The regional and international context: Are peace and cooperation possible?

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In its origins, the Taliban regime was not, simply, a product of the internal dynamics of Afghan society—or, to be more exact, *societies*. It emerged in the course of the conflictual interactions of numerous local, national, regional, and international powers that converged and diverged incessantly. The United States, Britain, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Central Asian states have all intervened in the formation of the post-Soviet structure of power.

The Taliban regime was concocted by the interstate system as much as it is nurtured by numerous non-state actors, both domestic and foreign. If the assumption of power by Khomeini in Iran inspired Islamic fundamentalists everywhere to vie for state power, the rise of the Taliban to statehood unleashed waves of warriors to fight for setting up an Islamic empire. Just as "Western imperialism" cannot survive without international markets, so Islamic theocracies cannot thrive without an empire of their own.

In both cases, we are dealing with supranational forces that have failed to secure prosperity, freedom and peace for a region that is rich in human and natural resources. Can there be an alternative, supranational regime that would promote coexistence in a context where state sovereignty is regularly violated by local, regional and world powers? If the interests of the neighbouring states are tied to who rules in Afghanistan, can there be a division of labour based on mutual recognition and non-interference?

A modern crisis in governance

Many observers of the globalizing world have noted in recent years that the modernist, Western tradition of sovereignty, which confers on the state the exclusive right to exercise power

> *"The peoples of the region are fed up with despotism, both Islamic and secular, and with the wars and massacres that inevitably accompany various forms of despotism."*

within its borders, is passé. States no longer have the capacity to govern in a centralized manner. Whether wanted or not, a division of labour is emerging in which supra- and sub-national entities exercise a great deal of power.[1]

This "crisis of governance" has materialized in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have unleashed a medieval regime of terror against women and everyone else. If it is true that Osama bin Laden is the perpetrator of the September 11 mass murder, there is little doubt that he has also trained and exported fundamentalist terrorists to Iraqi

Kurdistan, where they have occupied a number of villages, murdered many militias of the local Kurdish government, and declared an Islamic emirate of the Taliban type. How did the New World Order produce this regime? It is often claimed that Nazism and its Holocaust were products of modernity; if this is the case, the Taliban's Islamic emirate is a product of the interlocking of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern interests, and its reign of terror erodes all such borders.

Reconciling conflicting interests

Considerations of the future of Afghanistan and its peoples, who have been brutalized for two decades, should begin with a simple question: Will the United States, Britain, Russia, India, China, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Central Asian states leave the people of Afghanistan alone? Will they let the diverse population of the country freely elect a democratic government? I believe that the answer is simply "No!" These interests are too deep-rooted to be over-looked. Governance in Afghanistan is no longer regarded as an internal affair. At the same time, it is obvious that installing a puppet regime with one or more regional or international overlords will not lead to peace and prosperity. Turning Afghanistan from a hotbed of mischief into a sovereign state whose peoples can get on with their lives depends on a crucial change in the politics of the interested parties.

Afghanistan is part of a number of interlocking geostrategic regions and cultural areas. It is part of or, rather, at the

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[1]According to one observer, "the facts of sovereignty and territoriality as described by international law, then are becoming transnational fictions. As the proliferating sub/supranational nuclei of decentralized power now author(ize) contra-governmentalistic law-unmaking and law-breaking within uncertain territories, each sovereign finds itself on its own territory challenged from within and without..."; these divisive forces range from constructive "global environmentalism" to destructive "religious fundamentalism." Timothy Luke, "Reconsidering nationality and sovereignty in the New World Order," *Political Crossroads*, 1997, Vol. 5, Nos. 1-2, page 8.

margins of fuzzy regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Since 1978, it has been part of a "war zone." This zone, the contemporary world's largest and most active, extends from Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in the East to Sudan and Cyprus in the West. The people there have suffered from intermittent war, invasion, genocide, and ethnic cleansing; a partial list includes internal and external wars involving Kashmir, Pakistan and India; Iraq and Iran; Armenia and Azerbaijan; Chechnya-Russia; Israel-Palestine-Lebanon-Syria; Iraq and Kuwait; Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the Kurds; Turkey and Syria; Turkey and Iraq; Sudan; and, the potentially explosive Turkey and Cyprus.

Within this zone, there has been a sub- "zone of genocide," in which the Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds were subjected to several campaigns of extinction and ethnic cleansing in the Ottoman Empire and Iraq.[2]

It is difficult to reconcile the conflicting interests that Western powers and the states of the region pursue in Afghanistan. It may be more realistic, instead, if they accept and safeguard the neutrality of a democratic state in Afghanistan, which in turn does not allow its territory or citizens to be dragged into war, terrorism, and conspiracy. This looks like a "buffer state," a role that Afghanistan seems to have played for a few decades in the aftermath of the rise of Soviet power in Central Asia in the wake of WWI. It is a return to the past, a rosy picture drawn in the more simple bi-polar world that is gone.

Security in a supranational arrangement?

The sheer force of necessity may make the idea of a buffer state practical. This is not, however, a lasting alternative. The

"war zone" is not local or regional. The United States is a major participant, now leading the second major operation of the post-Cold War period in the zone. Equally serious is the threat of nuclear war between India and Pakistan.

Fear of war and serious upheaval may not deter the military option, as it could not in 20th Century Europe.

A more viable alternative may be to work toward a suprastate or supranational

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arrangement that addresses the most immediate, minimal requirement: non-interference and non-aggression.

One could, in fact, contemplate future steps towards a confederation of states that move from peaceful coexistence to cooperation in education, health, environment, technology, economic development, and other areas. While there has been no lack of regional organizations (to name only a few, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Black Sea Economic Cooperation Project, OPEC),

they have not led to anything similar to the European Common Market of the 1960s, which in its evolution, has turned into much more than economic integration, today's European Union.

Surely, there are no social, political and economic foundations for a radical rupture in the "statist paradigm" of the Near East, Middle East and Central Asia. Even in developed Western Europe, the formation of the European Union has spanned a half-century period.

However, the pace of change in governance is unprecedented. Less than twenty years after it came to power in the wake of the most popular revolution of the last century, the Islamic regime of Iran is eroding within itself. It has been seriously challenged by women, students, workers, peasants and other dissident groups. The very idea of theocracy has been challenged by Islamists, who call for the separation of state and religion.

In this unstable world, the idea of "confederal arrangements" or "confederal governance" is gaining ground.[3] The success of such arrangements in the region will depend on democratisation within each country. The peoples of the region are fed up with neo-colonialism and with despotism, both Islamic and secular, and with the wars and massacres that inevitably accompany both. Afghanistan bears witness to the enormity of this tragedy. There is every indication that they will be losers again. They are denied the opportunity to benefit from two centuries of democratic development in the world.

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[2]The concept "zone of genocide" is used by Mark Levene, "Creating a modern 'zone of genocide': The impact of nation- and state-formation on Eastern Anatolia, 1878-1923," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1998, pp. 393-433.

[3]See, for instance, Daniel Elazar, *Constitutionalizing Globalization: the Postmodern Revival of Confederal Arrangements*. Lanham, and New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998; Frederick Lister, *The European Union, the United Nations, and the Revival of Confederal Governance*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 1996.