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Afghanistan and BRICS: A SWOT Analysis of Integrating an Isolated State into New International Alliances

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Abstract. This article examines Afghanistan's potential integration into the BRICS framework amid its profound international isolation following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The central research question explores whether and how Afghanistan — despite lacking formal diplomatic recognition, facing severe socio-economic constraints, and implementing restrictive domestic policies — can engage with BRICS and its expanded BRICS+ formats. To address this, the study employs a qualitative SWOT analysis grounded in a systematic review of academic literature, policy documents, and official reports, integrating insights from key scholarly works on regional integration, SCO–BRICS dynamics, and the structural challenges of expanded BRICS cooperation. The analysis reveals that while Afghanistan possesses strategic geographic positioning, vast mineral resources, and growing interest from BRICS members in infrastructure and humanitarian cooperation, its path to meaningful engagement is hindered by non-recognition, institutional fragility, gender-based restrictions, and persistent security threats — particularly from Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS Khorasan)*. The findings suggest that Afghanistan's most viable trajectory lies in phased, low-threshold participation through BRICS+ thematic dialogues and project-based initiatives (e. g., the Trans-Afghan Railway and mining ventures), which could gradually enhance its diplomatic agency. However, without significant improvements in governance, macroeconomic stability, and human capital inclusivity, Afghanistan risks remaining a “passive beneficiary” rather than an active co-shaper within the emerging BRICS-led order.

Keywords: Afghanistan, BRICS, BRICS+, integration, international isolation, SWOT analysis, geopolitics, international alliances

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Introduction

With the Taliban* movement's rise to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has entered a new phase of political inertia and international isolation. Despite the lack of broad diplomatic recognition, the Taliban* leadership has consolidated control over most of the country's territory but faces a shortage of external financing, non-recognition, and structural problems in public administration. In a few instances, there has been an uptick in domestic instability and heightened activity by Islamist groups such as ISIS-Khorasan**, undermining security nationwide [1].

Since 2021, Afghanistan's economy has suffered a severe downturn: according to the International Institute of International Economic Studies (IIMES), GDP shrank by roughly 6.2% in 2022, and the decline continued in 2023–2024 due to reduced exports, the cessation of external aid, and restricted access to financial markets. Reports indicate the country is “surviving” thanks to critical assistance from neighboring states and resilient trade channels with major economies such as China and Russia [2]. For instance, Russia has emerged as an active partner: bilateral trade between Russia and

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Afghanistan reached USD 174 million over the first eight months of the Afghan year (from March 21). There are intentions to raise bilateral trade to USD 3 billion in 2025 and to expand investment projects in agriculture and infrastructure [3].

The external trade balance remains highly vulnerable. As of 2024, the trade deficit widened by 54% to approximately USD 9 billion, or around 45% of GDP. The main blow fell on coal and textile exports — coal exports plunged 64% to USD 92 million as key markets, such as Pakistan, shifted to alternative suppliers [4]. Additionally, the regional security remains a serious concern. According to the Russian International Affairs Council, despite some reduction in internal violence since 2021, uncertainty persists — terrorist groups (including ISIS-Khorasan*) remain active, and the country continues to pose threats to Central Asia [5].

The humanitarian situation is critical. In areas hit by natural disasters (e.g., following a recent earthquake in the country's east), casualties and the number of affected continue to rise, while access for humanitarian aid is heavily constrained by logistical and bureaucratic barriers. UN OCHA estimates that tens of millions of people require assistance; service availability remains limited [6]. However, also by the aid of countries in the region, the humanitarian issues are in the better circumstances. For example, Russia has already delivered an initial tranche of aid—20 tons of food and medicines — and is considering further engagement via EMERCOM structures [7].

Critical infrastructure — including roads, railways, energy grids, and water systems — suffers from severe degradation and chronic underinvestment. However, in 2025, China, Russia, and Uzbekistan called for increased investment in infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, potentially offering an entry point for external investment and international cooperation [8]. The cooperation of countries in the region shows the importance of Afghanistan as a location, and willingness of these countries for improvement and progress of this country.

Surely, restrictions imposed by the Taliban** have had especially severe impacts on education and healthcare for women and girls. Since 2022 they have been barred from education beyond sixth grade and are practically excluded from universities. Afghanistan has become the only country where women are prohibited from attending secondary and higher education, exacerbating the shortage of qualified female medical workers and teachers [9]. In health, the reduction of international aid and the closure of medical facilities have deepened the crisis. Many systems operate on the brink of collapse, while women's access to healthcare is constrained by mobility restrictions without male accompaniment and by the lack of female medical personnel. Moreover, in early 2025 the Taliban's Ministry of Higher Education revoked approximately 500 scholarships provided by Russia, illustrating inconsistency in education policy and limiting external engagement in this sphere [10].

The current situation in Afghanistan demonstrates that the country faces multifaceted challenges — not only stemming from economic collapse, humanitarian crises, deteriorating infrastructure, and persistent security threats from groups like ISIS-Khorasan*, but also significantly exacerbated by the Taliban's** restrictive domestic policies, particularly the systematic exclusion of women and girls from education and healthcare. These internal measures have deepened institutional fragility and

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limited international engagement, as seen in the revocation of Russian scholarships and the near-total isolation of Afghan women from public life. Nevertheless, the sustained interest and pragmatic cooperation of regional actors in expanding trade, delivering humanitarian aid, and investing in infrastructure signal a cautious yet tangible hope for stabilization and gradual development. Moreover, the Taliban's* expressed interest in joining BRICS reflects a strategic aspiration to break out of diplomatic isolation and integrate into emerging multilateral frameworks, potentially opening new avenues for dialogue and conditional cooperation, albeit contingent on significant policy shifts and regional security assurances.

Materials and Methods

This study builds upon four key scholarly works that collectively establish the theoretical and empirical foundation for analyzing Afghanistan's evolving relationship with BRICS through a SWOT framework. F.M. Khalmatova analysis of Afghanistan's new steps toward regional integration [11] provides critical insight into the diplomatic momentum generated by the 2022 Tashkent Conference, which marked a turning point in the Taliban's* engagement with neighboring states and major powers — including BRICS members — despite lacking formal recognition. This directly informs the author's assessment of Afghanistan's external opportunities, particularly how regional economic initiatives such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and preferential trade arrangements with China and Pakistan create potential entry points for deeper BRICS involvement. S. Rauf examination of transboundary interactions between Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after the U.S. withdrawal [12] offers essential geopolitical context, demonstrating how security concerns, counterterrorism cooperation, and functional economic collaboration within the SCO framework increasingly overlap with BRICS interests — especially given the shared membership of Russia, China, and India. This duality enables the author to treat SCO dynamics as a proxy for understanding BRICS' cautious yet pragmatic engagement with Taliban-led* Afghanistan.

The study by E. Bakhmetyeva and A. Morozkina on the expanded BRICS and common growth challenges [13] establishes the macroeconomic and structural baseline necessary for evaluating Afghanistan's compatibility with BRICS' developmental priorities. By highlighting divergent income levels, investment patterns, demographic structures, and innovation capacities across BRICS members, the authors underscore the group's internal heterogeneity — which paradoxically creates space for Afghanistan's inclusion as a low-income, resource-rich partner requiring infrastructure and institutional support. This comparative lens anchors the author's SWOT analysis of Afghanistan's internal weaknesses (e.g., governance gaps, gender restrictions) against BRICS' stated commitment to inclusive, non-Western models of development. Finally, V.I. Yurtaev and A.S. Rogov seminal work on SCO and BRICS in Eurasian integration [14] provides the conceptual bridge between regional and intercontinental cooperation, framing BRICS not merely as an economic bloc but as a “portal” for subregional economies to access global governance reform. Their emphasis on “clustered trade-economic partnerships” and the “convergence” of the Eurasian Economic Union with China's Belt and Road Initiative directly supports the author's argument that Afghanistan's geographic

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centrality and untapped mineral wealth position it as a potential node in BRICS-led connectivity projects — provided political and security risks are mitigated.

Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative literature-based SWOT analysis, drawing on primary and secondary sources — including official declarations, academic studies, and policy reports — to systematically evaluate Afghanistan's strategic position vis-à-vis BRICS. The approach integrates comparative institutional analysis with geopolitical and economic trend assessment, allowing for a multidimensional evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This methodology enables the identification of both structural constraints (e.g., non-recognition, human rights concerns) and emerging synergies (e.g., infrastructure diplomacy, alternative financial mechanisms) that shape the future trajectory of Afghanistan–BRICS relations.

Results and Discussion

SWOT Analysis

Situated at the heart of Eurasia and sharing borders with China, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, Afghanistan can potentially serve as a hub for transport and energy corridors linking South Asia with Central and Western Asia. This objectively increases major powers' interest in integrating Afghanistan into regional projects [15].

Another factor is available natural resources in this country. Afghanistan has more than 1,400 registered mineral deposits — including copper, iron ore, lithium, rare-earth elements, oil, and gas — many of which remain undeveloped [16]. With adequate infrastructure and stability, this resource wealth could be worth trillions of dollars. That point brings us to the next strength of Afghanistan that is investment interest from external actors. Governments and companies from China, Russia, and other states have already expressed interest in mining and infrastructure initiatives in Afghanistan. In 2023–2025, several multi-billion-dollar mining contracts were concluded, indicating investment potential [17].

Demographic potential and a young population can also be counted as one of the significant features of Afghanistan. The population is estimated at roughly 44–45 million (as of 2025) [18], with a significant youth share. If education, employment, and institutions can be ensured, a young population is a potential labor asset.

Lack of international recognition is the main issue for Afghanistan in the current moment. Since the Taliban's* takeover in August 2021, Afghanistan has faced unique international isolation: no UN member state has officially recognized the new government; diplomatic contacts are largely at a working level. This has systemic consequences. Kabul cannot participate fully in international financial mechanisms, including the IMF and World Bank, depriving it of access to investment and credit. Political isolation also limits Afghanistan's ability to take part in multilateral initiatives, including BRICS/BRICS+. The legitimacy deficit is thus a key barrier to integration.

A weak, unstable economy that is highly dependent on external aid creates the high issue for other countries and members of BRICS for cooperation. After most international

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assistance ended in 2021–2022, the country has seen a sharp GDP contraction, rising poverty, and limited access to global financial markets. Humanitarian agencies report that more than 23 million people (nearly half the population) need aid to meet basic needs. According to the World Bank, macro indicators in 2024–2025 remain volatile and consumer activity weak. The economy depends on imports of food and fuel, while domestic production remains fragmented and uncompetitive — limiting Afghanistan's ability to join major BRICS investment initiatives [19].

The issue of restrictions in education and healthcare, especially for women, additionally can limit the collaboration of BRICS members with Afghanistan. The degradation of human capital due to harsh gender policies is among Afghanistan's most acute weaknesses. Since 2022, girls have been prohibited from schooling beyond sixth grade, and universities are closed to women. These measures lead not only to discrimination but also to a long-term loss of qualified professionals, especially in health and education [19]. Limits on women's employment undermine productivity and damage the country's international image — posing an obstacle to equitable partnerships with BRICS members that publicly emphasize sustainable development.

Corruption remains deeply entrenched. Despite initial declarations by the Taliban* to curb embezzlement and abuses, opaque governance and shadow practices persist. Transparency International consistently places Afghanistan near the bottom of global corruption perception rankings. The absence of an independent judiciary, centralized oversight, and clear regulatory rules means decisions are made informally and depend on personal ties or factional affiliation. This institutional weakness directly affects the country's attractiveness to investors. Any energy, mining, or infrastructure project faces risks of "hidden taxes", arbitrary restrictions, and corruption-related costs [20]. In the context of integration with BRICS — where member states require relatively predictable rules of the game and long-term guarantees — Afghanistan's high level of corruption remains a serious obstacle to a full-fledged economic partnership [21].

Participation in BRICS+ can be a good opportunity for Afghanistan as a platform for legitimization. BRICS expansion in 2024 and the activation of Outreach/Plus tracks create an opening for targeted engagement: participation in events, sectoral dialogues, and Global South projects can enhance Kabul's diplomatic agency without requiring immediate formal recognition. For the IEA authorities, this could be a tool of "soft" legitimization via cooperation in transport, trade settlement, and humanitarian programs, aligning with BRICS' stated agenda of inclusivity and expanded partnership formats [22].

Additionally, the trans-Afghan railway (Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan), with a framework agreement for a feasibility study signed in Kabul on July 17, 2025, could cut delivery times from Central Asia to Arabian Sea ports from 35 to 3–5 days [23]. In parallel, TAPI remains a key energy corridor for regional integration. For Afghanistan, participation offers a chance to solidify its role as a transit hub and secure steady budget revenues [24].

Attracting investments due to the available resources and important location can be very significant for Afghanistan. Russia has publicly declared it is working up investment projects in Afghanistan, including railway construction; in August 2025 China discussed with Kabul practical starts in mining and the possibility

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of formally joining the BRI [25]. This forms a window for targeted infrastructure and resource projects, subject to guarantees for security and transit.

On the other hand, even under constraints, trade with neighbors is growing. Afghanistan became Russia's largest flour buyer in 2024 (nearly USD80 million), while trade with Iran reached USD 3.14 billion in 2024 (mostly Afghan imports, according to Iran) [26]. These flows strengthen alternative logistics and settlement channels outside Western markets and lay a foundation for subsequent investment cooperation.

Humanitarian and educational cooperation could be a good opportunity and subject for ease isolation. Humanitarian deliveries and education quotas remain the most "neutral" channels of engagement: Russia regularly sends aid (EMERCOM operations in September 2025), and the Russian MFA confirms scholarship quotas for Afghan citizens to study at Russian universities [27]. Combined with UNESCO/UNICEF programs, this helps preserve human capital and foster long-term links with BRICS partners.

Although the scale of war has diminished, ISIS-Khorasan* cells retain the capacity for high-fatality attacks and cross-border operations — from Afghanistan to Iran, Pakistan, and beyond. According to the UN Secretary-General's June 2025 report, attacks continue, and ISIS-Khorasan* remains a key threat to security and political stability, with international briefs noting an expanding "operational radius" and intent to act outside the region. This raises risks for foreign projects and transit corridors that underpin integration plans.

Additionally, the sanction pressure and international isolation threatening potential cooperation. The UNSC 1988 regime maintains asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes on Taliban** officials. Decisions to "unfreeze" Afghanistan's central bank reserves have been partially channeled through the Swiss-based Fund for the Afghan People, which does not give Kabul direct control [28]. This limits macro-financial maneuvering and undermines long-term investment plans — including within BRICS+ formats.

Also, Afghanistan remains a crossroads of interests. China promotes resource and infrastructure initiatives (including possible BRICS accession); India steps up engagement via corridors through Iran (Chabahar); Russia strengthens security and economic contacts; the US influences parameters of external deals indirectly through sanctions and financial levers [29]. Kabul risks becoming a venue for "soft balancing" between Chinese and Indian projects while depending on Russian–Central Asian transit routes.

Even assuming involvement in BRICS+ tracks, low institutional capacity and economic weakness may lock Afghanistan into the role of "passive beneficiary"—a recipient of projects and humanitarian aid without access to rulemaking. Studies on BRICS expansion highlight a dilemma that the broader the club, the harder it is to maintain manageability and "quality of cooperation," with the heterogeneity of partners increasing the risk of marginalization for weaker participants [22]. This conclusion on "peripherality" applies to Afghanistan too.

The last important challenge and danger is the socio-humanitarian crisis and mass migration. As of 2025, tens of millions need humanitarian assistance; at the same time, mass returns from Iran and Pakistan are growing — more than 714,000 Afghans returned from Iran in the first half of 2025 alone [30]. The combination

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of underfunded humanitarian plans and forced displacement pressures the labor market, social services, and border security — worsening conditions for long-term projects in logistics and mining [6].

This analysis identifies three plausible trajectories for Afghanistan's evolving relationship with the expanded BRICS framework, each shaped by the interplay of domestic governance choices, regional geopolitical dynamics, and the institutional flexibility of BRICS+ formats.

The first — most constructive — scenario envisions Afghanistan leveraging the Outreach and thematic engagement mechanisms of BRICS to initiate “low-threshold” diplomatic and economic interaction without requiring formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). Through participation in sectoral dialogues on logistics, humanitarian cooperation, and education, Kabul could incrementally enhance its diplomatic agency and establish functional channels with key Global South economies. Such engagement would not only circumvent the political impasse surrounding recognition but also align Afghanistan with the inclusive development narrative advanced in BRICS' 2025 presidency documents.

A second, project-driven pathway builds on concrete infrastructure initiatives that anchor Afghanistan within regional connectivity architectures. The Trans-Afghan Railway — linking Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan — exemplifies this approach. It could transform Afghanistan into a strategic transit corridor between Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. If realized, this project could generate stable transit revenues, foster external economic linkages, and serve as a tangible entry point for deeper integration into BRICS-aligned economic circuits. Complementing this, bilateral overtures offer a parallel track for “project-based” integration. These initiatives could later be elevated to multilateral BRICS platforms, thereby institutionalizing Afghanistan's role beyond ad hoc participation.

Conversely, a third scenario entails prolonged international isolation. Persistent sanctions, travel restrictions on IEA officials, and the absence of access to multilateral financing mechanisms continue to impede Afghanistan's ability to engage substantively with global economic institutions. Under these conditions, even BRICS+ participation risks remaining episodic, symbolic, and devoid of tangible economic or institutional returns. Without formal channels for investment guarantees, technical assistance, or policy dialogue, Afghanistan's engagement would lack the depth necessary for meaningful influence.

Overall, the most realistic trajectory appears to be a phased, pragmatic engagement model — mediated through BRICS Outreach mechanisms and anchored by high-impact infrastructure projects — that aligns with the bloc's Global South-oriented agenda. However, this pathway remains contingent upon addressing systemic vulnerabilities in Afghanistan's macroeconomic structure. Persistent trade deficits, fiscal instability, and acute humanitarian pressures constrain the state's capacity to act as an active co-shaper of regional economic governance. Absent significant improvements in external trade balances, fiscal sustainability, and humanitarian access, Afghanistan may remain confined to the role of a “passive beneficiary” — integrated functionally but excluded from normative and institutional decision-making within the emerging BRICS-led order.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that Afghanistan's engagement with BRICS yields mixed effects: significant potential benefits (transit, resources, humanitarian agenda) coexist with substantial constraints (domestic uncertainty, sanctions and institutional barriers).

In the short to medium term, targeted cooperation formats are realistic, whereas deeper participation is possible only if several prerequisites identified in this study are met.

There are windows for cooperation in infrastructure, energy, and humanitarian programs; BRICS members' interest in Eurasian connectivity and logistics diversification makes Afghanistan a potential hub under favorable conditions. On the other hand, low institutional resilience and legal uncertainty reduce the predictability of commitments; security risks raise transaction costs for projects.

However, practical cooperation requires gradualism, anchoring in specific sectors with low regulatory risk, and reliance on multilateral monitoring and transparency mechanisms. But for sure there are some risks in this regard. Continued foreign-policy fragmentation and sanctions constraints may block financing and international recognition of outcomes, narrowing initiatives to pilot formats.

Regarding the BRICS track, it will be wise to be more focused on low-risk areas such as humanitarian and educational programs, healthcare, agriculture, workforce training, and preliminary technical work on transport corridors without capital-intensive commitments. This phased approach could serve as a foundational pathway for Afghanistan's constructive, albeit incremental, participation in BRICS-led initiatives.

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Афганистан и БРИКС: SWOT-анализ интеграции изолированного государства в новые международные объединения

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Финансирование. Настоящее исследование не получало внешнего финансирования.

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Вклад авторов. Концептуализация, методология, предоставление ресурсов, рецензирование и редактирование статьи, научное руководство – Д. Ранджбар Мешкин; формальный анализ, проведение исследований, подготовка первоначального варианта текста – М.Н. Ацакзай и Д.А. Коропенко. При подготовке данной рукописи авторы использовали инструмент искусственного интеллекта для переработки разделов «Обзор литературы» и «Методология». Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

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Аннотация. Рассмотрен потенциал интеграции Афганистана в структуру БРИКС на фоне глубокой международной изоляции, вызванной возвращением к власти движения «Талибан» в 2021 г. Основной исследовательский вопрос заключается в том, может ли Афганистан, несмотря на отсутствие официального дипломатического признания, серьезные социально-экономические ограничения и реализацию жесткой внутренней политики, встроиться в сотрудничество с БРИКС и его расширенным форматом БРИКС+, каким образом это может произойти. Для решения поставленной задачи применен качественный SWOT-анализ, основанный на систематическом обзоре академической литературы, политических документов и официальных отчетов, а также на синтезе ключевых исследований, посвященных региональной интеграции, взаимодействию ШОС и БРИКС, а также структурным вызовам расширения сотрудничества в рамках БРИКС. Показано, что, обладая стратегическим географическим положением, обширными запасами полезных ископаемых и растущим интересом со стороны стран БРИКС к инфраструктурному и гуманитарному сотрудничеству, Афганистан сталкивается с серьезными препятствиями на пути к полноценному взаимодействию: отсутствием международного признания, институциональной неустойчивостью, ограничениями в сфере гендерного равенства и сохраняющимися угрозами безопасности, в первую очередь со стороны Исламского государства – провинция Хорасан. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют, что наиболее реалистичной траекторией для Афганистана является поэтапное участие в БРИКС+ через тематические диалоги и проектно-ориентированные инициативы (например, Трансафганскую железную дорогу и горнодобывающие проекты), что со временем может способствовать укреплению его дипломатической субъектности. Вместе с тем без существенных улучшений в сфере управления, макроэкономической стабильности и инклюзивности человеческого капитала Афганистан рискует остаться пассивным бенефициаром, а не активным соучастником формирующегося миропорядка, лидером которого выступает БРИКС.

Ключевые слова: Афганистан, БРИКС, БРИКС+, интеграция, международная изоляция, SWOT-анализ, геополитика, международные альянсы

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