



AFGHAN COVENANT FORUM

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Concept Note

Executive Summary

Today, Afghanistan embodies a form of repression rarely seen anywhere else. The Taliban deny women and girls their basic rights to education and work, exclude much of the population from political and public life, and reject political accommodation with either their opponents or the wider public. Their nebulous ties with international terrorist groups, widespread poverty, a fragmented opposition, and continued armed resistance could drag Afghanistan into another civil war and once again turn the country into a proxy battlefield for regional powers.

Afghanistan's core problem is not simply foreign interference or internal division, but the failure of its political actors to build enough internal consensus to prevent regional powers from exploiting their divisions. This failure is closely connected to the weakness of a shared civic national identity—the belief that Afghanistan is the common home of all its people and that its future is a shared responsibility. Without this foundation, Afghan factions have repeatedly invited outside support into their internal struggle for power. Foreign interference is condemned when it benefits an opponent but accepted when it serves one's own factional interests. As a result, foreign manipulation has become both an external pressure and an internally invited tool for gaining power.

This contradiction—condemning foreign involvement while seeking it for factional advantage—creates Afghanistan's foreign-support dilemma. Afghanistan needs international assistance to rebuild its war-torn society. Yet when such support enters the country—as it did after 9/11—dissatisfied Afghan factions often reject it and seek backing from rival foreign powers to fight both the international partner and its Afghan allies. This invites further regional rivalry, creating a cycle in which Afghanistan's internal and external divisions reinforce each other. Foreign competition over Afghanistan will not disappear. Afghans cannot end it, but they can prevent outside powers from pursuing it through Afghan factions. The solution must therefore begin with an Afghan Covenant that commits consequential Afghan parties to sharing and limiting power, protecting basic rights, preventing terrorism, rejecting foreign sponsorship against one another, and jointly sustaining a constructive international partnership based on agreed national priorities. If armed resistance becomes unavoidable, it must remain politically accountable and bound by these commitments.

On this Afghan foundation, a renewed partnership with the United States could provide Afghanistan with essential support while giving Washington greater political access, regional insight, influence, and strategic options in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It could also help counter terrorist threats, promote regional stability and human rights, and support the sovereignty of Central Asian states. Afghan Covenant Forum (ACF) will research, analyze, and advocate for this two-part approach: an Afghan Covenant first and a credible U.S. commitment second.

1. The Core Problem

Today, Afghanistan embodies a form of ruthless repression rarely seen anywhere else. Women and girls—half the country's population—are denied their basic rights to education and work. Its current de facto rulers, the Taliban, returned to power through terror and unfulfilled promises made during peace talks. They have excluded much of the population from political and public life and rejected any political role or accommodation for their opponents and the general public. Their ties with international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda risk once again turning Afghanistan into a hub for international terrorism.

Meanwhile, Afghans face widespread poverty and severe political and economic constraints, while opposition groups, mainly based outside the country, remain fragmented and burdened by past failures and corruption. This impasse could drag Afghanistan into another civil war and once again turn the country into a proxy battlefield for regional powers—a situation that international terrorists could exploit to gravely threaten both regional and international security.

A serious understanding of the current crisis must begin with a deeper diagnosis of the Afghan problem as a whole. Much of the existing debate attributes the country's nearly five decades of war and political turmoil to a complex mix of internal fragmentation and foreign—mostly regional—exploitation of the country's divisions. Given Afghanistan's sensitive location and rival geopolitical environment, regional interference is highly unlikely to stop anytime soon. Afghanistan's core problem, therefore, is not simply foreign interference or internal division, but the failure of Afghan political actors to build enough internal consensus to prevent regional powers from exploiting their divisions. Because Afghan factions have repeatedly used outside support against one another, foreign manipulation has become both an external pressure and an internally invited tool in the struggle for power.

This repeated preference for factional advantage reflects a deeper weakness: Afghan political actors have not sufficiently treated Afghanistan as their shared political home and one another as legitimate members of the same national political community. Over time, competing political elites have reinforced and widened these divisions within Afghan society by mobilizing ethnic identities to build support and gain power. This, in turn, has weakened the shared civic national identity needed to sustain a functioning Afghan state.

The absence of a solution is partly rooted in how Afghans understand the relative importance of internal and external causes. Thus far, many Afghans have either struggled to distinguish between internal power struggles and external manipulation or deliberately blurred that distinction to excuse continued violence over power. A combination of both is most likely the case: some benefit from foreign support, some are genuinely confused, and some believe that a solution must come from within. Nevertheless, Afghan political thinking about both the problem and its solution remains heavily focused on outside powers.

The roots of this belief can be found in Afghanistan's history and in the political thinking developed around its geographic location. Many Afghans believe that their country is exceptionally important to every major world power seeking to protect its international position, particularly its influence over Central Asia. For instance, the United States may need Afghanistan to contain Russia and China; China and Russia may need it to protect their positions in Central Asia; Pakistan seeks influence there to counter India; and India seeks influence to counter Pakistan. Afghanistan's experience of invasion and intervention by three leading powers of the past two centuries—the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and the United States—has only strengthened this belief even further.

Whether perceived or real, this sense of geo-strategic significance, particularly among the political elite of recent decades, has shaped Afghanistan's domestic politics as well as its foreign relations. The unexpected result is that many Afghan political actors have not only feared foreign interference but have also tried to use foreign powers against their internal rivals. Instead of relying on Afghan society, political agreement, and national institutions, different groups have looked outside the country for money, weapons, political support, or safe havens.

The Taliban's relationship with Pakistan during the war against the Afghan Republic is one clear example. While condemning foreign influence and declaring jihad, the Taliban themselves benefited from cross-border support that helped them fight the Republic and strengthen their position inside Afghanistan. Another example is the civil war of the 1990s, when different Afghan factions relied on neighboring countries for weapons, money, and political backing, helping them continue fighting one another instead of reaching a national settlement.

This is one of the deepest contradictions in Afghan politics: foreign interference is condemned when it empowers an opponent but accepted when it serves one's own struggle for power. Foreign interference, therefore, does not enter Afghanistan only through foreign ambition; it also enters through Afghan division. In this sense, foreign manipulation has not always been imposed from outside. Afghans have often invited it into their internal struggle for power.

Then comes Afghanistan's need for foreign support to rebuild its war-torn country and society. To make matters more complicated, such support often comes with its own baggage, alarming Afghanistan's immediate and distant neighbors that oppose the intervening power's presence and role. It also creates opportunities for rival Afghan factions to benefit from that support directly or use it as an excuse to oppose the intervening power while seeking backing from regional rivals.

This is Afghanistan's foreign-support dilemma: outside assistance is necessary for reconstruction, but once it enters the country, it quickly becomes tied to power struggles among rival Afghan factions, which neighboring powers then exploit to push out the primary provider of the needed support. Who creates this opportunity for exploitation: the intervening foreign supporter, rival Afghan factions, Afghanistan's neighbors, or some combination of all three? Because foreign powers will almost always find reasons to disagree over Afghanistan, it is ultimately the responsibility of Afghans to close this opportunity. If consensus among foreign powers is impossible because this is how the world works, then agreement among Afghans must be made possible because this is how nations are built. It is difficult, but it is the only way forward.

This is exactly what happened to the post-9/11 U.S.-led international intervention, which presented Afghanistan with a golden opportunity. Who or what ruined it? Was it Afghans—the Taliban and divided political factions within the Republic—rival regional powers, or a combination of all three? The answer lies first with Afghans themselves. If the Taliban and divided factions within the Republic had chosen not to fight or weaken the Republic, outside powers would have had far less opportunity to exploit their divisions. Again, this does not come easily; it requires ruthless commitment, sacrifice, and enlightened self-interest.

Countries use deterrence to manage difficult relations and prevent their rivals from freely exploiting their weaknesses. Afghanistan cannot prevent regional competition, but Afghans can build an internal political barrier against its exploitation. Their deterrence must come from internal resolve, commitment, and consensus to build an effective nation and state. External support can strengthen this commitment, but it cannot create or replace it. This is the kind of internal deterrence that Afghan Covenant Forum (ACF) seeks to build among Afghans.

2. The Proposed Afghan Covenant

The Afghan Covenant proposed here is not a complete peace settlement between the Taliban and the opposing political forces. It is also not a new constitution or an agreement that must include every Afghan from the outset. It is a step-by-step process through which the most consequential Afghan parties can begin building enough political commitment to stop their internal struggle for power from, once again, becoming an open door for regional competition. It must begin inside Afghanistan's political community before it can become the foundation for a reliable partnership with the United States and the international community.

An Afghan Covenant is possible only if consequential Afghan parties accept Afghanistan as their shared political home and recognize one another as legitimate participants in shaping its future. This does not require ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or ideological uniformity. It requires a civic national identity rooted in equal belonging, inherent rights, and reciprocal responsibility: Afghanistan belongs equally to all its people, and no faction may claim exclusive ownership of the state. This understanding should be grounded in Islam and in Afghanistan's own cultural and historical traditions, as understood and lived by Afghans themselves, while ensuring that no custom, tradition, or interpretation is used to justify persecution, coercion, violence, or the denial of the equal rights and dignity of others.

Every Afghan has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of a secure and fulfilling future without persecution, coercion, or violence, together with a duty to respect and protect those same rights for every other Afghan. The Covenant gives political form to this reciprocal promise; it does not impose a definition from outside or claim authority to settle Afghanistan's religious, cultural, or constitutional questions. Its participants must therefore work together, through legitimate Afghan processes, to determine how these principles are understood and applied in practice. They commit to protecting these rights for all Afghans and can expect the same protection in return. On this foundation, the Covenant can establish common rules, shared and limited power, political restraint, and binding commitments to one another.

This process can begin with a workable commitment among a limited number of consequential Afghan parties, including those within the Taliban who believe in an inclusive solution. They do not need to settle every political or constitutional question at the beginning. The objective is for them first to agree and pursue a shared political future, widen participation, and stop seeking power separately through violence or competing regional patrons. As participation and public support grow, this initial commitment can develop into a broader Afghan Covenant with greater national legitimacy.

The Afghan Covenant rests on the core principle of enlightened self-interest. Afghan political leaders do not need to abandon their identities, constituencies, beliefs, or political ambitions. They need to understand that no party can safely take everything and expect others to accept permanent exclusion from power. Each party protects its own future by accepting the same limits on power that it expects others to respect. This is a difficult sacrifice, but it is also how political competition is turned from a struggle for survival into a contest governed by agreed rules.

The initial Covenant must therefore contain several minimum commitments. Its participants must reject political violence as the normal and easy route to power, refuse rival regional sponsorship against other Afghan political forces, accept that political authority must be shared and limited, protect basic rights—especially the rights of women and girls—and prevent Afghanistan from again providing a safe haven for international terrorists. They should also

agree that the country's future constitutional order will be shaped through a wider Afghan political process rather than imposed by one victorious faction.

This commitment must be judged by conduct and not declarations. Its credibility will depend on whether participants coordinate their political positions, honor common decisions on supreme national interests, reject factional violence, resist efforts that divide them through competing patronage, and accept consequences when commitments are broken. A covenant that exists only on paper will add nothing. It must gradually create a political habit and culture in which cooperation at home becomes more rewarding than dependence on an outside patron.

The Covenant cannot end competition among regional and international powers, nor should it attempt to isolate Afghanistan from the world or its region. Its purpose is to give Afghans a coherent national position from which to welcome constructive foreign support, resist harmful interference, and manage competing interests without allowing them to produce another internal war. Afghanistan cannot stop the geopolitical waves around it, but with sufficient internal cohesion it can learn to navigate them rather than be destroyed by them.

3. Peaceful Political Action and Armed Resistance

Afghan Covenant Forum (ACF) believes that peaceful political action should remain the first course of action. Afghan political forces should exhaust dialogue, public mobilization, diplomacy, and other peaceful means of seeking an inclusive settlement. The Covenant is intended to create agreement on a shared political future, not to present war as the first or preferred answer to Taliban repression. There are other means besides violence to put pressure on the Taliban. Mass public mobilization to demand rights can be equally, if not more, powerful in forcing serious political concessions. The mass mobilizations in Bangladesh in 2024 and Nepal's 2006 People's Movement show how sustained public pressure can force major political change, even when such movements face violence. Peaceful political struggle can be as difficult as armed struggle. It often takes longer and requires major sacrifices, but it can deliver better and more lasting solutions.

Afghanistan's history has clearly shown that armed opposition to a common adversary does not by itself create lasting unity. Armed coalitions have often fragmented once their immediate objective was achieved, especially when their members pursued separate claims to power or relied on different regional patrons. Afghanistan cannot afford the continued replacement of one form of unilateral rule with another, nor can it allow victory over a common adversary to be followed by a new war among the forces that took part in it.

However, peaceful political action cannot be treated as the only possible or legitimate course under all circumstances. When the Taliban completely closes political space, continues severe repression, and leaves no meaningful peaceful path toward change, armed resistance can be legitimate only as a last resort. Political agreement among Afghan resistance actors must precede and govern any armed effort. A credible armed resistance must remain politically accountable, protect civilians, follow the commitments of the Covenant, and serve a negotiated and inclusive peace rather than military victory or unilateral power. It must not become a collection of competing military projects for resistance actors, a fundraising channel for personal ambitions, or another route through which regional powers reproduce a proxy war in Afghanistan.

An Afghan armed resistance will undoubtedly create foreign dependencies, particularly on countries bordering Afghanistan, where resistance forces may seek political support, logistical assistance, or sanctuary. Those involved must remain fully aware of this danger and manage

such relationships without allowing the Afghan resistance to become an instrument of competing regional powers. Afghanistan's history provides clear warnings: the Mujahideen relied heavily on Pakistan and Iran, only to face interference from those same countries after taking power, while the Taliban's former dependence on Pakistan has now developed into serious tensions.

A binding political Covenant, supported by international observation and political backing from a reliable partner such as the United States, could help limit these dependencies. Any resistance must derive its legitimacy and primary political support from inside Afghanistan while avoiding dependence on regional sanctuary or sponsorship. Where outside support becomes necessary, it must be limited, carefully managed, and subordinated to an agreed Afghan political purpose so that no regional power can control or divide the resistance according to its own regional or international ambitions.

ACF is not an armed group and does not raise funds for armed activity. It does not endorse attacks against civilians. Its concern is political: if armed resistance becomes necessary or develops, those involved must demonstrate before seeking outside support that they are committed to one another, civilian protection, shared and limited power, and a peaceful political outcome. The real measure of success is not only whether the Taliban regime is defeated, but whether Afghanistan avoids another internal struggle for power and another regional proxy conflict afterward.

The American Revolution offers a relevant principle, even though the historical circumstances were different. The colonists repeatedly sought redress before declaring independence, and their Declaration gave the struggle a clear political purpose grounded in liberty, rights, and representative government. Afghanistan's oppressors are internal, but the central principle is comparable: if Taliban repression closes every meaningful peaceful path, any resistance must remain a last resort and serve a clearly defined commitment to liberty, equal rights, limited power, and an inclusive post-Taliban order. This historical connection offers another basis for understanding between Afghans and Americans. It also points to an area in which American political experience could be valuable: supporting Afghan efforts to build a representative political framework capable of uniting diverse political and resistance actors and sustaining unity beyond the conflict.

4. The Afghan–U.S. Strategic Partnership

The U.S. withdrawal did not end Afghanistan's importance to American security and strategic interests. Afghanistan remains located at the meeting point of South Asia, Central Asia, and the broader Middle East. Developments there affect international terrorist threats, regional stability, human rights, and the balance of influence in a region where American political access, insight, and leverage remain limited while powerful rivals continue to expand their reach.

A renewed relationship would not require a return to the scale, cost, or military model of the previous post-9/11 intervention. Its value would lie in giving the United States greater political access, regional insight, influence, and strategic options. It could help counter terrorist threats, promote stability and human rights—especially the rights of women and girls—and support the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian states. A more coherent Afghanistan would also be better able to maintain constructive relations with its neighbors without allowing any one power to determine its internal politics.

The central lesson of the former partnership is that U.S. support cannot create the Afghan political commitment needed to sustain it. Washington invested heavily in Afghan institutions, public services, and security, but it ultimately lacked a sufficiently united and reliable Afghan political counterpart. Too many Afghan actors treated access to external support as a substitute for accepting limits on power and building a common national purpose. Rival powers then used those divisions to weaken both the Republic and its partnership with the United States.

This does not absolve the United States of its responsibility for serious failures during the previous partnership. From the beginning, the United States lacked consistent strategic clarity, as its mission repeatedly shifted between counterterrorism and nation-building. Any future partnership should therefore be based on clear and realistic strategic objectives. The United States also did not sufficiently distinguish between credible Afghan partners who genuinely believed in a better future for Afghanistan and those primarily interested in personal power. Moreover, it did not make its support sufficiently conditional on responsible conduct and to prevent corrupt Afghan elites from exploiting American assistance for their own political and economic benefit.

These American failures do not change the central lesson: Afghan commitment must still come first. A coherent and nationally committed Afghan leadership could not have prevented every American mistake, but it could have mitigated many of them by giving Washington a reliable Afghan counterpart from whom to seek insight and guidance, helping it identify credible partners and determine where and how resources could best be allocated to build and reinforce a functioning Afghan state. This does not mean that Washington should remain passive until a perfect national consensus appears. Early American political attention and encouragement can help create space for Afghan cooperation. But any major or durable U.S. commitment should reinforce demonstrated Afghan commitment rather than be expected to manufacture it. If Afghan leaders are not committed to one another and to a better future for their own country, they cannot make a credible commitment to the United States.

On the Afghan side, a future partnership must rest on a credible commitment to cooperate across factional lines, protect basic rights, prevent terrorism, maintain Afghanistan's independence, and pursue political power through agreed rules rather than violence or competing regional sponsorship. On the American side, engagement could begin with sustained political dialogue and expand, as Afghan credibility grows, to diplomatic support, policy coordination, assistance for human rights and civil society, technical cooperation, regional consultation, and carefully designed measures addressing shared security concerns.

The precise form and scale of the partnership should depend on political conditions and verified conduct, not assumptions or personal relationships. Neither side needs to agree with the other on every issue; the partnership requires only enough agreement on essential purposes and one reliable international relationship strong enough to support Afghanistan's recovery while helping it manage, rather than invite, competing regional interests.

The Covenant's emphasis on an Afghan–U.S. partnership does not mean excluding regional players from Afghan affairs. Afghanistan should remain embedded within its regional community and respect shared political, economic, and security interests based on mutual respect for every country's sovereignty. In return, regional states must respect Afghanistan's sovereign right to establish bilateral relationships, just as Afghanistan respects their relationships with regional and international powers.

Afghanistan is simply seeking the international partnership it needs to reconstruct itself, and constructive regional support will be welcomed. Through its Afghan Covenant, Afghanistan must guard against a repetition of the past pattern in which regional powers operated through Afghan divisions and weakened both the Afghan state and the Afghan–U.S. partnership before the U.S. withdrawal. That outcome left Afghanistan dangerously vulnerable to once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism, threatening both the security of Afghanistan and the international community.

5. ACF's Role and Approach

Afghan Covenant Forum is a policy, research, and dialogue initiative. It is not a political party, an armed group, a government-in-waiting, or a negotiating delegation. It does not seek political office and does not claim that a small initiative can itself create a national settlement. Its purpose is to develop, examine, and advocate the two connected commitments on which a different Afghan future can be built: first, a credible Covenant among consequential Afghan parties and, on that foundation, a renewed and durable Afghan–U.S. strategic partnership.

ACF will research and analyze the causes and consequences of the political fragmentation in Afghanistan, the ways regional competition operates through domestic divisions, the practical meaning of reciprocal restraint, the lessons of the Republic, and the interests that could sustain a new relationship with the United States. It will translate this work into articles, policy briefs, longer papers, and occasional OSINT reporting on terrorism, political violence, regional involvement, and other issues directly connected to its mission.

ACF will also advocate its analysis and consult Afghan political figures, civil society representatives, experts, community elders, religious scholars, members of the business community, American policymakers, and other relevant interlocutors. Particular attention will be given to Afghans whose voices are too often unheard. These consultations and dialogues are intended to test assumptions, incorporate different perspectives, and strengthen ACF's work. They are not political negotiations.

American policymakers are ACF's primary policy audience because a renewed U.S. commitment forms the second part of the proposed solution. Afghans are its foundational audience because the first and most important commitment must be built among them. ACF's role is to make the case clearly, subject it to serious scrutiny, and bring it into Afghan and American policy debate.

6. Main Activities

Research and policy analysis. ACF will examine Afghanistan's internal political divisions, external competition, the design and sustainability of an Afghan Covenant, the lessons of the former Republic, and the potential for renewed Afghan–U.S. engagement.

Publications and OSINT reporting. ACF will translate its research into accessible articles, policy briefs, longer papers, and occasional open-source reporting for Afghan, American, and wider international audiences.

Policy advocacy. ACF will bring its analysis and central arguments into relevant Afghan and American policy discussions without presenting itself as a political representative or negotiating body.

Consultations and dialogue. ACF will engage relevant individuals and institutions to examine its assumptions, hear different perspectives, improve its proposals, and build understanding of the two connected commitments.

7. Core Areas of Work

ACF's research, policy analysis, and advocacy will focus on interconnected areas relevant to an Afghan Covenant and renewed Afghan–U.S. engagement. These areas define the initiative's work; they are not a predetermined blueprint for any future political agreement.

1. National identity, equal citizenship, and the shared foundations of Afghan society.
2. Power, conflict, reciprocal restraint, and enlightened self-interest.
3. Designing, building, and sustaining an Afghan Covenant.
4. The Afghan Covenant, foreign support, and regional geopolitics.
5. The former Republic: achievements, state-building, collapse, and lessons.
6. Afghan–U.S. relations and the requirements of a durable strategic commitment.
7. Human rights, especially the rights of women and girls.
8. Terrorism, political violence, armed resistance, and the danger of renewed proxy war.

8. Long-Term Aspiration

ACF's long-term aspiration is not an outcome that a small policy initiative can deliver by itself. It is the larger national goal to which ACF seeks to contribute: a functioning Afghanistan in which political power is shared and limited, political differences are resolved peacefully, basic rights are protected, and the country is no longer trapped in recurring war and state collapse. Afghans would see Afghanistan as their shared political home and one another as equal members of the same national community, while retaining their distinct ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and ideological identities.

In such an Afghanistan, a broadly accepted constitution would regulate political competition and prevent any party from holding unlimited power. Islam would remain an overarching source of law and national values without becoming a justification for theocratic repression or the denial of equal rights. Political parties, civil society, religious scholars, community leaders, businesses, and ordinary citizens would participate in public life without fear of violence.

Afghanistan would not provide safe haven to terrorist groups or live under the constant threat of another internal war. Functioning institutions would provide security, justice, education, healthcare, and basic services across the country. Women and girls would enjoy equal rights and take part fully in education, work, political life, and society. Greater certainty about the country's future would allow the private sector to grow, resources to be developed responsibly, extreme poverty to decline, and Afghans to build their lives at home rather than escape their country.

A functioning Afghanistan would engage the United States and other international partners from a coherent national position. It would welcome constructive foreign support, resist harmful interference, maintain balanced relations with its neighbors, and prevent competition among outside powers from determining its internal politics. The precise constitutional and institutional arrangements must emerge through a broader Afghan political process. The Covenant's purpose is to build the commitment necessary for that process to succeed.

We are not searching for a perfect Afghanistan. We are working toward an Afghanistan that works.