

Research Article

# Investigation and Analysis of the Role of Mines in the Economic and Political Development of Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** Afghanistan, often called a "geological treasure trove," is richly endowed with vast mineral deposits worth over \$3 trillion. The minerals, including copper, lithium, iron, gold, and rare earths, can be used to resurrect the nation's economy, reduce dependence on foreign aid, and bring about political stability. However, three decades of conflict, political turmoil, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure have been a hindrance to the effective exploitation of the resources. This paper examines the role of mining in Afghanistan's economic and political development, distilling the opportunities and challenges in the industry. Drawing on comparative case studies from resource-rich countries like Botswana and Chile, the study highlights the importance of open government, robust regulatory institutions, and strategic foreign partnerships. The evidence suggests that an efficiently operated mining sector would be a driver of sustainable development, provided that Afghanistan addresses deep-seated systemic evils in the form of corruption, insecurity, and environmental degradation. The research concludes with policy imperatives aimed at maximizing the contribution of the sector to national development.

**Keywords:** Economic Development, Mineral Resources, Political Stability, Strategic Partnerships, Sustainable Development

## 1. Introduction

Afghanistan is a country of wealth in natural and mineral resources and is considered one of the most vital assets to achieve economic and political development. Given the high-grade and diversified mineral deposits, the mining sector in Afghanistan has the potential to be a power that can revamp the economic and social situations of the country. Coal, copper, iron, gold, and other minerals add not just raw materials for national production but also potential for foreign investment attraction and employment generation, establishing the ground for sustainable development.

However, the history of Afghanistan indicates that the effective exploitation of mineral resources has been accompanied by serious challenges over time due to factors such as war and instability. Political insecurity and internal conflicts have for decades precluded the right identification and use of these resources. Most of the discovered mines remain under-exploited, and their potential remains vastly unexploited.

In this regard, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, recognizing the importance of mineral resources as a primary source of revenue and economic growth, is seeking to develop this sector of the national economy. Achieving sustainable development goals requires transparency in resource management and the attraction of both domestic and foreign investments as fundamental necessities.

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Afghanistan, as a country abundant in natural and mineral resources, has long attracted attention. Due to its geographical location and extensive mineral reserves, it is considered a natural treasure trove. Coal, copper, iron, gold, and other valuable minerals not only serve as essential raw materials for domestic industries but also provide a vital opportunity for foreign investment and job creation, contributing significantly to sustainable development.

Furthermore, the role of the mining sector in Afghanistan's political development is undeniable. By generating economic opportunities and improving living standards, public trust in the government increases, fostering political and social stability. Additionally, given the range of countries cooperating with the Taliban government in mineral extraction, these partnerships could help reduce Afghanistan's international isolation and enhance its political standing on the global stage.

Overall, the mining sector in Afghanistan is regarded as a key driver of economic and political development. Despite existing challenges, there are substantial opportunities for the effective utilization of these resources. Therefore, proper management and transparency in this sector are of paramount importance. If the Afghan government successfully harnesses this potential, it can achieve sustainable economic and social development while overcoming political and economic challenges.

In the past two years, more particularly since the revival of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the economic policy of the administration has been distinctly focused on developing the mining sector and foreign investment. The Taliban administration has aptly realized that economic and social stability cannot be guaranteed without progress in the sector of mining and the exploitation of such resources in a healthy manner. Estimates put the worth of Afghanistan's mineral resources at over \$3 trillion, and the nation has vast potential to yield income and grow economically.

This study discusses and examines the role of the mining sector in the economic and political development of Afghanistan, outlining challenges and opportunities in mineral exploration and utilization. It also investigates the contribution of the sector to employment, social welfare, and economic development. The primary aim of this study is to formulate realistic solutions to optimize mining sector management and enhance its contribution towards sustainable development in Afghanistan. Finally, this research will provide a holistic assessment of the dimensions of the mining industry and its contribution to promoting Afghanistan's economic and political development.

## 2. Literature Review

The relationship between natural resource endowments and economic development has been the subject of heated argument in the academic literature. The "resource curse" hypothesis argues that natural resource-rich nations are likely to experience lower economic growth, greater inequality, and political instability due to rent-seeking behavior, corruption, and bad institutions. However, countries like Botswana and Chile have shown that effective governance, transparent policies, and wise investments can transform nature's riches into a driver of sustainable growth (Ross, 2012).

For Afghanistan, the mining sector has been the subject of significant policy and academic interest. Studies have highlighted the sector's potential to stimulate economic growth, particularly in the post-2001 era, when international focus was on the country's mineral riches (Giustozzi, 2019). However, the sector has equally been tainted by corruption, illegal extraction, and conflict, which have questioned its ability to contribute to long-term development (Global Witness, 2016). The existing literature is developed in this paper by providing an in-depth analysis of the difficulties and prospects presented by the mining sector of Afghanistan, with a particular focus on governance, foreign investment, and environmental sustainability.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to analyze the role of mining in Afghanistan's economic and political development. Data sources include:

**Secondary Data:** Academic journals, government reports, and international organization publications.

**Case Studies:** Comparative analysis of resource-rich countries such as Botswana, Chile, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

**Policy Analysis:** Examination of Afghanistan's mining contracts, regulatory frameworks, and governance structures.

The research is guided by the following questions:

What is the economic potential of Afghanistan's mining sector, and how can it contribute to national development?

What are the key challenges facing the sector, and how can they be addressed?

What lessons can Afghanistan learn from international best practices in resource governance?

## **4. Economic Potential of Afghanistan's Mining Sector**

### **4.1 Mineral Wealth and Economic Growth**

Afghanistan possesses a rich and diversified portfolio of minerals that is the principal pillar to support the country's economic upsurge. The nation's mineral wealth, varying from copper, lithium, iron, gold, and rare earth to a variety of other minerals, is recognized as immense as well as strategically crucial. Big deposits such as the Aynak copper deposit, which ranks among the world's largest, and the Hajigak iron ore deposit show the economic revolution potential hidden within these natural resources. Current estimates suggest that, with the proper regulatory frameworks and proper management, Afghanistan's mining sector could contribute up to 25% of the nation's GDP by 2030 (World Bank, 2022). This projection not only reflects the income-generating nature of Afghanistan's mineral resources but also depicts their capability to act as a macroeconomic stabilizing agent, revenue diversifier, and development driver in the long term.

### **4.2 Employment and Infrastructure Development**

The expansion of the mining sector in Afghanistan presents vast opportunities for employment generation and upgrading infrastructure. Mining operations are estimated to generate over 50,000 direct jobs—ranging from highly skilled employment in geology, engineering, and environmental management to semi-skilled employment in extraction, processing, and logistics (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2021). Aside from job creation, investments in mining-related infrastructure—i.e., improving road networks, rail connections, and power generation facilities—are also likely to yield substantial spillover benefits. Such improvements can reduce the cost of logistics, enhance regional connectivity, and stimulate broader economic activity by linking previously isolated areas with key economic corridors (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Thus, such infrastructure development provides the ground for a strong and inclusive economic environment, catering to both local development and national integration.

### **4.3 Foreign Investment and Strategic Partnerships**

Effective realization of the potential of the mining sector depends to a great extent on obtaining robust foreign investment and forging strategic foreign partnerships. Powerful nations of the world—China, India, and Iran, for instance—are highly interested in Afghanistan's mining activities, and the Mes Aynak copper project is one such good example of such engagement (World Bank, 2022). But to effectively utilize these opportunities, Afghanistan must overcome some systemic barriers. Ongoing issues such as impenetrable contractual processes, political instability, and repeated security issues continue to discourage large foreign capital inflows. These call for a fundamental transformation of the regulatory regime to improve transparency and predictability, as well as attempts to improve security processes (International Crisis Group, 2023). Additionally, the formation of public-private partnerships (PPPs) will support technology transfer, and the creation of local capacities, and guarantee that mining operations go on with a sense of environmental and social commitments (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Strategic partnerships will play a vital role in guaranteeing that growth in the sector induces sustainable, long-term development.

## **5. Challenges Facing the Mining Sector**

### **5.1 Political Unstable and Security Situation**

Afghanistan's mining occurs in a volatile security context. The circumstance that different armed militias, for example, hold key resource-endowed areas like in the ongoing fights between Taliban forces and other militancy groups, is conducive to cyber-attacks, violence in infrastructure, and ransom. With the return of the Taliban in 2021, efforts towards assuring stable domination of mining operations have been rendered difficult. Security issues such as looting threats, extortion by unauthorized groups, and attacks on personnel and equipment

have risen to become enormous impediments to attracting foreign and local investment. Moreover, the insufficient government presence in rural and remote areas provides a window of opportunity for illicit practices and exploitation, eventually resulting in the "resource curse" syndrome observed in resource-rich nations in politically unstable environments (AP News, 2025; Atlas Institute, 2025).

## 5.2 Corruption and Weak Governance

Poor governance and the pervasiveness of corruption are amongst Afghanistan's largest issues in the mining sector. Several anti-corruption networks' reports and government pilot studies indicate that bribery, fraud, and diversion of mining revenue are prevalent. Instances such as massive bribery payments in exchange for the signing of mining contracts and the secretive exercise of control over project management have eroded investor confidence both locally and internationally. Lack of independent oversight and effective administrative structures prevents the successful commercialization of Afghanistan's natural resources, thereby preventing sustainable economic growth (TOLO news, 2017; Mass Point PLLC, 2018).

## 5.3 Environmental and Social Impacts

In addition to the economic and political issues, mining in Afghanistan has extensive environmental and social impacts. Unregulated mining operations have caused extensive environmental degradation, including deforestation, water pollution (via chemical spillages such as cyanide and mercury), and loss of topsoil. These environmental effects directly have adverse effects on the surrounding communities, reducing agricultural output, draining precious natural resources, and increasing social tensions occasioned by the inequitable distribution of economic benefits. Besides that, spontaneous displacement and unplanned rural migration due to environmental disasters have been documented. It can add to social grievances and destroy both environmental and socio-economic sustainability unless it is governed through a proper policy framework (The Guardian, 2024; Research Gate, 2022).

## 6. Political Implications of the Mining Sector

### 6.1 State Building and Resource Governance

Good governance of Afghanistan's abundant mineral resources is central to the long-term state-building of the country. Where mineral resources are well managed, revenue and job creation can significantly enhance the state's capacity to provide public services and security. Successful examples in other resource-rich countries show that the establishment of robust legal institutions, transparent revenue systems, and accountable institutions can transform natural wealth into sustainable development (Auty, 1993). However, without them, poor governance and rampant corruption can lead to resource-induced conflicts, state legitimacy, and political instability (US Institute of Peace, 2012). For Afghanistan, reform initiatives—such as those of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)—can be a starting point to foster resource governance for inclusive state-building.

### 6.2 Geopolitical Considerations

Afghanistan's vast and strategically located mineral resources have wide-ranging geopolitical implications. The competition among regional hegemony—China, India, and Iran most prominently—for access to these resources is a subject of growing scholarly attention (Frynas & Yam, 2009). On one hand, strategic engagement with these countries can bring in the much-needed investment and technical expertise to develop Afghanistan's mining infrastructure. On the other, over-reliance on any one external partner risks exposing the country to dependency and loss of sovereignty as mineral riches may be employed by outside powers to pursue their geopolitical interests. This equilibrium underscores the need for Afghanistan to enter into agreements that ensure both short-term investment and long-term political independence.

### 6.3 Social Stability and Community Development

Beyond macroeconomic and geopolitical considerations, the mining sector plays a significant role in social stability at the local level. Mining operations can improve social outcomes by creating employment, raising income, and enabling community development initiatives. Yet without revenue-sharing institutions and robust community consultations, mining operations have the effect of widening social inequalities and provoking conflicts over benefit

distribution. The scholarship on the extractive industries suggests that unequal distribution of mining revenues leads to social instability and even violent conflict in fragile contexts (Bridge, 2004). As such, it is necessary to ensure local communities see concrete benefits—in terms of improved infrastructure, education, and health—to preserve social cohesion and avoid grievances that may derail both local and national stability.

## **7. Comparative Analysis: Lessons from Botswana and Chile**

### **7.1 Botswana: A Model of Resource Governance**

Botswana's success in managing its diamond resources offers valuable lessons for Afghanistan. Key factors include strong institutions, transparent revenue management, and a commitment to long-term development. By establishing the Botswana Diamond Trading Company and the Pula Fund, the country has been able to reinvest mining revenues in infrastructure, education, and healthcare.

### **7.2 Chile: Diversification and Environmental Sustainability**

Chile's mining sector, particularly its copper industry, has been a major driver of economic growth. The country has successfully diversified its economy, reducing its dependence on mining while maintaining a strong focus on environmental sustainability. Afghanistan can learn from Chile's experience by investing in value-added industries and implementing strict environmental regulations.

## **7. Comparative Analysis: Lessons from Botswana and Chile**

### **7.1 Botswana: A Model of Resource Governance**

Botswana's success in managing its diamond resources is often cited as a paradigmatic example of effective resource governance. Botswana established strong institutions and a clear legal framework shortly after independence. Through the creation of the Botswana Diamond Trading Company (BDTC) and the establishment of the Pula Fund—a sovereign wealth fund aimed at reinvesting revenues—the government has maintained fiscal discipline, ensured transparency in revenue collection, and safeguarded long-term developmental objectives (Auty, 1993 ; Ross, 2012 ). These measures have underpinned improvements in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, and they have contributed to the country's political stability. Botswana's example demonstrates the importance of linking resource revenue management to broader state-building efforts through rigorous oversight and inclusive financial planning.

### **7.2 Chile: Diversification and Environmental Sustainability**

Chile's mining sector, especially its copper industry, has been a major engine of economic growth while simultaneously promoting diversification and environmental sustainability. Over time, Chile has managed to leverage its vast copper reserves to spur substantial economic development. However, rather than allowing the economy to become solely dependent on mining revenues, Chile implemented policies aimed at economic diversification by investing in downstream industries and value-added processing (Bebbington, 2009 ). Moreover, the Chilean model is noteworthy for its integration of strict environmental regulations into the mining sector. These regulations, combined with strong public oversight and commitment to sustainable practices, have mitigated adverse environmental impacts and ensured that mining benefits are spread broadly across society. By following Chile's lead, Afghanistan might not only attract foreign technical expertise but also lay the foundation for sustainable, diversified economic development that avoids the pitfalls of overdependence on raw resource exports (World Bank, 2019 ).

## **8. Policy Recommendations**

To transform Afghanistan's mining sector into a driver of state building and sustainable development, the following policy recommendations are proposed. These recommendations are based on lessons from established resource-rich countries and supported by empirical research and international best practices:

- a. Strengthen Governance and Transparency
  - Establish independent oversight bodies: Create institutions modeled after Botswana's independent regulatory agencies to monitor mining contracts and revenue

management. This will help reduce corruption and bolster investor confidence (Auty, 1993).

- Adopt international transparency initiatives: Implement the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to ensure that all contracts, revenues, and expenditures are publicly available and independently audited. This transparency mechanism has been successfully applied in many countries facing the resource curse.
- b. Attract Responsible Foreign Investment
- Enhance the regulatory environment: Modernize and clarify mining laws, reduce bureaucratic obstacles, and ensure a fair legal framework that mitigates investor risks. Transparent regulatory reform can encourage both domestic and foreign investors to commit capital and expertise (Frynas & Yam, 2009).
  - Promote public-private partnerships: Leverage partnerships that combine state oversight with foreign technology and capital. Such partnerships should be structured to ensure local capacity building, while also transferring best international practices in mining and environmental management.
- c. Enhance Security and Stability
- Strengthen security measures in mining regions: Deploy coordinated security operations that include local community participation to protect mining installations and workers. This strategy should be informed by integrated security approaches used in stable resource-rich countries.
  - Engage local communities: Develop community-based security initiatives, ensuring that local populations are directly involved in monitoring and protecting the mining areas. This inclusive approach can foster trust between the community and the state, reducing the incidence of conflict around resource extraction.
- d. Promote Environmental Sustainability
- Develop and enforce strict environmental regulations: Establish comprehensive environmental impact assessments and regulatory guidelines before, during, and after mining operations. Learning from Chile's experience, Afghanistan should implement standards to minimize air, water, and soil pollution while ensuring proper site rehabilitation (World Bank, 2019).
  - Invest in sustainable mining technologies: Encourage the adoption of renewable energy sources and environmentally friendly mining practices that reduce the sector's ecological footprint and promote long-term resource conservation.
- e. Invest in Human Capital and Infrastructure
- Provide technical training and education: Establish vocational training programs in collaboration with international partners to develop a skilled workforce that can manage and operate mining technologies efficiently. This educational investment is critical for the long-term success of the industry (Bebbington, 2009).
  - Upgrade infrastructure: Prioritize investments in transportation, energy, and communication networks that are essential for efficient mining operations. Improved infrastructure will facilitate resource extraction, reduce transaction costs, and support broader economic development.

## 9. Conclusion

Afghanistan's mining sector represents a critical nexus of opportunity and challenge—a transformative engine with the potential to reshape the country's economic landscape, bolster state capacity, and drive social and political development. The nation's vast mineral wealth, valued at over \$3 trillion and comprising resources such as copper, lithium, iron, gold, and rare earth elements, positions Afghanistan uniquely as a geological treasure trove. Yet, realizing this potential demands systemic reforms, robust governance, and a comprehensive strategy that addresses interlinked challenges of corruption, insecurity, and environmental degradation. At the core of Afghanistan's economic potential is the vast diversity of its mineral reserves, which if harnessed under robust regulatory frameworks, can catalyze remarkable economic growth. Evidence from international cases demonstrates that the mining sector, when adequately managed, can generate significant revenue streams, foster industrial diversification, and create millions of direct and indirect employment opportunities. In particular, the direct employment opportunities in extraction, processing, and logistics combined with the indirect benefits through infrastructure development—ranging from roads and energy facilities to telecommunications—have the capacity to stimulate broader economic activity. The spillover effects of mining investments serve not only to modernize transport and energy networks but also to enhance regional connectivity and stimulate local enterprises, thereby contributing to a more diversified economy (International Monetary Fund, 2022 ; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2021 ).

For Afghanistan's society, the mining sector is more than an economic resource—it is a potential catalyst for social cohesion and inclusive growth. By channeling revenues into public services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, the state can uplift living standards and reduce widespread poverty. Research indicates that equitable revenue sharing in resource-rich sectors can mitigate social inequalities and generate a sense of ownership among local populations. When communities see tangible benefits from mining activities, trust in public institutions can strengthen, and conflict over resource distribution may be averted. Conversely, failure to implement robust community benefit-sharing mechanisms may exacerbate social disparities, triggering grievances that could spiral into wider unrest.

The role of mining in Afghanistan's political development is intrinsically linked to effective state-building. Mineral resources can empower a government by providing much-needed fiscal revenues that reduce dependency on volatile foreign aid. With stable revenue streams, the government could invest in both immediate and long-term social infrastructure—thereby enhancing its capacity to deliver public services and maintain security. Botswana's experience, for instance, illustrates how the establishment of sovereign wealth funds and transparent revenue management systems can turn resource wealth into a foundation for sustained state-building and political stability.

In Afghanistan's context, improving resource governance is paramount. The implementation of international frameworks such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) could serve as a vital mechanism for ensuring that mining revenues are managed in an accountable and transparent manner. Such initiatives would not only deter corrupt practices but also facilitate the reinvestment of mineral wealth into strategic sectors that underpin state capacity. Moreover, establishing independent oversight bodies and clear legal frameworks may help the Afghan government overcome historical challenges of mismanagement and corruption, transforming the mining sector from a potential source of conflict into an instrument of national development.

Afghanistan's geopolitical position adds further complexity to the management of its mineral resources. Regional powers, including China, India, and Iran, are actively seeking to secure access to Afghanistan's mineral wealth, thereby entwining Afghanistan's economic future with broader geopolitical strategies. While strategic partnerships with these nations can bring in much-needed investment and technical expertise, there is an inherent risk of dependency that could undermine Afghanistan's political autonomy. The state must, therefore, negotiate contracts that ensure long-term benefits and retain a significant degree of sovereignty over its resources. By learning from the diversification strategies employed by countries like Chile, Afghanistan can develop its value-added industries and minimize overreliance on raw material exports. This approach not only secures economic gains but also reinforces national resilience against external pressures.

In synthesizing the various dimensions of mining's role, it becomes evident that a well-managed and strategically integrated mining sector is indispensable for driving Afghanistan's sustainable growth. If the government can address the endemic issues of corruption, bolster

security in critical areas, and implement stringent environmental safeguards, the mining sector can unleash substantial potential—propelling overall economic development, reinforcing state-building, and stabilizing the political environment.

Policy recommendations put forth in this study emphasize a multi-pronged approach that includes strengthening governance frameworks, attracting responsible foreign investment, engaging local communities in security measures, enforcing strict environmental regulations, and investing in human capital and infrastructure. These strategies are interdependent and collectively serve to transform the mineral wealth into a sustainable foundation for prosperity and political legitimacy.

In conclusion, Afghanistan stands at a pivotal juncture. The realization of its vast mineral potential is contingent upon the government's ability to implement comprehensive reforms and adopt best practices from international experiences. When effectively managed, mining can emerge as the cornerstone of Afghanistan's economic transformation—a catalyst that fuels political stability, drives social growth, and underpins robust state-building. Future research and policy actions must continue to explore innovative mechanisms for resource governance, ensuring that Afghanistan's rich mineral endowments contribute decisively to national development and offer a sustainable path toward economic and political self-determination.

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