


# Geopolitical Requirements of Afghanistan's Foreign Policy

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## **Abstract**

Afghanistan, as a landlocked buffer state, has endured over four decades of instability and continuous military conflicts, driven by both foreign military interventions and internal strife. The primary focus of these conflicts has been the seizure of power and the expansion of influence within the country. Over this period, two of the world's leading military powers have attempted direct military intervention, only to be met with failure due to a combination of external rivalries-both regional and global-and internal resistance. These factors have perpetuated the crisis and hindered stability in Afghanistan.

As a buffer state, Afghanistan's survival depends on maintaining a balanced position among rival powers and avoiding entanglement in their spheres of influence. This requires a carefully crafted foreign policy that acknowledges the unique geopolitical demands imposed by its buffer state status. The hypothesis of this study suggests that one of the key reasons for the persistence of the crisis in Afghanistan is the country's failure to fully consider these geopolitical imperatives in its foreign policy. This oversight has heightened tensions and encouraged external intervention.

This article aims to first provide a comprehensive understanding of buffer states, drawing on the perspectives of prominent scholars. It then evaluates the foreign policy variables that shape Afghanistan's geopolitical environment, with a focus on the requirements specific to its buffer state role. The research is conducted using a descriptive-analytical methodology, with data sourced from a wide range of library materials, credible domestic and international publications, reports, and electronic sources.

**Keywords:** Buffer state, geopolitical requirements, foreign policy, crisis, international system, Afghanistan.

## Introduction

Buffer states and buffer zones often become flashpoints for military conflicts, particularly where spheres of influence intersect. As historian Robert Kagan aptly notes, "Great power wars often begin as disputes over buffer states where rival powers' interests overlap" (Kagan, 2015). Conflicts ignited in these zones can rapidly escalate into broader regional or even global confrontations. According to Thomas Ross, at least 32 of the approximately 200 political entities existing today have functioned as buffer states at some point in the 20th century, with many located on the Eurasian mainland (Ross, 1986, p. 20).

To ensure survival, a buffer state must continually reassess its geopolitical position amidst competing powers. Rather than passive intermediaries between great powers, buffer states dynamically shape their strategic and security policies to maintain their sovereignty amidst external rivalries.

Afghanistan provides a quintessential example of a buffer state in international politics. As Thomas Ross noted, British officials first referred to Afghanistan as a "buffer state" in 1883 (Andisheh, 2010, pp. 255-256). Following the Russo-British rapprochement after 1870, both empires sought to reduce tensions over Central Asia by agreeing to treat Afghanistan as a neutral zone where neither would exert dominance (Andisheh, 2019, p. 250).

The study of geopolitics, which has evolved over time, offers a deeper understanding of buffer states. The term "geopolitics" was initially coined by Rudolf Kjellén in 1899 to describe the state as a geographical organism situated in time and space. Karl Haushofer later expanded on this notion, emphasizing the spatial determinism of political processes by describing geopolitics as the "science of national governance" (Cohen, 2015, p. 15).

From a geopolitical perspective, Afghanistan's position can be analyzed on both regional and sub-regional levels. On the regional level, Afghanistan is part of what Saul Cohen describes as a "shatterbelt"-a zone characterized by deep internal conflicts and heavily influenced by external powers. This shatterbelt has persisted in the Middle East since the 1940s (Cohen, 2015, p. 48). At the sub-regional level, Afghanistan occupies a vital position between the Middle East, Russia's core area, and South Asia (Cohen, 2015, pp. 56-58).

Understanding these power dynamics is crucial for analyzing Afghanistan's domestic and foreign policies. Afghanistan's status as a buffer state became especially relevant after it gained

independence in 1919, as its geopolitical position was shaped by competition among great powers. Over the last century, changes in regional and global geopolitics have significantly impacted Afghanistan's internal and external conditions.

The concept of buffer states and their strategic function has been explored extensively in academic literature. For instance, Emily Laskin's article "*Rival Empires Have Long Viewed Afghanistan as a 'Buffer Zone' That Leads to Failed Wars*" (Laskin, 2021) traces Afghanistan's evolution as a buffer state from the 19th to the 21st century, including its role in the U.S. invasion. Chand Bebek's dissertation "*Buffer States in Sub-System Competitions: An Analysis of Nepal's Role in the Security Dynamics of China and India*" (2018) highlights the strategic importance of small buffer states in contemporary international relations and regional security. Furthermore, Christian Berg Harpyiken and Shahrbanu Tajbakhsh's work "*A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity*" (Harpyiken & Tadjbakhsh, 2016) discusses Afghanistan's critical position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, each marked by its own security dynamics and competitions.

Buffer zones as a geopolitical phenomenon have deep historical roots. Ancient examples include the Roman Empire's border regions and the Great Wall of China, both of which served as protective barriers against external threats (Turmanidze, 2009, p. 35). Scholars such as Chay and Ross observe that using territorial blocks as buffer spaces between rival empires dates back to pre-Roman times (Chay & Ross, 1986, pp. 16-19).

Various scholars have defined buffer states. Mathisen describes them as "small, independent states sandwiched between two large and often rival powers" (Mathisen, 1971). Patman-Potter refines this definition, emphasizing the vulnerability of buffer states, which are typically small, lack independent foreign policy, and face constant threats of external invasion (Potter, 1930, pp. 3-4).

In analyzing Afghanistan's role as a buffer state, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver argue that it functions as an "insulator," drawing neighboring states into its affairs while simultaneously keeping them apart (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 110-111). Despite changes in the international system, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance has remained, with scholars highlighting its role as a battleground for interregional cooperation and competition, particularly between South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Kapur, 2023).

Given Afghanistan's unique geopolitical circumstances, it is

crucial to consider how the concepts of geopolitics, geopolitical requirements, and buffer state dynamics intersect. Geopolitics is fundamentally about power dynamics and can be defined as "the study of power in global politics within the context of geographical space." Geopolitical requirements refer to the fixed or variable geopolitical components that influence policy choices aligned with national interests. Buffer states emerge from competition between rival powers, forming independent geographic spaces that must balance their sovereignty with the demands of the competing powers surrounding them. Understanding Afghanistan's status as a buffer state provides essential insight into its historical and contemporary foreign policy challenges, particularly in relation to regional power dynamics and security considerations.

### **1. Key Pillars of Afghanistan's Foreign Policy Since Gaining Independence**

Foreign policy in this period, i.e., since 1919, due to internal developments and power relations in the geopolitics of the region, consists of seven periods, including the monarchy, the Republic of Daud Khan, the communist government, the Islamic State of the Mujahideen, the first period of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban, the period of the Islamic Republic, and finally the second period of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban.

These seven lessons can be studied in two parts. The first part of this course is the balanced and neutral policy in Afghanistan's foreign relations. This section includes the monarchical governments that have been in Afghanistan for nearly half a century. The second part is about the post-monarchy period in Afghanistan which gradually distanced the Afghan government from the policy of neutrality. The power or absence of a clear and reliable manifesto becomes one of the major frameworks of foreign policy.

#### **1-1. The Period of Excellence of a Neutral and Balanced Foreign Policy in Foreign Relations**

After the war with Britain and the country's full independence in 1919, Shah Amanullah adopted a neutral and balanced strategy in relation to the great powers in order to avoid the competition between Britain, Russia, and Germany in the geopolitical security composition of the region. A strategy that was rooted in the conditions when the border of Afghanistan was opening and had become the traditional strategy of Afghanistan's foreign policy,

especially during the period of monarchical governments. (Andisha, 2015:1-3).

In his book "Afghanistan on the Path of History," Ghulam Mohammad Ghabar explains that in order to increase the capacity of Afghan manpower, Amanullah has adopted a balanced behavior by diversifying his choices in the field of foreign policy and has sent Afghan students to Germany, France, Turkey, and Italy, and also uses Britain's ability to train military forces by sending military students to this country (Ghobar, 1989, p. 793).

At the opening ceremony of the Afghan National Assembly in 1931, Nader Shah declared the principles of Afghanistan's foreign policy to be a policy of neutrality. While Amanullah's neutrality was based on maintaining a balance in relations with Russia, Britain, and other countries, Nadir Shah's policy of protecting the Arabian Sea does not seem appropriate. He showed his loyalty to the policy of non-interference in India and Central Asia in harmony with the interests of the British government in India (Gerigorian, 2009, pp. 395-396).

Nader Shah faced three issues in foreign policy:

- 1- Solving domestic economic and political issues related to German policies.
- 2- Limiting Russia's influence in Afghanistan.
- 3- Preventing British influence and interference in the British-administered border-free zones between Afghanistan and India (Adamec, 2013, p. 331).

Nader Shah was assassinated on November 8, 1933, and his government's file was closed. Nadir Shah's neutral strategy led him to be cautious in his relations with Britain and Russia. Although Nader Shah occasionally consulted with the British government in India and Russia on technical issues, during his time Afghanistan's political relations with Britain and Russia declined significantly.

On November 8, 1933, Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, took power at the age of nineteen after the death of his father, Nadir Shah. He ruled Afghanistan for about 40 years and left power on July 17, 1973, after a bloodless coup by his cousin Sardar Daud Khan. Since Zahir Shah came to the throne at a young age, power was in the hands of his three uncles, Shah Mahmud Khan, Shah Wali Khan, and especially Mohammad Hashim. It was Khan who had the title of Prime Minister. However, the distinctive feature of Mohammad Zahir Shah's foreign policy was the continuation of his father's conservative policy (Gerigorian, 2009, p. 461).

In 1934, Mohammad Zahir Shah announced in the National Consultative Assembly the principles of the country's foreign policy

as follows: strengthening friendly relations with all nations, emphasizing the consolidation of peaceful relations with other countries, neighborliness, and non-interference in the affairs of other countries. Zahir Shah believed that by continuing the policy of neutrality and the help of the two superpowers after World War II, Afghanistan's interests will be better secured, and if you seek help from Moscow, you should also ask Washington for help (Tanin, 2005, p. 103). Although there is no direct reference to neutrality in the aforementioned axes, Andisheh also believes that Afghanistan, except for a few cases between 1930 and 1945, has considered the international policy of neutrality in times of war as well as peace, which was usually similar to the policy of neutral governments at that time (Andisheh, 2019, p. 273).

As a result, it can be said that Mohammad Zahir Shah cautiously adopted a neutral and balanced policy in relations with the great powers during the geopolitics of the two world wars and during the Cold War.

### **1-2. The Period of Unilateral Alignment with Major Powers and the Lack of a Coherent Foreign Policy Manifesto**

On July 17, 1973, following the bloodless coup d'état of Mohammad Daud, which led to a change in the regime and his assumption of the presidency, he stated Afghanistan's foreign policy as follows:

"Afghanistan's foreign policy is based on neutrality, non-participation in military agreements, and the independent will of its people on these issues. This policy, which is based on our national aspirations, has no other goal than to meet the material and spiritual needs of the people (Andisheh, 2019, p. 278)."

Despite this stance, Mohammad Daoud's foreign policy can be divided into two relatively short periods. The first period, due to the fact that Pakistan was the basis of this policy and the support of the United States for Pakistan, led to Mohammad Daoud's inclination towards the former Soviet Union. The second period was accompanied by his attempt to avoid a one-sided policy towards the former Soviet Union, which did not succeed, and with the coup d'état of April 27, 1978, Afghanistan practically entered a long period of instability.

After the communist coup d'état in 1978, and especially during the presence of the former Soviet military forces in Afghanistan (1979-1986), the country's foreign policy was fully aligned and under Moscow's control. In fact, the last weak signs of neutrality in

Afghanistan were also eliminated by a one-sided tendency toward one of the poles of power at the time. They emphasized.

For example, Noor Mohammad Taraki, the first president of the communist era in Afghanistan, declared Afghanistan's foreign policy in a radio statement in May 1978 as follows: "The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan adheres to a policy of positive and active non-alignment and neutrality based on the principles of good neighborliness."

Although Afghanistan continued to be a member of the Non-Aligned Movement during this period, the outbreak of civil wars and the weak legitimacy of the government practically eliminated the possibility of formulating a clear and coherent foreign policy. In addition, regulating the relations of jihadi parties with regional and extra-regional powers had practically replaced the foreign policy of this country.

By controlling most of Afghanistan, the Taliban created their desired structure, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and were recognized only by three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The Taliban were in fact an ideological movement that lacked a clear manifesto on the way of governance in domestic and foreign policy. Olivier Roy, a French researcher, believed that the Taliban did not have a foreign policy (Roy, 1998, p. 210).

After 2001, the Afghan government remained an active member of the Non-Aligned Movement and regularly participated in its meetings, but none of the country's presidents used the term neutrality in explaining the principles of their foreign policy until the collapse of the republican order and the restoration of the Taliban's dominance.

Andisheh believes that President Karzai was sensitive to the reference to neutrality. He has spoken on various occasions about his desire to strengthen relations between Afghanistan and NATO member states (Andisheh, 2019, p. 281).

NATO assumed the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan on 11 August 2003. ISAF's primary objective, mandated by the United Nations, was to empower the Afghan government to provide effective security throughout the country and to develop new Afghan security forces to ensure this (Nato. 2022).

Declaration of Strategic Relations between Afghanistan and the United States in 2005, 2008, and 2009, and finally the ratification of the Strategic Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States

in 2012 by the Afghan National Assembly (Moradian, 2011). Also, the 2014 Afghan-American security pact (BBC.Com/2014) left no doubt about the unilateral attitude of the governments of the Islamic Republic towards the West.

The Taliban have not yet presented any document that expresses the principles of their foreign policy during this period. The executive structure governing interim Afghanistan and the prospects for the drafting of a new constitution are still unclear. Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's acting foreign minister, said in a press conference in January 2022 that the Taliban's foreign policy was "positive, impartial, balanced, and economic-oriented" (Tasnim News Agency, 2021).

Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah, in his Eid al-Fitr message in 2024, stated that the Taliban, within the framework of their "Sharia policy," seeks good relations based on mutual respect and asks them not to doubt the good intentions of the Islamic Emirate, adding: Our promise and commitment is a commitment, and we expect them to pay attention to the privacy, interests, and dignity of Afghanistan, and we want them to adopt good relations with us. The Taliban leader has reiterated: "We are moving forward with all the countries of the region in the light of the holy religion of Islam within the framework of a balanced and economic-oriented policy, and we want good diplomatic and economic relations with all countries." The countries of the region should also consider the security, stability, and progress of Afghanistan as a good opportunity and further expand good relations with the Taliban and create an atmosphere of trust. The Taliban leader added that the group's Foreign Ministry has been tasked with creating a better atmosphere of trust with all countries, especially the Islamic world."(www.dw.com/fa-af).

The two terms balanced and economically oriented are prominent and evident in the statements of the Taliban leader and their acting foreign minister. But so far, no document has been presented that explains these terms from their point of view and provides a clearer picture. In addition, the ideological character of the Taliban is still a fundamental element in their way of governing.

## **2. Geopolitical Requirements**

The geopolitical requirements of this research are assessed at three distinct levels.

## 2-1. First Level

This level prioritizes the nature of competition among buffer powers, identifying and presenting components that aim to maintain the buffer state's foreign policy free from tensions arising from rivalries between these powers.

1- Lack of unilateral inclination toward one of the powers: John Chai states that sometimes the buffer country begins to deviate from a neutral position; the role of the buffer is questioned. If it allies with one of its powerful neighbors, its value as a buffer state will end (Bella Russ can be considered an example of this; this is also called a quasi-buffer). Joining one side or establishing close relations with one of the powers is a delicate game for the buffer state, but it has advantages and disadvantages. Each of the powers should distance themselves. For this reason, the state of neutrality has persisted, and it has to stay away from armed conflicts at all times. Hostility to the powers and getting close to one power provokes the pressure of two or one of the powers. (Chay, 1986, pp. 193-197).

2- Countering one side's attempt to dominate the buffer zone: Regarding the competition between India and Pakistan, Saiqal emphasizes that Pakistan has always looked at Afghanistan as a strategic depth in its competition with India due to its lack of strategic depth. (Saikal, 1989, pp. 52-66), Ahadi has also expressed the same method in the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the efforts of these two countries to dominate Afghanistan. (Ahady, 1998, pp. 117-134). Keshino believes that a small buffer state surrounded by great powers is well aware of the strategy of survival. By avoiding being under the influence of one country and maintaining a balanced position among the major buffer states, this country should use a smart foreign policy. The very term buffer state, which can be considered an idea to stay away from the sphere of influence of the great powers, can also be the wisdom of the survival of a state. (Kishino, 2017).

3- Building trust with other countries and benefiting from regional organizations: Neighboring and geopolitical situations play a significant role in the relationship with the buffer state, with Ross, Prescott, and John Chay considering the neighborly position to be the most important factor in the life of the buffer state. De Spiegler says that bordering countries are more in contact with each other and therefore have more areas of conflict, while non-neighboring countries are less capable and willing to fight each other. British mathematician Richardson has shown in his research that there were

about 180 wars between 1820 and 1945, most of which were bordering each other. Knudsen also says that the closest neighbor is the biggest concern for any country. According to Tormanides, when a weak country is geographically attached to a stronger country, it usually plays the role of a quasi-buffer. And there is a space called a permeable subsystem that becomes a barrier between these two powers. Two conditions are necessary for the formation of a real and neutral buffer: first, mutual agreement between the rival powers to maintain the buffer, and second, understanding and awareness of the barrier's role in maintaining balance in relations with its neighbors. This second point should be considered in line with the above variable.

Analyzing the behavior of Laos as a buffer country, Kashino pointed to the country's use of the ASEAN shield and said, "The Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the umbrella of this organization in diplomatic relations whenever it is necessary to say that we are with ASEAN." (Kishino, 2017, pp. 91-112)

In general, building trust and authenticating interaction, avoiding entering into controversial issues, and using regional organizations will make the buffer country less difficult, especially in situations where the buffer country is also landlocked.

#### 4- Paying attention to the principle of neutrality in foreign policy:

Neutrality is one of the most important approaches in the foreign policy of buffer countries. In order to avoid the pressure of the powers or one of them and to stay away from the danger of disintegration or occupation, the buffer country is forced to adopt a policy of neutrality. To protect itself from the pressure of the great powers, the buffer state resorts to a combination of strategies, which Partam describes as "neutrality," "leaning toward one of the powers," and "relying on the support of third states." (Partem, 1983, p. 20). Of course, neutrality is useful when it is recognized by the world powers, and we have had many examples of self-proclaimed neutrality that were occupied during the war of the powers. Like Iran in the two world wars. A buffer state may declare neutrality, i.e., declare its neutrality unilaterally (according to domestic law) or multilaterally (by international treaties). It may voluntarily undertake not to intervene in conflicts between great powers or to host foreign military forces in its territory. The buffer state must be recognized by other countries. In general, in order to maintain sovereignty, the buffer state must follow the policy of neutrality and equality. (Handel, 1981, pp. 132-137).

#### 5- Adopting a policy of orientation toward the third party: The

tendency toward the third party leads to the intervention of another superior power in the affairs of the buffer space. In Partem's view, the third power, due to its geographical distance, is less inclined to conquer the buffer and is more willing to expand relations. Mailla also emphasizes that the buffer can maintain its independence when it can maintain its neutrality. (Partem, 1983, pp. 3-26).

When the buffer country finds it difficult to maintain its neutrality under the pressure of the buffer powers, especially if it has formed an alliance with one of the parties, the possibility of war increases and it may even lose its independence, but the buffer is faced with another option, i.e., an alliance with a third power that does not share a direct border with the buffer state and is less likely to dominate it and try more. It is preventing the expansionism of the two rival powers, and in this way, it prevents the implementation of their plans around the buffer country. Of course, Michelle Handel and Robert Rothstein argue that choosing a non-border great power as an alliance is not a safe strategy for small or weak states because the commitment of such a power to help in the event of aggression by larger neighboring powers is not guaranteed.

## **2-2. Second Level**

At this level, the impact of some geopolitical components, including fixed and variable, such as geographical location, topographical situation, hydropolitical situation, internal political conflict, internal governance capability, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural context, the degree of internal convergence or divergence, the lack of stabilization of some borders, economic and defense capacities, transit and transit location, being surrounded by land, in shaping the foreign policy of the buffer country, and in the form of geopolitical requirements are evaluated.

1- Having fixed and agreed boundaries: Jenkins believed that a real buffer should be designed in such a way that there was no question about its borders, as other colonial powers around the world did; in the case of Afghanistan, Britain and Russia were designed for border lines regardless of tribal borders. The borders that were established in the late 19th century have been maintained to this day and have been the source of many problems since World War II for Afghanistan (Jenkins, 1986, p. 180). According to Tormanides, however, the situation of buffers is not always good, and they are usually due to border manipulations, occupations, territorial separations, etc. They have many border disputes with their neighbors. (Turmanidze, 2009, p. 75). Knudsen, a professor at

Norwegian universities, states that the superior powers always seek to define their borders and expand their borders, and that weak neighbors always face this problem. Kent also believes that one of the components in the formation of the buffer state is the willingness of the powers to expand their borders and achieve new territories, and in this regard, they use any means to achieve more benefits are Korean (Knudsen, 1986:94).

Borders are one of the most effective tools for separation and territorial identification of states. Border lines, as they can play a significant role in integration, if they are determined based on the political interests of the great foreign powers and regardless of racial, linguistic, ethnic, historical and population conditions, they will become a major indicator in creating the grounds for instability.

2- Efforts to increase military and economic capabilities: Military and economic capabilities constitute the core foundation of a nation's power. The term "capability" refers to the potential, power, or capacity to undertake specific actions, while its plural form encompasses the full range of abilities of an individual or entity. In political and security contexts, capability is often synonymous with military capability, defined as the forces or resources a country can mobilize for military actions. The military capacity of a nation is intrinsically linked to its financial, material, and technical resources, collectively known as economic capabilities. A state's economic power is characterized by its ability to influence others through various means, including industrial strength, natural resources, capital, technology, geographical advantages, healthcare systems, and education (Graham, 2014).

Buffer states constantly face increasing pressure from surrounding powers, prompting them to strengthen their own capabilities as a means of alleviating this pressure. In doing so, they enhance their military capabilities, which inevitably leads to rising military expenditures. Achieving conventional military deterrence can potentially allow a buffer state to mitigate external pressures and considerations from neighboring powers. However, this pursuit is fraught with challenges posed by the very powers it seeks to buffer against.

Afghanistan and Iran serve as illustrative examples of buffer states where the presence or absence of military capability has shaped their distinct situations. In seeking to maintain their sovereignty, buffer countries often aim to reduce reliance on foreign nations, particularly in the economic domain. The resources, capacities, geographical locations, and infrastructures of these

countries vary widely, leading them to adopt different economic strategies tailored to their specific circumstances. For instance, in Afghanistan, the rivalry between Russia and Britain resulted in low economic growth, with corruption and inefficient management identified as significant obstacles to development, despite the interventions of international agencies and foreign governments (Ziring, 1986, p. 159).

3- Acknowledging geopolitical position and significance: The buffer space should be made up of geographical, cultural, human, military, strategic, etc. in order to attract the attention of great powers. Otherwise, and in a situation where it is not of the necessary importance for the great powers, there will be no competition that creates a buffer zone. In addition, the importance should be considered by all the buffer powers in order to lead to an agreement for the formation of the buffer. Warren says that in a great power strategy, spaces of greater strategic importance attract more attention. The effectiveness of the buffer depends on the strategic importance of the region for the important powers. As for Afghanistan, Jenkins believes that the country's natural environment has attracted the attention of the powers.

Afghanistan's geographical location at the intersection of three regions of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia has made it of significant geopolitical importance to its neighbors, the region, and major powers. Documents also show that Afghanistan has played the role of a buffer state between its powerful neighbors for much of its recent history. Attention of the buffer state to its geopolitical importance can mean taking advantage of this advantage in regulating its foreign relations with the buffer powers and other powers located in the region and outside the region in order to improve its position.

4- The capability of internal governance, the social fabric, etc. and the degree of internal convergence or divergence: According to Jenkins, most of the buffer and quasi-buffer countries have a hostile internal environment and a heterogeneous population in terms of ethnicity and culture. Thomas Ross also writes that the buffer zone can have the language, ethnicity, and religion of its neighboring cultures and play the role of a transitional zone independent of cultures. Buffer countries usually have a lot of ethnic diversity due to their transitory and border characteristics and the numerous cases of invasion against them. Much of this diversity can be attributed to the fact that buffer countries are located at strategic points and the contact of diverse cultures with a long history of trade with

appropriate invasion routes, and thus diverse cultures are formed in these spaces. Hannah and Jengins state one of the two conditions necessary for the formation of a real and neutral buffer: "understanding and awareness of one's role in maintaining balance in relations with neighbors." This point actually provides an indication of the ability of the buffer state to govern.

What Hafeznia expresses about the effect of the competition of powers in the buffer space with public thoughts and feelings can be considered as one of the factors of divergence in society that is related to the ability of governance to a certain extent. Hafeznia says: "The competition of powers in the buffer system reduced people's emotions and turned them into disgust and emotional and reactive attitudes towards deep changes in society. The most important demand of the people of the buffer zone is to solve the problems caused by the failed and costly competition of the powers in the buffer zone. Their desire to solve these problems was sometimes towards a strong central government, sometimes towards a third power, and sometimes even towards one of the rival powers during the struggle. (Hafeznia, 2002, p. 196).

Bashiriyeh also believes that one of the important problems of buffer states is that they cannot plan and make decisions independently of the buffer powers. The excessive pressure and interference of these powers in the buffer zone causes a kind of functional incoherence in the government and prevents it from initiating and pursuing development measures. (Bashiriyeh, 2001, p. 25)

According to the studies conducted during the two periods of the presence of foreign military forces of the former Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan, due to the lack of attention of the governments of the time to the social fabric of the country and the attempt to use the models of the invading countries with the society, the Afghan society suffered from divergence from the governments of the time. The above two cases clearly show the importance of social issues in the process of political developments and the dominance of governments in Afghanistan, the divergence and lack of social cohesion that are necessary for the strength of a government in the internal and external environment. This phenomenon not only leaves its mark in the face of foreign parties but also in domestic relations even without the presence of an external element. In fact, it is possible to establish a direct relationship between the ability of governance and convergence or divergence in society.

5- Facilitation of transit and strategic transit locations: Although landlocked remains one of the most detrimental situations for a state, especially in the modern global economy dominated by maritime trade, Paul Collier, a leading economist at the University of Oxford, cites landlocked with bad neighbors as one of the four key reasons why countries with a population of one billion are trapped in poverty (Rahim, May 2020, *The Diplomats*).

But Afghanistan's transit and transit location can provide the possibility of focusing on reviving the lost opportunity. In fact, Afghanistan is in a good position to link the markets of the surrounding regions as a transit and transportation hub. Geostrategic complementarity of these countries to access the southern waters through the continuation of the route in Iran and Pakistan.

The developments of the 1990s and the first two decades of this century showed that Afghanistan's transit and transit capacity can be an important factor in strengthening regional stability and connectivity, although due to geopolitical reasons and existing competitions, this capacity in Afghanistan remains unused for the time being.

6- Mitigating the challenges of landlocked status: Landlocked is a limitation for any country and has its effect in different areas. Glasner believes that the lack of seaports leads to a lack of growth and development, and also that the lack of access to the sea psychologically can promote isolationism and stagnation. In addition, the educated elites of landlocked countries know that their access to open waters is perhaps interrupted by a hostile neighbor, and they may experience feelings of deprivation, resentment, and even claustrophobia. These feelings can affect domestic development policies and foreign relations (Glassner, 1993).

Gael Rabaland examined the economic dimension of this issue by using three variables of distance to market through the nearest seaport. The number of national borders with coastal countries and the number of border crossings that crossed with a sample of 46 countries over a five-year period concluded that landlocked using his database method reduced trade by more than 80 percent (Haqiqi, BT).

Glasner sees the solution in strengthening bilateral relations and believes that landlocked countries, especially Asian countries, cannot rely solely or even to a great extent on international law, regardless of how desirable it is to solve the problem of geographical separation from the sea. In any case, this problem is fundamentally political, and in the long run, only good relations with countries that facilitate access to waters free can get close to

solving the problem. (Glassner, 1993).

7- Hydropolitical dynamics: Hydropolitical relations are inherently political processes that simultaneously involve conflict and cooperation. Cooperation as coordinated actions to achieve a collective outcome is a process and a reflection of the norms and ideas of the actors. On the other hand, conflict is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon and means a confrontation of interests (Miyabadi, 2021).

In fact, hydropolitics is a tool that, if used appropriately, leads to strengthening cooperation and, at the same time, has the potential to become a factor of discord and tension between upstream and downstream countries. Any disruption of the river system by Afghanistan will create a critical situation for the downstream consuming countries, so water acts as a powerful weapon for Afghanistan against its neighbors. Of course, this is a geopolitical risk for Afghanistan because it has led to their reaction, and this issue, especially considering that Afghanistan is landlocked, makes the maneuvering power of the ruling government restricted.

8- Internal cohesion and stability in governance: One of the significant challenges faced by buffer states is their inability to plan and make decisions independently from dominant external powers. The excessive pressure and interference from these powers can create functional incoherence within the government, hindering its ability to initiate and pursue effective development measures.

Internal stability and cohesion are essential prerequisites for the successful implementation of any governmental policy. Achieving these conditions requires the fulfillment of fundamental governance criteria, such as legitimacy, the rule of law, public order, and the provision of essential services, as well as fostering solidarity and social unity. While a straightforward definition of internal stability might be "the absence of widespread violence," the presence of such violence severely undermines state authority and erodes public trust, national cohesion, and the overall sense of belonging and citizenship among the populace.

### **2-3. The Third Level**

At this level, the evaluation focuses on the geopolitical necessities that can influence the foreign policy of buffer countries, particularly in the context of the existing international order or the global geopolitical landscape, whether in transition or post-transition. Superior powers consistently attempt to draw weaker nations into their defense and security spheres, seeking dominance over them.

Trygve Matthiessen argues that these powers view buffer zones as vulnerable to occupation by opposing forces, often trying to integrate these areas into their own defense systems. Amir Abdur Rahman vividly illustrates this dynamic by describing a swan caught between bears on one shore and wolves on the other, both vying for its allegiance. Partam's analysis suggests that if one power's pressure is alleviated, the buffer zone will likely fall under the influence of another power. Historical instances in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Iran exemplify this phenomenon. John Chai observes that great powers typically target buffer zones, driven by mutual distrust of one another. Each rival fears that the other's influence might expand, transforming the buffer area into a launchpad for further territorial ambitions. Henry Kissinger, the former U.S. National Security Advisor, famously stated that while the U.S. had no interest in Cambodia, it could not allow the country to become a base for adversarial actions, which justified U.S. military involvement there. Despite a superficial inclination toward independence and neutrality, great powers often manipulate buffer states to gain strategic advantages over their rivals. They are eager to incorporate these nations into their alliances and integrate them into their defense and security frameworks, undermining the very autonomy that the buffer states seek to maintain.

### **Conclusion**

According to Mattheen, no attempt has been made to construct a theory about the buffer state. This issue has always been studied in the framework of case studies related to the foreign policy of different countries (Mathisen, 1971). The concept derived from this point is to emphasize the lack of generalization of the foreign policy indicators of the buffer countries and, in fact, the exclusivity of the geopolitical requirements of the foreign policy of each buffer country (in the big picture) and the evaluation of each country based on the characteristics of that country. Of course, it is possible that some of these requirements are similar among a number of buffer countries, but this cannot mean the presentation of a theory or even the same version for the foreign policy of all the buffer countries.

In this paper, 14 general indicators have been identified in the framework of the geopolitical requirements of Afghanistan's foreign policy, some of which are positive and some of which are negative, and their evaluation and application by the domestic power holders will make it possible to recognize the continued survival and preservation of the country's independence among the buffer powers.

In explaining this issue, the following points are also useful:

- 1- Geopolitics has both a fixed component (geography) and a variable component (political dynamics). So the geopolitical logic can be changed, but it usually happens slowly and gradually. In addition to this definition of geopolitical components, what is important is the importance of the ruler/politician's perception of these components. This is where geopolitics, as the most hidden external force, and political psychology, as the most hidden internal force, combine and influence the foreign policy decision-making process. This point in itself highlights the importance of the role of the human factor in using geopolitics to improve the conditions of the country.
- 2- According to researchers in the field of security and strategic studies, Afghanistan is an "insulated state" that plays a relatively passive role, according to Buzan and Weaver: "It is an area of competition and influence, or it is an attraction of the energies surrounding regional security complexes." In fact, from their point of view, Afghanistan is more of a divergence than a factor of regional integration. This divergence factor can be attributed to the impossibility of managing the competition of external parties by the governing structure of Afghanistan.
- 3- In Afghanistan, foreign policy has priority over domestic policy. This situation is such that foreign policy, like some other countries, cannot be considered as a continuation of domestic policy. Three components are effective in creating this situation: First, the government in Afghanistan has relied on receiving foreign aid and so-called recipients from abroad since its inception. Second, Afghanistan is a landlocked country and needs neighboring countries to access open waters. Third, Afghanistan is a country with the capacity to be a buffer, which has often played a buffer role during its political life due to the competition of regional or extra-regional parties, and this issue imposes some requirements on the foreign policy of this country.
- 4- Afghanistan, as a landlocked buffer country, has been a victim of various conflicts for nearly five decades. Although different causes have contributed to the continuation of this conflict, this conflict has been fundamentally stimulated by the conflicting interests of regional and extra-regional powers as a constant factor. Contrary to those perceptions that prioritize cultural, tribal, and ethnic drivers in this conflict, a series of studies shows that the issue of stability in Afghanistan is mainly related to the engineering of regional security, Afghanistan's position in it, and

external and often proxy confrontations for dominance inside Afghanistan's territory. The very prominence of the variable of external competitions in the continuation and continuation of the crisis in Afghanistan has turned the issue of foreign policy into a decisive factor in shaping stability in this country.

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