

Afghanistan's Strategic Indispensability Under Taliban Rule: Conditional Legitimacy and Regional Security Complex Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan sits at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This geographic reality has historically attracted external influence and great-power competition.¹ The Taliban regained control of the government in August 2021, following the rapid withdrawal of NATO troops. This has further complicated the situation and made it a key issue in International Relations (IR) theory. Internal factors influence regional actors, and the international system has hesitated to fully accept the Taliban's role.² Complex forms of engagement are now occurring. This case challenges mainstream IR views, which assert that states must be recognised before formal interaction and cooperation. The aim of this paper is to answer the following research question: How does the Taliban regime in Afghanistan gain de facto 'strategic-necessity legitimacy' in its regional security complex, despite limited formal recognition?

This research is driven by Afghanistan's strategic importance to its neighbours. Some analysts

describe Afghanistan as a vital link, transforming it from a landlocked country into a land linked hub for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This position could support projects like the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Trans-Afghan Railway.³ Beyond geography, Afghanistan has mineral deposits estimated to be worth one to three trillion US dollars. These include lithium, copper, and rare-earth elements, all essential to the green energy transition.⁴ A declassified Pentagon report even dubbed Afghanistan ‘the Saudi Arabia

¹ Saira Khizar, Saeed Saeed and Muhammad Ilyas, ‘Afghanistan's Security Situation and the Regional Dynamics: An Analysis of the Convergence of Interests’ (2024) 5(2) *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 670, 671; Muhammad Tahir, ‘Regional Security Complex Theory and Soft Power: Mapping China’s Engagement in Afghanistan’ (2022) 26(2) *Margalla Papers* 39, 40.

² Deepak Kumar Maurya, ‘Resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan: A Global Threat to Human Rights, Security and Democracy’ (2025) 5(3) *Technoarete* 24, 25; Abdul Wali Popalzay and Bawa Singh, ‘Strategic Convergence or Tactical Accommodation? An Analysis of China-Taliban Engagements Since the Taliban's Takeover’ (2025) 11(3) *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 231, 233.

³ Imran Omarkhail and Asad Zahid, ‘Afghanistan's Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats’ (2025) 33(3) *Asian Journal of Political Science* 481, 484; Mir Hamidullah Jabarkhil and Maitreyi Parikh, ‘China's Strategic Engagement in Taliban-Led Afghanistan: Implications for China's Regional Hegemony’ (2025) 5(2) *International Journal of Innovations and Research Analysis* 101, 104; Ahmad Saud and Muhammad Usman Khan, ‘Geo-Politics of Afghanistan Under Taliban Regime: Prospects for Regional Integration’ (2022) 91 *Central Asia Journal* 41, 49.

⁴ US agencies initially estimated Afghanistan’s untapped mineral reserves at approximately USD 1 trillion in a 2010 survey. Subsequent assessments revised this figure upward to USD 3 trillion. See Pir Mohammad Paknehad, ‘The Geopolitical Influences on Afghanistan and Their Impact’ (Free International University of Moldova 2024); Prateek Malik and others, ‘Post-2021 Terrorism in Afghanistan and Its Geopolitical Impact on Regional Security: Case Studies of Pakistan and China’ (2025) 3(2) *American Journal of Development Studies* 76, 77; ‘USD 3 Trillion and Counting: Global Players Eyeing Afghanistan's Vast Mineral Reserves’ (India Today, 27 August 2021) <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/global-players-eyeing-afghanistan-vast-mineral-reserves-1846218-2021-08-27>

of lithium.’⁵ These resources are economically necessary for regional development, regardless of ideological arguments against the Taliban’s leadership. The presence of groups like ISIS-K, Al-Qaeda, and TTP, and the resulting defensive needs, also add to this necessity.⁶

The present diplomatic record foregrounds the main enigma more clearly. Russia was the first to recognise the Taliban government formally on 3 July 2025. This was during its acceptance of Afghanistan’s ambassador's credentials in Moscow, after the removal of the Taliban from the list of designated terrorist organisations in April 2025.⁷ China, Pakistan, Iran, and India have yet to extend formal recognition. Nonetheless, all four countries have functional embassies, significant bilateral agreements, and active security cooperation channels with Kabul. India's reopening of its Kabul embassy on 21 October 2025, after a four-year closure, shows the difference between official status and real involvement.⁸ India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar put the move in the context of strengthening the partnership and ensuring regional stability, instead of supporting the rule of the Taliban.⁹ These instances demonstrate a pattern that traditional international relations frameworks struggle to address.

⁵ The classified Pentagon memorandum is cited widely in secondary literature but has not been declassified in full. See 'Afghanistan's Rare Earth Element Bonanza' (Fraser Institute, 11 August 2013) <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/commentary/afghanistans-rare-earth-element-bonanza>. The memorandum's characterisation is significant because it predates the Taliban's takeover by over a decade, confirming that resource competition over Afghan lithium was already embedded in great-power strategic calculations well before 2021.

⁶ Salma Kiani, 'The Afghan Taliban's Intransigence on Counterterrorism and the Escalation of Regional Terrorism: Strategic Directions for Pakistan' (2024) 3(2) *Al-Nasr* 41, 43; Malik and others (n 4) 78; Khizar, Saeed and Ilyas (n 1) 674.

⁷ Mark Trevelyan, 'Russia Becomes First Country to Recognise Taliban Government of Afghanistan' (Reuters, 4 July 2025) <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-becomes-first-country-recognise-taliban-government-afghanistan-2025-07-03/>; Ibraheem Bahiss, 'Russia Becomes First State to Recognise Taliban as Rightful Afghan Government' (Crisis Group, 4 July 2025) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-russia-internal/russia-becomes-first-state-recognise-taliban-rightful>; 'A "New" Opening: Russia Officially Recognises the Taliban Regime' (OSW, 7 July 2025) <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-07-07/a-new-opening-russia-officially-recognises-taliban-regime>. Russia's Supreme Court had removed the Taliban from its federal list of designated terrorist organisations in April 2025, a designation that had been in place since 2003 and had legally prevented any formalisation of bilateral ties. The recognition act formalised what Moscow's own foreign ministry had described as an already existing operational relationship.

⁸ As of early 2026, at least 17 states have established embassies in Taliban-run Afghanistan and Taliban-appointed diplomats represent Kabul in most capitals across Asia, albeit at chargé d'affaires level. See Bahiss (n 7); Khizar, Saeed and Ilyas (n 1) 675; Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) 489. The term "de jure non-recognition" therefore operates alongside a dense web of de facto bilateral engagement, a combination that standard IR frameworks treat as unstable or transitional rather than as a sustainable equilibrium.

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs (India), 'Question No. 973: Reopening of Indian Embassy in Kabul' (Lok Sabha, 4 December 2025) https://www.mea.gov.in/lok_sabha.htm?dtl/40389/QUESTION+NO+973+REOPENING+OF+INDIAN+EMBASSY+IN+KABUL; Dharvi Vaid, 'India Set to Reopen Embassy in Afghanistan' (Deutsche Welle, 10 October 2025) <https://www.dw.com/en/india-set-to-reopen-embassy-in-afghanistan/a-74301831>.

Mainstream state-centric dilemmas, and especially Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), do not explain this trend. RSCT presumes that the units comprising a security complex are declared sovereign states. These states must address their own security problems in an interdependent manner through diplomatic channels.¹⁰ The writer contends that approaches such as 'conditional legitimacy' and 'Strategic-Necessity Membership' offer a more comprehensive way to illustrate the situation. This is particularly clear in the role of security interdependence, which compels local forces to see a minority government as an effective sovereign entity.¹¹ The location and mineral resources of Afghanistan necessitate actions that RSCT's state-oriented structure cannot foresee.

To study this claim, the paper adopts a doctrinal methodological approach. The analysis is based on a careful exploration of the UNSC briefings, diplomatic communiqués, and formal recognition acts covering the period from August 2021 to February 2026. It also includes relevant examples, such as the Amsterdam Darya oil deal, embassy reopenings, security contracts, and investment projects. The analysis is beyond the scope of the study and focuses on the reopening of embassies, security agreements, investment projects such as the Amu Darya oil deal, and lithium exploration dialogues during the period.¹²

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) was established by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. It views a Regional Security Complex (RSC) as a group of states with closely linked collective security concerns. These states' security issues cannot be viewed in isolation.¹³ The theory uses security analysis to understand how relationships of amity and enmity develop among neighbouring states. Geography and shared threats shape these regional ties.¹⁴ Most members see threats from neighbours as more serious than those from distant states, since projecting

¹⁰ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press 2003) 40-63. Buzan and Waever construct RSCT around the concept of "security complexes," defined as groups of states whose primary security concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot be reasonably analysed or resolved apart from one another. The theory is explicitly state-centric: it treats sovereign recognition as a background condition for membership in a regional complex rather than as a variable that itself requires explanation. This architectural assumption is what post-2021 Afghanistan systematically disrupts.

¹¹ Florian Weigand, 'Afghanistan's Taliban: Legitimate Jihadists or Coercive Extremists?' (2017) 11(3) *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 359, 362; Khizar, Saeed and Ilyas (n 1) 677.

¹² Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) 492; Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 244.

¹³ Buzan and Waever (n 10) at 44.

¹⁴ *ibid* 40.

force far away is more difficult.¹⁵ Buzan and Waever also analyse the inner structure of each RSC. They focus on polarity, the distribution of power among states, and the patterns of security relationships. These two factors determine each region's security setup.¹⁶

Despite these insights, RSCT exposes a critical flaw. Afghanistan after 2021 exemplifies this problem. The theory rigidly classifies Afghanistan as an "insulator state" at the fringe of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, absorbing or deflecting security pressures without forming its own security complex.¹⁷ Buzan and Waever describe insulators as wholly passive: barriers to insecurity rather than creators of security ties.¹⁸ While this label matches Afghanistan's geography, it ignores Afghanistan's potential to interact simultaneously with all its neighbours. More seriously, RSCT presumes all actors in a security complex must be internationally recognised states.¹⁹ This assumption leaves the theory unable to address unrecognised groups driving regional security dynamics, exactly what has occurred with the Taliban since 2021.²⁰

To further analyse Afghanistan's regional significance, neorealism offers another perspective. Neorealism, advanced by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), explores state behaviour within an anarchic international system. In this system, states act as rational actors seeking survival and rely on self-help.²¹ State capacity encompasses factors such as valuation, territory, resources, economic development, and military power.²² In the context of

Afghanistan, neorealism explains why regional states cannot ignore Kabul in their plans. Afghanistan is often called the “Heart of Asia” or the “Asian roundabout.” It is a transit point for developmental projects, funding, trade, and investment among South Asian, Central Asian,

¹⁵ *ibid* 45. This logic draws on a consistent finding across realist IR scholarship: the “loss of strength gradient” (attributed to Kenneth Boulding in *Conflict and Defence* (Harper 1962)) holds that a state's effective military power decreases as geographic distance from its base increases. Buzan and Waever incorporate this spatial logic into RSCT's core premise that security relationships are most intensive among geographically proximate units.

¹⁶ Buzan and Waever (n 10) at 53.

¹⁷ *ibid* 41-42; Tahir (n 1) at 39, 41. Buzan and Waever formally categorise Afghanistan as an insulator in the 2003 edition, placing it between the South Asian and Central Asian RSCs with residual connections to the Middle Eastern complex. This categorisation was designed to describe Afghanistan's Cold War and immediate post-Cold War position and does not anticipate a scenario in which the insulator generates centripetal security attraction across all three adjacent complexes simultaneously.

¹⁸ Buzan and Waever (n 10) at 42.

¹⁹ *ibid* 40.

²⁰ Nadia Adil, Asif Rana and Basit Khan, 'Post-2021 Situation in Afghanistan: Implications on Regional Security' (2023) 5(4) *Global International Relations Review* 84, 87.

²¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley 1979) 88.

²² *ibid* 131.

and Middle Eastern countries.²³ Projects like China's CPEC, the Trans-Afghan Railway, and the TAPI pipeline cannot function fully without Afghanistan. Its territory links the infrastructure plans of several regional powers.²⁴

Resource determinism matches this geographic logic. Afghanistan sits on undeveloped mineral resources estimated between a trillion and three trillion dollars. These include lithium, copper, iron ore, and rare-earth elements, all of which are necessary for the global green energy transition.²⁵ The neorealist perspective starts here: states will involve all peoples who control this area. The value of exclusion, such as access to strategic resources and transit corridors, outweighs the reputational cost of dealing with an unrecognised authority.²⁶ The transnational terrorism threat from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) strengthens this defensive view. Adjacent states cannot counter these cross border threats solely through isolation.²⁷

The issue of recognition determines the legal framework of this engagement. International law treats this in two ways: *de jure* recognition, which refers to the formal and final acceptance of a regime as a full legal subject under international law, and *de facto* recognition, which is provisional and allows practical relations without granting full legal status.²⁸ Hersch Lauterpacht's study, *Recognition in International Law*, argues that recognition creates international legal personality. The regime cannot possess it without being recognised. Thus, as long as recognition is absent, the regime is outside the state's legal order.²⁹ The Montevideo

Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) sets out classical criteria for statehood: a permanent population, a defined territory, a stable government, and the ability to manage

²³ Khizar et. al. (n 1) at 670-671; Saud and Khan (n 3) at 41,44.

²⁴ Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) at 481, 485; Popalzay and Singh (n 2) at 231, 240.

²⁵ Malik and others (n 4) at 76-77; Paknehad (n 4).

²⁶ Waltz (n 21) at 105.

²⁷ Kiani (n 6) at 41, 45; Syed Sarfraz Hussain Shah, Asif Mahmood and Mohsin Kamran, 'Resurrection of Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan Amidst Afghan Regime's Indifference: Threats to Intersectional Security Strands in the Region' (2024) 12 Social Inclusion 1, 5.

²⁸ S Aditi Rao, 'International Law: De Facto and De Jure as Modes of Recognition of States' (2024) 5(2) International Journal of Advanced Legal Research 1.

²⁹ Hersch Lauterpacht, *Recognition in International Law* (Cambridge University Press 2012, first published 1947) 55. Lauterpacht's constitutive theory holds that a state does not exist as an international legal subject until other states recognise it as such. This position contrasts with the declaratory theory, associated with scholars such as Hans Kelsen, which holds that statehood is a factual condition independent of recognition. The declaratory view is now more widely accepted in customary international law but Lauterpacht's constitutive framework remains the better descriptive account of actual state practice, where recognition routinely serves as a political instrument rather than a neutral legal acknowledgment.

relations with other states.³⁰ The Taliban meets three out of four criteria. As of July 2025, only Russia has given full de jure recognition, and no other country has.³¹

The hegemonic IR paradigm treats regime legitimacy as a simple fact: a regime is either legitimate or illegitimate. Yet, scholars who focus on post-conflict governance see it differently. Florian Weigand's analysis of the Taliban administration shows that legitimacy can operate across several dimensions simultaneously.³² For example, a regime may have instrumental legitimacy if it provides security and resolves disputes, even without substantive legitimacy based on democratic consent or common norms.³³ Applying this framework, China, India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iran see the Taliban as having enough functional legitimacy for security and economic transactions. However, they refrain from offering political endorsement through de jure recognition. In short, legitimacy has many layers, and the Taliban represents only one of them.³⁴

The idea of "strategic-necessity legitimacy" is proposed in this paper by the combination of two converging arguments: one is the neorealist logic of geographic and resource necessity, and the other is the concept of stratified legitimacy, which is the idea of engagement driven only by geographical, resource, and security imperatives, superseding the political endorsement of a regime's governance.³⁵ Safranchuk and Zhornist argue that in a polycentric world, actors with high functional value and uncertain normative status create modalities of international involvement that pre-existing categories cannot detail.³⁶

³⁰ Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (adopted 26 December 1933, entered into force 26 December 1934) 165 LNTS 19 (Montevideo Convention) art 1.

³¹ Trevelyan (n 7).

³² Weigand (n 11) at 359, 363.

³³ *ibid* 365. Weigand identifies four analytically distinct dimensions of legitimacy as applied to the Taliban: procedural legitimacy (derived from correct process), substantive legitimacy (derived from shared values), performance-based or instrumental legitimacy (derived from service delivery and security provision), and coercive acceptance (compliance produced by force). His analysis finds that the Taliban's strongest claim, both in the 1990s and post-2021, rests on performance-based and coercive dimensions rather than procedural or substantive ones. This means that even within Afghanistan, acceptance of Taliban authority is conditional and functional rather than ideological. This pattern at the domestic level mirrors the engagement behaviour of regional states at the international level: both are transactional responses to structural realities rather than expressions of normative endorsement.

³⁴ Bikash Halimi, Khalid Jawad and Wahidullah Safi, 'Foreign Policy of Regional Powers Towards Afghanistan (2021-2024)' (2024) 6(2) *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*; Neel Kumar Motwani and Subir S Bose, 'Afghanistan: "Spoilers" in the Regional Security Context' (2015) 69(2) *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 266, 270.

³⁵ Maurya (n 2) at 24, 26.

³⁶ Ivan A Safranchuk and Vladimir M Zhornist, 'The Taliban Enigma and the Polycentric World: The Benefits of Being Independent' (2021) 19(3) *Russia in Global Affairs* 10, 17.

Based on this idea, the discussion further presents “Strategic-Necessity Membership” as a modified analytical construct within the framework of RSCT, while designating Afghanistan as a “Tier 2 Member” of the particular regional security complex. The so-called “Tier 2 Member” is a particular unit that is fully enmeshed in the security and economic interdependencies of a regional complex, though it is not included in the formal legal architecture.³⁷ What is more, it is not merely a transitional phase of recognition but a structurally stable equilibrium developed by geospatial necessity and resource competition. The formulation gives RSCT the possibility of including agents with an ambiguous international legal profile, rather than a binary issue of sovereignty judgment.³⁸

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of this paper is doctrinal and theory-testing. It is supplemented through specific online case studies. The doctrinal analysis relies on a close reading of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) briefings and documents on sanctions monitoring. The focus is on the successive resolutions that extended the mandate of the Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team from Resolution 2611 (2021) to Resolution 2763 (2024). This also includes the reporting of the Team for Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring, covering May 2024 to November 2025, as described in its Sixteenth Report.³⁹ The main texts are also viewed in the context of bilateral agreements and MOUs. For example, the Amu Darya oil extraction deal was signed in January 2023 between the Taliban administration and Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co. (CAPEIC) of China.⁴⁰ Other examples are regional trade and transit

³⁷ Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) at 101, 107.

³⁸ Tahir (n 1) 45.

³⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2611 (17 December 2021) UN Doc S/RES/2611 (2021); UN Security Council Resolution 2665 (16 December 2022) UN Doc S/RES/2665 (2022); UN Security Council Resolution 2716 (14 December 2023) UN Doc S/RES/2716 (2023); UN Security Council Resolution 2763 (12 December 2024) UN Doc S/RES/2763 (2024); UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 'Sixteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2763 (2024) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan' (8 December 2025) UN Doc S/2025/796. The consecutive annual renewals of the monitoring mandate are themselves a primary legal text for this study. They simultaneously affirm that the Taliban remains under UN sanctions as an entity threatening Afghan peace and security, and confirm that the Security Council treats the Taliban as a sufficiently coherent governing authority to warrant dedicated and continuing monitoring. This duality, formal sanction combined with institutionalised engagement through the monitoring mechanism, reflects the same pattern of conditional rather than categorical treatment that this paper examines in the bilateral context.

⁴⁰ 'Afghanistan Signs Oil Extraction Deal with Chinese Company' (Al Jazeera, 6 January 2023) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/6/afghanistan-signs-oil-extraction-deal-with-chinese-company>; Mohammad Yunus Yanwar, 'Afghanistan's Taliban Administration in Oil Extraction Deal with Chinese Company' (Reuters, 5 January 2023) <https://www.reuters.com/business/afghanistans-taliban-administration-oil-extraction-deal-with-chinese-company-2023-01-05/>. The 25-year contract committed CAPEIC to invest USD 540

agreements between the Taliban and Russia and Pakistan. The analysis includes statements, actions, Foreign Ministry press releases, parliamentary records, and embassy communiqués of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Iran.⁴¹ A textual-legal approach to this corpus reveals how each document translates the ideas of degrees of de facto recognition, strategic conditionality, and cooperation; none of which are equivalent to full diplomatic approval.

Case studies are identified based on two axes: urgency for regional security and time parameter. Here, 'urgency' refers to issues that immediately affect safety and stability, such as counter terrorism coordination, border management, and infrastructure integration.⁴² The 'time parameter' refers to the period from August 2021 until February 2026. Main examples include Russia's official acknowledgement in July 2025, the reopening of India's Kabul embassy in October 2025, and discussions of Chinese investments in lithium and copper extraction following the CAPEIC contract. Pakistan's actions on the TTP threat, accompanied by security coordination, and discussions between Iran and the Taliban about border management and the rights of Shia and Hazara communities are also included.⁴³ All examples are drawn from publicly accessible online resources, including government communication, official UN documents, and peer-reviewed academic works.

The paper then applies the doctrinal and case-based findings, integrating them with an alternative Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) framework. This tests the analytical validity of two key concepts: "conditional legitimacy" (a state's acceptance being dependent on certain conditions rather than formal recognition) and "strategic necessity membership" (membership based primarily on strategic needs rather than official status).⁴⁴ The question for theory-testing is whether the observed trend of dense contact without formal recognition

positions Afghanistan as a “Tier 2 member” in its regional security complex. The evidence shows the existence of security and economic interdependence without de jure recognition. The

million over its first three years, with the Taliban retaining a 20 percent stake and a contractual right to increase that stake to 75 percent. The deal was terminated by the Taliban in June 2025 amid mutual accusations of contract breach. The contract's existence is analytically significant for this paper regardless of its subsequent collapse: a non-recognised authority negotiated, concluded, and partially performed a long-term extractive agreement with a state-linked Chinese enterprise, demonstrating that transactional engagement proceeds independently of formal recognition.

⁴¹ Halimi et. al (n 34); Popalzay and Singh (n 2) at 231, 238.

⁴² Adil et. al. (n 20) 84, 88.

⁴³ Trevelyan (n 7); Vaid (n 9); Shah et. al (n 27) 1, 7; Ruchi Verma, 'US-Taliban Peace Deal and Regional Powers as Potential Spoilers: Iran as a Case Study' (2022) 59 *International Politics* 260, 265.

⁴⁴ Tahir (n 1) 39, 44.

modified framework is considered a better explanatory tool than the conventional state-centric RSCT model.⁴⁵

AFGHANISTAN IN ITS REGIONAL COMPLEX

Afghanistan is situated at the crossroads of six states: Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Its location at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East creates unavoidable security and economic dependencies with all its neighbours. The country serves mainly as the land conduit for diversified infrastructure networks. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) considers an Afghan route essential for establishing overland corridors between East Asia and South Asia. Additionally, ongoing diplomatic talks focus on the northern extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan. Regional analysts say this transformation would make Afghanistan a land-linked hub instead of a landlocked state.⁴⁶ The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan India (TAPI) gas pipeline is expected to carry up to 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh field to India. It passes through Herat and Kandahar provinces. As of April 2025, 14 kilometres of the pipeline in Afghanistan are complete, with 24 more kilometres planned for construction.⁴⁷ Additionally, the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project connects Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with Pakistan and Afghanistan. This project adds a new layer of connectivity to the existing infrastructure.⁴⁸

In contrast, the Wakhan Corridor perfectly illustrates Afghanistan's leverage over China. Located on the northern border, the corridor is a narrow strip of Afghanistan that stretches about 500 kilometres from Badakhshan Province to China's Xinjiang Region. It stands at an altitude of 5,000 meters above sea level.⁴⁹ The Taliban regime has completed a 50-kilometre

⁴⁵ Buzan and Waeber (n 10) 53.

⁴⁶ Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) at 101, 104; Popalzay and Singh (n 2) at 231, 239.

⁴⁷ '14 Kilometres of TAPI Pipeline Completed Inside Afghanistan, Says Official' (Afghanistan International, 23 April 2025) <https://www.afintl.com/en/202504248323>. The TAPI pipeline is a USD 10 billion project designed to deliver Turkmen gas to energy-deficit markets in Pakistan and India. Construction inside Afghanistan had been suspended for years due to security conditions. The Taliban's stated willingness to provide security guarantees for the project, and the resulting resumption of construction in 2024, represents a concrete case of strategic-necessity engagement: Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and India are all advancing a major energy corridor with an unrecognised authority whose cooperation is structurally irreplaceable.

⁴⁸ Tariq Sultan Bushar, 'Sovereign Actors in Afghanistan: The Strategic Calculus 2001-2021' (2022) 8(3) *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 320, 328.

⁴⁹ Aigerim Turgunbaeva and Fayazuddin Ghiasi, 'The Wakhan Corridor: China's Inroad to Afghanistan' (CACI Analyst, 5 November 2024) <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13827-the-wakhan-corridor-chinas-inroad-to-afghanistan.html>.

road through the corridor to the Chinese border, at a reported cost of 369 million afghani. By August 2024, the road had already reached the Afghanistan-China zero point.⁵⁰ In 2024, Chinese Ambassador Zhao Xing visited the site. During this inspection meeting, he suggested laying a rail along the road.⁵¹ However, Beijing has kept the border crossing closed, citing security concerns in Xinjiang. The road's construction shows that the Taliban has taken steps, even without formal recognition, to build infrastructure for connecting with this influential neighbour.⁵²

Afghanistan, a land of abundant subsurface resources, is the main driver of resource-based rivalry in the region. The country's mineral deposits are estimated at one to three trillion US dollars. These include copper at the Mes Aynak deposit in Logar Province, iron ore at the Hajigak deposit in Bamiyan Province, and significant lithium in the south and east.⁵³ The U.S. Army referred to Afghanistan as "the Saudi Arabia of lithium" in an internal paper, often cited in strategic literature.⁵⁴ These are critical raw materials for batteries, technology, and the global green energy transition. This motivates China, India, and other regional powers to secure a presence in Afghanistan, regardless of Taliban control.⁵⁵ In contrast, some regional alternatives have lost their ability to confirm influence. Afghanistan borders groups such as ISIS-K, Al Qaeda, and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). These groups are not only a threat but also conduct cross-border operations.⁵⁶ ISIS-K claimed responsibility for 60 attacks in Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, and Turkey in 2024. This represents a 40 per cent rise from 2023.⁵⁷ A total disconnection policy from Kabul has not adequately prevented these threats. Breaking the

⁵⁰ Najibullah Haroon (spokesperson, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Afghanistan), quoted in Bibi Amina Hakimi, 'Preliminary Work on Wakhan Road to China Completed' (Afghanistan Peace Campaign, 20 August 2024) <https://afghanistanpeacecampaign.org/2024/08/21/preliminary-work-on-wakhan-road-to-china-completed/>.

⁵¹ F. M. Shakil, 'Wakhan Corridor: A Centuries-Old Silk Route Is Being Rejuvenated' (Al Mayadeen, 5 March 2025) <https://english.almayadeen.net/articles/analysis/wakhan-corridor-a-centuries-old-silk-route-is-being-rejuvena>.

⁵² Aarish U. Khan, 'The Reality of Afghanistan's Land Link with China' (The Diplomat, 8 October 2024) <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/the-reality-of-afghanistans-land-link-with-china/>. ⁵³ Paknehad (n 4).

⁵⁴ The memorandum is described in the secondary literature but has not been officially declassified. The "Saudi Arabia of lithium" characterisation is attributed to a Pentagon internal document and is cited consistently across the strategic literature; see Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) 487.

⁵⁵ Tahir (n 1) 39, 42; Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) 106.

⁵⁶ Kiani (n 6) at 41, 43; Malik and others (n 4) 76, 78.

⁵⁷ US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, cited in 'ISIS-K Remains a Major Threat to Afghanistan, Regional Stability, US Watchdog Warns' (Global Fatwa Against Terrorism Forum, 2 February 2025) <https://www.gfatf.org/archives/isis-k-remains-a-major-threat-to-afghanistan-regional-stability-us-watchdog-warns/>.

direct link between counter-terrorism and border management made operations more expensive.⁵⁸

The Taliban took power in Kabul on August 15, 2021, after NATO forces departed. This led to the collapse of the Western-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.⁵⁹ Afterwards, no country was immediately willing to give diplomatic recognition to the new government. By 2025, this position had shifted slightly, though not fundamentally. Russia was the first and only country to grant full de jure recognition. They did this by removing the Taliban from their federal terrorist list on July 3, 2025, after accepting credentials from the Taliban-appointed Afghan ambassador in Moscow on April 1 of that year.⁶⁰ Other players; China, Pakistan, Iran, and India, have not yet made definitive moves about recognising the Taliban. India, though, fully shunned the Taliban and its ministers. However, it reopened its embassy in Kabul on October 21, 2025, four years after evacuating its staff. This move was described by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar as being in the country's strategic interests and for regional connectivity, not as an endorsement of Taliban rule.⁶¹ These two examples, the Russian acknowledgement and India's embassy reopening, suggest the regional attitude is neither total isolation nor full acceptance. Instead, countries are cautiously calibrated in their operations, balancing geographic and resource requirements.⁶²

DOCTRINAL AND CASE ANALYSIS OF 'STRATEGIC NECESSITY LEGITIMACY'

Russia's policy toward the Taliban shifted over four years from strategic caution rooted in what scholars describe as "Afghan Syndrome," the institutional memory of the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, to becoming the first state to grant formal de jure recognition in July 2025.⁶³ Between 2021 and 2024, Russia's foreign ministry described engaging the Taliban as a "pragmatic necessity" to stabilise Central Asian border areas. The 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, with about 7,000 Russian troops, is Russia's largest military facility outside its

⁵⁸ Amitabha Kumar and Venkat Ramachandran, 'China-Taliban Security Ties: A Reimagining of South Asia's Security Discourse' (2025) 18(2) *Journal of Strategic Security* 178, 185; Malik and others (n 4) 79. ⁵⁹ Halimi et. al (n 34).

⁶⁰ Trevelyan (n 7).

⁶¹ MEA (n 9).

⁶² Popalzay and Singh (n 2) at 252; Halimi et. al (n 34).

⁶³ Alina E Dzhorobekova and others, 'Regional Security in Central Asia After the Return of the Taliban to Power: Challenges and Threats, Scenarios' (2023) 28(3) *Science Journal of VolSU. History. Area Studies. International Relations* 187, 191.

borders.⁶⁴ Russia's approach separated security cooperation from political endorsement, showing conditional legitimacy in practice.

Russia's recognition of the Taliban remained conditional. The group stayed on Russia's list of federal terrorists until April 2025. This legal status blocked formal bilateral relations, just as Canada had done for decades. Once this restriction was lifted, Russia could officially recognise the Taliban.⁶⁵ The announcement on 3 July 2025 confirmed existing cooperation in energy, grain, and security. It did not mean a shift from hostile to supportive relations. In the UN Security Council, Russia called for unfreezing Taliban assets while focusing sanctions on the ISIS-K threat.⁶⁶ This dual stance supported Taliban financial integration but also recognised shortcomings in countering transnational terrorism. Russia's approach moved from operational cooperation to formal recognition, but remained focused on security without endorsing Taliban governance.⁶⁷

China considers the Taliban an interlocutor for two reasons: protecting the Xinjiang border and safeguarding the USD 65 billion CPEC investment corridor, a network tied to Pak-China relations.⁶⁸ China accepted a Taliban-appointed ambassador in 2013, being the first major state to do so, but has not given formal diplomatic recognition.⁶⁹ China agrees to engage with the Taliban only if they sever ties with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur

⁶⁴ 'Putin Calls Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan Key Guarantor of Security' (TASS, 9 October 2025) <https://tass.com/politics/2027231>; 'Russian Military Base in Tajikistan a Key Pillar of Regional Security' (Asia Plus, 9 October 2025) <https://asiaplus.tj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20251010/putin-russian-military-base-in-tajikistan-a-key-pillar-of-regional-security>. The 201st Military Base at Dushanbe and Bokhtar is Russia's largest non-naval military facility outside its borders. It hosts approximately 7,000 troops under an agreement extended to 2042. Its physical proximity to the Afghan border, approximately 80 kilometres at its nearest point, means that any deterioration of Afghan security directly affects the operational environment of Russia's largest foreign deployment.

⁶⁵ Trevelyan (n 7).

⁶⁶ Halimi et. al (n 34); Adil et. al. (n 20) 84, 89; UN Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 'Sixteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2763 (2024)' (8 December 2025) UN Doc S/2025/796.

⁶⁷ Ruslan B Makhmudov, 'The Return of the Taliban to Power as a Factor in the Transformation of Threats and Challenges to Regional Security' (2025) 69(2) *World Economy and International Relations* 65, 70; Saud and Khan (n 3) at 41, 55.

⁶⁸ Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 236; Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) 101, 106.

⁶⁹ Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 238. China's acceptance of the Taliban ambassador's credentials in 2023 constitutes de facto recognition under the declaratory theory of statehood but falls short of the constitutive de jure recognition that requires a formal governmental declaration of recognition. Beijing's action was deliberate in this regard: accepting credentials is a standard diplomatic formality that enables operational bilateral contact without the legal and political implications of a formal recognition announcement. This is a well-documented technique in the recognition literature; see Lauterpacht (n 29) 374.

group accused of separatism in Xinjiang.⁷⁰ Chinese officials describe the bilateral relationship as “win-win cooperation.” For example, they established the Pine Nut air corridor in 2020, trading Afghan pine nuts for Chinese goods.⁷¹ China's dealings remain focused on commerce, without endorsing the Taliban's political model.

China's practice is shown by two clear examples. The first is the Amu Darya oil contract from January 2023. This contract is a 25-year extraction agreement that the Taliban made with Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co. (CAPEIC) of China. Under this deal, the Taliban gets 15% of the profit from oil extracted from the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan.⁷² China presented this contract as part of a larger investment drive, arguing that it would help the Afghan economy recover, instead of claiming it was about commercial gain. The second example comes from August 2024, when the Taliban completed a 50-kilometre road through the Wakhan Corridor to the Chinese border. China's Ambassador to Kabul, Zhao Xing, made this public, and during his visit, he proposed building a railway along the same line.⁷³ China's reasons for delaying the border opening are unofficially stated and reportedly relate to security in Xinjiang. But mentioning the railway extension shows that strategic planning continues, even without formal recognition.⁷⁴

Among the five regional countries studied, Pakistan's connection with the Taliban is the most complex. Traditionally, Islamabad has seen Taliban influence in Afghanistan as ‘strategic depth’ against India. However, after Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan resurfaced from Afghanistan after 2021, this view changed. Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements and parliamentary debates from 2022 to 2025 show new priorities. Pakistan now calls on the Taliban to maintain counter-terrorism commitments against the TTP, work with Pakistan on border management, and allow CPEC to extend north.⁷⁵ This creates a framework of tension. The Taliban refused to act against the TTP, treating it as a domestic Afghan actor. Pakistan

⁷⁰ Kiani (n 6) 41, 46; Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) 108.

⁷¹ Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) 481, 491; Tahir (n 1) 39, 43.

⁷² Afghanistan Signs Oil Extraction Deal with Chinese Company' (Al Jazeera, 6 January 2023) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/6/afghanistan-signs-oil-extraction-deal-with-chinese-company>;

Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) 492.

⁷³ Hakimi (n 50); Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 247.

⁷⁴ Kumar and Ramachandran (n 58) 178, 188.

⁷⁵ Shah et. al (n 27) 1, 8; Imran Khan and Khalid Hussain Syed, 'Afghanistan Under the Shadows of Taliban and Implications for Pakistan and Regional Security' (2021) 5(4) Pakistan Social Sciences Review 455, 462.

cannot break ties because Afghanistan's collapse could bring more refugees and militants, which Pakistan cannot handle.

These two events show clear strategic ambiguity. In October 2023, Pakistan set a 1 November 2023 deadline for all undocumented foreigners, including about 1.7 million Afghans, to leave or face forced deportation.⁷⁶ Pakistan said this was an anti-terrorism measure. The interior minister blamed TTP attacks on Afghan refugee networks. The Taliban condemned the deportations, but diplomatic channels stayed open. Meanwhile, border clashes at the Torkham crossing in 2023 and 2024 led to exchanges of fire.⁷⁷ Despite this, trade and transit agreements continued. Pakistan, therefore, uses pressure tactics but keeps working with the Taliban. This fits the model of strategic-necessity legitimacy: both depend on each other so much that cooperation continues even when political relations are tense.

The Taliban's engagement with Iran is guided by three principles: protecting Shia and Hazara minorities in Afghanistan, managing the refugee crisis, and sustaining transit and energy trade through the Chabahar port corridor.⁷⁸ Iranian politicians consistently call for an "inclusive government" in Kabul and describe the Taliban's Sunni exclusivism as a threat to Afghan Shias. Nevertheless, Tehran has kept its embassy in Kabul open and maintained trade agreements that route Afghan goods through Chabahar, bypassing Pakistan and providing Iran with transit revenues.⁷⁹ Ruchi Verma describes Iran as a "limited spoiler" in Afghan affairs, meaning it can disrupt Afghanistan's stabilisation even without the intent or capability to do so repeatedly.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Ayaz Gul Sarah Zaman, 'Pakistan to Begin Deportation of 1.7 Million Undocumented Afghans' (Voice of America, 2 October 2023) <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-begin-deportation-of-1-7-million-undocumented-afghans/7294939.html>.

⁷⁷ Makhmudov (n 67) 69; Shah et. al (n 27) 10. The Torkham crossing is the primary land trade corridor between Pakistan and Afghanistan, handling a reported 40 percent of bilateral trade volume. Border closures at Torkham directly damage both Afghan and Pakistani commercial interests, which is why even periods of military tension have not produced permanent closure.

⁷⁸ Verma (n 43) 260, 267; Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) 110.

⁷⁹ Halimi et. al (n 34); Verma (n 43) 270.

⁸⁰ Verma (n 43) 264. Verma borrows the "limited spoiler" category from the peacekeeping literature, where it describes actors who pursue limited, defined objectives through destabilising means rather than seeking to

overturn the entire peace architecture. Iran's spoiler capacity in Afghanistan is limited by its own economic vulnerabilities, its need for Afghan transit routes, and its interest in avoiding the kind of ungoverned space that produced ISIS-K.

The Helmand River controversy clearly reflects this conflict. The 1973 Helmand River Treaty requires Afghanistan to provide Iran with 820 million cubic metres of water each year. On May 27, 2023, a clash occurred between Iranian and Afghan border guards in Sistan province. This resulted in the death of one Taliban soldier and two Iranian guards. The incident was directly related to Iran's accusation that the Taliban had not delivered the treaty-mandated water flow.⁸¹ Iranian President Raisi had earlier warned the Taliban to respect their water obligations during his May 18, 2023, visit to Sistan and Baluchistan province.⁸² Despite this armed incident, Iran and the Taliban have continued bilateral negotiations. The Chabahar transit arrangements remain unchanged. This established pattern shows that Iran and the Taliban cooperate on issues of narcotics and border security. Iran sees the Taliban as the only interlocutor for managing border and resource problems.⁸³

India's re-engagement with the Taliban is the most cautious among these five cases. It is most explicitly framed by competitive strategic logic, not by political acceptance.⁸⁴ Indian MEA statements since 2021 have called India's initial contact with the Taliban a "technical mission." The statements stress humanitarian assistance delivery. This included 60,000 metric tonnes of wheat imported to Afghanistan via Pakistan and Iran as the basis for interaction.⁸⁵ India reopened its embassy in Kabul on October 21, 2025, raising engagement levels. However, this did not change the framing. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar told Lok Sabha that the decision was driven by regional security concerns. He referenced India's longstanding interests in connectivity and infrastructure. He made clear it did not mean a change in India's formal position of non-recognition.⁸⁶ Analysts at Indian strategic institutions directly attributed this recalibration to concerns over China and Pakistan's growing presence in Afghanistan. They also cited the risk that India could lose relevance in a region it had invested in during the Republic era.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Holly Dagres, 'Iran and Afghanistan Are Feuding Over the Helmand River' (Atlantic Council, 17 July 2025) <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-afghanistan-taliban-water-helmand/>. ⁸² Khola Junaid, 'Assessing the Helmand River Dispute' (Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, 29 October 2024) <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/assessing-the-helmand-river-dispute/>. ⁸³ Kiani (n 6) 47; Verma (n 43) 272.

⁸⁴ Adil et. al. (n 20) 90; Halimi et. al. (n 34).

⁸⁵ Khizar, Saeed and Ilyas (n 1) 670, 676; Halimi et. al. (n 34).

⁸⁶ MEA (n 9).

⁸⁷ Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 250; Adil et. al. (n 20) 91.

Concrete examples of India's non-involvement in certain sectors can be cited, such as the provision of scholarships for Afghan students under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) programme as well as the discussions relating to the construction of Salma Dam (formally Afghan-India Friendship Dam) in Herat Province which is a project of 42 MW hydroelectric energy that India inbuilt and inaugurated in 2016 and needs the ongoing technical support.⁸⁸ Such actions constitute contractual engagements without India, such as the provision of services and the maintenance of the institutional presence, while, officially, the Lok Sabha records a clear statement on the lack of consideration for formal diplomatic recognition.⁸⁹

The convergence of all five regions is apparent. Each of the regional states engages in significant communication and collaboration regarding security and economic sectors, but they carefully avoid referring to the Taliban as a legitimate political entity.⁹⁰ Documents, press releases, parliamentary records, and Memoranda of Understanding use transactional language in distinct ways. The terms, such as "regional connectivity," "counter-terrorism assurances," "humanitarian corridors," and "border management," are prioritised, whereas the language of shared values and political endorsement is not used.⁹¹ This observation on the performance of legitimacy through the necessity of strategy is not confined to a single bilateral relationship. On the contrary, such is the normative Taliban modus operandi within the wider regional security network, which is underpinned by geopolitical and resource factors that no other state has managed to overcome.⁹²

⁸⁸ Halimi et. al. (n 34); Adil et. al. (n 20) 91. The Salma Dam, formally inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Ashraf Ghani in June 2016, is a 42 MW hydroelectric and irrigation facility on the Hari Rud river in Herat Province. It represents India's single largest infrastructure investment in Afghanistan. The Taliban administration has not expelled Indian technical personnel from the facility, and India's continued association with the project provides a concrete, visible presence in western Afghanistan that serves both humanitarian and strategic purposes.

⁸⁹ MEA (n 9).

⁹⁰ Shahid Iqbal, 'Comparative Analysis of Taliban Regimes to Assess the Global Challenges in Afghanistan: A Realist Perspective' (2023) 6(2) Global Foreign Policies Review 76, 82.

⁹¹ Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 253; Tahir (n 1) 45.

⁹² Saud and Khan (n 3) 58.

TESTING “STRATEGIC-NECESSITY MEMBERSHIP” AND TIERED LEGITIMACY

Strategic-Necessity Membership is a form of participation in a regional security complex. It is influenced by factors such as geography, resources, and the threat an entity poses to the region. The entity's formal security needs make it a strategic necessity for regional powers to engage over the long term, regardless of formal recognition.⁹³ This is based on simple logic: if disengagement comes at a higher cost, ranging from terrorism spillover, refugee flows, loss of minerals and transit routes, to reputational damage, then states are drawn to be involved. Afghanistan under the Taliban meets all these criteria, individually and collectively.⁹⁴ The country's location, at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, makes it a vital land route for the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor extension, and the TAPI gas pipeline.⁹⁵ Afghanistan reportedly has lithium, rare earth elements, copper, and iron ore worth up to three trillion US dollars, all key for the global energy transition.⁹⁶ Afghanistan is home to ISIS-K, TTP, and several Al-Qaeda nodes. These groups are often found along the borders, which forces every neighbouring country to address the issue.⁹⁷

The question of Afghanistan's Strategic-Necessity Membership is more than recalling the label. It means discussing how Afghanistan is treated politically. This makes the Taliban's status a concept with a stable equilibrium, but one not dependent on full recognition. The works of Ivan Safranchuk and Vera Zhornist, who study the Taliban in a polycentric world, show that entities excluded from the system can still gain independent power based on geography and function rather than norms.⁹⁸ Regional actors, mainly China and Russia, have included the Taliban in long-term infrastructure and security plans. This is not the behaviour of a short-term manager. It signals that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is seen as a lasting part of the region's security architecture.⁹⁹ The shift from “tactical accommodation” to structural integration is clear in long-term contracts: the Amu Darya oil contract for 25 years, the TAPI

⁹³ Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 231, 252.

⁹⁴ Adil et. al. (n 20) 84, 90; Saud and Khan (n 3) 41, 55.

⁹⁵ Omarkhail and Zahid (n 3) 481, 494.

⁹⁶ Malik and others (n 4) 76, 77.

⁹⁷ Kiani (n 6) 41, 48.

⁹⁸ Safranchuk and Zhornist (n 36) 10, 18.

⁹⁹ Popalzay and Singh (n 2) 254.

pipeline for 30 years, and Russia's planned recognition in 2025, which comes after four years

of institutionalisation.¹⁰⁰

Afghanistan is a “Tier 2 Member” of the regional security complex. This status has two features: the security and economy of the region are deeply tied to Afghanistan, but the country lacks universal recognition and institutions. Doctrinal proof of this is provided by primary sources in Section V. The Amu Darya oil contract of January 2023 uses functional language, giving the Taliban 15 per cent of profits without any statements of endorsement or recognition.¹⁰¹ China accepted the Taliban ambassador’s credentials in 2023. This shows real engagement, but not formal government-to-government recognition.¹⁰² When India reopened its Kabul mission in October 2025, it called it a “technical mission.” This term was chosen to allow practical engagement without implying a formal embassy.¹⁰³ The UNSC sanctions reports still use restrained language on Taliban forces. However, they also list many trade and security agreements between the Taliban and neighbouring states.¹⁰⁴ These texts do not present a regime excluded from the region. Instead, they show a regime incorporated into the regional system, though formally shut out.

Aligning this position is not possible for standard RSCT. Buzan and Waever’s paradigm holds that membership in an RSC coincides with recognition as a sovereign state.¹⁰⁵ The Afghanistan example clearly disproves this assumption in the period after 2021. This paper offers a clear adjustment: RSC membership should be imagined as a hierarchy of layers, with entities trading off across different levels. The first axis is the degree of legal recognition, running from full *de jure* recognition to total non-recognition. The second axis covers the level of security and economic interdependence, measured by bilateral agreements, trade flows, and security coordination. The third axis is institutional embedding, which means participating in regional forums, infrastructure projects, and multilateral security mechanisms.¹⁰⁶ Under this layered structure, Afghanistan shows high interdependence and institutional embedding, but low formal recognition. This makes it Tier 2. A fully recognised state with similar interdependence

¹⁰⁰ Al Jazeera (n 40); Afg. Int. (n 47); Trevelyan (n 7).

¹⁰¹ Yanwar (n 40).

¹⁰² Lauterpacht (n 29) 374; Jabarkhil and Parikh (n 3) 101, 109.

¹⁰³ MEA (n 9).

¹⁰⁴ UNSC (n 66).

¹⁰⁵ Buzan and Waever (n 10) 40.

¹⁰⁶ Tahir (n 1) 39, 46.

would belong to Tier 1. There is no recognition or contact with a body external to the entire complex.

This change enhances RSCT's predictive capability. Analysts can now foresee that states may interact with unregistered entities when high interdependence exists, regardless of recognition. They can also identify when such entities seek or gain legal acknowledgement as a next step rather than a prerequisite. Kosovo and Palestine illustrate this: both are regional security actors that impose a burden on others, even though their recognition remains disputed and limited.¹⁰⁷ Afghanistan is a new and different case. The Taliban did not seek independence and recognition, but were driven to integrate by limited resources and geography. Adding tiers allows RSCT to explain types of actors that the state-centred model misrepresents.¹⁰⁸

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The paper identifies the implications for Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which examines how clusters of geographically proximate states share interconnected security concerns, addresses power, geography, and legitimacy. In accordance with the standard RSCT approach, states are assigned to a complex based on sovereign recognition (i.e., international acceptance of a state as a formal and legitimate entity), which is treated as a background condition rather than a variable to be analysed. The Afghanistan case presents a clear contradiction, as the assumption leads to systematic errors in the analysis. When geographic and resource profiles create unavoidable interdependencies, the question of whether a state is recognised is irrelevant to determining the security behaviour of its neighbours. Accepting this conclusion calls for RSCT scholars to amend the coding of membership in accordance with the three criteria proposed in Section VI: the extent of legal recognition (formal acceptance by other states or international bodies), the degree of security and economic interdependence (how much states rely on one another for safety and commerce), and the level of institutional embedding (the degree to which a state is included in regional arrangements and collective organizations). The insulator state category, used in RSCT to describe a state that acts as a buffer but is not fully integrated into any one regional complex, should not apply to instances in which the state manifests centripetal security influence (drawing neighbouring security

¹⁰⁷ George Kyris and Bruno Luciano, 'Collective Recognition and Regional Parliaments: Navigating Statehood Conflict' (2021) 1(3) Global Studies Quarterly.

¹⁰⁸ Adil et. al. (n 20) 76, 83.

dynamics inward) across more than one adjacent complex in the same timeframe. Future empirical RSCT studies are expected to implement tiered membership coding (a classification system distinguishing recognised and partially recognised states) in comparison with similar cases, including Palestine, Taiwan, and the self-declared republics in the post-Soviet area.

Building on the theoretical implications, the sustained conditional engagement option carries serious, non-neutral policy implications. The Amu Darya contract, TAPI pipeline agreements, and Russia's formal acknowledgement all went on without any documented human rights precondition, risking the entrenchment of an authoritarian player in the regional physical and institutional infrastructure. However, isolation does not abolish ISIS-K, lower TTP cross border attack incidences, or prevent China from extending its foothold. Therefore, regional states need well-defined, publicly articulated doctrines that outline the conditions and limits for their interaction with indispensable yet unrecognised regimes, rather than simply transactional bilateral arrangements that regulate the Taliban sideshow at present.

The paper provides evidence that the strategic legitimacy of Afghanistan as a mandatory state (a state whose location or status forces neighbours to factor it into their security planning) is a permanent condition, but not a temporary phase. Afghanistan adheres to a Tier 2 Member of its regional security complex regime: it is fully embedded within the security and economic interdependencies (its neighbours must include it in trade and security planning); yet it is formally excluded from the legal framework of recognised states (it lacks general international acceptance as a legitimate state). Further studies must focus on the comparative application of the tiered model (which categorises states by their level of recognition and embedding), quantitative coding of membership, and elite interview-based fieldwork where access is available.

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