



Active Neutrality Policy for Afghanistan: A Possible Model in the International System

Dr. Azizullah Basir

PhD in Political Science
Lecturer, Department of Political Science
Gharjistan University, Kabul, Afghanistan

Email: azizullahbasir1331@gmail.com

<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v9i7.3499>

Abstract

This article examines the feasibility of “active neutrality” as a potential foreign policy strategy for Afghanistan within the contemporary international system. The central question of the study is whether active neutrality can be regarded as a viable strategic option or whether it remains merely a normative idea in light of Afghanistan’s geopolitical and structural constraints. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis and analytical method, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of realism, institutionalism, and small-state theory. The findings indicate that Afghanistan’s geopolitical position at the intersection of major regional spheres, together with its history of foreign intervention and internal fragility, highlights the need for a cautious and balanced foreign policy. Active neutrality, defined as non-alignment with hostile blocs combined with active diplomacy, may offer advantages such as reducing the costs of alignment, diversifying international relations, and lowering the risk of becoming an arena for proxy competition. However, the study also identifies significant limitations, including weak state capacity, lack of domestic consensus, economic and security dependencies, and the persistence of regional and global rivalries. A comparative analysis of Switzerland, Austria, and Turkmenistan shows that the success of neutrality policy requires institutional capacity, international recognition, and stability in strategic orientation. The article concludes that active neutrality for Afghanistan is neither fully attainable nor entirely unrealistic. Rather, it should be understood as a conditional and gradual framework whose realization depends on domestic cohesion, diplomatic capacity, and relative international acceptance. The value of this concept lies not in offering a ready-made solution, but in providing a structured path toward a more balanced and less costly foreign policy.

Keywords: *Active Neutrality; Afghanistan; Foreign Policy; Small States; Geopolitics; Balance of Power; Non-Alignment*

1. Introduction and General Framework of the Study

Throughout its modern history, Afghanistan has rarely been able to turn its geopolitical position into a sustainable strategic advantage. Due to its location at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, the country has consistently been exposed to competition among regional and extra-regional powers. As Thomas Barfield argues, Afghanistan's political structure from the early nineteenth century to the present has been deeply shaped by its surrounding environment, and the state has often been unable to exercise full independence in its foreign policy (Barfield, 2010, pp. 3–5).

This pattern is also evident in Barnett R. Rubin's analysis. Rubin shows that state collapse or weakness in Afghanistan has often coincided with increased foreign intervention and great-power competition, making the country's domestic and foreign politics mutually dependent (Rubin, 2002, pp. 25–30). Similarly, William Maley emphasizes that Afghanistan's geographical position and social structure have made it vulnerable to external influence and have limited the possibility of forming a fully independent foreign policy (Maley, 2010, pp. 969–972).

In this context, Afghanistan's foreign policy has often fluctuated between two costly patterns: on the one hand, dependence on or unequal alignment with a particular power or bloc; and on the other, unstable attempts to balance among different actors. Historical experience shows that both patterns, in the absence of strong domestic institutions and a clear definition of national interests, have faced serious challenges. This situation highlights the need to consider an alternative framework—one that can preserve relative independence in foreign policy while also preventing the country from being isolated from the international system.

Within this framework, the concept of “active neutrality” emerges as a significant analytical option. Unlike the classical understanding of neutrality, which limited it to non-participation in war, contemporary literature also treats neutrality as a possible foreign policy strategy in times of peace. According to Laurent Goetschel, neutrality can still remain a valid foreign policy instrument under certain conditions, particularly when combined with active diplomacy and multilateral engagement (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 117–120). Christine Agius likewise emphasizes that neutrality in the contemporary period is a multilayered concept that can be linked to the identity, security, and foreign policy of states (Agius & Devine, 2011, pp. 268–270).

On this basis, the central problem of this study is whether “active neutrality” can serve as a possible foreign policy model for Afghanistan. The importance of this question lies in the fact that Afghanistan, as a state with limited capacity and a sensitive geopolitical position, needs a model that can reduce the costs of great-power competition while preserving the possibility of constructive engagement with the international environment.

The main objective of this article is to explain the feasibility of this model for Afghanistan. In this context, several subsidiary questions are raised: first, what exactly does active neutrality mean, and how does it differ from traditional neutrality or non-alignment? Second, to what extent are Afghanistan's geopolitical and political conditions compatible with this model? Third, what obstacles and opportunities exist in the path toward its realization? Accordingly, the central claim of the article is that active neutrality, if supported by a minimum level of domestic cohesion, balanced diplomacy, and relative international acceptance, can be considered a viable framework for Afghanistan's foreign policy, although its realization faces serious structural limitations.

In terms of the research background, three main bodies of literature can be identified. The first is the theoretical literature on neutrality and non-alignment, in which neutrality is examined as both a legal and political concept (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 115–118). The second consists of studies on Afghanistan's

foreign policy, which emphasize the role of geopolitics and foreign intervention (Rubin, 2002, pp. 25–30; Barfield, 2010, pp. 3–5). The third includes studies on small states, which show that such states are often compelled to adopt specific survival strategies, including balancing and neutrality (Baehr, 1975, pp. 456–458). However, the systematic connection of these three fields within the framework of “active neutrality for Afghanistan” has received limited attention.

Conceptually, this article distinguishes between several key concepts: neutrality, non-alignment, buffer state, and balancing. Neutrality in its classical sense refers to non-participation in war, while non-alignment is more closely related to avoiding membership in power blocs during peacetime. A buffer state refers to a state whose geographical position lies between competing powers (Maley, 2010, p. 970). In this article, “active neutrality” is defined as a strategy based on balance in foreign relations, active diplomacy, and avoidance of one-sided dependence.

1.1. Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and descriptive-analytical in method. Its aim is not to statistically test an empirical hypothesis, but to assess the feasibility of a foreign policy model for Afghanistan in light of the country’s geopolitical, historical, and institutional conditions. Accordingly, the article seeks, through conceptual analysis, examination of Afghanistan’s situation, and limited comparison with several international cases, to show the extent to which “active neutrality” can be considered a realistic and conditional framework for Afghanistan’s foreign policy.

The data for this study have been collected through documentary and library-based research. The sources used include authoritative books on Afghanistan’s political history and foreign policy, scholarly articles on neutrality and small states, analytical reports on state-building and fragility in Afghanistan, and official documents related to the neutrality of Switzerland, Austria, and Turkmenistan. The criteria for selecting sources were scholarly or institutional credibility, direct relevance to the research topic, and usefulness for theoretical and comparative analysis.

The analytical method of this article is based on three stages: first, the conceptual clarification of active neutrality and its distinction from concepts such as traditional neutrality, non-alignment, buffer state, and balancing; second, the analysis of Afghanistan’s situation from the perspectives of geopolitics, foreign intervention, state weakness, and foreign policy constraints; and third, a limited comparison of Afghanistan’s experience with the cases of Switzerland, Austria, and Turkmenistan in order to extract elements useful for designing a conditional model. This comparison is not intended as direct model-copying; rather, its purpose is to identify the conditions, capacities, and limitations that can help explain the possibility or impossibility of active neutrality for Afghanistan.

The analytical framework of the study is composite and draws on three approaches: realism, institutionalism, and small-state theory. Realism is used to explain geopolitical pressures and power competition; institutionalism is applied to examine the role of international recognition and multilateral mechanisms; and small-state theory is used to understand the limitations and survival strategies of states with limited capacity. On this basis, the article’s conclusion also rests on a conditional judgment: active neutrality for Afghanistan is not a definitive or immediate solution, but a gradual model dependent on domestic capacity, active diplomacy, and relative regional and international acceptance.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Active Neutrality

The concept of neutrality in international relations has undergone significant transformation over time. In its classical understanding, neutrality was defined as a legal status in which a state refrained from participating in conflicts among other states. Rooted in traditional international law, this definition limited

neutrality to wartime conditions. However, with the transformation of the international system, the concept has moved beyond a purely legal framework and has become an instrument of foreign policy (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 116–117).

During the Cold War, many states sought to preserve their independence by avoiding membership in power blocs. This trend contributed to the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, it is important to emphasize that non-alignment is not identical to neutrality. Non-alignment is primarily a political position in peacetime, whereas classical neutrality is a legal status in wartime (Agius & Devine, 2011, pp. 269–271). This distinction is essential for a precise analysis of states' foreign policies.

In contemporary literature, the concept of “active neutrality” has emerged as a more developed form of neutrality. It is based on the assumption that a state can actively participate in the international system without joining power blocs. In other words, active neutrality does not mean withdrawal; rather, it refers to a controlled and balancing presence in international relations (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 118–120).

The distinction between active and passive neutrality becomes clear at this point. Passive neutrality is based on non-intervention and distance from international commitments, whereas active neutrality requires dynamic diplomacy, broad engagement, and the management of foreign relations. Active neutrality also differs from isolationism: isolationism emphasizes the reduction of external interactions, while active neutrality depends on engagement combined with independence (Agius & Devine, 2011, p. 270).

From the perspective of small-state theory, neutrality can be understood as an instrument of survival. Because of their limited resources, small states cannot guarantee their security through hard power alone; therefore, they tend to adopt strategies such as balancing, neutrality, and multilateralism (Baehr, 1975, pp. 456–457). This point is particularly important for analyzing Afghanistan's situation, as the country faces similar limitations.

Nevertheless, the success of neutrality depends on specific conditions. At the domestic level, an effective state, political cohesion, and a clear definition of national interests are essential. At the external level, the relative acceptance of other states, especially major powers, is also important. Without these conditions, neutrality may be perceived as a sign of weakness and may be violated (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 119–120).

International legitimacy plays a crucial role in this regard. Recognition of a state's neutrality by the international community can contribute to its consolidation. Active diplomacy is also essential for maintaining this legitimacy, because a neutral state must be able to build trust among other actors. In addition, balance in foreign relations is necessary, since any one-sided orientation can undermine the principle of neutrality.

Overall, active neutrality can be understood as a conditional foreign policy strategy. It is not an idealistic concept, but a practical option that, under specific conditions, can help states balance independence, security, and engagement. Therefore, assessing its feasibility for Afghanistan requires a careful examination of the country's domestic and external conditions.

3. Afghanistan and the Problem of Choosing a Foreign Policy Strategy

Moving the discussion from the theoretical level to the Afghan context requires understanding the country's foreign policy not in abstract terms, but in relation to its geographical position, historical experience, and institutional capacity. Afghanistan is one of the few countries where geography is not

merely a spatial variable; rather, it is a determining factor in state formation, patterns of conflict, and the limits of foreign policy independence. William Maley argues that Afghanistan's current difficulties are largely the product of its "turbulent history" and "problematic geographical position," a combination that has made the country vulnerable and exposed to intervention by external actors (Maley, 2010, pp. 967–968). This point shows that, in Afghanistan's case, the choice of a foreign policy strategy cannot be separated from its geopolitical context.

Afghanistan is located at the intersection of several important regional spheres: it is connected to Central Asia on one side and to South Asia on the other, while also maintaining historical and security links with West Asia, China, and the Eurasian sphere. This position has given Afghanistan transit, security, and geostrategic significance. However, in the absence of a strong state and a clear foreign policy strategy, this potential advantage has often turned into a source of vulnerability. A recent study on Afghanistan's geopolitical importance also emphasizes that, because of its location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, the country has consistently been a focus of attention for regional and global powers, and its instability has produced consequences beyond its national borders (Barna, 2024, pp. 3, 31–32). Thus, Afghanistan's geopolitics simultaneously creates opportunities for regional connectivity and increases the risk of turning the country into an arena of competition among multiple actors.

This situation is clearly visible in Afghanistan's modern history. Maley shows that Afghanistan emerged in the nineteenth century as a "classic buffer state," a state that was not only located between the British and Russian empires, but was also partly defined by their rivalry (Maley, 2010, pp. 968–969). Accordingly, the formation of Afghanistan's borders and a significant part of its international position were shaped from the outset within the logic of external balance of power. This historical legacy was later reproduced in new forms: the Soviet occupation turned Afghanistan into a Cold War battlefield, and after the Cold War the country became an arena of regional competition and, later, military intervention by the United States and NATO (Maley, 2010, pp. 967–968, 978–979). From this perspective, Afghanistan has repeatedly been reduced to an object of others' competition rather than acting as an independent actor in regional politics.

The problem, however, is not limited to external pressure. One of the main factors limiting Afghanistan's foreign policy independence is the internal fragility of the state. Maley explains that, over time, the Afghan state became a rentier state dependent on unstable resources, including foreign aid, and this dependence made it vulnerable to shifts in external priorities and crises of legitimacy (Maley, 2010, pp. 969–970). He also notes that by the 1960s almost half of government expenditure was financed by foreign aid, a pattern that increased the risk of financial and political instability (Maley, 2010, p. 970). As a result, Afghanistan found itself in a condition in which its independence in foreign policy decision-making was weakened not only in security terms, but also financially and institutionally.

Nematullah Bizhan's research confirms this issue from the perspective of state-building and chronic fragility. He writes that by late 2001 Afghanistan faced a failed, weak, and fragmented state that was neither capable of providing effective services nor able to protect its citizens (Bizhan, 2018, p. 4). Bizhan further identifies five main indicators of Afghanistan's fragility: a legitimacy deficit, weak fiscal and legal capacity, declining investment and growth, the link between insecurity and state weakness, and low resilience to political and security shocks (Bizhan, 2018, p. 4). These findings are directly relevant to the present discussion because they show that Afghanistan's foreign policy does not operate in a vacuum. The more fragile the state is internally, the more likely its foreign policy becomes reactive, dependent, or exposed to external influence.

Within this same framework, the relationship between internal fragility and foreign influence in Afghanistan has been reciprocal. Bizhan shows that the roots of Afghanistan's state fragility lie in exclusionary political institutions, an unstable fiscal base, a subsistence economy, landlocked geography,

a complex social fabric, armed conflicts, and great-power competition for dominance in the region (Bizhan, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, foreign interventions have not only weakened the legitimacy of governments, but have also transformed the internal structure of political agency in Afghanistan through patronage networks, the arming of local groups, and the redistribution of power resources (Bizhan, 2018, pp. 6–7). On this basis, Afghanistan has been caught in a vicious cycle: state weakness facilitates foreign influence, while foreign influence, in turn, undermines state-building and strategic autonomy.

On the other hand, Afghanistan's particular position among regional powers makes the choice of a foreign policy strategy a vital issue. Afghanistan can neither completely distance itself from its surrounding environment nor bear the costs of permanent alignment with a hostile axis. Historical experience shows that any form of unequal alignment with one power has usually provoked suspicion and reaction from other actors, bringing the country closer to proxy competition. Conversely, the absence of a clear strategy has often caused Afghanistan merely to react to its external environment rather than manage it. This is precisely where the need for a cautious, balanced, and active approach becomes evident.

Therefore, the debate over Afghanistan's foreign policy strategy is not merely a theoretical discussion about diplomatic preferences; it is directly related to survival, stability, and the reduction of geopolitical vulnerability. If Afghanistan seeks to move away from the status of an "arena of competition," it must replace episodic and dependent foreign policy with a model that combines three features: first, avoidance of exclusive dependence on any single actor or bloc; second, maintenance of balance in regional and international relations; and third, strengthening the state's internal capacity so that foreign policy does not become a reflection of domestic weakness. In the logic of this article, such a model approaches "active neutrality"—not in the sense that Afghanistan should withdraw from the world, but in the sense that it should seek to redefine its position in a competitive environment as a balanced, cautious actor with a degree of strategic initiative.

For this reason, Afghanistan, more than many other countries, needs a strategy that understands its geopolitical sensitivities while moving away from the logic of subordination or involvement in hostile bloc politics. Afghanistan's geography cannot be changed, but the way it deals with that geography can change. As long as the country lacks a clear framework for the balanced management of foreign relations, its geopolitical position will remain less a source of opportunity than a factor in reproducing insecurity and dependence. Accordingly, the central issue in the following section is whether active neutrality can make this transition possible, even if only conditionally and gradually.

4. Assessing the Feasibility of an Active Neutrality Policy for Afghanistan

The discussion of active neutrality in relation to Afghanistan becomes meaningful only when the concept is analyzed within the country's actual capacities, limitations, and structural requirements. Unlike purely normative approaches, this section seeks, on the basis of empirical data and theoretical analysis, to show that active neutrality is not an absolute option, but a "conditional" strategy whose realization depends on a set of domestic and external factors. From this perspective, the feasibility of this policy must be examined at three levels: capacities and opportunities, obstacles and limitations, and conditions for realization.

4.1. Capacities and Opportunities

The first potential capacity of active neutrality for Afghanistan is the reduction of costs arising from taking sides in regional and international conflicts. Historical experience shows that Afghanistan's alignment with a particular power or bloc has often provoked negative reactions from other actors and exposed the country to proxy competition. For example, during the Cold War, the alignment of different governments with either the Soviet Union or the United States contributed to the intensification of

internal conflict and foreign intervention (Rubin, 2002, pp. 64–68). Under such conditions, adopting a balanced policy could help prevent Afghanistan from becoming an arena of direct competition among powers.

The second opportunity is the possibility of managing foreign relations in a balanced manner. Active neutrality would allow Afghanistan to develop relations with a diverse range of actors—from regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan, China, and India to extra-regional actors—instead of depending on a single axis. Such diversification would not only reduce the risk of dependence but also increase the country's bargaining power. The literature on small states also emphasizes that such countries can partly compensate for their structural limitations through “multilateralism and diversification of relations” (Baehr, 1975, pp. 456–457).

Third, Afghanistan's transit position is one of the most important potential capacities for supporting a neutral policy. The country's location along routes connecting Central Asia with South Asia and the Middle East creates the possibility of turning Afghanistan into an “economic crossroads.” If Afghanistan can distance itself from geopolitical tensions and present itself as a secure route for trade and energy, active neutrality could strengthen this role. Some studies also show that the development of transit corridors can increase interdependence among countries and reduce incentives for hostile intervention (Barna, 2024, pp. 31–32).

Fourth, active neutrality could reduce the likelihood of Afghanistan becoming an arena of proxy competition. Proxy competition intensifies when a country is perceived as an ally or base of a particular power. Conversely, if Afghanistan can consolidate the image of a balanced and non-aligned actor, the cost for external actors of using it instrumentally would increase. This effect would not be absolute, but it could reduce the level of intervention.

Fifth, active neutrality would enable simultaneous engagement with competing actors. As the international system moves toward multipolarity, the ability to maintain relations with different actors has become a strategic advantage. From this perspective, active neutrality could help Afghanistan benefit from opportunities for economic, political, and security cooperation without entering bloc-based rivalries (Agius & Devine, 2011, pp. 269–270).

4.2. Obstacles and Limitations

Despite the capacities discussed above, serious obstacles also stand in the way of realizing active neutrality. The first and most important obstacle is the weakness of the state and governance institutions in Afghanistan. As noted earlier, the country faces problems such as low institutional capacity, fragile legitimacy, and dependence on external resources. Maley states that, in many periods, the Afghan state has been unable to exercise effective control over its territory, and this has placed its foreign policy under the influence of external actors (Maley, 2010, pp. 969–970). Under such conditions, implementing a complex policy such as active neutrality would face serious difficulties.

The second obstacle is the absence of national consensus on the direction of foreign policy. Afghan society is ethnically, politically, and ideologically diverse, and in many cases different views exist regarding foreign relations. This fragmentation can prevent the formation of a stable and long-term strategy. Bizhan also shows that one of the indicators of state fragility in Afghanistan is the lack of political consensus and weakness in creating national cohesion (Bizhan, 2018, p. 4).

The third obstacle is Afghanistan's economic and security dependence. The country's economy has depended on foreign aid in different periods, and this dependence has limited its capacity for independent decision-making. In addition, security dependence on external support has also been one of the country's

major challenges. Such dependencies reduce the possibility of adopting a fully independent and neutral policy, because any shift in foreign policy may provoke reactions from the providers of resources (Rubin, 2002, pp. 25–30).

The fourth obstacle is the persistence of regional and global power competition around Afghanistan. The country is located in an environment where competition among actors such as China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the United States continues. Even if Afghanistan adopts a policy of neutrality, there is no guarantee that other actors will accept or respect it. Historical experience also shows that neutrality without the support or relative acceptance of major powers can easily be violated (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 119–120).

The fifth obstacle is the difficulty of consolidating neutrality in an unstable environment. Active neutrality requires a minimum level of internal stability and predictability in the external environment. Since Afghanistan faces challenges such as insecurity, economic crisis, and political uncertainty, implementing such a policy would involve high risks. In other words, in the absence of stability, active neutrality may become an impractical slogan rather than an effective strategy.

4.3. Conditions for Realization

Despite these obstacles, active neutrality cannot be ruled out entirely. Rather, it should be understood as a conditional strategy whose realization depends on a set of prerequisites.

First, there must be a clear definition of national interests. Without a defined framework of priorities and objectives, foreign policy cannot be coherent. Afghanistan needs to define its vital interests—from internal security to economic development—with precision and place its foreign policy in their service.

Second, professional diplomacy must be strengthened. Active neutrality has no meaning without active diplomacy. This requires training specialized personnel, developing diplomatic institutions, and increasing the capacity to analyze the international environment. International relations literature also emphasizes that small states must rely on smart and multilateral diplomacy to compensate for their structural weaknesses (Baehr, 1975, p. 457).

Third, relative domestic cohesion must be created. Without a minimum level of political stability and elite agreement, no long-term strategy can be implemented. Active neutrality must be accepted as a “national policy,” not as a temporary or factional choice.

Fourth, relative regional and international acceptance is necessary. Through diplomacy, Afghanistan must be able to communicate to different actors that its neutrality does not threaten their interests. This can be strengthened through bilateral agreements, regional cooperation, and participation in international institutions.

Fifth, multilateral and legal channels should be used. International institutions can serve as platforms for consolidating neutrality. Although these instruments do not provide a complete guarantee, they can raise the cost of violating neutrality and contribute to its legitimacy.

In sum, active neutrality for Afghanistan is neither a fully attainable option nor an entirely unrealistic idea. Rather, it should be regarded as an intermediate and conditional strategy. If a minimum level of domestic capacity, active diplomacy, and external acceptance exists, this policy could help reduce Afghanistan’s geopolitical vulnerability. In the absence of these conditions, however, neutrality may turn

into a passive or even fragile status rather than a strategic instrument. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether active neutrality is feasible for Afghanistan is not definitive; it is conditional and dependent on the country's future developments.

5. Comparative Study and Proposed Model

To assess active neutrality in Afghanistan realistically, it is useful to draw on the experiences of other countries. However, such use must be limited, comparative, and non-mechanical. The purpose of the comparative study here is not to find a “fully replicable model,” but to identify elements that can help explain the conditions for the success or failure of neutrality. From this perspective, Switzerland, Austria, and Turkmenistan represent three different cases: first, a classical and institutionalized model of permanent neutrality; second, a case of permanent neutrality shaped in the context of Cold War Europe and later gradually adapted to post-Cold War developments; and third, a case of permanent neutrality recognized by the United Nations in a sensitive regional environment in Central Asia. These differences make the three experiences useful for Afghanistan in terms of “conditional lesson-learning,” not direct model-copying.

5.1. Limited Comparative Study

A. Switzerland: Permanent, Armed, and Active Neutrality

In the Swiss experience, neutrality was not merely a legal position; rather, it gradually became an instrument for defending independence, preserving territorial integrity, and managing the country's position among European powers. The official report of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs states that Switzerland's neutrality is permanent, recognized, and armed, and that it has been used to protect the country's independence and territorial integrity (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs [FDFA], 2022, pp. 5–6, 16–17). The “White Paper on Neutrality” also states that neutrality for Switzerland has not been an end in itself, but an adaptable instrument for defending national interests and preserving the highest possible degree of independence (Swiss Federal Council, 1993, pp. 5–6). For this reason, the relative success of this model was not merely the result of declaring neutrality; rather, it depended on a combination of international recognition, defense capability, predictability in foreign policy, and the capacity of domestic institutions.

Another dimension of the Swiss experience is the link between neutrality and diplomatic activism. The 1993 report of the Federal Council states that Swiss neutrality did not prevent international activity; instead, it enabled the provision of “good offices,” or mediation and peace-support services, in a way that facilitated impartial and humanitarian services (Swiss Federal Council, 1993, pp. 9–10). The 2022 report also emphasizes that neutrality does not mean political silence or isolation, and that Switzerland can defend its fundamental values, participate in peace missions, and enter into non-binding military cooperation, provided that such cooperation does not create dependence in the event of conflict (FDFA, 2022, pp. 6, 15–17). For Afghanistan, this experience is important in two respects: first, successful neutrality is difficult without an effective state and at least a minimum level of deterrent capacity; second, active neutrality is compatible with diplomacy, mediation, and multilateral engagement. However, much of the Swiss experience—such as historical stability, institutional cohesion, and early international recognition—cannot easily be transferred to Afghanistan.

B. Austria: Permanent Neutrality within the Framework of Balance and Adaptation

Austria represents a different case from Switzerland. Austrian neutrality was established in 1955 following the end of occupation and within the context of a great-power compromise. Gaertner and Hoell state that accepting permanent neutrality was the “political price” Austria paid to regain full

independence, while also becoming the best possible arrangement at that time (Gaertner & Hoell, 2001, p. 1). The same authors also show that, for decades, Austrian neutrality served both as an instrument of foreign and security policy and as part of the identity of the Second Austrian Republic (Gaertner & Hoell, 2001, p. 1). Rathkolb also notes that Austrian neutrality was never merely the product of an internal decision; rather, it was always defined within the framework of its neighborhood environment and the balance among great powers (Rathkolb, 2001, p. 1).

What makes Austria important for this article is the adaptability of its neutrality. After the end of the Cold War, Austria's accession to the European Union and its cooperation with NATO's Partnership for Peace program showed that neutrality could continue in a redefined form without necessarily leading to membership in a military alliance (Gaertner & Hoell, 2001, pp. 1–2). This experience offers an important lesson for Afghanistan: neutrality does not necessarily mean cutting off foreign cooperation; rather, it can coexist with economic, diplomatic, and even certain limited, non-alliance-based security cooperation. Nevertheless, the structural differences between Austria and Afghanistan are profound. At the time neutrality was consolidated, Austria had a more stable state, a more orderly legal environment, and a higher level of domestic consensus. Therefore, the transferable element in this experience is the principle of “neutrality with flexibility and adaptation,” not its historical and institutional context.

C. Turkmenistan: Internationally Recognized Permanent Neutrality with Limited Transferability

Turkmenistan is not the closest case to Afghanistan in terms of regional geography, but it is noteworthy because of its location in Central Asia and its attempt to use neutrality as a strategic shield. In Resolution 50/80, the United Nations General Assembly not only recognized Turkmenistan's status of permanent neutrality, but also called on states to respect that status. The resolution also emphasized Turkmenistan's “active and positive” role in developing peaceful and mutually beneficial relations (United Nations General Assembly, 1995, pp. 1–2). Turkmenistan's Constitutional Law on Permanent Neutrality also defines this status as the basis of the country's domestic and foreign policy, stating that the country does not join military blocs, does not host foreign military bases, supports open and equal economic cooperation, and seeks friendly and mutually beneficial relations with the region and the world (Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality, 1995, pp. 1–2).

However, Turkmenistan's experience must be read cautiously in relation to Afghanistan. A scholarly study of this policy notes that permanent neutrality in Turkmenistan became a legal and identity-based mechanism of foreign policy, but at the same time it was closely linked to a centralized political structure, the dominant role of the president, and efforts to preserve regime stability (Amanova, 2019, pp. 33, 49–50). Therefore, what can be drawn from this experience for Afghanistan is not the authoritarian form of governance, but several specific principles: seeking international registration and recognition of neutrality, avoiding membership in hostile blocs, preventing the use of national territory by foreign actors, and linking neutrality with economic and regional cooperation. By contrast, the Turkmen model is not fully transferable to Afghanistan because Afghanistan has greater political and social pluralism, a more tense security environment, and a different level of interdependence with external actors.

5.2. Proposed Model of Active Neutrality for Afghanistan

The comparative study above shows that none of these three experiences can be directly applied to Afghanistan. However, common elements can be extracted from them. First, neutrality becomes more sustainable when it is not merely a political declaration, but is supported by institutional, legal, and diplomatic foundations. Second, successful neutrality is usually accompanied by a form of “activism,” whether through mediation, multilateralism, or the development of non-exclusive economic cooperation. Third, effective neutrality remains vulnerable without some form of internal deterrence or at least a

minimum level of sovereign capacity. On this basis, the model proposed in this article for Afghanistan should rest not on “static neutrality,” but on “active and layered neutrality.”

The first element of this model is non-alignment with hostile blocs. To reduce its vulnerability, Afghanistan should avoid formal or practical entry into hostile regional and global alignments. This principle does not mean cutting relations with major powers; rather, it means avoiding exclusive dependence and conduct that could make the country appear, in the eyes of others, as a “base of the opposing side.” Here, the main lesson from Austria and Turkmenistan is that neutrality becomes meaningful when, both declaratively and practically, a state distances itself from the obligations of hard alliance politics.

The second element is balance in regional and international relations. Afghanistan can neither distance itself from all actors nor proceed with only one side. A reasonable strategy is to organize relations with neighbors, regional powers, and extra-regional actors in a way that no relationship turns into monopoly, dependence, or a perceived threat to other parties. This is precisely where active neutrality requires diplomatic balancing. The experiences of Switzerland, and to some extent Austria, show that neutrality loses its credibility without predictability and balance in external relations.

The third element is economic cooperation without exclusive political dependence. If Afghanistan wants to move neutrality beyond the level of rhetoric, it must link it to tangible economic interests. The country can benefit from its transit position, regional connectivity, and transport and energy projects, but such cooperation should not develop in a way that leads to the political dominance of a particular actor. The experience of Turkmenistan shows that linking neutrality with economic cooperation and a relatively open economic space is part of the strategic function of this policy, although in that country this process has been accompanied by its own structural limitations.

The fourth element is preventing the use of Afghan territory against others. This is perhaps the most fundamental component of active neutrality for Afghanistan. As long as the country’s territory can be perceived as a place for deployment, transit, arming, or pressure against others, the claim of neutrality will have limited credibility. In the experiences of Switzerland and Turkmenistan, respect for national territory and the prevention of its hostile use have been integral parts of neutrality (FDFA, 2022, pp. 15–17; Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality, 1995, p. 1). For Afghanistan, this principle must be institutionalized at the legal, security, and diplomatic levels.

The fifth element is strengthening multilateralism. Afghanistan cannot rely solely on a unilateral declaration to consolidate its neutrality; rather, it must pursue this policy through regional and international channels. The experience of Turkmenistan shows that recognition and support by the United Nations can create important symbolic and legal value, although it is not sufficient by itself (United Nations General Assembly, 1995, pp. 1–2). In the case of Afghanistan as well, any future move toward active neutrality would need to pass through regional dialogue, multilateral support, and perhaps a minimum legal understanding.

The sixth element is linking neutrality with domestic stability and development. No model of neutrality for Afghanistan will be viable without rebuilding governance capacity, reducing fragility, and creating a degree of sustainable political cohesion. From this perspective, active neutrality is not a substitute for state-building, but a complement to it. The weaker the state, the more neutrality is reduced to passivity or an unsupported claim. Conversely, the stronger the country’s internal capacity, the greater the possibility of active balancing and a less costly foreign policy. This conclusion is consistent with the general lesson of all three cases: effective neutrality is built on internal capacity and external credibility, not on formal declaration alone.

Table 1. Components, Functions, Preconditions, and Main Obstacles of the Proposed Model of Active Neutrality for Afghanistan

Component	Function	Precondition	Main Obstacle
Non-alignment with hostile blocs	Reducing external threats and suspicion	Avoidance of exclusive dependence	Pressure from competing powers
Balance in regional and international relations	Increasing diplomatic maneuverability	Professional and predictable diplomacy	Institutional weakness and miscalculations
Economic cooperation without political dependence	Using geography and transit capacity	Diversification of partners and balanced agreements	Financial dependence and political pressure
Preventing the use of territory against others	Strengthening the credibility of neutrality	Effective control over territory	Security weakness and the influence of non-state actors
Strengthening multilateralism	Increasing international legitimacy	Active regional and global participation	Regional mistrust
Linking neutrality with stability and development	Turning neutrality into a sustainable policy	Effective state and relative cohesion	Internal fragility

This model is not a definitive and ready-made formula for implementation. Rather, it is an analytical framework through which Afghanistan, if a minimum level of domestic and external conditions is met, could move from the status of an “arena of competition” toward that of a “balanced actor.” In this sense, the added value of active neutrality for Afghanistan lies not in rejecting engagement, but in organizing it intelligently.

6. Summary and Conclusion

The present study began with the question of whether “active neutrality” can be proposed as a possible foreign policy model for Afghanistan. The analysis of the theoretical foundations showed that neutrality in international relations is not merely a legal concept limited to wartime conditions. Under certain circumstances, it can also serve as a foreign policy strategy for reducing threats, preserving relative independence, and managing relations with different actors. In this sense, active neutrality differs from isolationism and passive neutrality, as it is based on diplomatic activism, balance in foreign relations, and avoidance of exclusive dependencies, rather than withdrawal from the international environment (Goetschel, 1999, pp. 118–120; Agius & Devine, 2011, pp. 269–270).

Applying this discussion to Afghanistan showed that the country’s foreign policy, more than that of many other states, is tied to geography, the history of great-power competition, and the fragility of state structures. Afghanistan is located at the intersection of several major regional spheres, and this position has made it both an opportunity and a source of vulnerability. The country’s historical experience also shows that Afghanistan has repeatedly become an arena of competition among external actors rather than acting as an independent agent, a condition intensified by weak governance institutions, economic dependence, and crises of legitimacy (Maley, 2010, pp. 967–970; Bizhan, 2018, pp. 4–7). Therefore, Afghanistan’s need for a cautious, balanced, and active strategy is not merely a theoretical preference; it is directly related to reducing geopolitical costs and strengthening its capacity for survival.

The feasibility analysis showed that active neutrality for Afghanistan has real capacities on the one hand and serious limitations on the other. In terms of capacities, this model can reduce the costs of taking sides in regional rivalries, enable balanced relations with different actors, make better use of the country’s transit position, and reduce, to some extent, the likelihood of Afghanistan becoming an arena of proxy competition (Rubin, 2002, pp. 64–68; Barna, 2024, pp. 31–32). In terms of obstacles, however, state weakness, the absence of national consensus, financial and security dependencies, and the continuing competition of regional and global powers make the realization of this model difficult (Maley, 2010, pp.

969–970; Bizhan, 2018, p. 4). Thus, the answer to the article's central question is neither fully positive nor fully negative: active neutrality is possible for Afghanistan, but this possibility is conditional, limited, and gradual.

The comparative study of Switzerland, Austria, and Turkmenistan also reinforced the conclusion that successful neutrality is never merely the result of a political declaration. In all three cases, neutrality has, to varying degrees, been linked to international recognition, institutional capacity, predictability in foreign policy, and a connection between neutrality and tangible national interests (Swiss Federal Council, 1993, pp. 5–10; Gaertner & Hoell, 2001, pp. 1–2; United Nations General Assembly, 1995, pp. 1–2). For Afghanistan, these experiences do not offer a ready-made model, but they provide several key lessons: non-alignment with hostile blocs, balance in foreign relations, prevention of the use of national territory against others, strengthening of multilateralism, and linking neutrality with domestic stability and development.

In conclusion, active neutrality for Afghanistan is neither an immediate solution nor an abstract ideal. Rather, it is a framework that can become a credible strategy only if a minimum level of domestic and external conditions is met. The first condition is a clear definition of national interests and the transformation of neutrality from a slogan into public policy. The second is the strengthening of professional diplomacy and the capacity of foreign policy institutions. The third is the creation of relative domestic cohesion and efforts to secure regional and international acceptance of this approach. Without these conditions, neutrality may be interpreted as passivity; with their partial realization, however, it can become an instrument for reducing Afghanistan's geopolitical vulnerability.

From a policy perspective, any discussion of active neutrality in Afghanistan should be accompanied by the formulation of a clear framework of national interests, the redefinition of the role of regional diplomacy, and emphasis on the principle of preventing the use of Afghan territory against others. From a research perspective, future studies should examine, independently and in detail, the legal possibility of international recognition of Afghanistan's neutrality, the relationship between neutrality and economic development, and the connection between this model and the rebuilding of state capacity. In this way, the main value of active neutrality for Afghanistan lies not in offering a definitive formula, but in opening a pathway toward a less costly, more balanced, and more realistic foreign policy.

References

- Agius, C., & Devine, K. (2011). Neutrality: A really dead concept? A reprise. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 46(3), 265–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836711416955>
- Amanova, N. (2019). *Permanent neutrality policy of Turkmenistan* (Master's thesis, Middle East Technical University). <http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12622966/index.pdf>
- Baehr, P. R. (1975). Small states: A tool for analysis? *World Politics*, 27(3), 456–466. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009977>
- Barfield, T. (2010). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press.
- Barna, E. (2024). *Afghanistan's geopolitical and geostrategic importance for international security: A Great Game Theory analysis of its role across three centuries* (Master's thesis, Charles University). <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/191352>
- Bizhan, N. (2018). *Building legitimacy and state capacity in protracted fragility: The case of Afghanistan*. International Growth Centre. <https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2018/04/afghanistan-report-v3.pdf>
- Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. (2022). *Swiss neutrality*. Swiss Confederation. https://www.fdfa.admin.ch/content/dam/eda/en/documents/publications/SchweizerischeAussenpolitik/neutralitaet-schweiz_EN.pdf
- Gaertner, H., & Hoell, O. (Eds.). (2001). *Small states and alliances*. Physica-Verlag.

- Goetschel, L. (1999). Neutrality, a really dead concept? *Cooperation and Conflict*, 34(2), 115–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836799034002001>
- Maley, W. (2010). Afghanistan: An historical and geographical appraisal. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92(880), 967–981. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383111000130>
- Rathkolb, O. (2001). International perceptions of Austrian neutrality after 1945. In G. Bischof, A. Pelinka, & R. Wodak (Eds.), *Neutrality in Austria* (pp. 69–91). Transaction Publishers.
- Rubin, B. R. (2002). *The fragmentation of Afghanistan: State formation and collapse in the international system* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Swiss Federal Council. (1993). *Report on neutrality*. Swiss Confederation. https://www.eda.admin.ch/content/dam/eda/en/documents/aussenpolitik/voelkerrecht/bericht-neutralitaet-1993_EN.pdf
- United Nations General Assembly. (1995). *Permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan* (A/RES/50/80). United Nations. <https://undocs.org/A/RES/50/80>
- Constitutional Law of Turkmenistan on Permanent Neutrality. (1995). Government of Turkmenistan. <https://www.neutrality.gov.tm/docs/EN-Turkmenistanyn-Hemishelik-Bitaraplygy-%281995%29.pdf>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).