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## **SOVEREIGNTY OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM: THE EXAMPLE OF AFGHANISTAN AND THE CRISIS OF INTERNATIONAL NORMS**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2021 Afghanistan has represented a paradoxical case in contemporary international relations. The country demonstrates stable territorial control, a functioning administrative apparatus, and a consolidated monopoly on the use of force, while remaining outside the framework of formal international recognition. This article examines whether sovereignty can exist beyond institutionalized international order and argues that the Afghan case reflects a broader structural crisis of international norms rather than an isolated anomaly. Drawing on empirical observations and normative analysis, the article conceptualizes sovereignty as a set of practices rather than a legal status, highlighting the growing gap between formal recognition and effective governance. Afghanistan is presented as an indicator of the transformation of the international system, where pragmatic interaction increasingly substitutes for normative coherence.

**Keywords:** Sovereignty, non-recognition, international norms, Afghanistan, de facto governance

### **Introduction**

After 2021, Afghanistan demonstrates stable control over its territory, a well-established management system and a de facto monopoly on the use of force, while remaining outside formal international recognition. The fundamental question arises whether it is possible to talk about sovereignty outside the institutional international order and to what extent the Afghan case reflects the broader crisis of existing international norms.

In the classical sense, sovereignty is inextricably linked to recognition, participation in international institutions, and inclusion in the regulatory order.



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However, the Afghan reality casts doubt on this connection, demonstrating the discrepancy between the legal status and the actual exercise of power. Despite the sanctions regime and the policy of non-recognition, state functions continue to be reproduced, and external actors are forced to interact with the de facto authorities in hybrid, often informal formats. This creates a gray area between exclusion and recognition, where current norms lose their regulatory force and increasingly give way to pragmatic practices. In this context, Afghanistan is becoming not an exception, but an indicator of the structural transformation of the international order, in which sovereignty is increasingly manifested outside the established institutional framework.

The current situation in Afghanistan is characterized by a deep humanitarian, social and economic crisis, which is aggravated by the lack of full-fledged international recognition and a significant reduction in external assistance. More than half of the population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, millions are suffering from severe food shortages, and the health care system and basic social services are under severe pressure due to a lack of funding and international support. Significant restrictions on rights and freedoms, especially in relation to women and girls, continue to deepen social inequality and the exclusion of a significant part of the population from economic and public life. Afghanistan's foreign economic and diplomatic ties remain extremely limited: only a few States maintain formal relations with the de facto Government, and global institutions continue to balance the need for cooperation on humanitarian issues and the principles of non-recognition. This reality not only affects the daily lives of Afghans, but also challenges traditional notions of sovereignty and the functioning of international norms in the 21st century.

In an empirical dimension, the Afghan case demonstrates that sovereignty can be reproduced through practices rather than through formal acts of recognition. After 2021, the de facto government established stable control over the entire territory of the country, eliminating competing centers of the armed forces and restoring the vertical of security. The monopoly on the use of violence, even if implemented outside the internationally recognized framework, has become a key element of governance and internal order, which corresponds to the basic features of sovereign control.



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Administrative management in Afghanistan also remains functional, despite its institutional isolation. Tax collection, trade regulation, and the work of courts and local authorities continue, often in simplified and ideologically transformed forms, but at the same time they ensure the reproduction of basic state functions. Sovereignty here manifests itself not as compliance with regulatory standards, but as the ability to manage space and population in a daily manner.

Control of borders and cross-border flows is of particular importance. The Afghan authorities carry out de facto border administration, interact with neighboring States on security, migration and trade issues, and are also included in regional economic chains, albeit on limited and informal terms. This underlines that even in conditions of non-recognition, Afghanistan remains embedded in the regional system, and its sovereignty is realized through practical interaction, rather than through legal membership.

Afghanistan's external contacts are of a hybrid nature. There is no official diplomatic recognition, but working channels of communication with States, international organizations and humanitarian structures remain. Such interaction indicates a gap between the stated policy of non-recognition and the need for pragmatic contact with a de facto sovereign actor.

In this context, the sanctions regime acts not only as an economic instrument of pressure, but also as a form of regulatory regulation aimed at limiting the international legitimacy of the Afghan authorities. However, sanctions do not eliminate sovereignty as a practice, but only transform its forms, shifting governance towards informal mechanisms and gray areas of international interaction. This allows us to consider the Afghan case as an empirical confirmation that sovereignty is able to function outside the institutional order, while exposing the limits and contradictions of existing international norms.

The Afghan case clearly reveals the crisis of existing international norms that are unable to adequately regulate situations in which de facto sovereignty exists without formal recognition. The policy of non-recognition, originally conceived as a tool of regulatory pressure, in reality does not lead to a change in the behavior of the authorities or to the restoration of the regulatory order. Instead, it creates an institutional vacuum in which there are no clear rules of interaction, responsibility and long-term regulation.



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In this vacuum, international actors are forced to act pragmatically, combining official non-recognition with informal contacts and technical cooperation. Humanitarian organizations, international financial institutions, and individual States maintain working channels of interaction with the de facto authorities, while publicly denying their legitimacy. This ambivalence undermines the regulatory function of international norms, turning them from universal rules into flexible and selective tools of political convenience.

The emerging gray area between legal exclusion and actual interaction indicates a gap between normative principles and empirical reality. Sovereignty does not disappear in these conditions, but it turns out to be taken beyond the institutional order, where it is reproduced through management, security and external contacts, rather than through formal recognition procedures. Afghanistan, therefore, demonstrates not so much a deviation from international norms as their structural inability to adapt to new forms of political reality, in which the boundaries between recognition and non-recognition are becoming less defined.

International norms, originally developed to regulate relations between recognized States, are increasingly demonstrating the limits of their universality. In the classical international system, legality and legitimacy were considered as interrelated categories.: A State is considered legitimate if it is recognized by the international community, and legal recognition is the main source of its right to participate in international institutions. Afghanistan after 2021 shows that this bundle stops working automatically. Sovereignty in his case exists as a practical ability to govern a territory and a population, but it does not receive confirmation through formal recognition procedures and institutional inclusion. This means that international norms are no longer neutral rules, but are becoming instruments of political pressure and isolation.

Non-recognition as a strategy, as a rule, does not lead to the disappearance of power, but creates a stable gray area where norms and their logic are opposed by reality. The international community finds itself in a situation where it is forced to combine declarative non-recognition with pragmatic forms of interaction, since the solution of humanitarian, migration and security issues depends on it. In such conditions, norms do not disappear, but they lose their regulatory function and turn into a flexible mechanism that can be adapted to political expediency. As a



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result, there is a duality: formally, the de facto government is not recognized, but in fact, negotiations are conducted with it, agreements are concluded and limited forms of cooperation are maintained.

This duality leads to a blurring of the distinction between legitimacy and legality. Previously, legality was the main criterion of legitimacy, but now legitimacy is increasingly determined by the practical effectiveness of governance and the ability to maintain order, even in the absence of formal recognition. In this case, international norms cease to be a common standard applicable to all actors equally. They turn into a tool that can be turned on or off depending on political goals, creating a system of double standards. That is why the Afghan case can be considered not as a special case, but as an indicator of the structural transformation of the international order: norms continue to exist, but their universality and ability to regulate political reality are seriously weakened.

In this sense, Afghanistan should be viewed not as a deviation from the norm, but as a symptom of the fact that the system of international norms itself has entered a phase of rethinking. Sovereignty is increasingly manifested outside the institutional order, and international norms are losing their ability to regulate political reality, requiring a new conceptual framework. That is why the Afghan case is important not only as a regional issue, but also as an indicator of global changes, showing that the world is becoming more fragmented, and the international order is becoming more flexible, but also more uncertain.

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