

15 Exploring the Prospect of Afghanistan as a Permanently Neutral State

A Historical Evaluation¹

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Introduction

Geography has been destiny—yet it is humans who get to decide what that destiny means.

(Morris, 2022).

Each country possesses unique geographic, cultural, or historical characteristics that shape its identity and influence its foreign and security policies. For Afghanistan, its geography and location – being a landlocked, mountainous terrain strategically located at the crossroads of South, Central, and West Asia – are the primary factors determining its foreign policy and the role it plays in the region.

Historically, Afghanistan was an essential link in the ancient Silk Route, which connected China and India to Persia and Europe and facilitated the exchange of goods, knowledge, and ideas between the East and the West. However, during the 19th century, intense rivalry between two major global powers, Great Britain and Tsarist Russia, extended into the Far East and the Indian subcontinent, turning Afghanistan into a proxy battleground in their struggle for regional dominance. Ultimately, after two rounds of failed British military campaigns and futile Russian attempts to win over fugitive and incumbent Afghan kings and princes, the country emerged as a buffer state separating the territories of the rival empires in the region.

Even after gaining its complete independence in 1919, geopolitics and the competition of the residual great powers required Afghanistan to maintain a delicate balance between foreign powers and pursue a policy of neutrality. Ever since, almost all rulers of Afghanistan have spoken about some form of neutrality in their official policy statements. Interestingly, even the second Taliban regime, which is not internationally recognized, has recently claimed to pursue a foreign policy of neutrality. However, a cursory review of neutrality in Afghanistan's foreign policy reveals that, except during the two World Wars, the rulers have hardly observed neutrality. In fact, the policy of neutrality often acted as a fallback position to which the rulers of Afghanistan would resort whenever other alternatives were exhausted.

Based on Afghanistan's history over the past century and a half, it is evident that the nation experienced moments of calm and stability when it pursued some

form of neutrality. As a result, it appears likely that adopting a policy of neutrality in the future could pave the way for long-lasting peace and prosperity. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, there have been several failed attempts at neutralization of Afghanistan, which will be discussed further on. However, the current near-abandonment by all major powers, combined with the historical failure of alliances and interventions, presents a renewed opportunity for serious discussion on how to turn Afghanistan into a permanently neutral state.

As neutrality is a complex legal and political phenomenon, the chapter begins with the definitions, types, and scope before elaborating on how the country's traditional stance of neutrality evolved and eventually veered off course. It offers a set of conclusions to inform future academic and practical steps.

Definitions, Scope, and Practice of Neutrality

Neutrality is a complex concept. At its most basic, it is defined as 'the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict'. The rights and duties of neutral states and persons were formally defined and codified by the Hague Conventions of 1907 (Hague Convention V, 1907). In the context of international law, neutrality is a wartime political position involving legal duties and responsibilities, and the following:

Observance of strict and honest impartiality, so as not to afford advantage in the war to either party; and particularly in so far restraining its trade to the accustomed course which is held in the time of peace, as not to help one of the belligerents in escaping the effects of the other's hostilities. Even a loan of money to one of the belligerent parties is considered a violation of neutrality.

(Bouvier, 1843, p. 772)

Whereas traditional legal definitions focus mainly on the negative rights and duties of neutrals during the war (that is, what they should not do), subsequent definitions such as those by Oppenheim (1955) and Lawrence (1910, p. 587) provide a more positive and constructive role for the neutral state. For example, a neutral state was defined as an honest broker capable of offering good offices and having the potential to mediate between the belligerents. Hence, in its contemporary use, neutrality is not only a wartime legal status but also a peacetime political and diplomatic posture.

Types of Neutrality

Based on their legal and political dimensions, the policies of neutrality in general have been divided into three broad categories: (1) neutrality or militarily un-aligned, (2) neutralism or non-alignment, and (3) neutralization or permanent neutrality. Each type of neutrality has its features and characteristics, and can be further divided into sub-categories depending on the depth of analysis one undertakes.

1. *Neutral or militarily un-aligned* refers to the traditional form of neutrality enshrined in the provisions of international law and often observed during inter-state wars. Neutral states, however, adhere to the legal obligations of neutrality during a war but also stay militarily un-aligned during peacetime at their discretion. In most cases, neutral states declare their peacetime neutrality through some form of internal legislation. Sweden, Ireland, and Finland were often described as neutral states throughout the 20th century.
2. *Neutralism* is a Cold War phenomenon and refers to a policy of distancing oneself from the East-West conflict. Neutralism, in the eyes of its proponents (mainly the Third World leaders), was an attempt to 'remove or, at least, mitigate some of the harshness of the Cold War struggle' (Lyon, 1960, p. 267). Based on this definition, neutralism could be synonymous with non-alignment and peaceful coexistence. At its essence, neutralism is a political and diplomatic posture with no legal implications for a state adopting this policy. Non-aligned nations argued that staying aloof from the superpowers' conflict did not mean being indifferent toward injustices and suffering; rather, it allowed them to have an independent outlook toward global issues.
3. *Neutralization and permanent neutrality* are the formal and strict types of neutrality practised during both war and peace. Permanent neutrality could be either self-declared or externally prescribed and enforced, in which case it is mainly referred to as *neutralization* (Hanggi, 1991, p. 3). Switzerland's neutrality serves as a classic example of the former, while Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria, and Laos provide instances of the latter type.

Cronin (2013) defines neutralization as:

a reciprocal agreement between a small, strategically-located weak state and two or more major powers at odds with each other. It is an interest-based tool designed to keep enemies from directly confronting each other over a territory whose strategic significance affects them all. Neutralisation is not about building neighbourly harmony; it's about avoiding major war.

(Cronin, 2013, p. 56)

Hence, neutralization is also referred to as a policy of permanent neutrality, with a neutralized state being:

a state whose political independence and territorial integrity are guaranteed permanently by a collective agreement of great powers, subject to conditions that the neutralized state will not take up arms against another state, except to defend itself, and will not assume treaty obligations that may compromise its neutralized status.

(Black and Falk, 2015, p. xi)

While cognizant of the technical difference, this research uses the terms *neutralization* and *permanent neutrality* interchangeably. The existence of an official and

internationally recognized agreement distinguishes permanent neutrality from other types of neutrality.

Tracing Neutrality in Afghanistan's Foreign Policy

When the buffer state of Afghanistan was caught in the middle of a great power struggle for dominance in the region, neutrality was seen as a rational foreign policy choice to ensure its sovereignty and survival. However, striking a correct balance whilst upholding and sustaining neutrality was a task full of challenges for the Afghan rulers.

The first instance of Afghanistan upholding a policy of neutrality with some degree of independence occurred during the First World War, when Britain and Russia urged the Afghan ruler, Amir Habibullah I (1901–1919), to avoid the world war disaster by remaining neutral. In September 1914, King George V sent a letter to Habibullah reminding him that neutrality was in the interest of Afghanistan, urging him to stay neutral, and finally assuring him of an eventual British and allied victory (Adamec, 1967, p. 205). Habibullah initially declared Afghanistan a neutral country (Siraj al-Akhbar, 1914, p. 1), but subsequent developments seriously tested Amir's ability to uphold this policy. In September 1915, a Turco-German delegation known as the 'Niedermayer-Hentig Expedition' arrived in Kabul to attempt to persuade Habibullah to help the Central Powers.

British authorities in India demanded that, as a neutral country, Afghanistan should arrest and disarm the members of the Niedermayer-Hentig delegation, who represented belligerent states. Habibullah did not consider the delegation's visit to Afghanistan a breach of neutrality. Instead, he entertained the Turco-German delegation for nearly two years without giving them a definite response. Similarly, he waited 16 months before replying to King George's letter in January 1916.

With hindsight, one can argue that neutrality was the most rational policy for Afghanistan at the time and one that enabled Habibullah to secure promises of concessions from the British and a treaty of friendship with Germany.

From a conceptual and international legal viewpoint, this first episode of Afghanistan's neutrality fits the general definition of wartime neutrality described in the 1907 Hague Convention Concerning the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Land Warfare (Hague Convention V, 1907). Given the setbacks mentioned above, the wartime practice of neutrality did not transform into a peace-time policy of neutrality.

Independent Foreign Policy and Search for Allies

After ascending the throne in Kabul, the reformist Afghan King Amanullah (1919–1929), son of Habibullah, in his first formal correspondence with the British, pressed for negotiations that would grant Afghanistan complete independence. Britain's rejection of the demand prompted Amanullah to unilaterally declare Afghanistan an independent country on 19 April 1919 (Farhang, 1988, p. 776).

Contrary to his father's defensive policies, Amanullah initiated a political and diplomatic offensive to compel Britain to recognize Afghanistan's independence. He ended Afghanistan's policy of isolation and appointed Mahmud Tarzi as the first Foreign Minister. He dispatched Mohammad Wali Khan Darwazi as his first Ambassador-at-large to negotiate the establishment of diplomatic relations with countries around the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, 2009). Between 1919 and 1922, Afghanistan signed treaties of bilateral cooperation with Russia, Turkey, France, Italy, and Iran (for English translation of these treaties, see Adamec, 1967, pp. 188–198). Darwazi travelled to Washington, DC in July 1921 in search of new alliances. He met with President Warren G. Harding, solicited diplomatic recognition, and asked for the establishment of economic ties between Afghanistan and the US. The US Government, which considered Afghanistan part of the British sphere of influence, declined to confer diplomatic recognition or invest in Afghanistan.

Amanullah's ambitious attempt to attract new allies and his closer ties with Soviet Russia, which provided financial and technical support, did not end Afghanistan's economic and military dependence on British India. He failed to realize that even as a fully independent country recognized by a dozen regional and European nations, striking a 'correct balance' in relations with the British and Soviet Empires would have to remain the fundamental principle of Afghanistan's foreign policy. Abdul Samad Ghaus, author and a former deputy foreign minister (1973–1978), even suggests that Amanullah's unorthodox foreign policy – hostile toward Britain while welcoming Russians and other Europeans – partially contributed to the collapse of his rule in 1929, when he was deposed following tribal uprisings (Ghaus, 1988, p. 47).

Return to Neutrality and Keeping the Balance

Following the brief rule of Amir Habibullah Kalakani, the leader of a popular uprising that deposed Amanullah, Mohammed Nadir, a former military chief, seized power in Kabul. Nadir Shah (1929–1933) favoured closer ties with Britain, which had supported him in his campaign for power. According to Ghaus, 'Nadir Shah saw to it that the Afghan foreign policy, having wandered from its natural course, was brought back into line...The pendulum, which had gone too far to the left, swung back to the middle' (Ghaus, 1988, p. 47).

In his remarks to the opening session of the Afghan National Assembly, Nadir stated, 'The best and most fruitful policy that one can imagine for Afghanistan is a policy of neutrality. Afghanistan must give its neighbours assurances of its friendly attitudes while safeguarding the right of reciprocity' (quoted in Gregorian, 1969, p. 321). While at the official level, Nadir Shah elevated neutrality as the core principle of Afghanistan's foreign policy, the most significant challenge he faced, according to the historian Vartan Gregorian, was 'to make Afghan neutrality a reality and to convince all elements, including the Soviets and the Muslim nationalist-modernists inside and outside the country, that he was not a tool of British imperialism' (Gregorian, 1969, p. 321).

Nadir took a series of steps to build confidence in his policy of neutrality. He reaffirmed the past Anglo-Afghan treaties and signed a new treaty of neutrality and non-aggression with the Soviet Union (for the text of the treaty, see League of Nations, 1935, pp. 370–381). To further convince his powerful neighbours that Afghanistan would be truly neutral, Nadir did not take sides in subsequent conflicts and Pashtun uprisings against British India in tribal areas, refrained from intervening in the affairs of Soviet Central Asia, and expelled Central Asian independence fighters from northern Afghanistan. He struck the ‘correct balance’ in his ties with Britain and the Soviet Union, avoiding them as much as possible, and increasingly engaged with the ‘third powers’, such as Germany, France, and Italy, in the development of the economic and education sectors.

Nadir’s reign ended abruptly with his assassination in November 1933. The delicate tasks of maintaining balance in foreign policy and nurturing his peacetime policy of neutrality were left to his teenage successor, Mohammed Zahir.

Zahir did not make direct reference to Afghanistan’s neutrality in his first major policy speech to the parliament in 1934. Instead, he alluded to a unilateral policy of non-aggression vis-à-vis neighbours and expected reciprocal treatment from other nations in return. Gregorian argues that ‘in practice, the Hashim government was guided by the same principles as Nadir in foreign policy’ (Gregorian, 1969, p. 375). However, there are instances – such as Afghanistan’s participation in the Saadabad Pact of 1937, a regional security alliance² allegedly aimed at containing Soviet influence, and Kabul’s growing political and economic ties with Nazi Germany – to indicate an increasing desire for forging alliances as and when such opportunities were available.

Back to Strict Wartime Neutrality

Once again, anxious about provoking either of its powerful neighbours, Afghanistan found it imperative not to participate in the Second World War. On 6 September 1939, Zahir Shah declared that Afghanistan would not join any warring alliances and would remain neutral.³ Much like the episode of neutrality during the First World War, this time, the king faced severe pressure from within the government ranks, driven by three prominent sources. First, an active and strong ultranationalist and somewhat pro-German constituency at the highest government ranks, including two of his cousins, Prince Daud and Naim, who later became the prime minister and foreign minister, respectively. Second, the presence of nearly two hundred German and Italian technical experts inside Afghanistan, some of whom were accused of subversive activities against British interests in the tribal areas (Adamec, 1974, p. 2501). Third, Germany’s generous investment in nascent economic and financial sectors and general public sympathy for Germany in contrast to popular suspicion and disgust toward British and Soviet activities in the country (Maillart, 1940; Gregorian, 1969, p. 380). However, Zahir Shah’s declaration of neutrality had the support of Shah Mahmoud, his uncle and powerful prime minister, who, according to Siddiq Farhang, ‘had the final say on all policy matters’.⁴ To strengthen their position, the King called a grand assembly of elders (*Loya*

Jirga), held in November 1941, to deliberate on the policy of neutrality and provide advice on the allies' demands for the eviction of all suspicious Axis nationals from Afghanistan's territory.⁵

The *Loya Jirga* overwhelmingly supported the government's policy of neutrality and announced that Afghanistan would not allow belligerents to use its territory against each other and that the country stood ready to defend itself against foreign aggression. The *Jirga* also recommended that the German and Italian nationals be given a dignified and safe exit to their home countries (Farhang, 1988). Except for a small number of diplomats who remained in Kabul, the rest of the Axis nationals were deported from Afghanistan to Turkey under the guarantee of safe passage.

With few exceptions, as previously noted, during the period 1930 to 1945, Afghanistan pursued an internationally sanctioned policy of wartime neutrality and typical peacetime neutrality very similar to the policies followed by other neutral states at the time.⁶ However, rapid and dramatic shifts in post-war international and regional contexts – such as the demise of the British Empire, the emergence of the Soviet Union and the US as the two dominant global powers with competing ideologies, and most crucially, the creation of Pakistan as an independent state encompassing the frontier Pashtun tribes – lured the leaders of Afghanistan to review their foreign and domestic policies. While the older and more conservative policy makers thought that Afghanistan could continue its buffer-neutral state policy by replacing the British with the Americans in the traditional balancing formula, the younger and more hard-line group – such as Daud and Naim, began to demand radical reforms in foreign and domestic policies.

Faced with mounting pressure from hardliners, King Zahir gave in as post-Partition developments dealt a heavy blow to Afghanistan. The lack of international sympathy for Afghanistan's position on the Durand Line – which marked the border with Pakistan⁷ – and the incorporation of the Pashtun tribal areas east of the line into the newly established Pakistani state further weakened his hand. The appointment of his cousin, Mohammed Daud, as prime minister effectively marked the end of Afghanistan's long-held tradition of neutrality.

The policies followed by successive governments, first by Daud and later through the Soviet occupation, could be described as 'neutralism', 'positive neutrality', and 'non-alignment', differing in meaning and scope from the way that Afghanistan had previously interpreted its policy of neutrality. While Afghanistan had maintained a certain balance in its foreign policy until the Soviet invasion in 1979, any discussion on Afghanistan's neutrality beyond this period, particularly from the 1955 Bandung Conference that created the Non-Aligned Movement, needs to consider this shift in the concept and practice of neutrality.⁸

The Era of Change, Neutralism and Non-alignment

Prime Minister Daud (1953–1963) quickly embarked on a reform and modernization drive which, according to Saikal, pivoted on 'three interrelated policy goals: to centralize power as comprehensively as possible under his leadership; to institute

a command-based process of speedy social and economic change; and to promote Pashtunism as the foundation for Afghan nationalism' (Saikal, 2006, p. 123).

To achieve these goals, Daud introduced revolutionary changes in the structure of his cabinet. First, he appointed a group of like-minded young and highly educated ministers. He was acutely aware that his goals could not be realized without economic, military, and political support from external sources. Strict adherence to traditional (passive) neutrality limited his ability to enlist much-needed foreign assistance in pursuit of his domestic and regional ambitions.

Daud calculated that a shift in foreign policy was possible since the strategic imperatives that had forced Afghanistan to be a buffer-neutral state in the past had disappeared. With the British departure from India, Afghanistan was no longer constrained by keeping the 'correct balance' between its northern and southern neighbours. During this period, Afghanistan was actively engaged in a territorial and political dispute with Pakistan and eagerly sought partners to strengthen its position.

Hence, Daud redefined neutrality in a way that enabled him to attract military and political support from the Soviet Union in particular. Explaining this shift in the government's outlook toward neutrality, Sayed Qasim Reshtia, author and press minister in the 1960s, affirms that while Afghanistan previously followed a policy of passive neutrality, mainly to appease its powerful neighbours, the new government employed a positive and active type of neutrality which 'was based on the national interest and independent judgement of the people of Afghanistan' (Reshtia, 1997, p. 101). According to Abdul Rahman Pazhwak (1962), Afghanistan's permanent representative at the UN in the 1960s, this new policy was intended to preserve close and friendly relations with the US and the Soviet Union and receive unconditional assistance while not being forced to align with either side (Pazhwak, 1962, p. 2). Reshtia (1997, p. 101) argues that in the early years, the adoption of this policy enabled Afghanistan to receive a considerable amount of development aid from various sources, including the US government.

Over time, frustrated by America's lack of interest in meaningful assistance and Washington's pro-Pakistani approach (Roberts, 2003, p. 147),⁹ Daud found the Soviet bloc was a more responsive partner. Politically, he joined the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) to maintain a veneer of Afghanistan's neutral posture and preserve his ability to engage all sides. From this point, in the words of Reshtia, 'Afghanistan's neutrality had evolved into active nonalignment' (Reshtia, 1997, p. 101).

On 17 July 1973, Daud (now the Afghan President after a bloodless coup against Zahir Shah) described this new form of neutrality in a national address:

The foreign policy of Afghanistan is based on neutrality, non-participation in military pacts, and independent judgment of the issues by the people themselves. Emanating from our national aspirations, this policy is designed to fulfill the material and spiritual needs of the people.

(quoted in Ghaus, 1988, p. 109)

By this time, however, according to William Piez, an economic and political officer at the US embassy (1963–1966), Afghanistan was:

Considered to be a neutral country but with a pretty strong Communist influence. Their [Afghanistan's] representative at the UN almost always voted on the Soviet side of any issue and was recognised by American political analysts as essentially a kind of stalking horse for the Russians whenever an important issue came up

(see The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST), n.d.)

Perhaps neither President Daud nor other policymakers and intellectuals of the time foresaw the historical outcome. President Daud's emotional and obsessive Pakistan-centric foreign and security policy drove Afghanistan deeply into the Soviet orbit. The so-called 'unconditional' assistance and training offered by the Eastern bloc brought with it a zealous ideology which soon permeated all levels of government and society in Afghanistan and sowed the seeds of instability and destruction for decades to come.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ended what was left of its autonomy and policy of neutrality, although the Soviet-backed regimes would continue to espouse neutrality in their rhetoric. Even within the NAM, the invasion caused a severe division between members when Yugoslavia and some Arab states decided to condemn it based on NAM's principle of non-interference. A joint Soviet and Cuban diplomatic offensive promptly suppressed the effort (see Wilson Center, 1980).¹⁰

Ironically, even Afghanistan's communists, despite their apparent military dependence and ideological association with the Soviet Union, formally remained committed to the rhetoric of neutrality. Prime Minister Noor Mohammed Taraki, in a radio address in May 1978, avowed that 'the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan adheres to a policy of non-alignment and positive and active neutrality...based on principles of peaceful coexistence' (Vaidik, 1981, p. 239).

Attempt at Permanent Neutrality

The next attempt to neutralize and even demilitarize Afghanistan came in the wake of the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988. This time, the initiative was conceived in Moscow, though it was officially proposed by the regime in Kabul. President Najibullah (1987–1992) called on the Secretary General of the UN to hold an international conference on Afghanistan to discuss the reinstatement and confirmation of Afghanistan's permanent neutrality and to work out an international assistance programme in support of a peace and reconciliation programme.¹¹ On the domestic level, Najibullah instructed Afghanistan's Academy of Science to study the feasibility of adopting a policy of demilitarized permanent neutrality. A year later, in May 1990, the Constitution was amended to reflect the regime's desire for neutralization and demilitarization. An entirely new chapter in the amended constitution was dedicated to foreign policy, and for the

first time in the country's history, the term 'permanent neutrality' was featured in its constitution.¹²

Although Najibullah managed to secure consensus among the elites supporting his regime on the declaration of a demilitarized and permanently neutral status, this initiative hardly attracted any serious support at the regional and international levels. The Western capitals and the Afghan resistance forces, the 'Mujahideen' were predicting an imminent collapse of the Kabul regime soon after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops.¹³ They perceived the neutralization initiative to be an attempt by the regime to assure its survival beyond the Soviet departure. Besides, at that juncture, when the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, neither Kabul nor Moscow had enough political capital to garner broader support for such an ambitious proposal.

The failure of both initiatives, the West's in the early 1980s and the Soviet's support of President Najibullah in 1989 indicate that, as long as any of the conflicting parties believe that a victory is achievable on the battlefield, accepting neutrality as the basis for a solution to a protracted conflict is out of the question. Hence, creating consensus among external and internal stakeholders on a neutrality declaration requires a military stalemate accompanied by diplomatic leverage and perseverance.

Despite this failed attempt at adaptation of permanent neutrality, Afghanistan officially remained a member of NAM after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the fall of the last communist regime in 1992, as well as during the five troubled years of the Mujahideen government in Kabul from 1992 to 1996. Given that this was a period of civil war, with a badly divided government, there was no real possibility of making an independent foreign policy. The Taliban regime that followed (1996–2001) was more of an ideological movement than a government with articulated domestic and foreign policy goals. As Olivier Roy once emphasized, 'The Taliban have no foreign policy' (Roy, 1998, p. 210). Moreover, the Taliban's regime was not recognized by the wider international community, as is the case in their current regime.¹⁴ However, unlike the case at present, they openly announced their adherence to a policy of neutrality, albeit without offering any details. No records have been found to indicate the Taliban's official position vis-à-vis Afghanistan's neutrality and membership in NAM during their rule from 1996–2001.

Neutrality in Post 9/11: Hamid Karzai's Era

The post-2001 government of Afghanistan remained an active member of NAM and regularly participated in the movement's meetings. However, it refrained from using the term *neutrality* in its official statements. Whereas most previous Afghan leaders at least rhetorically embraced neutrality as a principle of Afghanistan's foreign policy, President Karzai was particularly sensitive to even a mention of neutrality.¹⁵ He openly discussed the desire to strengthen ties between Afghanistan and the NATO member states on several occasions.

Some of Karzai's senior cabinet ministers challenged the logic of Afghanistan's traditional neutrality and disagreed with the proposition that neutrality was the

most suitable foreign policy for Afghanistan (Andisha, 2015). Instead, recalling the Russian invasion of 1979, these ministers argued that Afghanistan's neutrality, especially in the absence of a credible domestic or international enforcement mechanism, made the country vulnerable to foreign aggression. A minister added emphatically that, had Afghanistan joined the Western-led alliances of the time, such as SEATO (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (the Central Treaty Organization), and had Afghanistan maintained a more strategic, not Pakistan-centric, attitude toward its relationship with the US, the Soviet leadership would have thought twice before invading the country in 1979.

President Ashraf Ghani and his Late Detour to Neutrality

While Karzai was initially sensitive toward pronouncements of Afghanistan's neutrality, he became increasingly wary of signing bilateral security agreements and legally granting bases for US/NATO forces in Afghanistan. On the contrary, one of the first acts of President Ashraf Ghani's government, Karzai's predecessor, was to sign the overdue Bilateral Security Agreements (BSA) with the US and a SOFA (the Status of Forces Agreement) with NATO granting them nine military bases in Afghanistan (VOA News, 2014).

A US citizen who built his early career outside Afghanistan, working as an academic in the US and at the World Bank, Ghani was a keen supporter of partnership with the West. When asked about Afghanistan's neutrality being compromised by signing these agreements, President Ashraf Ghani, during the Munich Security Forum in December 2014, called neutrality 'a term from the 1950s' and questioned its applicability in the contemporary international setting (Ghani and Keating, 2014). In April 2015, in an unprecedented move, President Ghani announced Afghanistan's support for the Saudi-led coalition in its war against the Houthis-led government in Yemen, removing any illusion of adhering to Afghanistan's 'traditional neutrality' in regional affairs.

However, during his incomplete second term (2019–2021), with fledgling Western support to his government, intensification of regional rivalries around Afghanistan, and the Taliban's unceasing violence, Ghani made a foreign policy turnaround by including permanent neutrality as one of the main ingredients of his proposed peace and transitional plan. While announcing his plan at a regional summit in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, Ghani underscored that 'principles for forming a government of peace-building would be the product of genuine political settlement that results in [an] agreed-upon end state of a sovereign, democratic, united, neutral and connected Islamic Republic Afghanistan' (see Ruttig, 2015).

He tasked the Foreign Ministry to prepare a roadmap of steps leading toward the declaration of Afghanistan's permanent neutrality. In April and May 2021, the Ministry held initial internal discussions. Afghanistan's diplomatic missions in the region started soliciting host nations' initial reactions toward Afghanistan's permanent neutrality. In early July 2021, the foreign ministry submitted its roadmap for Afghanistan's permanent neutrality to President Ghani.¹⁶ It was too little, too late. On the 15 August 2021, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and his

government collapsed. This episode once again demonstrates that the policy of permanent neutrality gains traction with the Afghan leaders when other alternatives fail, and the incumbent government reaches the nadir of its legitimacy, credibility, and authority.

The Taliban 2.0 and the Rhetoric of a Foreign Policy of Neutrality

The most visible difference between the 1.0 and 2.0 versions of the Taliban is their attitude toward digital media and communication. Unlike in 1996, the current Taliban regime has allowed the mainstream and social media to function under strict monitoring. It has turned them into an effective propaganda tool for promoting their narrative. Another difference is in the area of foreign relations. Although not recognized by any country (other than Russia), including the three countries Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, which recognized them during their previous rule, the Taliban built deeper diplomatic connections and adopted more nuanced language in dealing with regional and international stakeholders.

Building on the political legitimacy bestowed upon them during the Doha talks, the Taliban boosted much-improved diplomatic and commercial ties with Iran, China, Russia, and Uzbekistan. They also actively engage with the US and European non-resident missions in Doha, Qatar. A combination of regional diplomatic and commercial support and humanitarian and financial funding from the West has provided the Taliban ample opportunity to consolidate their windfall victory on 15th August 2021. Therefore, the majority of their Kabul-based leaders recognize the importance of maintaining the right balance in their foreign relations. The occasional utterance of a policy of neutrality seems a natural response to preserving the status quo. For example, in reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the spokesman of the Taliban's foreign ministry stressed that 'the Taliban government follows a foreign policy of neutrality (but) calls on both sides of the conflict to resolve the crisis through dialogue and peaceful means' (Anadolu Agency, 2022).

The Taliban's assertion of neutrality in the first year of their full control over the country seems to indicate a departure from the traditional pattern, where opting for a policy of neutrality was an option of the final resort for the ruling groups. However, the facts that the Taliban are neither recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan nor have they produced any official edict on the nature and scope of their proclaimed 'foreign policy of neutrality' make it premature to claim that Afghanistan is going to finally emerge as a neutral state under the Taliban regime.

Conclusion

Historically, neutrality has been a prominent feature of Afghanistan's foreign policy; however, very little is known about the nature and latitude of this policy. Given the constant changes like Afghanistan's neutrality, it is equally difficult to describe, based on the literature available, what specific type of neutrality, if at all, Afghanistan has pursued in the past.

Nevertheless, this review can offer three broad conclusions. First, Afghanistan's post-independence policy of neutrality was not a strategic choice, crafted through a usual policymaking process, but a mere continuation of a colonially imposed buffer policy. Second, despite some consistency in official statements of the various Afghan governments regarding the country's buffer-neutral status, in practice, except during the two World Wars, Afghanistan was never a truly neutral state. As argued by Louis Dupree, the Afghan rulers occasionally used a broad and loose definition of the concept of neutrality, often for their convenience. Over time, Afghanistan's traditional neutrality evolved into positive neutrality, neutralism, and non-alignment. Third, the policy of neutrality often acted as a fallback position to which the rulers could return whenever other alternatives had failed.

This historical analysis not only illuminates the deficiencies in the construction and conduct of Afghanistan's foreign policy but also provides us with the necessary insight when seeking to prevent the recurrence of previous mistakes.

Considering geography as a constant factor and the primacy of geopolitical motives in the strategic calculation of the great powers, permanent neutrality emerges as a pragmatic pathway for Afghanistan to achieve lasting peace, stability, and the benefits of regional cooperation. Exploring how to make this feasible remains a subject for further investigation.

Notes

- 1 Part of this chapter is based upon an earlier version of Andisha (2022).
- 2 In 1941, Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani invoked the Saadabad Treaty and requested that Afghanistan support his country in fighting against British invasion. The Afghan Government declined his request based on Afghanistan's declaration of neutrality in 1939. See Farhang (1988, p. 646).
- 3 In August 1939, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia signed a non-aggression pact, while the United Kingdom engaged in a 'phony war' with Germany. Effectively, Afghanistan's northern and southern neighbours were on different sides of the grand conflict that was then emerging.
- 4 As a conservative, pragmatic and elderly statesman, one hardly challenged Prime Minister Hashim on state policy matters. See Farhang (1988, p. 645).
- 5 The Soviet embassy in Kabul, for example, had invoked the 1931 treaty of neutrality and non-aggression to demand the eviction of nationals of belligerent states.
- 6 Peacetime neutrals avoid treaties of alliance with other states that could put them at risk of being a party to a future war or support of war preparations, as in the policies of Switzerland, Belgium, and Sweden and to some extent the US before entrance in the Second World War. See, Wengler (1964).
- 7 After the partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan, the Government of Afghanistan supported the right of self-determination for Pashtuns and Baluchs residing on the opposite side of the Durand Line.
- 8 After 1955, the suffixes of Mosbat and Fa'al were added to the Persian world of *bitarafi*, reading Bitarafi Mosbat and Bitarafi Fa'al, which means positive neutrality and active neutrality.
- 9 During his visit to Kabul in 1953, US Vice President Richard Nixon disapproved Daud's position on Pashtunistan. Nixon referred to Afghanistan's neutrality as equivalent to

- 'political leprosy'. A year later, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles refused to offer any military assistance to Foreign Minister Mohammad Naim, Daud's brother, while a huge military assistance programme was approved for Pakistan. See Roberts (2003).
- 10 A top secret instruction was sent by the Soviet Foreign Ministry to its ambassadors in the non-aligned countries to counter-balance Yugoslavia's effort to convene a meeting concerning the invasion of Afghanistan. The excerpt of the cable is available online, see Wilson Center (1980).
 - 11 'Permanent Neutrality and Disarmament of Afghanistan', collection of articles from a seminar held by the Academy of Science of Afghanistan. Government Publication, 1989, p. 3
 - 12 The preamble read '...creating favourable conditions for determining the legal status of permanent neutrality of Afghanistan and its demilitarization'. See, the constitution of Afghanistan 1990, available at: <http://www.afghan-web.com/history/const/const1990.html>
 - 13 For example the prevailing attitude in the US government mirrored in the National Intelligence Estimate dated March 1988 which strongly argued that 'we judge that the Najibullah regime will not long survive the completion of Soviet withdrawal even with continued Soviet assistance. The regime may fall even before the withdrawal is complete'. See, 'USSR: Withdrawal from Afghanistan' Director of Central Intelligence, Special National Intelligence Estimate, March 1988. p. 1. Available at: www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP09T00367R000200120001-3.pdf
 - 14 The three countries that recognized the Taliban government were Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations was held by a representative appointed by the Mujahideen government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani.
 - 15 In a September 2013 meeting with Kai Eide, former Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Afghanistan (2008–2010), recalled to the author that, when he used the term 'neutrality' in reference to Afghanistan's future international status, President Hamid Karzai rejected the idea as 'totally unacceptable'. This incident is referred to in his memoir, Eide (2013, pp. 138–140). Gharekhan, Inderfurth, and Tellis (2010) have also pointed to President Karzai's displeasure with the idea of Afghanistan's neutrality noting that 'President Hamid Karzai has expressed reservations about a regional approach based on Afghanistan's future as a permanently neutral state'.
 - 16 The author prepared the initial draft of the said roadmap.

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