflects how widely recognized and clearly identifiable these obstacles were among respondents rather than any lack of concern about them.

Table 1. Survey response metrics and analytical depth by question domain

Question Domain	Responses	Response Rate (%)	Avg. Words	Unique Concepts
Leadership Qualities	20/21	95.2	46.2	320
Institutional Bridging	19/21	90.5	72.8	373
Aid Impact	20/21	95.2	55.8	356
Coordination Obstacles	20/21	95.2	11.8	20
Institutional Weaknesses	20/21	95.2	29.5	214
Government Legitimacy	20/21	95.2	17.9	41

Table 1 summarizes response rates, average word counts, and the number of unique concepts identified within each of the six question domains analyzed, ranging from leadership qualities and institutional bridging to aid impact, coordination obstacles, institutional weaknesses, and government legitimacy. Leadership qualities generated twenty out of twenty-one possible responses at a ninety-five-point two percent response rate with an average of forty-six point two words and three hundred twenty unique concepts, while institutional bridging generated nineteen responses at a ninety-point five percent rate but the highest average word count of the six domains.

4.2 Leadership Qualities and Strategic Competencies

Analysis of leadership attributes revealed three dominant competency clusters. The concept of a leader appeared sixteen times across responses, generally alongside strong references to national orientation, which appeared eleven times, and ethnic representation, which appeared nine times, as detailed in Table 2. Qualitative responses repeatedly emphasized leaders who could build trust and solidarity among different groups and who could demonstrate strategic vision suited to crisis management. One respondent specifically described the need for cross-ethnic vision that accounts for Afghanistan connection to all of its ethnic communities.

Table 2. Leadership quality themes and frequency distribution

Concept	Frequency	Competency Domain
Leader	16	Leadership role recognition
National	11	National unity orientation
Afghan	11	Local context understanding
Effective	10	Performance and impact focus
Ethnic	9	Cross-ethnic representation
Ability	8	Functional competence
Trust	7	Credibility and reliability
Vision	6	Strategic direction setting

Table 2 lists eight leadership-related concepts alongside their frequency counts and the competency domain each represents, moving from leadership role recognition and national unity orientation through local context understanding, performance focus, cross-ethnic representation, functional competence, credibility, and strategic direction setting. A recurring tension surfaced between strategic vision, mentioned six times, and the demand for practical implementation. Stakeholders consistently valued leaders capable of translating broad vision into concrete, well-thought-out plans and policies rather than treating vision and execution as separate concerns.

4.3 Institutional Bridging and Governance Architecture

The analysis identified significant, persistent challenges in bridging formal government institutions with traditional governance structures. The concept of tradition dominated with twenty-five mentions, while institutions and government appeared twenty-two and nineteen times respectively, as shown in

Table 3. Stakeholders reported that Afghan leaders failed to build a lasting link between government and traditional structures, describing prior bridging efforts as symbolic rather than sustainable or institutionalized. The jirga system retained considerable influence throughout the reconstruction period, yet its integration with formal governance was consistently described as unstable and lacking sustainable coordination mechanisms.

Table 3. Institutional bridging and governance challenge themes

Concept	Frequency	Governance Dimension
Traditional	25	Traditional structure integration
Institutions	22	Formal governance capacity
Government	19	State authority and function
Structures	18	Organizational frameworks
Jirga	17	Traditional decision-making systems
Formal	14	Official governance mechanisms
Leaders	19	Leadership institutional role
Afghan	17	Local contextual factors

Table 3 presents eight concepts associated with institutional bridging and their corresponding governance dimension, spanning traditional structure integration, formal governance capacity, state authority and function, organizational frameworks, traditional decision-making systems, official governance mechanisms, leadership's institutional role, and local contextual factors.

4.4 International Aid Impact and Strategic Capacity Development

International assistance emerged as a critical concern in stakeholder testimony, with leaders mentioned twenty-four times and Afghan mentioned sixteen times within aid-related discussion. Stakeholders described heavy reliance on foreign funding and technical assistance as having hampered the development of self-reliant, accountable strategic thinking within Afghan institutions. Strategic thinking itself was mentioned fifteen times and strategic considerations more broadly twelve times, indicating persistent concern about independent policy formulation capacity. Accountability mechanisms were mentioned ten times, dependency-related terms such as reliance and independence were each mentioned eleven times, and references to international or foreign influence appeared twelve and eleven times respectively. One respondent summarized the underlying tension directly, observing that over-reliance on international aid had led Afghan leaders to lose their intellectual independence and domestic accountability, with decisions increasingly shaped by external interests rather than the needs of the population.

4.5 Coordination Architecture and Institutional Capacity

Coordination challenges centered on systemic issues, with lack of capacity appearing twenty-five times and corruption sixteen times within this particular thematic domain. Institutional weaknesses centered on corruption, mentioned twelve times, alongside government capacity limitations, also mentioned twelve times, and systemic capacity gaps mentioned eleven times. Legitimacy-related concerns were even more pronounced, with inability to provide security mentioned twenty-three times, corruption eighteen times, and perceived dependence on foreign powers thirteen times. Stakeholders specifically identified the inability to provide basic services such as health, education, and justice as severely damaging to government credibility and public trust.

4.6 Comprehensive Thematic Integration and Cross-Cutting Patterns

Across the complete dataset, Afghan and corruption tied as the most frequent concepts, each appearing fifty-four times, followed by government at forty-six mentions and leaders at forty-four mentions, as summarized in Table 4. This pattern demonstrates how tightly leadership, governance, and accountability themes are interwoven in stakeholder accounts of Afghanistan reconstruction experience.

Table 4. Comprehensive concept frequency across all survey responses

Concept	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Afghan	54	6.36
Corruption	54	6.36
Government	46	5.42
Leaders	44	5.18
Institutions	42	4.95
Lack	41	4.83
National	31	3.65
Strategic	29	3.42
Traditional	26	3.06
Security	26	3.06

Table 4 ranks the ten most frequent concepts across all survey responses together with their overall percentage share of total coded instances, led jointly by Afghan and corruption at six point three six percent each, followed by government, leaders, institutions, lack, national, strategic, traditional, and security. Thematic categorization placed traditional structures at twenty-six point three percent, governance broadly at twenty-one point one percent, and leadership at fifteen point eight percent of coded content, reflecting the degree to which formal institutions, traditional systems, and leadership capability intersect throughout Afghanistan reconstruction experience. Taken together, these patterns suggest that leadership challenges, institutional weaknesses, and dependency on international support reinforce one another, forming cycles that undermine both managerial diplomacy and sustainable reconstruction outcomes.

4.7 Leadership Competencies in Divided Societies

The prominence of national orientation and ethnic representation in stakeholder responses underscores the central challenge of building inclusive leadership within an ethnically fragmented post-conflict setting. Stakeholders consistently framed effective leadership as requiring cross-ethnic vision and the capacity to build trust across different communities. This finding extends earlier work on inclusive leadership in fragile states by Singh, Lim, Jha, Kumar, and Ciasullo (2023), by identifying specific competencies required where traditional and modern governance systems intersect directly, rather than operating in separate spheres. The tension between strategic vision and practical implementation revealed here also echoes broader strategic leadership scholarship emphasizing that vision without execution capacity produces little durable change (Weber & Tarba, 2024), a pattern rarely examined within diplomatic studies specifically but clearly visible in this dataset.

4.8 Institutional Hybridity and Governance Diplomacy

Stakeholder responses point toward what might be called governance diplomacy, the ongoing negotiation between formal state institutions and traditional governance mechanisms. The prominence of traditional structures and jirga references alongside continued emphasis on formal institutions indicates that Afghanistan state-building project has never fully resolved this tension. This finding supports hybrid governance theory generally by Justin and Verkoren (2022) while adding empirical nuance from an Afghan setting specifically, since stakeholders described bridging efforts as symbolic rather than institutionalized, closely paralleling recent findings on institutional friction in hybrid systems of authority elsewhere (El, 2026). Corruption prominence across nearly every thematic domain suggests that successful managerial diplomacy cannot be reduced to institutional design alone; it must also confront questions of integrity and public trust directly, a conclusion consistent with governance research on post-conflict settings more broadly (Mosamim, 2026).

4.9 International Engagement and Strategic Sovereignty

The findings point toward a genuine paradox at the heart of managerial diplomacy: external support is essential to reconstruction, yet it can simultaneously undermine the very leadership autonomy and accountability it is meant to strengthen. This pattern is consistent with the broader aid effectiveness

literature, which finds that aid channeled through fragile state institutions frequently fails to build lasting capacity precisely because of how it is designed and implemented, not simply how much is provided (Ocran, 2023; Hoeffler & Justino, 2024). Stakeholders in this study described decisions increasingly shaped by external interests rather than domestic needs, suggesting that effective managerial diplomacy must actively guard against this drift rather than assuming that aid volume alone determines outcomes. The concept of strategic sovereignty, meaning the deliberate preservation of indigenous strategic thinking capacity even while accepting external support, captures what several stakeholders described but had no single term for.

4.10 Coordination Complexities in Multi-Actor Environments

Coordination obstacles, particularly the lack of institutional capacity, reveal operational dimensions of managerial diplomacy that theoretical frameworks often overlook. Stakeholders described specific difficulties coordinating between donor countries and international institutions, difficulties that closely mirror findings from aid-targeting research showing that assistance to fragile states is frequently misallocated relative to actual need (Ocran, 2023). That coordination obstacles produced the most concise stakeholder responses in this survey suggests these problems are widely recognized and clearly understood, rather than being ambiguous or contested, which may itself explain why they have proven so difficult to resolve despite two decades of attention.

4.11 Theoretical Contributions to Managerial Diplomacy

These findings support several contributions to the study of managerial diplomacy in reconstruction contexts. They demonstrate that managerial diplomacy requires competencies distinct from conventional diplomatic skill, specifically the ability to navigate hybrid governance systems, manage aid relationships without generating dependency, and coordinate across fragmented institutional landscapes while sustaining a coherent strategic direction. They further show that effective managerial diplomacy requires balancing competing demands, including traditional versus modern governance systems, local ownership versus international standards, and short-term stabilization versus long-term institution building. Finally, the consistent prominence of corruption as a cross-cutting theme indicates that managerial diplomacy must address accountability and public trust as governance problems in their own right, not simply as side effects of weak technical capacity.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how strategic leadership and managerial diplomacy shape Afghanistan post-conflict engagement with the international community, drawing on structured testimony from twenty governance stakeholders. The evidence points toward three interlocking requirements for effective governance in this setting. Leadership development must prioritize cross-ethnic representation, national orientation, and the capacity to translate broad vision into practical, actionable policy. Institutional architecture must move beyond symbolic gestures toward substantive integration of traditional mechanisms such as the jirga with formal government structures. International engagement must be redesigned to preserve local decision-making capacity and strategic sovereignty rather than deepening dependency on external actors. Corruption, appearing as frequently in stakeholder accounts as references to Afghan governance itself, stands out as a problem that cuts across every other dimension examined in this study, and any framework for reconstruction that treats it as secondary is likely to repeat the failures documented here.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that suggest productive directions for future research. The focus on 20 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, possesses unique historical and cultural characteristics that may limit direct generalizability to other post-conflict settings.

5.3 Suggestions and Dirrections for Future Study

Future research in managerial diplomacy offers several promising directions that can significantly

enrich both theoretical development and practical application. First, comparative studies should be conducted across different post-conflict contexts with varying traditional governance systems to understand how cultural and institutional diversity shapes the effectiveness of managerial diplomacy. Second, longitudinal research is needed to examine how managerial diplomacy competencies evolve over time, particularly across different phases of reconstruction and political transition, in order to capture dynamic capability development processes. Third, experimental or quasi-experimental approaches can be employed to test the effectiveness of various coordination mechanisms, leadership development programs, and institutional integration interventions in strengthening diplomatic and managerial outcomes. Finally, deeper investigation is required into how traditional governance systems can be systematically integrated into modern state structures in a way that preserves their legitimacy, cultural relevance, and functional effectiveness, while still supporting state-building objectives.

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Author Contributions
KA contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, investigation, manuscript drafting, review, and editing. KA also approved the final version of the manuscript. The author was responsible for ensuring the accuracy, integrity, and overall quality of the research.

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