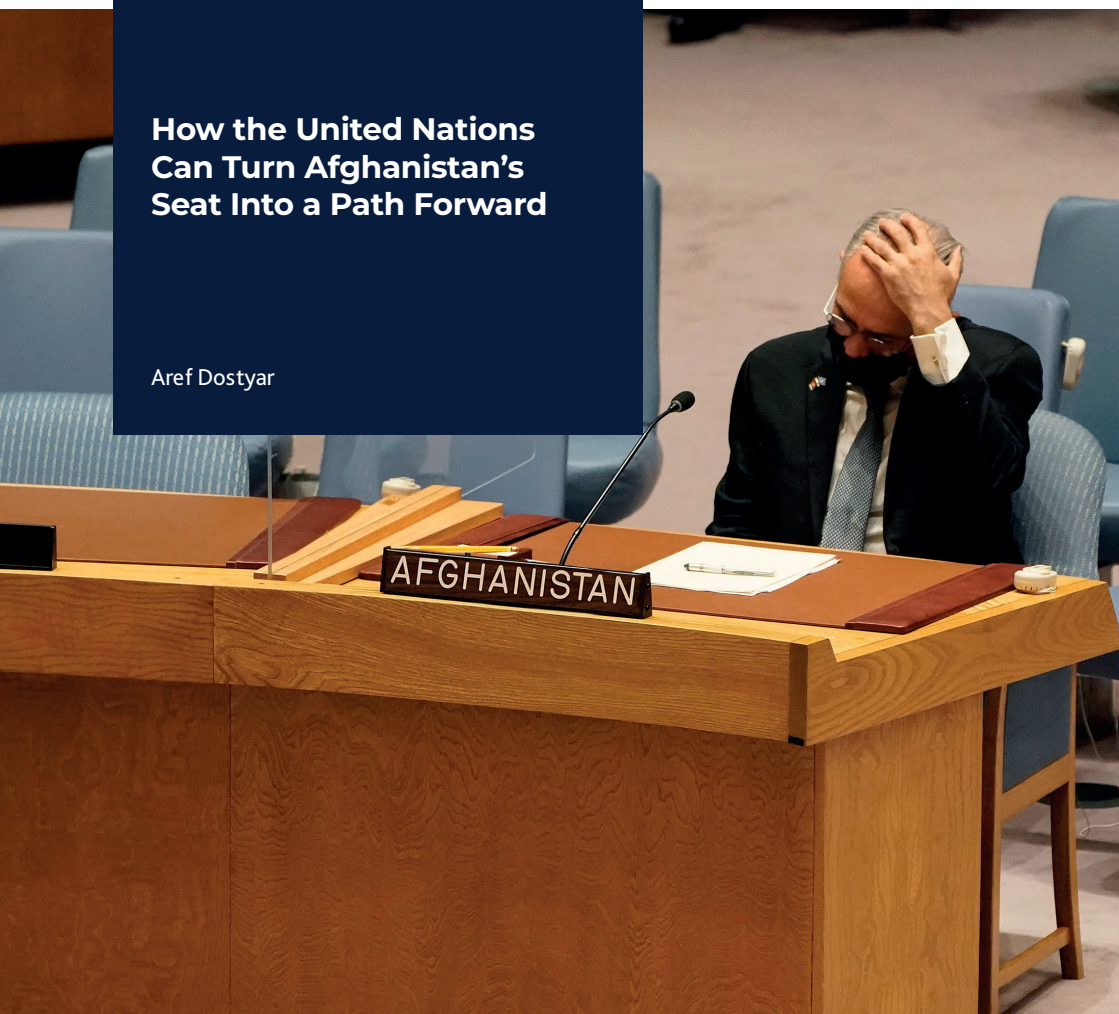


AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH NETWORK

How the United Nations Can Turn Afghanistan's Seat Into a Path Forward

Aref Dostyar





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PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL
Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005
E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk
Website: PeaceRep.org
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/>

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About the author:

Aref Dostyar is the Director of the Afghanistan Program for Peace and Development at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame, and former Consul General of Afghanistan in Los Angeles.

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Key Findings and Recommendations

- ▶ **State of the seat:** Afghanistan's representation at the UN has remained in limbo since 2021. The Taliban claim the right to the seat and the Afghanistan Mission at the UN disputes it. The UN has defaulted to the status quo. A medium-level diplomat from the former Republican government continues to hold the seat without backing from a legitimate authority in Kabul or voting rights in New York. The result is a state of ambiguity and paralysis.
 - ▶ **Opportunity for diplomacy and dialogue:** Use the status of Afghanistan's UN seat as an entry point for a dialogue process that can involve a broad spectrum of relevant actors. Multiple scenarios exist for Afghanistan's seat at the UN, but the debate commonly narrows down to whether or not it should be given to the Taliban.
 - ▶ **Strategic proposal:** Aim to reach a time-bound and mandated joint nomination by all relevant actors for the UN seat. This proposal is grounded in the UN Charter and UN resolutions on Afghanistan, and it draws on the UN's historical precedent for innovation in unique moments of dispute and legitimacy crisis. Together, Namibia, Cambodia, Haiti, Afghanistan during the first Taliban rule in the 1990s, and other cases show the range of practice at the UN. Afghanistan's current case is distinct, but it calls for similar flexibility and innovation. The strategic proposal benefits the people of Afghanistan more than choosing between inadequate or polarised options, and it could lay the groundwork for broader political dialogue.
 - ▶ **Practical next steps:** Establish a small facilitation group of mediation experts and strategists to coordinate the nomination process, consult with relevant actors, and garner domestic and international support for the proposal.
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Introduction

As the saying goes, "a handful reveals the heap." This is evident in the case of Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations, which reflects the country's broader political reality of uncertainty and inertia. Four years after the collapse of the Islamic Republic, the question of who should represent Afghanistan at the UN remains in limbo. The Taliban claim the seat, the remnants of the former government hold it without voting rights, and the UN defers decision.

This paper proposes to the UN Secretary-General, the UN General Assembly, and Afghanistan's movements, to treat the status of the seat as an opportunity for constructive diplomacy. Grounded in the UN Charter, relevant resolutions on Afghanistan, and precedent to innovate in unique circumstances, the UN can utilise the liminal state to catalyse a political dialogue that the country urgently needs.

There are five scenarios, but only one strategic option:

- ▶ Awarding the seat to the Taliban violates the UN Charter and UN resolutions on Afghanistan.
- ▶ Seating the opposition undermines the current UN policy of engagement with the Taliban.
- ▶ Sustaining the status quo by deferring decisions has led to paralysis.
- ▶ Vacating the seat altogether further isolates Afghanistan and its people, and benefits no one.
- ▶ A consensus-based, time-bound, and mandated nomination by all relevant parties is the most promising and strategic option.

This paper analyses the first two scenarios and then argues in favour of a joint nomination as the most strategic option for Afghanistan's seat. Let us begin with some background on how representation is typically decided at the UN.

How Representation is Decided at the UN

Representation at the UN is important politically because it determines who speaks for a country on the world stage, and who is seen as legitimate in the eyes of the international community. It is crucial to note, though, that representation is different from recognition. Representation is granted through UN procedures, but there is no such thing as “collective recognition” (United Nations, 1950). The decision to recognise a ruling group as a government or not is made by individual countries. Nonetheless, representation can pave the way for recognition.

Generally, a government designates individuals to represent it at the UN meetings and events. These designations are reviewed every September by the UN Credentials Committee, made up of nine member states appointed annually by the General Assembly on the proposal of its President.¹ The Committee then recommends a decision to the General Assembly that typically follows the recommendation. The Committee's function is formally technical. However, its decisions become political when a government's legitimacy is in question.

There are no fixed criteria to guide the Committee's decisions. General Assembly Resolution 396(V) (1950) recommends that representation disputes should be resolved in light of the UN Charter's principles. This recommendation leaves ample room for discretion. As a result, precedent has been uneven. In some cases, such as Afghanistan during the Taliban's first rule in the 1990s, the Committee rejected nominations from regimes that seized power by force. In the case of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, it has accepted representatives under questionable circumstances (Ratliff, 1999).

Afghanistan's representation at the UN (and other international organisations) has remained in limbo since 2021. The Taliban claim the right to the seat and the Afghanistan Mission at the UN disputes it (United Nations General Assembly, 2024). The Committee has neither resolved the representation issue nor articulated a path forward. Instead, the UN has defaulted to the status quo. A medium-level diplomat from the former republic continues to hold the seat without backing from a legitimate authority in Kabul or voting rights in New York. As outlined in the introduction, multiple scenarios exist for Afghanistan's seat at the UN. However, common debate often focuses around whether to award the seat to the Taliban or not.

¹ The US, China, and Russia have all been members of the Credentials Committee since its inception in 1947.

Awarding the Seat to the Taliban

The main argument for awarding Afghanistan's UN seat to the Taliban is that the group exercises effective control over the country's geography and government institutions. Proponents of this view reason that representation should follow control.

However, this rationale overlooks several critical issues. The UN's standard for representation is not solely based on territorial control. The UN General Assembly rejected nominations that were previously accepted by South Africa's apartheid government in the 1970s despite its control over geography. In 1979, two rival groups claimed the right to Cambodia's seat. The General Assembly chose to seat the Khmer Rouge, a group that did not hold control over the country at the time.

These cases illustrate that factors other than territorial control also play determining roles in the UN's accreditation process. These factors include a commitment to international obligations, the degree of domestic acceptance and legitimacy, and the extent of international political support. The Taliban fall drastically short on all three accounts.

The Taliban's claim is further weakened by multiple UN resolutions. For example, resolution 2543 (2020) states that the UN Security Council "does not support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." The General Assembly's resolution in July 2025 on "[t]he Situation in Afghanistan" expresses "grave" concern over widespread human rights violations in the country (United Nations General Assembly, 2025). Compounding these issues are the arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the Taliban's leader and chief justice (International Criminal Court, 2025). These warrants are supported by ICC member states, many of whom are also influential voices in the UN.

That said, the UN credentials process is highly political. Although the Taliban's path to the UN seat remains unlikely under current conditions, it is not impossible, especially if they make concessions to address international concerns.

Seating the Opposition Groups

The UN has accredited representatives of governments that have been ousted from power. In 1996, when the Taliban first seized Kabul, the UN continued to recognise the representative of the deposed Islamic State of Afghanistan. In Cambodia throughout the 1980s, the seat remained with a coalition backed by the Khmer Rouge, even though it had lost territorial control and operated from exile in Thailand (Amer, 1990). Another example is Haiti where the government was overthrown by a military junta in 1994. The UN Security Council response seemingly came in the form of resolution 940 which aimed to restore democratic governance (United Nations Security Council, 1994). As part of that, the UN preserved diplomatic representation by the ousted government and supported its return to power.

These examples demonstrate that it is possible to seat an ousted party, and even support efforts to reinstate it. However, this approach faces a fundamental challenge in the case of Afghanistan: where is the ousted government? Unlike in 1996, when the Islamic State retained an organisational structure inside and outside the country, the Islamic Republic collapsed in 2021 without preserving its leadership architecture. The fall broke parts of the government into too many smaller pieces. Former officials and politicians are scattered across geographies and factions, with no joint opposition platform, no political vision, and too little broad-based popular support to galvanise international backing.

The fractured nature of the various domestic actors of Afghanistan, combined with a lack of international support for them, makes it unlikely that the UN would transfer the seat to the Taliban opponents under current circumstances.

In light of these dynamics, the Taliban have seemingly shifted their demand from outright claiming the seat to requesting that the UN make it vacant. Getting the UN to rescind credentials of the current chargé d'affaires at the Afghanistan Mission at the UN, an appointee of the former Republican government, might remove one symbolic road block for the Taliban, but it would not resolve the underlying issues surrounding representation.

The Strategic Alternative

There is another option: a consensus-based and time-bound nomination with a specific mandate limited to this one seat. This strategic alternative keeps the door open to dialogue with the Taliban and also maintains the UN's commitment to inclusive governance and international norms. Let us break down the elements of this proposal:

- ▶ The nomination could take different shapes. For example, it can be one impartial representative who is endorsed by all relevant actors. It is hard to imagine such an individual exists. However, there is no way to know unless there is an attempt to find out. The nomination could also take the form of a delegation. In this case, it would make sense to have three people, each nominated by political parties, civil society, particularly women's movements, and the Taliban. Guidance for the nominee comes from a mandate.
- ▶ The mandate needs to be clear and anchored in the UN's relevant resolutions on Afghanistan such as the UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023). Additionally, the mandate should not be in opposition to the interests of the Taliban, political parties, civil society, and most importantly the people of Afghanistan. The mandate becomes the source of instruction for the nominee(s). The specifics of such a mandate must emerge through a process of dialogue.
- ▶ The process can be coordinated by the UN, beginning with informal consultations among key UN member states and Afghan stakeholders, followed by the appointment of a small facilitation group to shape the nomination process.

All proposals come with risks, and this idea is no exception. Taliban members who maintain a maximalist approach may reject any mechanism that dilutes their claim to exclusive representation. It needs to be communicated to them that alternatives include the status quo or an empty seat. Neither one benefits the Taliban. On the other hand, participation in a process of nomination promises greater international engagement with the Taliban. Since the fall of the Republican government in 2021, Afghanistan does not have a formal diplomatic relationship with the global community. A thoughtful process framed as an important step toward Afghanistan's reintegration to international systems may gain traction, particularly if regional powers reinforce its value. Countries such as China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia have all called for "inclusive governance" in Afghanistan (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2024). This proposal gives them a concrete opportunity to support that principle in a limited and manageable way.

The common belief that groups opposed to the Taliban lack coherence may also challenge this proposal. However, this is a more manageable risk. These groups have a history of coalition-building over the past two decades. Under certain conditions such as the presence of a clear goal and a credible facilitator, they can organise effectively.

This initiative is narrow in scope, which makes it relatively low-cost and low-risk. Even if it does not succeed, it is unlikely to cause damage. If it succeeds, however, the returns will be disproportionately large. At a minimum, this process would test political will and build habits of consultation. It could also lay groundwork for more comprehensive political dialogue in the future.

Precedent and the General Assembly Rule 27

General Assembly Rule 27 states that only a head of state or a foreign minister can issue credentials on behalf of a member state (United Nations, n.d.). It is not clear who has this authority in Afghanistan. This presents a procedural challenge.

While there is no perfect precedent to this proposal, the UN has long responded uniquely to unique cases. In other words, there is precedent for innovation across various dimensions of representation.

From 1973 to 1990, the UN recognised the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) as the representative of the Namibian people, who were under South African occupation, until it transformed into Namibia's governing body. This case is relevant to this paper's strategic proposal in showing how actors without effective territorial control can still gain a formal role within the UN system.

The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, formed by three rival groups, garnered enough support at the General Assembly in 1982 to take Cambodia's seat (United Nations General Assembly, 1982). The case connects with this paper's proposal for a coalition-based nomination.

Together, SWAPO, Cambodia, and ample other cases show the range of practice at the UN. Afghanistan's case is distinct, but it calls for similar flexibility and innovation.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's UN seat has become a focal point of ambiguity and paralysis. The default response, indefinite deferral, may feel safe, but it sustains a stalemate that benefits no one. A more forward-looking option exists to turn the seat into an active tool for diplomacy.

Grounded in the UN Charter, UN resolutions, and precedent for innovation at the UN, a strategic approach would use the contested seat to initiate constructive engagement with all relevant actors. This paper has outlined a strategic direction. The next critical step is to develop this idea into an actionable plan.

It is important for a bold approach to have champions. Clearly domestic experts and strategists should have a central role in this effort. Additionally, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (currently Rosemary DiCarlo) who chaired the last UN's Doha process meeting on Afghanistan, is in a strategic position to work, upon the request of the potential facilitation group, with member states and domestic stakeholders in support of such a process. This proposal may not solve Afghanistan's political crisis overnight, but it would serve as a meaningful step toward it.

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peacerep@ed.ac.uk | <https://peacerep.org>

University of Edinburgh, School of Law
Old College, South Bridge EH8 9YL