

Thinking Long on Afghanistan: Could it be Neutralized?

Having crushed the al-Qaeda leadership, the United States and its NATO allies should exit Afghanistan without leaving behind the kind of instability that prompted their intervention in the first place. No other sub-region of the world contains such a dangerous intersection of radical ideologies, clashing interests, and regional nuclear arsenals. Further proliferation, lucrative drug corridors, and exploitable mineral wealth will make future Afghan conflicts more dangerous than ever. Yet under our current approach, the United States is failing to protect its interests as it withdraws from Afghan territory and the neighbors prepare to pounce. Although it defies current practice, the United States urgently needs not short-term but long-term thinking. Washington must craft a lasting political strategy for managing Afghanistan and the region from afar.

For decades, the rational long-term political solution for Afghanistan has been a strategy called neutralization. After the 1979 Soviet invasion, British Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the establishment of a neutral Afghanistan, a proposal then adopted by the European Community (now the European Union).¹ U.S. President Jimmy Carter wrote to Yugoslav President Broz Tito, co-chairman of the group of non-aligned nations, offering to guarantee Afghanistan's neutrality in the Cold War if Soviet troops pulled out. U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski reiterated the offer to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and suggested a UN peacekeeping force composed of Islamic troops from neutral North African

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states (Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco). According to his memoirs, Dobrynin thought the proposal promising, but the Politburo rejected it because they wanted Afghanistan within the Soviet sphere of influence.² When Mikhail Gorbachev finally expressed interest in 1985, it was too late: the United States was vigorously supporting the Afghan resistance, a story that played out, at least indirectly, in the attacks of 9/11. If Afghanistan had been neutralized in the 1980s, the tragedies of 2001 might never have occurred.

This article examines the potential for Afghan neutralization today, to reduce threats to the United States and increase regional stability. U.S. policymakers must move beyond short-term, tactical arguments about military operations and internal negotiations to develop a long-term strategy to contain the broader problems which will inevitably arise. A tradition of repelling invaders—one of the few sources of national unity—as well as formidable geography that is difficult to occupy make Afghanistan a natural candidate for neutralization. Achieving a broad legal and diplomatic agreement will not be easy, but continuing on our current path would be much worse.

Neutralization could provide an overarching diplomatic and legal structure—one that counterbalances competitive regional powers externally and works with the xenophobic warrior ethos of the Afghans internally—to lay the groundwork for a guaranteed non-alignment of the state. In addition to Afghanistan itself, participants in a neutralization agreement should include those states most threatened by potential future instability and most capable of intervening militarily, such as Pakistan, China, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States. This ambitious goal must be approached in stages, with knowledge of classic pitfalls, but it is the most promising long-term political option. Only by seeking a new regional framework can we minimize the threat of additional violence emanating from—or catalysed by—post-ISAF Afghanistan.

What is Neutralization?

Neutralization is 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. Neutralization is not about building neighborly harmony, it's about avoiding major war.

Grounded in centuries of practice, neutralization advances regional and domestic stability where the goals of competing powers intersect. The purpose is

to avoid military intervention by one power, which would potentially be countered by another power, ultimately catalysing a systemic war in which everyone would lose. In neutralization, the state commits itself to remain perpetually neutral and to prohibit the projection of force from its territory, while the external powers guarantee the political independence and territorial integrity of the state. Both elements of the formula are imperative: the target state must commit to non-alignment, and the major powers must commit to non-intervention.

The perfect candidate for neutralization is a small or disadvantaged state, seen as a military power vacuum or an enticing object of economic gain, subject to competitive intervention and unlikely to resist on its own. A kind of lowest-common-denominator approach, neutralization removes a vulnerable state from any one country's sphere of influence and ensures its autonomy. Stuck in the middle of a dangerous neighborhood, the state gains diplomatic and legal leverage where it would otherwise have none. It gains diplomatic leverage when neighboring powers put regional stability over individual gain, and legal leverage when there is a way to pursue grievances without intimidation. Through a negotiated agreement, neutralization removes the threat of invasion, dismantlement, or annexation by playing off the interests of meddling neighbors, and increases the potential for international peace and stability in a dangerous region. In short, neutralization builds a regional balance of power. Of course, it doesn't always work; but centuries of practice have yielded plenty of insight into the conditions under which neutralization succeeds or fails.

Geography and tradition of repelling invaders make Afghanistan a natural neutralization candidate.

The Historical Record: When Does it Work?

Neutralization has often been applied at the geographic crossroads of opposing major powers. The modern Europeans did not invent it—Thucydides vividly describes attempts to neutralize city-states during the Peloponnesian War—but in its current form, it has evolved along with modern international law. While our current situation may be more complicated than earlier periods, the history of neutralization offers insights for the complex regional environment of Southwest Asia.

The modern concept first emerged clearly in the writings of Hugo Grotius in 1625, but major powers attempted to isolate key territories from invasion long before that. The British and French neutralization of the Channel Islands on

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March 1, 1483, was the earliest instance. From 1492 to 1518, a pact between France and the Netherlands saved Liege, a small state within the Spanish Netherlands, from pillaging. In the 17th and 18th centuries, most cases involved imposed neutrality—neutral cities in the armed-barrier system erected against France by the Netherlands, Austria, and England, for example. These were all successes, but there were also ample failures. For example, in 1791 Prussia and Russia tried to

‘neutralize’ Poland; in 1801 the German Empire tried to keep six free cities from the Holy Roman Empire; and in 1802 (under the Treaty of Amiens) France and England unsuccessfully tried to neutralize Malta. Sometimes the result was a mixed bag. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the great powers tried to neutralize upper Savoy and the city of Cracow, both fruitless efforts, yet the small Belgian–Prussian condominium of Moresnet, holder of a valuable zinc spar mine, lasted until World War I. And of course, Switzerland’s neutrality was formalized in this period, too (more on that in a moment). Throughout this early history, successes had four characteristics:

- a form of public legitimation (by the Church, or by agreement from more than one power);
- challenging geographical features (which make a state hard to conquer and occupy);
- limited intrinsic strategic importance (not worth the sacrifice); and
- yet some economic value to the major powers (worth the agreement).³

The Swiss Model

Switzerland, a fractious and highly-militarized mountainous country, was formally neutralized at the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, but that was really the codification of long-standing practice. The Swiss Confederation emerged during the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire between the 10th and 13th centuries, a time of transition when power devolved to feudal lords, local authorities, monasteries, and cities. In 1291, the Eternal Alliance or League of the Three Forest Cantons (the alpine areas around Lake Lucerne) aligned for mutual defense. This grew to a conglomeration of free cities and valley communities in a process of confederation, including bloody civil war (1436–1450). The Swiss then conquered external territory at the expense of what we now know as Austria, Germany, and France, and by 1500 had unparalleled warrior prowess. In 1515, Swiss fortunes reversed when the French defeated them at the Battle of Marignano. An “Eternal Peace” treaty was signed in 1516,

in which the Swiss retained the crucial Alpine passes and received a French subsidy; and the French gained the right to enlist Swiss mercenaries. Three more offensive and defensive alliances with France followed.

The Swiss were never again military aggressors on their own accord, but their relationship with France, as well as later with Austria and other powers, both insulated and involved them in European wars over the

next 250 years. Swiss mercenaries were so prized that the French intervened several times to prevent the Swiss from fighting their own neighbors, which would have led them to recall their mercenaries from French service. The French also ameliorated religious tensions within Switzerland, repeatedly forestalling more civil war violence. Like the rest of Europe, the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) was a major crisis for the Swiss: divided between Catholic and Protestant cantons, the Swiss confederation was paralyzed and remained officially neutral to avoid being torn apart. The sectarian violence raging around them pushed them to establish a federal army of 36,000 and to forbid passage through Swiss territory.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) recognized the independence of the Swiss Confederacy, and the Swiss unilaterally declared their permanent neutrality. But they continued to fight internally over religious issues (it was still a very loose federal system), and to send mercenaries by the thousands to fight under foreign flags (especially French). Meanwhile, the Swiss developed vigorous free trade policies, aimed at equal access for all powers to Swiss goods. Their even-handed economic policies, control of crucial lines of communication (especially key mountain passes), and trade abundance probably most influenced belligerents to support their neutrality (at least most of the time).

When the Napoleonic Wars came along, Switzerland experienced the revolutionary unrest sweeping the rest of Europe, especially in Swiss cities. Napoleon invaded, annexed Geneva, compelled the Swiss to provide 12,000 mercenaries, and tried to centralize the Swiss government by force. He declared, "I shall never suffer any influence in Switzerland but my own, even though it should cost me 100,000 men."⁴ Being much more comfortable with local governance, the Swiss resisted; Napoleon eventually had to give up and allow power to devolve to the cantons again. Shortly thereafter, the allies invaded, overwhelming Swiss defenses on their way to the Battle of Leipzig in 1813. In the Treaty of Paris (November 1815), Austria, France, Great Britain, Portugal, Russia, and Prussia formally neutralized Switzerland—a status that has mainly held since.

Centuries of practice have yielded plenty of insight into when neutralization succeeds.

General David Petraeus famously quipped in January 2010, “We’re not trying to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland.”⁵ He correctly sought to set realistic goals. Yet ironically, Swiss neutralization does have certain historical parallels to the current case. These include the land-locked, mountainous geographical positions of the two states; control over lines of communication (especially key mountain passes); strong trading cultures; early fluidity and contention over borders; crippling sectarian/religious civil strife; the absence of strong centralized governance (and a failure to impose it through force); strong warrior cultures; and a tradition of fierce territorial defense from all invaders. France essentially played the role in Switzerland that Pakistan is currently playing in Afghanistan, repeatedly intervening and seeking exclusive influence over its back-door neighbor. Nonetheless, Switzerland’s neutrality developed gradually over the course of five centuries, was self-declared, and was ultimately codified by the great powers. And there are vast obvious contrasts today, including Switzerland’s control over clear borders, strong defensive capabilities, modern culture, and thriving economy.

Subsequent Experiences

All later cases of neutralization have harkened back to the Swiss model, including the intertwined fates of the neutralizations of Belgium (1839) and Luxembourg (1867). The Belgian Revolution of 1830 led to the neutralization of Belgium, as the neighboring powers feared it would destabilize the 19th-century Concert of Europe. Against the Belgians’ will, the London Conference of 1831 imposed “an independent and perpetually neutral state” with limited defenses. Also caught up in the 1830 revolution, Luxembourg lost half its territory to Belgium in the settlement. Luxembourg had emerged from the Congress of Vienna under Dutch sovereignty, but permanently garrisoned against the French with Prussian and Dutch troops. When the Austro–Prussian War later broke out in 1866, Luxembourg demanded that the Prussians withdraw, but the government refused. Scheming with Bismarck, Napoleon III then tried to buy Luxembourg from the King of the Netherlands for France; but Bismarck leaked the deal, setting off an acute European crisis. To restore stability, the European powers agreed that Luxembourg would be a neutral state like Belgium, but completely disarmed. Luxembourg was neutralized at the 1867 London Conference, stripped of its defenses, and given a collective great power guarantee of permanent neutrality.

In August 1914, the Germans swept away the neutrality of both states, barely a speed bump on their way to fight the French, bringing in the British and resulting in World War I. But unlike the Swiss, the Belgians and Luxembourgers were coerced, rendered largely defenseless, and, living mostly on plains and

plateaus, had poor geographical and topographical positions that made invasion easy.⁶

The aftermath of World War II, with its sharp division into Soviet and Western spheres of influence, reawakened an interest in neutralization. Stalin proposed a corridor of neutral states running through the European continent as a buffer for the Soviet Union, an initiative that failed when West German Prime Minister Konrad Adenauer resisted it and Germany was formally divided throughout the Cold War. Neutralization was repeatedly proposed during the Cold War for divided nations like Germany, Korea, and Vietnam, briefly attempted in Laos in 1962, and unsuccessfully proposed for all of Southeast Asia by Malaysia in 1970.⁷

Austria's 1955 neutralization is the most recent successful case. Again referencing the Swiss model, the Austrians pushed for their own neutralization as a way to regain their full sovereignty and independence following World War II, and the four post-war occupying powers (the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union) eventually complied. The Soviet government held out for ten years in fractious negotiations, but eventually cut its losses and signed the Austrian State Treaty, a four-power guarantee and withdrawal of occupations, followed by Austria's declaration of its own permanent neutrality. Looking at this prosperous country today, it is difficult to imagine the occupation: Austria had bitter disputes over borders, dangerous riots, internal unrest, and two attempted coups (1947 and 1950). Under the terms of the agreement, Austria eschewed alliances with either East or West and developed a capable army to defend its own territory.⁸

Of course, in sharp contrast to Afghanistan, Austria was an advanced country with a strong central government vigorously committed to permanent neutrality, not to mention an army capable of defending the frontiers. And the "Swiss model" was right next door. Obviously, Afghanistan is neither Switzerland nor Austria now; but neither should it be destined for continuous destabilizing interventions by neighbors when regional stability is a prerequisite for much more important development priorities. Afghanistan's challenging topography, dislike of outsiders, and widespread warrior traditions certainly make it more like Switzerland than 19th-century Belgium and Luxembourg were. Given a serious multilateral diplomatic effort, it is possible that a regional neutralization agreement could succeed in Afghanistan where other regional approaches have failed.

Given a serious multilateral diplomatic effort, neutralization could succeed in Afghanistan.

The Failure of Other Regional Approaches

The need for a regional solution in Afghanistan has long been apparent, even if the exact way to go about it has not. Over the past ten years, there have been repeated multilateral efforts to cooperate on this issue: the 2005 economic summit, the 2008 Paris summit, and subsequent high-level meetings in Islamabad, London, and Lisbon have all ended in disappointment. But earlier efforts have operated in a different political context. As the 2014 deadline for combat troop withdrawal looms, the American people are no longer willing to spend the lives and treasure needed to stabilize Afghanistan while others enjoy a free ride. Neutralization could be a wise way out.

Participants at earlier meetings risked little when multilateral talks failed, because the United States consistently came through with a massive influx of troops and assistance in the end. The cost-benefit analysis was obvious: better to grab opportunities unilaterally while someone else paid the price. For example, with Americans and NATO drawing fire from radical insurgents and footing the bill for Afghan security, the Chinese developed lucrative projects like the huge Aynak copper mine south of Kabul, the Iranians planned a new car manufacturing plant in Herat, the Uzbeks pursued a major rail project in northern Afghanistan, and the Pakistanis played a double game of helping the Americans with one hand and succoring their enemies with the other. It was a sweet deal for all of them, but it's about to end.

The Obama administration has pursued approaches which started within Afghanistan and worked outward. In its first months, the administration expanded the Afghan theater of operations to include Pakistan, and tried to integrate Afghan and Pakistani efforts at defeating radical Islamists. It then built up regional counterterrorism cooperation to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Finally, it tried to transform Afghanistan into a region-wide trade hub by rejuvenating the historic Silk Road. While enjoying some success, these initiatives assumed a common concern for Afghanistan that either did not exist within the region or was overshadowed by neighbors' own economic and security problems.

This is not to imply that the Obama administration was uninterested in a regional solution, especially early in its tenure. In 2009–10, the late Richard Holbrooke, then special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, tried mightily to build a foundation for broader approaches. Hampered by the fact that India was not in his brief, he struggled to circumvent India–Pakistan hostility, even as the Pakistanis resented being lumped into an “Af–Pak” approach and the Karzai regime accused him of favoring of Pakistan.⁹ Holbrooke's untimely death in December 2010, just as he seemed to be making progress with both countries, was a heavy blow. There was a chance that Holbrooke's efforts might

have resulted in a wider, long-term U.S. plan. After that, however, short-term military and intelligence missions eclipsed the U.S. strategic approach.¹⁰ Indeed in the run-up to the November 2012 election, it was difficult to get either party's candidates or policymakers to talk about Afghanistan at all.

From the American perspective, the key goal in Afghanistan is to leave behind a country strong and stable enough to prevent al-Qaeda or any other malicious actor from again exploiting its territory as a springboard to project major violence abroad. All of the regional powers share an antipathy to al-Qaeda and other destabilizing non-state actors, an interest in the stability of Afghanistan and neighboring areas, and an imperative to prevent any single power (or non-state actor) from controlling the country according to its narrow agenda. These provide grounds for limited cooperation. Neutralization, which starts by working with outside powers first and then works inward, could give Afghanistan a better framework in which to navigate its own foreign, economic, and security policy.

Neutralizing Afghanistan?

Always a weak country surrounded by stronger neighbors, Afghanistan has been most stable during periods when it was neutral and non-aligned, as it was from 1929–1978 during what the Afghans call the “Era of Tranquility.” Against considerable pressure, the country was even able to maintain its neutrality during the Second World War. The best hope for a stable post-ISAF Afghanistan is to restore that status, guaranteed at a minimum by states that have previously supported factions within the country, notably Pakistan, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States, joined by China.

Recent attempts to transport Afghanistan from its deeply embedded tribal and cultural roots to a modern centralized democratic government were well-meaning, but ignored the 500-year consolidation needed by other ethnically complex nation-states. There is no doubt that endemic factionalism, sectarianism, corruption, and weak institutions will continue in the short- or medium-term. Afghanistan may even lapse again into civil war. The Karzai government is seen as a foreign invention that will struggle to build political legitimacy on its current path. ISAF has made important strides, especially with the Afghan National Army, but outside powers cannot impose long-term order and unity any more than Napoleon could crush the independent-minded Swiss into a centralized nation-state. Today, Switzerland is a descendent of the only attempt to form a free league of those cities/communities that both survived the feudal period and sidestepped the consolidation of strong nation-states in 19th-century Europe. Likewise, Afghanistan is a semi-feudal state that must be built

indigenously, with economic support but without further political meddling. The point is to buy the country time to find its own path.

Neutralization does not necessarily guarantee peace within a state. Instead, it quarantines the state from outside interference so that internal conflicts are not exacerbated and made contagious; in short, it contains the problem. Some will argue that the presence of non-state actors, a powerful Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other warring factions within Afghanistan make neutralization impossible. In fact, the opposite is true: only a pact of non-interference and verification can remove Afghanistan from an endless cycle of civil war at home and projection of violence abroad. In other words, even if the Taliban take over parts of Afghanistan, the rest of the region will be better off with a neutralization agreement than without it.

Negotiating a Tough Neighborhood

The key to crafting such an agreement is to determine what each of the seven powers *must* have as opposed to what they would *like* to have. The interests of Afghanistan's neighbors are not completely aligned, but they are hardly more conflicting than the aspirations of 19th-century revolutionary France, Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia.

All of the major powers share three immediate goals for post-ISAF Afghanistan. First, they want to eliminate any return of al-Qaeda (or associates) and abolish any use of Afghan territory for projecting power or drawing retaliatory fire which might affect them. This is not just an American concern: the attacks of September 11 sparked two conventional wars that destabilized the entire region. Second (and related), all the powers want to prevent Sunni ideological radicalization from spreading to adjacent areas. This is far more dangerous to regional neighbors like Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and China than it is to the United States. Third, all want to avoid strengthening radical Islamist groups that could gain access to Pakistani nuclear weapons. Pakistan's ISI might believe that realpolitik games with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba have advanced their anti-India agenda; but these proxies now attack Pakistani military targets and threaten the stability of their own country.¹¹ A stable, non-Taliban-controlled independent state is in the immediate interests of Afghanistan and all of its neighbors.

Related are four longer-term concerns. First, returning Afghan refugees from nearby countries, especially Iran and Pakistan, would lessen the burden on neighbors. Second, reducing the burgeoning drug trade would help regional states, especially Iran, whose population suffers from the highest levels of drug addiction in the world.¹² Third, responsibly developing the resources and mineral wealth of Afghanistan would serve the entire region and contribute to long-term stability and development of the country as well as its neighbors.

And finally, revitalizing trade routes through Afghanistan would restore the state to its customary role along the Silk Road and help build the region's economic prosperity.¹³ In giving Afghanistan room to pursue its own interests and development, neutralization could advance all of these longer-term goals as well.

Despite the daunting task of bringing so many parties to the negotiating table, not to mention the diplomatic skill required to reach agreement, multilateral neutralization has powerful international advantages. While the bipolar bargaining of the Cold War had simplicity and symmetry, having only two "sides" to such agreements meant that when inevitable violations occurred, only the other side could respond. The result was that strategically located weak states struggled to maintain independence from the opposing alliances. For example, Austria was neutralized by Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union; but in practice, over the course of ten years of occupation (1945–1955), the Cold War bipolarity came into focus and hardened—so the years of difficult negotiations became a competition between the three Western powers on one hand and the Soviet Union on the other. After the signing of the 1955 treaty, maintaining Austrian neutrality in the shadow of a divided Germany required remarkable skill and diplomacy from Vienna.

However, with a multilateral neutralization agreement, signatory powers that are not directly threatened by rivals can help address practical problems when they arise. The November 1815 declaration recognizing and formalizing the neutralization of Switzerland was signed by Austria, France, Great Britain, Portugal, Prussia, and Russia, later also joined by Sweden and Spain.¹⁴ Lacking a zero-sum outlook, the signatories value stability over relative gains against an opposing bloc, so the chances for stability are higher. In other words, a 19th-century Concert of Europe arrangement suits neutralization agreements even better than the bipolar alliance structure of the 20th century did, and this can be the case for 21st-century Afghanistan.

But of course, neutralization would not be easy. Intervention used to be more clear-cut than today: all of these militarily-capable states (Pakistan, China, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States) can support non-state groups and actors with plausible deniability. Indeed, some already do—most notably Pakistan and Iran. Although the government denies it, the Pakistanis support the Haqqani network that attacks ISAF soldiers and civilians, for example. In the face of American withdrawal, their attacks have increased, gaining them power and political leverage. Regardless of the kind of future government Afghanistan has, the Haqqani network will have to be bought off. But it is a mistake to see them as mere stooges of Pakistan: the Haqqani network could turn against Pakistan in the future. The Iranians are sowing just enough chaos in western Afghanistan to keep the occupation off balance and to deter anti-Iran actions by the United States and Israel elsewhere. Providing training, funding,

explosives, and small weapons, they are targeting Americans and trying to pull the Afghan government away from the United States. Yet their aims are complex. They are not interested in bringing a Taliban regime to power, so their meddling could actually decline when American targets diminish. Both Pakistan and Iran could find it in their interests to stop poking the Afghan hornet's nest if other foreign powers do the same.

Well into preparations for post-ISAF Afghanistan, Pakistan poses the greatest obstacle to neutralization, and yet would benefit most from it. Afghanistan

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would severely undermine Pakistan's government if it again became a safe haven for the ISI's Islamist project. ISI-trained or ISI-supported Taliban who currently attack American troops might turn their attention toward assassinating Pakistani government officials, security personnel, and moderate reformers, or worse, toward triggering a large-scale, potentially nuclear war with India over Kashmir. Pakistan needs a stable government in Kabul that is not antagonistic to Pakistan and does not allow Afghan territory to be used against it;

Pakistan also wants a settlement that does not spread Pashtun nationalism and instability in Pakistan. On the first point, the Pakistanis fear that India will gain strategic access and force them into a two-front war. The best way to reassure Pakistan is to neutralize Afghanistan in such a way that no military assistance or alliance with India is possible. On the second, Pakistan's government worries about the future of the Pashtuns, especially considering pressure for the secession of "Pashtunistan" on both sides of the Durand line between Afghanistan and Pakistan. A guarantee of territorial integrity would mean that any efforts to break up Afghanistan would be met with a multilateral response. For Pakistan, the best buffer is a territorially secure, independent state that is proxy to no one.

With the present condition of U.S.–Iranian relations, it is hard to remember that Tehran helped Washington to overthrow the Taliban after the 9/11 attacks. Tehran wants a stable, moderate, and secure state along its eastern border, as well as the protection of Afghan tribes of Persian origin, especially the Hazaras. It does not want another radical Sunni regime on its borders, particularly one with close ties to Saudi Arabia. Iran has also engaged in an ambitious campaign against drug smuggling, including building a large concrete barrier across the border with Nimruz, the southwestern-most province Afghanistan.¹⁵ But the relationship with the United States is a serious problem, prompting troublemaking in Afghanistan and sanctuary for members of al-Qaeda in Iran. Nevertheless, the best outcome for Iran would be an independent, stable, non-radicalized neighbor, which is what a neutralization agreement could

encourage—especially as Tehran claims it opposes additional military measures and wants the region to solve its own problems.

Broadening the geographical circle, China and India, as well as the Central Asian states (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), all have interests that neutralization could meet. While the Chinese have been wary of the large Western military presence on their border, they also worry about instability and the threat to Chinese economic interests after withdrawal. Beijing has a great deal to lose if the Uighur population of China's Xinxiang region radicalizes further. In July 2009, for example, major unrest broke out in the Xinxiang capital Urumqi, killing 200 people. More recently, Islamist radicals in Kashgar, who were apparently trained in Pakistan, knifed a dozen Han Chinese. The tight friendship between China and Pakistan has been strained as a result, with the Chinese government more willing to press for a regional deal that calms tensions in its Western province. Vigorous efforts to negotiate through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) demonstrate that China understands its long-term interests in Afghanistan.¹⁶

India is probably least happy about the imminent troop withdrawals, because it may bear the brunt of any Islamist violence emanating from post-ISAF Afghanistan. It is keenly interested in regional economic cooperation which might help bring energy from Central Asia to the subcontinent. New Delhi strongly favors a regional political solution and continued involvement of other major powers, particularly since the most likely alternative is a Pakistan-controlled proxy state in Afghanistan.

The Central Asian states should be observers, not signatories, to a neutralization agreement, as its purpose is to balance the interests of competing major powers against each other. All five Central Asian states suffer from drug trafficking and fear resurgent Islamist radicalism in a post-ISAF Afghanistan. All are strongly interested in the kinds of regionally-based economic initiatives, especially gas and electricity projects, that a neutralized Afghanistan could support. A stable, independent Afghanistan that is focused on policing its own borders would serve all of their interests.

Finally, in the largest sphere, a well-crafted agreement could also serve Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Although Russia has drawn satisfaction in seeing Americans suffer at the hands of the insurgency, resurgent Islamist radicalism would be deeply against their interests, in the Caucasus as well as Central Asia. Like Beijing, Moscow is already using its role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to reach out to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Of all the major powers, Russia, with a long history of bilateral neutrality agreements beginning in 1931 as well as a well-established preference for Afghanistan as a buffer state, should be the most interested in Afghanistan's neutralization now that ISAF drawdown is inevitable.

Saudi Arabia might be tempted to resurrect its close ties to Sunni insurgent movements in Afghanistan to offset Iranian influence, but the blowback of its mujahideen project toward Saudi targets has convinced the Royal family that the experiment of the 1990s must not be repeated.¹⁷ Government and private financiers send a great deal of money to Afghanistan and Pakistan, so Saudi involvement is essential. Riyadh has been deeply involved in efforts to achieve internal reconciliation among Taliban factions and the Afghan government, and would like to see a more conservative unified government in Kabul. Giving the Afghans the space to find their own way should appeal to the Saudis, particularly if the United States supports it.

As for the United States, Afghanistan has little strategic value except in negative terms. Afghanistan must not destabilize the region or become a haven for radical non-state actors that would attack the United States. This undesirable outcome is *more* likely if Afghanistan becomes aligned with Pakistan, especially as it would set Afghanistan back toward the medieval brutality that the United States and NATO have been working hard to forestall. The United States does not need a strong central government in Kabul. It needs a stable, autonomous state that will not project power externally or become a proxy to another power, as it maintains autonomy and pursues its own path.

How it Might Work

To achieve the best possible long-term outcome in the Afghanistan campaign, the seven key militarily-capable states that would be threatened by a destabilized Afghanistan (Pakistan, China, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States) might enter into a common agreement to neutralize the state. The chances for neutralization of Afghanistan today are better than they were during

the Cold War, when the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union was zero-sum.

The interests of relevant powers are now adequately aligned to remove Afghanistan as a catalyst of instability among them.

The mechanics of neutralization—verification and enforcement—are important, however, because precipitous action could itself destabilize the state. In August 2010, Selig Harrison put forward one proposal: a UN diplomatic initiative to achieve military neutralization of Afghanistan, including a three-year timetable for complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, with

termination of U.S. access to bases.¹⁸ Afghanistan could not achieve full neutrality with foreign forces on its soil, so their complete removal must happen

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eventually. But such a short timetable is counterproductive. Regional neighbors are not uniformly against a U.S./ISAF presence in Afghanistan; indeed, some (such as China, India, Russia, all the Central Asian republics) see benefit in it, and Kabul likewise appreciates having the United States train Afghan forces for a while. In the May 1, 2012, U.S.–Afghan Strategic Partnership agreement, which sets the broad outline of the relationship between those two countries from 2012–2024, the U.S. commits to support the “training, equipping, advising and sustaining of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), so that Afghanistan can independently secure and defend itself against internal and external threats” beyond 2014. While Afghanistan is designated a Major Non-Nato Ally, the partnership framework also commits the United States to “the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan” with no permanent U.S. military bases in Afghanistan.¹⁹

It would not be a great leap from this partnership arrangement to restoring Afghanistan’s neutrality; but the transition should occur in phases. With the Afghan government gradually taking on the internal stabilization role, the mission of U.S. and NATO forces could shift to helping protect Afghanistan’s frontiers. No control machinery aided the neutralizations of Belgium, Luxembourg, or Switzerland, but today a range of proven technical means could be employed to secure the borders of Afghanistan, including infrared sensors and cameras.²⁰ These would differ depending on the local situation, but even more important would be complementary measures put in place by countries on the other side. Iran, Uzbekistan, and China already protect their borders reasonably well; Turkmenistan and Tajikistan do not. Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot even agree on what their border is, but Afghanistan would be more likely to recognize the Durand line if a neutralization agreement guaranteed its territorial integrity and lessened the likelihood that Pakistan would try to control its future.

To address the more difficult frontiers, the United States should sponsor a multilateral program of verification through the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and radar. The purpose would be to involve the neighbors in efforts to track and prevent the movement of arms or troops. Violations would be reported in real time to a UN monitoring commission and also shared with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). According to the commander of Iran’s National Border Police, Iran already employs UAVs along its borders. International investment in border control management should gradually increase as ISAF draws down. Community policing in remote border areas would also be essential, with the central priority being to prevent foreign fighters or arms from entering Afghanistan. Obviously, a border patrol in Afghanistan would be far from perfect, but even partial success would deter outsiders, strengthen Afghan national identity, and have beneficial effects for the region.

The Logic of Neutralizing Afghanistan

With ISAF withdrawal inevitable, a sea change is already underway: the question is whether the United States will be ahead of the curve or behind it. Under current circumstances, key actions within Afghanistan by any one state are perceived to have a deleterious effect on the interests of other competing states, so the only feasible solution is to discourage all of them from interfering in a neutralized state. As the United States draws down over the next two years, yielding to regional anarchy would be irresponsible. Allowing neighbors to rely on bilateral measures, jockey for relative position, and pursue conflicting national interests without regard for dangerous regional dynamics will result in a repeat of the pattern that has played out in Afghanistan for the past thirty years—except this time the outcome could be not just terrorism but nuclear war.

Neutralization is the best strategic solution for the future of Afghanistan. It maintains the integrity of the state, deters intervention, and draws regional powers into stabilizing rather than destabilizing behavior. It is not a panacea: within Afghanistan (as in Switzerland), neutralization may involve the violent emergence of new (or very old) confederate forms of governance. But the outcome of this struggle for modern statehood is up to the Afghans, not NATO or the United States—or Pakistan, China, or Russia for that matter—under any circumstances. Neutralization is the only way, over time, to stabilize the region and maximize the chances for Afghan self-determination to evolve.

Notes

1. Peter Alexander Rupert Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 318 and 325–6. Soviet reactions to the Carrington plan appear in *Izvestiya*, February 21, 1980; *Tass*, February 20, 1980; and *Tass*, July 5, 1981.
2. Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 450–1. For other prominent support, see Selig S. Harrison, “Dateline Afghanistan: Exit Through Finland?” *Foreign Policy*, no. 41 (Winter 1980–81): pp. 163–187; and former Indian Foreign Minister Jagat S. Mehta, “A Neutral Solution,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 47 (Summer 1982): pp. 139–153. More recently, see Henry A. Kissinger, “In Afghanistan, America Needs a Strategy, Not an Alibi,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 25, 2010, <http://www.henryakissinger.com/articles/iht062510.html>.
3. On the history of multilateral neutralization, see Cyrus French Wicker, *Neutralization* (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1911) and Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Neutralization as a Method of Conflict Resolution among States* (unpublished book manuscript).
4. Quoted by Edgar Bonjour, *Swiss Neutrality: Its History and Meaning*, 2nd ed., trans. Mary Hottinger (London: Allen & Unwin., 1948), pp. 46.
5. Fareed Zakaria, “The General: An Interview with David Petraeus, the Head of Central Command and the Commander in Iraq during the Bush Surge,” *Newsweek*, January 4,

- 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/01/03/the-general.html>. Petraeus drew the comparison repeatedly in response to questions about nation-building. See also Elisabeth Bumiller, "Petraeus Tells Panel July Drawdown in Afghanistan May Include Some Combat Troops," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/world/asia/17petraeus.html?_r=0.
6. For further information on the neutralizations of Belgium and Luxembourg, see William E. Lingelbach, "Belgian Neutrality: Its Origin and Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 39 (October 1933): pp. 48–72; Fred Greene, "Neutralization and the Balance of Power," *The American Political Science Review* 47, no. 4 (December 1953): pp. 1041–1057; Gordon E. Sherman, "The Permanent Neutrality Treaties," *Yale Law Journal* 24, no. 3 (January 1915): pp. 217–241.
 7. On the Cold War experience with neutralization, see Cyril E. Black, Richard A. Falk, Klaus Knorr, and Oran R. Young, *Neutralization in World Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968).
 8. On the neutralization of Austria, see Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Great Power Politics and the Struggle over Austria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
 9. David Rohde, "Holbrooke's Last Mission in Afghanistan," *The Daily Beast*, November 26, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/26/richard-holbrooke-s-last-mission-in-afghanistan-by-david-rohde.html>; and Karen DeYoung, "Holbrooke's Death Leaves Major Void in Obama's Afghan Strategy," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/13/AR2010121306799.html>.
 10. For an excellent, in-depth analysis, see Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), especially Chapters 24 and 25, pp. 653–712.
 11. See, for example, Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kakur, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2010): pp. 47–59, <http://csis.org/files/publication/twq10januarygangulykapur.pdf>.
 12. The 2005 U.N. World Drug Report found that Iran had the highest drug addiction in the world, with 2.8 percent of the population over age 15 being opiate addicts. Karl Vick, "Opiates of the Iranian People, Despair Drives World's Highest Addiction Rate," *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/22/AR2005092202287.html>.
 13. See S. Frederick Staff and Andrew C. Kuchins, et al., *The Key to Success in Afghanistan: A Modern Silk Road Strategy*, (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program with CSIS, 2010), <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/1005Afghan.pdf>.
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 15. Luke Mogelson, "The Scariest Little Corner of the World," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/magazine/the-corner-where-afghanistan-iran-and-pakistan-meet.html?pagewanted=all>.
 16. For more information, see Ahmed Rashid, "Russia and China eye role in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *BBC News Asia*, June 6, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18342888>; "SCO Sees Role in Afghanistan," *Dawn.com*, September 12, 2012, <http://dawn.com/2012/09/12/sco-sees-role-in-afghanistan/#print>.
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18. Selig Harrison, "How to Leave Afghanistan Without Losing," *Foreign Policy*, August 24, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/24/how_to_leave_afghanistan_without_losing.
19. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement," May 1, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/fact-sheet-us-afghanistan-strategic-partnership-agreement>. The complete agreement is at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf>. Negotiations on a post-2014 Status of Forces agreement are ongoing.
20. Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Elizabeth Collett, *A New Architecture for Border Management*, Transatlantic Council on Migration, (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, March 2011), p. 7, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/borderarchitecture.pdf>.