©2026, author(s)
Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 329-345.
DOI: 10.32787/ijir.v10i1.937

EDUCATION AS A TOOL OF INDONESIA'S SOFT POWER TOWARD AFGHANISTAN (2021-2025)

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INFO ARTIKEL
Article History

Received
3 July 2026

Revised
25 August 2026

Accepted
25 August 2026

Kata Kunci
Afghanistan; beasiswa KNB; diplomasi pendidikan; Indonesia; kekuatan lunak.

Keywords:
Afghanistan; KNB Scholarship; educational diplomacy; Indonesia; soft power.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pendidikan berfungsi sebagai instrumen soft power Indonesia terhadap Afghanistan pada periode 2021–2025. Dengan menerapkan Teori Soft Power Joseph Nye dan konsep diplomasi pendidikan melalui kerangka analisis dokumen kualitatif, penelitian ini mengevaluasi dokumen kebijakan resmi, catatan beasiswa, dan laporan institusional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Indonesia berhasil memproyeksikan soft power melalui mekanisme hibrida multi-jalur yang menggabungkan program yang didanai negara seperti Beasiswa KNB dengan berbagai inisiatif dari perguruan tinggi Islam dan masyarakat sipil. Pendekatan ini mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai Islam moderat (Wasathiyyah) dan solidaritas Selatan–Selatan untuk mempertahankan keterlibatan diplomasi non-koersif. Namun, pembatasan mobilitas perempuan yang diberlakukan oleh Taliban serta keterbatasan pendanaan menjadi hambatan terhadap dampak yang lebih luas. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendidikan merupakan alat kebijakan luar negeri non-koersif yang efektif bagi negara-negara kekuatan menengah di wilayah yang terdampak konflik, dengan menggabungkan akses pendidikan, solidaritas Islam, dan hubungan diplomatik antarmasyarakat (people-to-people diplomacy) dalam jangka panjang.

Abstract

This study examines how education functioned as an instrument of Indonesia's soft power toward Afghanistan between 2021 and 2025. Applying Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory and educational diplomacy concepts within a qualitative document analysis framework, the study evaluates official policy documents, scholarship records, and institutional reports. The findings reveal that Indonesia successfully projected soft power through a hybrid, multi-track mechanism combining state-funded programs like the KNB Scholarship with initiatives from Islamic higher education institutions and civil society. This approach integrated moderate Islamic values (Wasathiyyah) and South–South solidarity to maintain non-coercive diplomatic engagement. However, Taliban-imposed restrictions on female mobility and financial limitations constrained its broader impact. The study concludes that education serves as a effective non-coercive foreign policy tool for middle powers in conflict-affected regions, combining educational access, Islamic solidarity, and long-term people-to-people diplomatic outreach.

ISSN: 2548-4109 electronic
ISSN: 2657-165X printed

INTRODUCTION

Education has increasingly become one of the most influential instruments of soft power in contemporary international relations. Unlike military or economic coercion, states increasingly rely on attraction, cultural exchange, and knowledge cooperation to shape international perceptions and strengthen diplomatic relations. Joseph Nye explains that soft power emerges from a country's ability to influence others through culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate and attractive (Yaqoub, Matusitz, Jingwu, & Haizhou, 2026). In the twenty-first century, higher education, scholarships, academic mobility, and international cooperation programs have become important components of this strategy because they enable states to build long-term relationships, cultivate future networks, and promote positive international images.

Within this broader framework of soft power, educational diplomacy has emerged as an important mechanism through which states utilize education as an instrument of foreign policy and international engagement. Educational diplomacy refers to the use of scholarships, academic exchange, university cooperation, and educational assistance to strengthen international cooperation and long-term people-to-people relations. Rather than relying on coercive instruments, educational diplomacy emphasizes peaceful interaction, cultural exchange, and knowledge sharing (Arslan & Sezgin, 2023). The international students often become informal agents of soft power because their educational experiences contribute to intercultural understanding, professional cooperation, and transnational networks. Similarly, Knight explains that the internationalization of higher education plays an important role in promoting global engagement and intercultural relations (Knight, 2004).

The growing internationalization of higher education has transformed universities and scholarship programs into important tools of public diplomacy and international engagement. Recent studies demonstrate that international student mobility contributes to cultural exchange, global connectivity, and long-term diplomatic relationships between host countries and foreign students (Cretu & Grosseck, 2025). Educational exchange programs also help states project positive international images while simultaneously fostering intellectual and professional

development among participants (Marginson et al., 2025). Consequently, many emerging powers in Asia, including Indonesia, Türkiye, China, and Vietnam, increasingly integrate educational diplomacy into their broader foreign policy strategies (Caliskan & Buyukgoze, 2026).

Within this broader context, Indonesia has gradually expanded its educational diplomacy toward developing countries, particularly within the framework of South–South cooperation. The Kemitraan Negara Berkembang (KNB) Scholarship is a flagship educational program supported by the Government of Indonesia to promote international cooperation and provide higher education opportunities for students from developing nations. According to official reports, Indonesia has provided educational opportunities for Afghan students through the KNB Scholarship program between 2021 and 2025. During this period, around 50 Afghan students were awarded scholarships to study at Indonesian universities, and most recipients pursued master's degree programs, reflecting Indonesia's use of higher education as a form of educational engagement and international cooperation (KNB Scholarship, 2026). Recent studies show that Indonesia uses educational cooperation not only for academic purposes but also to strengthen solidarity among developing and Muslim-majority countries (Harapan, Sairwona, & Kabul, 2024). Educational assistance for Afghan students, especially after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, represents one of the clearest examples of Indonesia's educational diplomacy operating within the broader framework of soft power.

Afghanistan provides an important case for examining the relationship between education, educational diplomacy, and soft power. Following decades of war, political instability, and humanitarian crisis, Afghanistan's education system has remained highly fragile. Although educational progress improved significantly between 2001 and 2021, millions of Afghan children and youth continue to face serious barriers to education, particularly women and rural populations (Mohammadi & Joseph, 2025). After the Taliban regained control in 2021, restrictions on women's education and declining international assistance further intensified educational challenges in the country. In this situation, international scholarship opportunities and educational cooperation became increasingly important for Afghan students seeking access to higher education abroad.

Against this background, Indonesia emerged as one of the countries offering

educational opportunities and scholarships for Afghan students through universities, Islamic institutions, and state-supported scholarship programs. Indonesian universities and government institutions provided scholarships, educational support, and training initiatives aimed at improving academic capacity and maintaining educational access for Afghan students, including Afghan women (Munawati, 2025). These initiatives reflect Indonesia's broader foreign policy approach that combines humanitarian concern, Islamic solidarity, educational diplomacy, and South–South cooperation. The central research question of this paper is: How has education functioned as a tool of Indonesia's soft power toward Afghanistan between 2021 and 2025?

However, existing studies on soft power and educational diplomacy have several limitations. Much of the literature focuses on major powers, such as the United States, China, and Türkiye, whose educational influence is supported by extensive economic resources, global institutions, and established cultural networks. While these studies provide important explanations of how powerful states utilize education to enhance international influence, they offer limited insight into how developing countries and emerging middle powers, such as Indonesia, employ educational diplomacy with more limited resources and within the context of South–South cooperation. Furthermore, previous research on educational diplomacy often examines international student mobility and higher education internationalization primarily from an institutional perspective, while paying less attention to how scholarship programs function as strategic foreign policy instruments for building diplomatic relations and long-term influence (Mohammadi & Joseph, 2025).

In the context of Afghanistan, existing research has mainly concentrated on educational challenges related to conflict, humanitarian crises, restrictions on education, and gender inequality, particularly following the political transition in 2021. Although these studies provide valuable insights into Afghanistan's domestic educational conditions, they have paid limited attention to the role of external actors and educational diplomacy initiatives in maintaining international engagement with Afghanistan. Consequently, the role of Indonesia's educational engagement, particularly through the KNB Scholarship program, remains insufficiently explored.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how Indonesia, as an emerging middle power, utilizes education as a form of soft power and educational diplomacy toward Afghanistan during the period of 2021–2025.

Therefore, this paper seeks to examine how Indonesia utilized education as a soft power instrument toward Afghanistan during the period 2021–2025. The paper argues that Indonesia's educational initiatives toward Afghanistan represent an important form of educational diplomacy that combines humanitarian engagement, Islamic solidarity, South–South cooperation, and long-term people-to-people relations. By analyzing scholarship programs, educational cooperation, and higher education initiatives, this study contributes to broader discussions on soft power, educational diplomacy, and the role of emerging powers in international relations.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This study develops an integrated analytical framework to examine how Indonesia utilizes education as an instrument of soft power toward Afghanistan during 2021–2025. The framework combines three interconnected perspectives: Soft Power Theory (Joseph Nye), Educational Diplomacy, and South–South Cooperation (SSC). These concepts are not examined separately; rather, they explain different stages of Indonesia's educational engagement. Soft power explains the sources of Indonesia's attraction, educational diplomacy explains the mechanisms through which attraction is projected, and South–South Cooperation explains the principles that shape Indonesia's engagement with Afghanistan.

Soft Power: Sources of Indonesia's Attraction

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, explains that states can achieve international influence through attraction rather than coercion or material incentives (Nye, 2019). In this study, soft power is used to identify the sources of attraction that Indonesia projects through its educational engagement with Afghanistan.

The analysis focuses on three indicators: (1) Cultural and religious values: Indonesia's projection of moderate Islamic values, tolerance, inclusiveness, and peaceful coexistence as part of its national identity. These values represent an important source of attraction, particularly in relations with Afghanistan as a Muslim-majority country. (2) Political values: Indonesia's image as a democratic, multicultural, and peaceful

country that promotes dialogue, equality, and access to education. (3) Foreign policy practices: Indonesia's commitment to humanitarian engagement and educational cooperation as a non-coercive approach to maintaining relations with Afghanistan.

Through these indicators, this study examines how Indonesia constructs an attractive image beyond traditional material power.

Educational Diplomacy: The Mechanism of Soft Power Projection

While soft power explains why Indonesia can become attractive, educational diplomacy explains how Indonesia transforms this attraction into concrete foreign policy practices. Educational diplomacy refers to the strategic use of education, including scholarships, academic cooperation, and knowledge exchange, to strengthen international relations.

In this study, educational diplomacy is operationalized through three indicators: (1) Scholarship and academic mobility: The provision of educational opportunities for Afghan students through programs such as the KNB Scholarship and other university-based scholarships. These programs are analyzed as mechanisms for creating direct engagement and long-term connections between Indonesian and Afghan societies. (2) Institutional cooperation: The involvement of Indonesian universities, Islamic higher education institutions, and civil society organizations, including Muhammadiyah, in academic cooperation, capacity building, and knowledge exchange. (3) People-to-people networks: The role of Afghan students, alumni, academics, and educational communities as social bridges that contribute to mutual understanding and positive perceptions of Indonesia.

South–South Cooperation: The Framework of Indonesia's Engagement

South–South Cooperation provides the normative explanation of why Indonesia's educational diplomacy toward Afghanistan takes a partnership-based approach. Unlike traditional aid models that may involve political conditions or unequal relationships, SSC emphasizes solidarity, equality, mutual benefit, and respect for sovereignty.

This study analyzes SSC through three indicators: (1) Equality and partnership: Indonesia's engagement with Afghanistan is understood as cooperation between developing countries rather than a donor–recipient relationship. (2) Non-coercive

cooperation: Educational assistance is provided without political pressure, ideological intervention, or conditional demands. (3) Capacity building and mutual benefit: Educational cooperation aims to develop human resources and strengthen long-term relations between Indonesia and Afghanistan.

Based on these three dimensions, this study argues that Indonesia's educational engagement with Afghanistan operates through a specific process. Indonesia's cultural and political values create sources of attraction (soft power); these values are then translated into practical programs through educational diplomacy, such as scholarships, academic cooperation, and institutional partnerships. The implementation of these programs reflects the principles of South–South Cooperation, emphasizing solidarity, equality, and mutual development.

Therefore, this framework allows this study to analyze not only what educational programs Indonesia provides to Afghanistan, but also how these programs function as instruments of soft power and contribute to Indonesia's diplomatic engagement during 2021–2025.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using qualitative document analysis to examine how Indonesia utilizes education as a soft power instrument toward Afghanistan during 2021–2025. This method is appropriate because it enables systematic analysis of policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature to understand Indonesia's non-coercive foreign policy practices and educational engagement.

The study uses secondary data collected through document analysis. Documents were selected based on three criteria: (1) relevance to Indonesia's educational diplomacy and Afghanistan-related engagement during 2021–2025; (2) credibility of sources, prioritizing official institutions, international organizations, and peer-reviewed publications; and (3) relevance to the study's analytical framework.

First, official government and institutional documents, including publications from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kemlu), Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology (Kemdiktisaintek), KNB Scholarship reports, and university publications related to educational cooperation with Afghan students. Second, international organization reports, including documents from

UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNAMA regarding Afghanistan's educational conditions after 2021. Third, academic literature, including peer-reviewed articles and books discussing soft power, educational diplomacy, South–South Cooperation, and Indonesian foreign policy.

The collected data were analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis based on the study's Analysis Framework. The analysis involved three main stages. First, relevant documents were categorized according to key themes, such as scholarships, institutional cooperation, moderate Islamic values, and civil society involvement. Second, the findings were coded according to three analytical dimensions: Soft Power Resources (cultural values, moderate Islam, and political values), Educational Diplomacy Instruments (scholarships, mobility, and institutional partnerships), and South–South Cooperation Principles (solidarity, equality, and non-coercive cooperation). Third, data from different sources were triangulated to strengthen the reliability of findings and develop conclusions regarding Indonesia's educational diplomacy toward Afghanistan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Empirical Context: Post-2021 Afghan Educational Crisis and Foreign Policy Imperatives

The educational crisis in Afghanistan after 2021 represents not only a consequence of political transition but also a significant interruption of two decades of educational reconstruction and human capital development. Following the fall of the previous government and the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021, Afghanistan's education sector experienced a fundamental transformation from an area of development investment into a politically restricted domain. Although Afghanistan achieved considerable educational expansion between 2001 and 2021, including increased school enrollment, institutional development, and greater participation of women in education, these achievements remained structurally vulnerable because they relied heavily on international financial assistance and external institutional support (Amin & Azim, 2023).

The most severe consequence of the post-2021 transition was the systematic restriction of women's and girls' access to education. Afghanistan became the only country where girls were prohibited from continuing secondary education, while

restrictions were later expanded to female participation in universities and professional training. These policies significantly reduced educational opportunities for women and created long-term consequences for Afghanistan's human capital development. The exclusion of women from education should therefore be understood not merely as a gender issue but as a broader challenge affecting economic productivity, social stability, and future state capacity (Adeli, 2024).

The crisis also affected Afghanistan's higher education system. Universities faced declining international cooperation, financial difficulties, reduced academic freedom, and institutional isolation. The deterioration of higher education weakened the country's ability to produce skilled professionals in fields necessary for reconstruction and governance. In conflict-affected societies, education functions beyond knowledge production because it contributes to social resilience, peacebuilding, and the development of future leadership capacity (Samim & Noori, 2025).

This situation created a complex diplomatic dilemma for international actors. On one hand, political engagement with the Taliban remained sensitive because recognition of the regime was contested internationally. On the other hand, complete disengagement risked further isolating Afghan society, particularly young people and women affected by educational restrictions. Consequently, education became a strategic channel through which international actors could maintain engagement without direct political endorsement of the Taliban government.

Within this context, Indonesia's educational engagement with Afghanistan represented a form of non-coercive foreign policy. Rather than approaching Afghanistan solely through humanitarian assistance, Indonesia utilized education as a mechanism to maintain social connections, promote inclusive development, and project its international identity. Therefore, the Afghan educational crisis provided the structural condition that enabled education to become a strategic field for Indonesia's soft power projection between 2021 and 2025.

Moderate Islam and South–South Solidarity as Indonesia's Soft Power Resources

Indonesia's educational diplomacy toward Afghanistan was not effective merely because it provided educational opportunities. Its influence was generated through the attraction of particular values and

identities associated with Indonesia's foreign policy. According to Nye's soft power framework, international influence emerges when other actors voluntarily recognize the legitimacy and attractiveness of a country's values, culture, and political identity rather than being persuaded through coercive instruments (Kosovo, 2025). In the Afghan context, Indonesia's main sources of attraction were derived from two interconnected elements: moderate Islamic identity and South–South solidarity.

Indonesia's position as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy provides an important foundation for its international image. Through the concept of religious moderation, Indonesia promotes an understanding of Islam that emphasizes coexistence, pluralism, democracy, and educational advancement. This identity distinguishes Indonesia from both Western actors and more conservative interpretations of Islamic governance because it presents a model where Islamic values are compatible with modern education and social inclusion (Hidayat, 2025).

This identity became particularly significant following the Taliban's restrictions on women's education. Indonesia's continued educational engagement indirectly communicated an alternative understanding of the relationship between Islam and education. By supporting Afghan students, including women affected by educational restrictions, Indonesia demonstrated that religious commitment does not necessarily contradict women's educational participation or intellectual development. Consequently, Indonesia's attraction was not generated only through scholarships but also through the symbolic representation of a different Muslim social model (Damayanti, 2025).

The effectiveness of this soft power resource lies in cultural familiarity. Afghanistan and Indonesia share important religious connections as Muslim-majority societies, which can reduce perceptions of external interference. Unlike some external actors whose educational assistance may be interpreted as ideological intervention, Indonesia's approach was more easily framed as cooperation between societies with shared religious and developmental experiences.

A second source of Indonesia's soft power was its commitment to South–South Cooperation (SSC). Indonesia presented educational assistance not as a traditional donor-recipient relationship but as a partnership among developing countries

based on equality, mutual learning, and solidarity. This distinction is significant because Afghanistan has experienced decades of international intervention, which has sometimes generated concerns regarding dependency and external influence (Mawdsley, 2023).

Through SSC principles, Indonesia positioned itself as a partner sharing knowledge and capacity-building opportunities rather than imposing political preferences. This approach strengthened Indonesia's legitimacy because its educational engagement reflected cooperation among countries facing similar developmental challenges. Therefore, Indonesia's soft power toward Afghanistan was constructed not only through material assistance but through the combination of cultural compatibility, normative legitimacy, and South–South solidarity.

Operationalizing Educational Diplomacy: Scholarships, Institutional Mobility, and Civil Society

While values create attraction, soft power requires practical mechanisms to transform attraction into sustained relationships. Indonesia operationalized its soft power through educational diplomacy instruments involving government programs, higher education institutions, and civil society organizations. This demonstrates that education functioned not only as an academic activity but also as a diplomatic channel for building long-term interpersonal connections.

The KNB Scholarship represents one of Indonesia's primary instruments of educational diplomacy. Designed to provide higher education opportunities for students from developing countries, the program reflects Indonesia's broader strategy of expanding international academic cooperation and strengthening global networks. Unlike traditional foreign assistance, scholarship diplomacy creates direct social interaction between foreign students and Indonesian society, allowing perceptions of Indonesia to develop through personal experiences rather than official narratives (Knight, 2022).

For Afghan students, studying in Indonesia provides access to academic development while simultaneously creating opportunities for cultural exchange. Through classroom interaction, campus activities, and daily social experiences, Afghan students encounter Indonesia's multicultural society, democratic practices, and educational environment. International students often become informal representatives of host

countries because their experiences influence how they perceive and communicate the image of that country after returning home (Kim, Bamberger, & Kim, 2025).

However, Indonesia's educational diplomacy cannot be understood solely through government-led initiatives. The involvement of universities and civil society organizations demonstrates a hybrid model of diplomacy. Indonesian institutions such as UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Universitas Sebelas Maret, and organizations such as Muhammadiyah contributed to educational engagement through scholarships, training programs, and humanitarian initiatives.

The involvement of non-state actors became particularly important after 2021 because formal government diplomacy faced political limitations due to international uncertainty regarding Taliban recognition. Universities and civil society organizations provided flexible channels for maintaining people-to-people relations when official diplomatic engagement became politically sensitive. This reflects the increasing role of non-state actors in contemporary diplomacy, where universities and civil society organizations function as transnational actors that support international cooperation beyond traditional state mechanisms (Wit, Altbach, & Wit, 2021).

Therefore, Indonesia's educational diplomacy operated through a multi-track approach. Government institutions provided policy direction and legitimacy, while universities and civil society organizations expanded social access and practical implementation. This combination increased the resilience of Indonesia's soft power because diplomatic influence was not dependent exclusively on formal state-to-state relations.

Structural Challenges and Limitations to Indonesia's Educational Soft Power

Despite Indonesia's successful educational engagement with Afghanistan, several structural limitations restricted the broader impact and sustainability of its soft power strategy. The first challenge originated from Afghanistan's domestic political environment. Taliban restrictions on women's education and mobility directly affected the ability of Afghan students, particularly women, to access international educational opportunities. Even when Indonesian institutions provided scholarship opportunities, many potential recipients faced difficulties related to documentation,

travel permissions, and domestic restrictions (Mckinney & Farrar, 2024)

This condition demonstrates an important limitation of soft power. Attraction alone does not automatically produce influence because the effectiveness of soft power depends on whether the receiving environment allows interaction and engagement to occur. Indonesia could provide attractive educational opportunities, but political constraints within Afghanistan limited the extent to which these opportunities could generate diplomatic outcomes.

A second limitation concerns Indonesia's institutional and financial capacity. Compared with major education diplomacy actors such as China, Türkiye, and Western countries, Indonesia operates with more limited scholarship capacity, international education infrastructure, and global university networks. While Indonesia possesses normative legitimacy, expanding educational influence requires sustained financial investment, institutional coordination, and international branding strategies (Caliskan & Buyukgoze, 2026).

Therefore, Indonesia faces a strategic challenge: its educational diplomacy has strong legitimacy but limited scale. The main obstacle is not the attractiveness of Indonesia's educational model but its ability to transform this attraction into wider and more sustainable international influence.

Finally, the long-term sustainability of educational soft power depends on continued engagement after students complete their studies. Without strong alumni networks, institutional partnerships, and long-term cooperation mechanisms, the diplomatic benefits generated through educational exchange may gradually decline. Educational diplomacy produces influence through relationships built over time rather than immediate political outcomes (Robertson & Wu, 2023).

Nevertheless, Indonesia's experience demonstrates that middle powers can exercise meaningful international influence through education. In conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan, soft power does not depend exclusively on economic strength or military capability. Instead, legitimacy, cultural compatibility, humanitarian commitment, and sustained interpersonal relationships can become important sources of diplomatic influence.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of education as an instrument of Indonesia's soft power toward Afghanistan between 2021

and 2025, particularly during a period marked by political uncertainty, humanitarian challenges, and severe restrictions on educational access following the Taliban's return to power. The findings demonstrate that Indonesia utilized education not merely as humanitarian assistance but as a strategic diplomatic instrument that combined normative values, institutional cooperation, and interpersonal engagement. Through scholarships, academic cooperation, and educational support, Indonesia maintained constructive engagement with Afghan society while avoiding direct political confrontation with the de facto Taliban authorities.

The study reveals that Indonesia's educational soft power operates through three interconnected dimensions. First, Indonesia's influence is rooted in its soft power resources, particularly its identity as a Muslim-majority democracy promoting moderate Islam (Wasathiyyah), pluralism, and inclusive education. These values provided Indonesia with normative legitimacy in Afghanistan because its engagement was perceived less as external intervention and more as solidarity between Muslim-majority developing societies. Furthermore, Indonesia's commitment to South–South Cooperation strengthened its image as a partner that emphasizes mutual learning, equality, and capacity building rather than dependency.

Second, Indonesia transformed these values into practical influence through a hybrid model of educational diplomacy. Government initiatives, particularly the Kemitraan Negara Berkembang (KNB) Scholarship, provided institutional support for international academic engagement, while universities and civil society organizations expanded diplomatic access through scholarships, training programs, and people-to-people interaction. The involvement of institutions such as Islamic higher education institutions and organizations such as Muhammadiyah demonstrates that contemporary diplomacy increasingly extends beyond state actors. These non-state actors became important diplomatic channels, particularly when formal government-to-government engagement faced political constraints after 2021.

Third, the study identifies significant structural limitations affecting the sustainability of Indonesia's educational soft power. Although Indonesia successfully generated goodwill and attraction, the

effectiveness of educational diplomacy remained constrained by Afghanistan's domestic political conditions, particularly restrictions on women's education and mobility. Additional challenges included limited scholarship capacity, institutional resources, language adaptation difficulties, and the absence of comprehensive alumni management mechanisms. These findings demonstrate that soft power effectiveness depends not only on the attractiveness of a country's values but also on the political environment and institutional capacity that allow diplomatic relationships to develop.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on soft power and educational diplomacy by demonstrating how middle powers in the Global South can generate international influence through normative attraction rather than material dominance. The Indonesian case challenges the assumption that soft power is primarily produced by major powers with extensive economic and institutional resources. Instead, it shows that cultural compatibility, religious identity, humanitarian commitment, and civil society participation can become important sources of influence in conflict-affected contexts.

From a policy perspective, Indonesia's educational diplomacy toward Afghanistan requires further institutionalization to maximize long-term diplomatic benefits. Expanding scholarship opportunities for students from conflict-affected countries, strengthening preparatory programs for language and cultural adaptation, developing structured alumni networks, and improving coordination between government institutions, universities, and civil society organizations would enhance the sustainability of Indonesia's educational engagement.

This study has several limitations. The research relies primarily on qualitative document analysis and secondary sources, which limits direct understanding of how Afghan students, Indonesian institutions, and policymakers perceive the impact of educational diplomacy. Future research should incorporate interviews, surveys, and longitudinal studies involving Afghan graduates and institutional stakeholders to evaluate the long-term effects of educational exchange on individual development, social networks, and Indonesia–Afghanistan relations

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