

Multilateralism without Recognition: Managed Non-Recognition and the Governance of Contested Authority in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 has generated a structural dilemma for the contemporary international order: how can international actors engage a de facto authority that exercises effective territorial control while withholding formal diplomatic recognition? While Afghanistan continues to exist as a recognised state in international law, most states have refused to recognise the Taliban government due to concerns regarding inclusivity, constitutional process, and systematic restrictions on women's rights. Yet complete disengagement has proven impractical in light of acute humanitarian crisis, economic collapse, and regional security externalities.

This paper examines the emerging architecture of international engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and conceptualises it as a form of managed non-recognition — a calibrated strategy that permits functional engagement while withholding formal endorsement. Drawing on legal doctrine on recognition, theories of legitimacy, and scholarship on multilateral institutional authority, the paper argues that multilateralism functions as a buffering mechanism that diffuses political responsibility, embeds conditionality, and reduces symbolic signalling associated with bilateral diplomacy. This configuration is further theorised as multilateralism without recognition: a governance model in which collective, rule-bound institutional channels enable operational interaction without conferring diplomatic legitimacy.

While this approach has enabled the continuation of humanitarian assistance and security coordination, it carries inherent fragilities. Sustained engagement, if unstructured, risks generating performance-based legitimacy and gradual normalisation of contested authority. Through comparative references to Myanmar, Iran and Gaza, the paper identifies the risks of fragmentation, legitimacy creep, and erosion of normative credibility. It concludes that the sustainability of managed non-recognition depends on coordination, measurable benchmarks, and periodic multilateral review.

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recognition as a governance strategy in contexts of contested authority.

Keywords: Multilateralism without recognition; Managed non-recognition; Recognition theory; Legitimacy; De facto regimes; Humanitarian governance; Afghanistan

Introduction

The withdrawal of the United States and its NATO allies from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the subsequent return of Taliban to power in the country have culminated in a structural transformation of Afghanistan's political order. The establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the *de facto* governing authority supplanting the *de jure* Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has led to the emergence of a profound governance and institutional dilemma in the international political ecosystem. While the Taliban regime exercises effective territorial, administrative and institutional control, the international community (with the exception of Russia, which in July 2025 became the first state to extend formal recognition by accepting a Taliban-appointed ambassador) has not accorded formal diplomatic recognition to the government. Afghanistan's seat at the UN remains contested, embassies have toned down operations and development fundings have been suspended. However, despite the lack of *de jure* recognition, regional actors and multilateral agencies continue their engagement with the Taliban regime by way of humanitarian aid, technical coordination and limited diplomacy. Sanction regimes encompass humanitarian exemptions. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is functional, large-scale relief operations are undertaken by humanitarian agencies such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and various regional diplomatic forums and dialogue mechanisms such as the Moscow Format Consultations, Doha Meetings and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – Afghanistan Contact Group, among others, host representatives of the Taliban-led government. India, through its *technical mission* in Kabul, has initiated a direct but limited engagement with Taliban on the security and economic fronts. This scenario presents a governance paradox marked by the co-existence of political and legal non-recognition, and sustained engagement.

In traditional frameworks of international relations, recognition is often situated in the binary concept of either recognising a regime or isolating it. However, the present case of Afghanistan goes beyond this binary, where engagements persist without formal endorsement. This situation

is precipitated by the fact that, while on the one hand, the country is faced with acute humanitarian crisis, economic breakdown and security threats – addressing which is in the collective interest of a globalized world, on the other hand, most states and institutions are

unwilling to recognize a regime that is accused of systemic human rights violations, particularly of women and minorities. Hence, leveraging multilateral institutions as the primary channels of engagement, international actors have adopted this hybrid approach of engaging with Taliban on practical grounds while withholding diplomatic upgradation.

This paper argues that such practices can be understood as a form of *managed non-recognition*: a structured mode of multilateral engagement designed to balance pragmatic necessity with normative restraint. Rather than constituting implicit recognition, multilateralism functions as a political and institutional mechanism that diffuses responsibility, embeds conditionality and limits bilateral signalling. However, this arrangement does come with inherent fragility. Without clear safeguards, sustained engagements risk generating functional legitimacy that may gradually evolve into political normalisation.

Further, this paper does not seek to put forward a formal theory of recognition in the domain of international relations. Instead, it attempts an analytical policy examination of how multilateral institutions structure engagement with a non-recognised regime. Though the case study of Afghanistan, it evaluates the necessity of continued engagement as well as the institutional safeguards required to prevent unintended legitimisation. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on international governance in the contexts of contested authority and normative rupture.

1. Conceptual Framework: Recognition, Engagement and Legitimacy in Multilateral Contexts

1.1 Recognition: Legal Status and Political Practice

In international relations and law, recognition implies formal acknowledgement by existing states that a government entity constitutes a legitimate representation of a state within the international system. Classical debates surrounding the concept of recognition have been primarily rooted in two doctrines: (i) the Constitutive Theory, as propounded by Hegel, Oppenheim and Lauterpacht², which posits that recognition by existing states is a pre-requisite for earning international legal personality, and (ii) the Declaratory theory, as ²

Hersch Lauterpacht, *Recognition in International Law* (CUP 1947).

supported by the Montevideo Convention (1933) framework³, which holds that statehood is a function of objective criteria such as territory, population, government and capacity for relations, beyond mere external acknowledgement.

Given that, although contemporary international law formally aligns with the declaratory theory doctrinally, state practice demonstrates recognition as a deeply political act, carrying constitutive effects. As scholars including James Crawford⁴ and Stefan Talmon⁵ argue, recognition often reflects normative and political considerations including constitutional legitimacy and adherence to international norms. Thus, despite exercising effective control over their territories, governments may remain unrecognized owing to violation of democratic principles or human rights – a situation illustrated by the case of the Taliban-led Afghanistan government since August 2021. Albeit wielding territorial and administrative control over the country (thereby satisfying the declaratory criterion), the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan lacks broad international diplomatic recognition, due to concerns regarding systemic human rights violations, particularly women's rights and civil liberties. Thus, Afghanistan presents a case of *de facto* authority without *de jure* recognition. This situation severely limits access to international institutions and assets, besides significantly affecting international legitimacy and participation.

This distinction between effective control and formal recognition forms the first analytical foundation of this paper. Here recognition does not merely constitute legal determination, but signifies a political signal that confers international standing and symbolic endorsement.

1.2 Engagement: Interaction without Endorsement

Engagement denotes structured interaction with a governing entity by way of diplomatic contact, humanitarian coordination, technical dialogue, sanctions management, security consultations or economic exchange. International practice illustrates that engagement does not essentially imply formal endorsement, but rather maintaining a working relationship with contested authorities justified on pragmatic grounds, which may include preventing a humanitarian collapse, addressing security concerns and maintaining geopolitical stability⁶. Termed variously as “constructive engagement” or “targeted sanctions with humanitarian exemptions” in foreign policy scholarship, such interactions are projected as functional

³ Montevideo 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.

⁴ James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law* (2nd edn, OUP 2006).

⁵ Stefan Talmon, *Recognition of Governments in International Law* (OUP 1998).

⁶ Talmon (n 5).

rather than diplomatic, and is often conceived to address the immediate needs of governance or civilians, without according legal endorsement⁷. In the context of Afghanistan, engagement has taken the following forms mainly:

- Continued operation of UN through UNAMA⁸
- Humanitarian interventions by multilateral agencies such as the International Rescue Committee
- Sanction regimes incorporating humanitarian carve-outs⁹
- Technical dialogues between Taliban and various regional actors

In the above context, the key analytical question that emerges is that whether such engagement would remain “operational” or gradually evolve into political normalisation.

1.3 Legitimacy, Functional Authority and Normalisation

According to Ian Hurd¹⁰, legitimacy refers to the belief in the normative appropriateness of authority. In other words, it denoted the perception that an authority has the right to rule. It can be further classified into domestic and international legitimacy based on acceptance by the governed population or by external actors including multilateral institutions respectively. Further, Max Weber¹¹ had identified three forms of legitimacy, primarily in the context of domestic authority structures. These include (i) Traditional Legitimacy (based on long standing customs, traditions and inherited status), (ii) Charismatic Legitimacy (deriving from the perceived extraordinary qualities of a leader), and (iii) Legal-Rational Legitimacy (based on formal rules, laws and bureaucratic procedures). Though useful, this framework does not fully capture the dynamics of international acceptance.

In the case of Afghanistan, the domestic legitimacy of the Taliban regime remains contested on account of the absence of electoral validation and broad-based political inclusion, while its international legitimacy is constrained by restrictive policies on women’s education, employment and public participation – measures widely perceived to be inconsistent with human rights as well as prevailing international democratic norms.

⁷ Robert O Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton University Press 1984).

⁸ UN Security Council, ‘The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security’ SC Res 2626 (2022).

⁹ UN Security Council, ‘Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts’ (22 December 2021) UN Doc S/RES/2615.

¹⁰ Ian Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton University Press 2007).

¹¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (University of California Press 1978) 215–16.

Further, legitimacy may be analytically distinguished into (i) normative legitimacy

(alignment with shared international principles), (ii) procedural legitimacy (lawful accession to authority), and (iii) performance-based or functional legitimacy (capacity to deliver governance outcomes).¹² These categories frequently intersect in empirical contexts, particularly in cases of contested authority where external recognition is partial or absent.¹³ The concept of performance-based legitimacy holds significance in the context of contested recognition¹⁴. Repeated engagement by multilateral actors with a *de facto* regime for operational purposes, tends to reinforce the latter's image as the effective governing authority in the long run. While this does not constitute formal recognition, it can contribute to political normalisation.

This paper refers to normalisation as the gradual shift from exceptional, crisis-driven engagement towards regularised acceptance of the regime as the rightful governing authority, without the requirement of a comprehensive philosophical theory of authority. Unlike recognition, which is a formal and discrete legal act, normalisation is an incremental and often implicit process through which repeated interaction gradually stabilises perceptions of authority.¹⁵ Thus, it may be observed that the Afghan context entails the risk of sustained multilateral engagement (be it for technical or humanitarian purposes), leading to the reinforcement of functional legitimacy, which in turn, tends to soften the resistance towards eventual diplomatic upgrading. This possibility underscores the fragility of the existing non-recognition framework.

1.4 Recognition, Legitimacy and the Limits of Engagement

A central tension in the analysis of multilateral engagement with *de facto* authorities lies in the distinction between diplomatic recognition and functional legitimacy. While traditional international relations scholarship often treats recognition as the primary gateway to legitimacy, empirical cases suggest a more complex relationship in which legitimacy may emerge independently of formal recognition.

This distinction becomes particularly evident when comparing Afghanistan under Taliban rule and Taiwan's international position.

¹² David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (2nd edn, Palgrave 2013) 16–25.

¹³ Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford University Press 2005); Allen Buchanan, *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-Determination in International Law* (Oxford University Press 2004). ¹⁴ Hurd (n 10) 5.

¹⁵ Talmon (n 5) 4.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban constitutes a *de facto* governing authority that lacks widespread international recognition. Multilateral engagement has therefore been largely constrained to

humanitarian, technical, and issue-specific interactions. In this context, legitimacy remains highly contested, shaped not only by absence of recognition but also by concerns regarding governance practices, human rights compliance, and normative alignment with international standards.

By contrast, Taiwan presents a structurally different configuration. Despite limited formal diplomatic recognition, Taiwan exhibits high levels of functional legitimacy, reflected in stable governance institutions, administrative capacity, democratic consolidation, and deep integration into global economic and technological networks. Unlike Afghanistan, legitimacy in Taiwan's case is derived less from recognition politics and more from performance-based authority and institutional credibility.

This comparison highlights that recognition and legitimacy do not operate in a linear or mutually reinforcing manner. Instead, they reflect distinct logics: recognition is primarily a juridical-diplomatic act embedded in interstate relations, whereas legitimacy is an evaluative and practice-based condition shaped by governance performance, institutional stability, and normative alignment.

From this perspective, multilateral engagement with de facto authorities can generate forms of functional legitimacy even in the absence of formal recognition. However, the durability of such legitimacy depends on governance performance and normative alignment. This framework also underscores the limits of engagement strategies. Where governance performance is weak or normatively incompatible with prevailing international norms, engagement remains instrumental and conditional. Conversely, where institutions are stable and normatively aligned, legitimacy may persist despite diplomatic ambiguity. This analytical distinction allows the paper to move beyond recognition-centred accounts of international order and instead foreground legitimacy as a multi-dimensional and independently variable category.

1.5 Multilateralism as a Governance Mechanism: *Management of Non-Recognition*

According to John Ruggie¹⁶, multilateralism refers to coordination between three or more states based on generalised principles of conduct. However, in practice, multilateral institutions move

¹⁶ John Gerard Ruggie, 'Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution' (1992) 46(3) *International Organization* 561, 571.

beyond mere coordination mechanisms to serve as governance structures that shape individual state behaviour. As Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore argue¹⁷, multilateral organisations

possess bureaucratic authority, which makes them capable of structuring political engagement through rules, mandates and procedural frameworks. However, such bureaucratic mediation does not neutralise the political effects of engagement; rather, it redistributes legitimacy through procedural channels, thereby transforming symbolic recognition into incremental administrative normalisation.

Given that, with respect to contested authority, multilateralism performs the additional function of diffusing political responsibility¹⁸. In simpler terms, while bilateral engagement between state actors and non-recognised regimes may signal implicit endorsement of the latter, the channelling of this engagement through multilateral agencies such as the United Nations or regional forums, would signal collective and procedural responsibility rather than symbolic and diplomatic. By embedding interactions within formal mandates and collective oversight mechanisms, multilateral engagement reduces the symbolic weight of bilateral diplomatic gestures and projects engagements as compliance with international responsibilities rather than political alignment. Thus, multilateral institutions serve as a buffer between engagement and endorsement.

Further, by shifting engagement into technical committees, humanitarian clusters and sanctions review mechanisms, multilateralism transforms political contact into administrative procedure. Such proceduralisation serves to

- Limit symbolic signalling
- Standardize conditions
- Create documentary accountability, and
- Allow collective reassessment.

Engagement, thus, becomes rule-bound rather than discretionary¹⁹.

Also, a multilateral framework can incorporate explicit benchmarks tied to access to human rights, education policies or humanitarian facilitation. While recognition remains withheld, engagement is calibrated against measurable indicators. Such guardrails help prevent

¹⁷ Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Cornell University Press 2004) 5–8.

¹⁸ Ruggie (n 15).

¹⁹ Keohane (n 7) 5.

legitimacy creep by (i) reaffirming the provisional nature of interaction, (ii) maintaining public articulation of normative concerns, and (iii) linking incremental engagement to observable change.

In Afghanistan, multilateral platforms have enabled a structured approach that allows pragmatic engagement for humanitarian and technical purposes, that proceed through institutional channels, while formal legal and diplomatic recognition remains withheld. Such a configuration strives to balance two imperatives:

- To prevent an economic and humanitarian collapse;
- To check the premature legitimisation of a regime whose policies fundamentally violate established international norms.

This paper conceptualises the above configuration as *managed non-recognition*. It seeks to balance humanitarian necessity, security pragmatism, normative consistency and geopolitical coordination. The success of this model depends on sustained coordination among major actors and clear differentiation between operational contact and political endorsement. Where coordination fragments or engagement expands without conditions, the model risks gradual normalisation.

In institutional terms, this configuration may also be understood as a form of *multilateralism without recognition*. While *multilateralism without recognition* captures the broader governance model through which collective institutions engage *de facto* authorities without extending formal diplomatic endorsement, *managed non-recognition* refers to the calibrated policy strategy adopted within this framework to balance humanitarian necessity, security pragmatism and normative consistency.

However, multilateral buffering does not eliminate the production of legitimacy; it merely redistributes it. By routinising engagement through institutional procedures, multilateralism may inadvertently convert operational necessity into perceived authority over time. This creates a structural tension between humanitarian pragmatism and normative containment, particularly in cases of prolonged engagement with entrenched *de facto* regimes.

2. Why Engagement Becomes Necessary Despite Non-Recognition

Continuing engagement between international actors and the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan since August 2021 has stemmed primarily from structural constraints rather

than normative endorsement. Engagement thus emerges not as a normative endorsement but as a pragmatic response to structural constraints.

2.1 Humanitarian Imperatives and Civilian Protection

The political transition in Afghanistan was followed by sharp economic contraction, which in turn was further compounded by asset freezes, sanctions uncertainty and the withdrawal of development aid. It must be noted here that Afghanistan is a heavily aid-dependent country with millions facing unemployment, food insecurity and inadequate access to healthcare facilities. According to World Bank estimates²⁰, international aid accounted for approximately 40% of Afghanistan's GDP prior to 2021 – a fact that illustrates the long standing aid dependency of the country. Since 2021, Afghanistan has received around USD 6.7 billion in humanitarian aid²¹, the amount peaking at nearly USD 3.3 billion in 2022. In 2024-25, approximately 22.9 million Afghans – which translates to more than half of the country's population – were dependent on humanitarian assistance, including 12.6 million people who experienced food security crisis²².

However, on the other hand, appeals for humanitarian aid remains grossly underfunded. For instance, while the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) pegged the needs at roughly USD 2.4 billion, only 41% of the requested funds were received, hindering response capacity²³. The World Food Programme statistics suggest that just over 9 million people received life-saving assistance in 2024²⁴. Further, it is projected that approximately 3.7 million Afghan children would require treatment for acute malnutrition, while shrinkage of funds is limiting the coverage to one-fourths of those in need²⁵.

In the above context, though a total diplomatic disengagement would not prove disadvantageous to the political elites, it would undoubtedly intensify civilian suffering. Engagement thus becomes a humanitarian necessity rather than political endorsement, as it facilitates aid delivery and ensures continued access to essential services. The alternative of total isolation risks economic collapse with transnational spillovers. Such a situation necessitates a minimal coordination between the international humanitarian actors and the

²⁰ World Bank, *Afghanistan Development Update* (World Bank 2022).

²¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023* (UNOCHA 2023).

²² OCHA, *Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023* (UNOCHA 2023).

²³ OCHA (n 21).

²⁴ World Food Programme, *Afghanistan Situation Report 2024* (WFP 2024).

²⁵ UNICEF, *Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation Report 2024* (UNICEF 2024).

de facto regime to secure access, movement and operational permissions. Hence multilateral institutions such as the UN agencies operating under the mandate of the Security Council, maintains a structured engagement with the Taliban-led regime for logistical and technical purposes.

2.2 Security and Counter-Terror Considerations

In the regional security architecture of South Asia, Afghanistan occupies a strategically sensitive position. The presence of extremist groups²⁶ as well as past episodes of transnational militancy emanating from its territory, makes a complete political disengagement with Afghanistan impractical for neighbouring states and global powers alike.

Even in the absence of recognition, it becomes imperative to maintain direct or indirect channels of communication to monitor threats, manage intelligence concerns and communicate red lines. While regional actors such as Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian Republics, China and Russia have maintained varying levels of contact with Taliban representatives, their western counterparts increasingly relied on multilateral platforms to counter terror-financing, narcotics trafficking and address refugee crisis.

Thus, engagement persists as security externalities cannot be addressed through normative distancing alone. Security dialogue does not equate to recognition, rather it reflects the reality that governance vacuums generate externalised instability.

2.3 Economic and Financial Containment

The integration of Afghanistan into global financial networks have been constrained by sanction regimes. However, complete financial isolation entails multiple systemic risks ranging from illicit financial flows, flourishing of informal economy and strengthening of shadow governance structures.

Targeted sanction regimes encompassing humanitarian exemptions, present an attempt to balance pressure with containment²⁷. Limited technical engagement, especially with regard to banking channels, currency stabilization and humanitarian interventions, help in

²⁶ UN Security Council, 'Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report on ISIL (Da'esh) and Al Qaida' UN Doc S/2023/XYZ.

²⁷ UN Security Council (n 9).

preventing uncontrolled economic breakdown. In this sphere, engagement functions as risk management rather than political accommodation.

2.4 Multilateral Risk-Sharing

As discussed earlier, multilateral engagement frameworks help in preventing unilateral political signalling. Embedding of interactions within the UN mandates or coordinated donor platforms serve in diffusing responsibilities and framing engagement as institutional obligation, in place of diplomatic endorsement²⁸.

This collective structure enables state actors to pursue practical objectives while not according formal recognition. It also reduces reputational costs associated with bilateral normalisation. In this sense, multilateral engagement in Afghanistan reflects, an emergent practice of multilateralism without recognition – a model in which institutional coordination substitutes for bilateral diplomacy, thereby allowing operational engagement without symbolic endorsement.

However, this balancing act comes with its own tensions.

3. Risks of Unconditional or Unstructured Engagement

While engagement is necessary, its design and limits are of critical importance, as in the absence of adequate safeguards, sustained interaction may culminate in producing unintended legitimising effects.

3.1 Legitimacy Creep and Incremental Normalisation

Sustained technical coordination, diplomatic contact and interaction on international forums, tend to confer functional legitimacy in the long term²⁹. Despite lacking formal endorsement, such practices may symbolize the tacit acceptance of the governing authority. Over time, exceptional crisis engagement risks becoming routinised normalisation and symbolic acts can blur the distinction between operational necessity and political endorsement. This phenomenon may weaken the normative leverage initially intended by non-recognition.

3.2 Fragmentation of International Response

²⁸ UN Security Council (n 8).

²⁹ Hurd (n 10).

Divergent approaches by individual state actors, ranging from deepening bilateral engagement to maintaining strict distance, creates inconsistencies that erode the collective non-recognition framework. Fragmented international response would enable *de facto* regimes to forum shop among state actors, thereby exploiting geopolitical competition to reduce the pressures of conditionality. Without clear and coordinated benchmarks, interactions become strategically diluted.

3.3 Erosion of Normative Credibility

The reluctance on the part of the international community to recognize Taliban emanates primarily from human rights concerns, especially gender-based restrictions. Expanding engagement without commensurate reforms in these spheres would only serve to widen the existing gap between normative commitments and operational practice. This in turn undermines the credibility of human rights advocacy and weaken conditionality efforts in future contexts.

3.4 Entrenchment Without Incentive Reform

Unconditional engagement tends to stabilize regimes without incentivizing policy reform. If limited economic interaction and humanitarian coordination continue regardless of domestic governance changes, the leverage embedded in non-recognition diminishes.

Thus, the challenge here is not to decide on whether to engage, but rather how to effectively structure such engagement so as to preserve normative boundaries. These risks highlight the importance of distinguishing between engagement as a tool of governance and recognition as a political status signal.

4. Comparative Glimpses: Engagement Without Recognition in Other Contexts

It is to be noted that Afghanistan does not represent the first case in which the international community is faced with the dilemma of engaging with a non-recognised regime. Below is a brief comparative reference to previous contexts, which illustrate both potential and limitation of *managed non-recognition*.

4.1 Myanmar After the 2021 Military Coup

After the coup of February 2021 in Myanmar, many Western countries refused to accord recognition to the military junta as the legitimate governing authority. However, given that delivery of humanitarian aid and addressing of regional security concerns required

sustained engagement, the ASEAN attempted at mediation, by adopting a “5-Point Consensus”, while avoiding complete diplomatic accommodation³⁰.

But the lack of an enforceable framework weakened collective leverage and fragmentation quickly emerged, whereby certain regional actors maintained deeper engagement while others, imposed sanctions. The case of Myanmar illustrates that engagement without coordinated conditionality risks normalisation through incremental diplomatic accommodation.

4.2 Iran After the 1979 Revolution

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, several Western States imposed diplomatic isolation and sanctions on Iran. Yet functional engagement sustained through back-channel diplomacy, multilateral forums and issue-specific negotiations. This experience demonstrates a central point that recognition and diplomatic relations can fluctuate, but states rarely disengage totally where strategic interests are affected. However, such long term isolation did not fundamentally alter Iran’s internal political structure, suggesting limits to external leverage in the absence of coordinated international strategy.

4.3 Hamas in Gaza and Limited Engagement Frameworks

In the context of Gaza, international actors have engaged indirectly with Hamas, by channelling their interactions through multilateral agencies, for humanitarian aid delivery while maintaining formal non-recognition. This model highlights the significance of institutional buffering and third-party mediation in preventing symbolic legitimisation which ensuring the provision of essential services³¹.

4.4 Lessons for Afghanistan

From the above contexts, three comparative lessons emerge:

- Fragmentation undermines leverage.
- Engagement without benchmarks risks gradual normalisation
- Multilateral channels can reduce symbolic endorsement but require coordination to remain effective.

³⁰ UN General Assembly, ‘Situation of human rights in Myanmar’ UN Doc A/RES/76/180

Hence, Afghanistan does not present a novel dilemma but rather a recurring governance challenge within international political system – how to balance normative commitments with structural realities.

These cases collectively demonstrate that non-recognition regimes are sustained not by isolation alone but by calibrated and often inconsistent engagement strategies that generate unintended legitimacy effects over time.

5. Policy Recommendations: Operationalising Managed Non-Recognition

If engagement is necessary but recognition premature, the policy objective should not be isolation or accommodation, but structured calibration.

The following recommendations operationalise managed non-recognition. **5.1**

Maintain Clear Public Distinction Between Engagement and Recognition

State actors and multilateral institutions should consistently emphasize that functional engagement does not constitute diplomatic recognition. In this context, public messaging assumes paramount importance, as ambiguity accelerates legitimacy creep. Formal recognition should remain contingent on clearly established benchmarks, including demonstrable progress on gender equality, respect for fundamental civil rights and inclusive governance mechanisms.

5.2 Institutionalise Engagement through Multilateral Channels

Wherever possible, engagement should be embedded within:

- UN-mandated frameworks
- Coordinated donor mechanisms
- Sanctions review committees
- Regional dialogue platforms

Preventing bilateral diplomatic upgrading reduces symbolic signalling and preserves collective leverage.

5.3 Establish Measurable Conditional Benchmarks

Engagement should be linked to transparent benchmarks, which are realistic, incremental and collectively endorsed to prevent unilateral dilution, such as:

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- Reopening of secondary and higher education institutions for women •

Non-interference with humanitarian operations

- Protection of minority communities
- Cooperation on counter terror commitments
- Independent monitoring of humanitarian distribution mechanisms

5.4 Strengthen Sanctions Clarity and Humanitarian Exemptions

Ambiguity in sanction regimes can over-deter legitimate financial activity and exacerbate humanitarian suffering. Clear humanitarian carve-outs and monitored financial channels help prevent economic collapse while maintaining targeted pressure. Financial engagement should be narrowly tailored and subject to review.

5.5 Coordinate Major Power Positions

Divergence among major actors reduces the effectiveness of non-recognition. Regular coordination among key stakeholders – including western states, regional powers and multilateral institutions – is necessary to avoid forum-shopping and geopolitical fragmentation. A unified framework increases the credibility of both conditionality and engagement.

5.6 Periodic Review Mechanism

Managed non-recognition should not be static. A periodic multilateral review mechanism involving both state and multilateral reporting structures– perhaps annually – could assess:

- Human rights developments
- Security cooperation
- Humanitarian access conditions
- Regional stability indicators.

This creates accountability and prevents drift towards automatic normalisation. 6.

Conclusion

The resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan has revealed a fundamental tension within contemporary international system: the gap between normative commitments and geopolitical realities. While formal recognition remains widely withheld due to concerns regarding inclusivity, constitutional processes and systematic restrictions of women's

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rights, a complete disengagement has proved to be impractical in the face of humanitarian collapse, security externalities and regional instability.

This paper has argued that the emerging international response constitutes a form of managed non-recognition – a structured multilateral approach that permits functional engagement while withholding diplomatic endorsement. Recognition and engagement are analytically distinct, but not politically neutral. Sustained interaction, if unstructured, risks generating incremental legitimacy and gradual normalisation.

The challenge, therefore, is not whether to engage but how to design engagement. Multilateral institutions offer mechanisms for buffering symbolic endorsement, embedding conditionality and diffusing political responsibility. However, their effectiveness depends on coordination, clarity and consistent articulation of normative boundaries.

Afghanistan ultimately tests the resilience of multilateralism itself. The Afghan case thus demonstrates both the possibilities and the fragilities of *multilateralism without recognition* as a governance strategy in contexts of contested authority. If engagement can be calibrated to address humanitarian and security imperatives without eroding core normative standards, *managed non-recognition* may offer a pragmatic middle path. Where fragmentation prevails, however, even multilateral buffering may fail to prevent incremental legitimization of contested authority. This requires rethinking multilateralism not merely as coordination among states, but as a mechanism that actively structures the production and containment of legitimacy in global governance.

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