Stop Meddling and Declare Afghanistan A Neutral State

By Ghulam Faruq Achikzad

Afghanistan has endured more than its share of foreign intervention and occupation, spanning decades during which its people have suffered death, displacement and seemingly intractable instability. Ghulam Faruq Achikzad argues that it’s time for the international community, and especially Afghanistan’s neighbors, to declare Afghanistan neutral and allow the Afghan people to shape their own future without foreign interference.

The first phase consisted of establishing a six-month interim government, which was led by a former Afghan justice minister, representing former King Mohammad Zaher Shah. The second phase was the creation of a Transitional Authority, paving the way for general elections, which was the third and final phase. An important stipulation was that a traditional loya jirga (grand council) would be convened within 18 months of the formation of the Transitional Authority to draft a new constitution that would build on the suspended 1964 constitution, excising clauses that pertained to the monarchy and mandating a presidential system with a bicameral legislature. It was hoped that this new constitution would accelerate Afghanistan’s move toward democracy and provide much needed stability.

But external forces subverted the political process, expressly ignoring the will of the Afghan people. Hamid Karzai, a little-known exile figure at that time, was selected as the chairman of the interim administration through some questionable backroom dealings and has been kept in power to this day, contrary to the original vision laid out in Bonn. Outsiders also tampered with the new Afghan Constitution, which was supposed to be drafted by Afghans to establish the legal ground-work for a just and stable society.

Karzai’s tenure as president has been marked by systemic corruption, cronynism and a resurgence of the Taliban. Far from fulfilling the expectations of the Bonn Agreement, his poor stewardship has short-circuited the transition to a functioning democracy. It also seems to have further entrenched destabilizing forces that undermine any movement in that direction. So it is hardly surprising that very little has been accomplished in terms of nation-building and sustainable economic development. As a result, movement towards a civil society and a just social order has also been curtailed.

For democratic ideals to take root and for Afghans to take charge of their own future, Afghanistan must be free to pursue its own national interests. Enshrined in the Bonn Agreement was a critically important — and willfully ignored — principle that required all stakeholders to “take necessary measures to guarantee national sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Afghanistan as well as the non-interference by foreign countries in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.”

As host of the Bonn Conference and the only impartial international body capable of overseeing an orderly transition to democracy in Afghanistan, the UN Security Council should build on the Bonn Agreement and pass a resolution guaranteeing the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan in a way that would keep the country free from any outside interference and declare Afghanistan a demilitarized and neutral state. This could also be accomplished through a UN-sponsored international conference. Useful precedents for such an idea may be found in the 1955 Austrian State Treaty, or the International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, signed in 1962. Signatories to these agreements — neighboring countries and dominant foreign powers — pledged not to interfere in the internal affairs of these states and to respect their fundamental rights of self determination, notwithstanding the semi-secret US intervention in Laos at the time.
This does not mean that the international community should not play any role in shaping Afghanistan’s future. There is a place for responsible action, and the pursuit of peace should rightly be viewed as a moral imperative. But Afghanistan must not be viewed as a battleground where competing ideologies and regional rivalries are acted out in a destructive power struggle. In their zeal to maintain the primacy of their own strategic objectives and national interests above anything else, certain nations have undermined peace and stability and have unduly influenced the political, economic and military spheres in Afghanistan. Neighboring countries and other interested parties can play a more productive role in Afghanistan by encouraging regional economic co-operation and partnership as a way to promote peace and prosperity.

**MEDDLESOME NEIGHBORS**

While the question of neutrality was broached at Bonn, Afghanistan’s neighbors have never actually respected its sovereignty. Foreign governments, international institutions, think tanks and the media have all written about the broader international community’s so-called exit strategy. But few suggest any meaningful solution to the meddling in Afghan affairs by Pakistan, Iran and, to some extent, India. Lawless tribal areas along the long and porous border with Pakistan — with the government often mired in corruption and influence in the region. Pakistan’s mini-military-industrial complex has profited handsomely from the war on terror and has every incentive to keep it going for the foreseeable future. If this is allowed, the conflict in Afghanistan could spread and become a “bleeding wound” for everybody involved — Afghans, neighboring countries and the global community.

Iran, on the other hand, continues to play its Shia card to exert influence and stir up the restive Shiite population in Afghanistan. This is a dangerous game. Pakistan, Iran and others must realize that a weak and unstable Afghanistan will eventually mean that their own countries will become weak and unstable.

It is also important to note that both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda are foreign creations that found a safe haven in a weak and vulnerable Afghanistan. There isn’t a long-established Islamic militant tradition in Afghanistan. Suicide bombings, decapitations and the wanton and indiscriminate slaughter of civilians are new phenomena expressly forbidden by Islamic law. Outside instigators have fomented much of the violence inside Afghanistan, stirring people’s passions and creating division. The recent, deadly protests that erupted over the burning of the Quran reflect this ability to incite hatred.

External factors have conspired to create this media-driven image of Afghanistan as a seething cauldron of religious extremism and virulent anti-Westernism. In fact, a Western-style modernization drive began in Afghanistan in the late 1950s that lasted for two decades. But this first serious attempt at industrialization and development was thwarted by the Soviet invasion in 1979.

**ECONOMIC RUIN**

The Afghan economy is in a shambles and completely dependent on foreign aid, which pays government and military salaries, among many other things. It runs a massive trade deficit that in 2010 showed $6 billion in imports against just $571 million in exports. The economy will likely collapse when the US military commitment to Afghanistan is sharply reduced. The same scenario played out after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, when over 70 percent of economic activity in Afghanistan was derived from Soviet sources. Chronic overdependence on foreign aid is dangerous and destabilizing. Afghanistan needs a more robust economic policy that focuses on promoting regional economic cooperation with its neighbors. Some progress is already evident. China has invested in Afghanistan’s newly discovered mineral wealth; and natural gas pipeline projects will connect the Central Asian States, Pakistan, India and Russia to Afghanistan and will help spur economic growth. Export promotion should also be pursued, capitalizing on Afghanistan’s once-vibrant textile and handicrafts industry. This will encourage the creation of a dynamic entrepreneurial class.

The integration of Afghanistan into the regional economy and greater mutual interdependence will ease tensions between neighboring nations and reduce outside interference in Afghan affairs, which should provide an incentive for building alliances between states to enhance collective security. The creation of a regional economic union or a free trade zone would boost trade and development and make South Asia an attractive investment option, as member nations work together to remove tariffs and other trade barriers. Everybody stands to gain.

Afghanistan shares close cultural, linguistic and historical ties with its neighbors, particularly with...
Iran and Pakistan, reaching back across millennia to the halcyon days of the Great Silk Road. Such linkages should form the basis for meaningful, long-term co-operation. These countries have a shared destiny and need to work collectively to strengthen partnerships in new and emerging areas of common interest. They must resist the urge to trample on each other’s sovereignty and must acknowledge the rights and humanity of all the people who would be affected by their actions. They need to view each other as potential trading partners, not as enemies.

**COUNTERINSURGENCY ALONE CANNOT SUCCEED**

Another enormous problem is the fact that opium production represents the biggest chunk of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product. This doesn’t portend well for the health of the economy, now or in the future. Aggressive and serious crop-substitution and alternative livelihood programs (extracting essence from flowers, for example) can address this critical challenge. Eco-friendly aerial spraying (as has been done in South America), administered under the aegis of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), can destroy poppy plants and enable farmers to substitute saffron and mint, say, for opium. Saffron, the world’s most expensive spice, fetches high prices on the world market and is extremely labor-intensive. Afghanistan’s climate is highly conducive to saffron production, and there are small pockets in the country—notably Herat and Khost—where people are growing saffron instead of opium. But such efforts need to be ramped up dramatically.

An important corollary is that the US must seriously discourage the cultivation and sale of opium in Afghanistan. The country supplies more than 90 percent of the world’s opium. The most effective way to control the flow of Afghan-produced opiates would be to block the major transit routes through surrounding countries. This regional initiative would include close cooperation between states in the interdiction of cross-border traffic and the adoption of other new counternarcotics strategies.

Afghanistan’s sputtering reconstruction process illustrates the different and sometimes contradictory foreign influences at play in a situation where the national government is ineffective. Afghans must assume ownership over the reconstruction and development of their country for things to improve.

Some $46 billion in direct aid was pledged to Afghanistan under the four “compacts” put to donors at meetings in Tokyo, Berlin, London and Paris. According to those in charge of overseeing these compacts, only 18 percent of the committed funds have gone to the Afghan budget (for both operations and development expenditures). Due to documented corruption at all levels of government, a mere fraction of this sum is being spent on development and reconstruction. The remainder of the pledged sum, when realized, wends its way through a crooked, multi-layered maze, from the donors to the military to special projects and to foreign non-governmental organizations, with little or no transparency and accountability. Also, the outsized presence and influence of foreign NGOs and private firms may have smothered, to some extent, private sector development, making entry difficult for Afghan organizations and discouraging participation.

The result is that there are too many competing agendas in Afghanistan—the US military, USAID, other donors and foreign NGOs. For the benefits of reconstruction to reach ordinary Afghans, priority must be given to Afghan institutions run by Afghans for the benefit of Afghans—in short, the Afghanistan of reconstruction and development is crucial.

It is important to remember that the vast majority of the Afghan population has not been radicalized. Only a very narrow segment of society, aided and abetted by international sponsors, and mostly foreign fighters are responsible for the murder and mayhem in Afghanistan. As a result, the counterinsurgency strategy adopted by NATO can only succeed in winning people’s hearts and minds if military operations are combined with parallel efforts in development—for example, building and strengthening institutions and infrastructure, and creating a positive climate for economic uplift. This is the most effective way to combat extremism. Otherwise, the international community risks prosecuting an unbalanced campaign that will have only a fleeting impact. For example, greater donor investment in projects by the Afghan National Solidarity Program (NSP), which is led by the Afghan government and aims to develop some 5,000 villages throughout the country, will not only restore confidence and trust in government, but also help engender a renewed sense of national pride, purpose and identity in the people.

A key aspect of this strategy should be to curb the use of indiscriminate drone strikes that kill scores of innocent civilians and inflame the local population, fueling the insurgency. Afghans perceive these strikes as a blatant assault on their national sovereignty.

**FINDING SOLUTIONS**

Since the need to find a durable solution to the problems in Afghanistan will become paramount in the wake of the US/NATO exit, I would like to make the following proposals, which can be accomplished with a UN Security Council Resolution followed by vigorous enforcement:

1) The UN must declare Afghanistan a neutral state. All intervention in the affairs of the country by outsiders and, in particular, neighboring countries must be stopped. The neutrality and territorial integrity of Afghanistan will only be respected if it is part of a broader regional effort to encourage co-operation and dialogue to address jointly defined challenges.

2) All warlords and their militias must be disarmed through a much more systematic and stringent disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process than was implemented previously. To marginalize entrenched warlords, their assets must be frozen and their financial and military support from foreign sponsors must be cut off immediately. Such foreign support runs counter to a policy of neutrality. Through bribery, horse-trading and intimidation, warlords have subverted democratic processes in Afghanistan. They must face prosecution before an internationally mandated tribunal for crimes committed against the Afghan people.

3) Opium cultivation must be declared illegal and fully controlled by the UNODC. A new,
Countries that violate Afghanistan’s neutrality would be subject to trade embargoes and other economic sanctions and possibly even limited military action. In the last century, for the most part, the neutrality of nations has been respected. In the few instances where it wasn’t, the offending country incurred widespread international condemnation. The threat of political and economic isolation has proven to be a strong deterrent. Moreover, as regional interests are harmonized through expanded co-operation, this will create powerful incentives for nations to work together to achieve peace and prosperity.

CONCLUSION
Throughout Afghanistan’s turbulent history, conflict has been an inseparable component in shaping national identity. These events, often instigated by outside aggressors, have influenced language, culture and ethnicity, creating a diverse mosaic of people who have one point of commonality: they are Afghan. At various points in Afghan history, most recently during the British invasions of the 19th century and the Soviet invasion of 1979, these diverse groups set aside their differences and banded together to resist foreign encroachment. They were able to forge a uniquely Afghan identity from this complex patchwork of tribes and ethnicities. It is a fallacy to assume that the differences between the people of Afghanistan are irreconcilable, and that the country must be partitioned to be pacified. History suggests otherwise.

What’s needed is a renewed commitment from the Afghan people and the global community to follow the vision mapped out in Bonn more than a decade ago. Afghanistan must be free to pursue its national interests without any foreign intrusion. It must be allowed to conduct free, fair and transparent elections that reflect the true will of the electorate — to date this has not happened. Afghanistan’s national sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of its borders must be respected. Excessive meddling in Afghanistan risks widening the conflict and threatens regional peace. Finally, efforts to expand economic co-operation between neighbors, which would revitalize ancient trade routes, should be bolstered and will yield a substantial peace dividend with wide-ranging implications for all stakeholders. Nations must work together to overcome decades of mistrust. Security and prosperity can only be realized by advancing regional solutions.

For the international community — particularly the US — the war on terror and the task of pacifying the nettlesome tribes in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region have proven to be exasperatingly difficult, draining resources that could be put to better use at home. As policy makers debate the costs of a hasty drawdown of troops and the problems that it could unleash, perhaps they might consider the merits of declaring Afghanistan a neutral state and using the right mix of political, economic and military tools to restore order. That might prove to be the best way to unite this Gordian knot.