

A Neutral Afghanistan

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By Faruq Achikzad

I. Introduction

This essay is by Faruq Achikzad, former UN Resident Coordinator in the United Arab Emirates, Cyprus and North Korea. Achikzad argues that the only hope for a long term, broad-based Afghan government is through a United Nations framework. In the short term, the United States and its coalition partners must actively restrain the Northern Alliance, and avoid a de facto reemergence of a factional pre-Taliban era in Afghanistan.

This essay was also published in the San Francisco Chronicle as an Op-Ed on December 14.
<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2001/12/07/ED160094.DTL>

II. Essay By Faruq Achikzad

"A Neutral Afghanistan"

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It has been suggested that the only viable means for building a new Afghan government is for all parties to embrace a plan designed by the United Nations where the former king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, serves as the focal point.

Fortunately, the U.N. came up with just such a framework. It called for a meeting of leaders from Afghan ethnic factions to be held in Bonn, Germany. After nine days of hard bargaining among representatives of the Northern Alliance and the other three ethnic groups (not to mention internal struggles within the alliance that pitted the head of their delegation in Bonn against their president in Kabul), an agreement was reached Wednesday.

The draft agreement calls for an interim government composed of 29 individuals and an independent grand council of elders. The former king, as the symbol of national unity, will convene this grand council ... or loya jirga ... in six months. The present nominal government in Kabul, headed by former

president Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Northern Alliance's political leader, is to transfer power to the interim administration on Dec. 22.

However, the current state of Afghanistan remains highly precarious and volatile. Any hope for a future broad based representative government rests on insuring the success of the interim government and explicitly protecting it from northern alliance interference and third party states seeking to exploit the current situation.

Two weeks is a long time, particularly given that Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network are on the run and cannot be located. Moreover, the Taliban leadership have neither surrendered nor been eliminated. In the capital city of Kabul, the Northern Alliance is the de facto government. In other regions where the Taliban have slipped away without a fight, former warlords have proclaimed themselves regional governors. Chaos and lawlessness prevail in many areas of the country. In other words, what we are seeing today is a re-emergence of the much-feared pre-Taliban era.

There are other troubling developments as well. The Russians, who ... along with the Iranians ... helped the Northern Alliance in their war against the Taliban, have once again surfaced in Kabul without informing the United Nations. This time, the former invaders of Afghanistan come under the pretense of humanitarian assistance. The troops, they say, are there only to protect Russia's newly reopened embassy. This gesture may be the first installment of Russia's war reparations to Afghanistan. This unanticipated action by a former enemy, however, has left the Afghans understandably skeptical and the international community perplexed.

Given the perilous and uncertain state of affairs within Afghanistan today, it is imperative that the United Nations, the United States and its coalition partners make it unequivocally clear to the Northern Alliance and other local warlords that the framework endorsed by the U.N. Security Council and the agreement reached in Bonn will be strictly implemented. At the same time, the Northern Alliance and the local warlords must be relentlessly reminded that their recent victories over the Taliban would not have been achieved without the costly intervention and powerful support of the coalition forces. Such a reminder will also serve as a clear warning to these jumbled factions that there is no place for their power struggle in the new Afghanistan.

It is also now crucial that the U.N. Security Council pass a resolution guaranteeing the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan ... one that would keep Afghanistan free from any outside interference and declare Afghanistan a demilitarized and neutral state. This could also be accomplished through a U.N. sponsored international conference, a useful precedent for which may be found in the 1955 Austrian State Treaty.

With that, and a multinational force envisioned by the U.N. plan in place, long-suffering Afghanistan may have a chance to live in peace, reconstruct its economy and join the world community as a responsible member.

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