



H.E. Mahmoud Saikal

EDITORS' NOTE *Ambassador Mahmoud Saikal has served as Special Representative and Senior Adviser to the Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Ambassador of Afghanistan to Australia and New Zealand, Honorary Consul of Afghanistan to Australia, and First Secretary and later Counsellor Minister Plenipotentiary at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Tokyo. Ambassador Saikal has served as CEO and JICA Senior Advisor to Kabul New City Development, World Bank Consultant where he authored the policy paper, 'Afghanistan and Economic Regionalism,' and UNDP International Adviser to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). He was the President of the Commission for the Coordination of the Implementation of the Old Kabul City Plans and Senior Architect with Australian private sector and government. Ambassador Saikal is the recipient of a "First Class Merit Award" from the President of Afghanistan and "Best Ambassador Award" from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan. He has a Master's Degree in International Development from Deakin University of Melbourne, as well as two bachelor's degrees from the University of Sydney and the University of Canberra. He graduated with a First Class French Baccalaureate from Lycee Esteqlal of Kabul. He was a visiting fellow at Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, Australian National University (2007-2010).*

From your standpoint, how do you see the critical role that Afghanistan needs to play for the future?

Looking at the big picture in terms of what has been happening to Afghanistan over the past few decades, and where we are now, it looks very positive. In particular, over the past 15 years, we have had the opportunity to reconstruct, redevelop, and remake Afghanistan.

We have had a healthy international engagement with Afghanistan, leading to profound changes within the country in almost all sectors.

Remaking Afghanistan

An Interview with His Excellency Mahmoud Saikal, Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations

This is why Afghanistan today is in a much better position to play a bigger role, for its own people and also for the region and the rest of the world.

That role is important because we sit at a highly sensitive geostrategic location – between Central Asia, South Asia, the Far East, and the Middle East. We are the connecting point, the point where different civilizations can complement each other and have a dialogue.

Although from time to time in the past, our location has been turned into a liability, there has been every chance lately to turn it into an asset for our own people, for the region, and for the world at large.

We live in a very busy neighborhood and we are surrounded by major powers and cultures of the world like China, the Russian Federation, and India. Being in one of the most-populous areas of the world creates opportunities and challenges. The opportunities are in accessing the markets and the external resources, as well as our internal resources. Given its size and population, Afghanistan is probably one of the most resource-rich countries on the planet. A U.S. geological survey estimated that our mineral resources are worth more than \$1 trillion and our own estimates, which include mountainous areas, indicate it could be close to \$3 trillion.

Because of lengthy turmoil and invasions, and tension in the region, we haven't been able to exploit those resources.

The region and the rest of the world can have access to our surplus resources. We also have an energy-rich Central Asia, rich in oil and gas in particular, and South Asia with a very high demand for energy. Afghanistan plays a key role in connecting Central Asia to South Asia.

There are already some major regional projects taking off, two of which are the TAPI gas pipeline and CASA-1000 power project.

We also play a role in the connectivity of the Far East and the Middle East. A five-nation railway project is underway at the moment between China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, which improves connectivity horizontally. Recently the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan railway was inaugurated and the Iran-Afghanistan railway is under construction.

In November, we concluded an agreement on a trade and transit corridor known

as Lapis Lazuli, which connects Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey through to Europe. It is crucial for us to open as many trade and transit corridors as possible.

After the nuclear agreement between Iran and P5+1, sanctions are being lifted and there is an opportunity to access the Port of Chabahar. We're working on that because it's the closest seaport to us, which connects us to the rest of the world.

We have already signed a trilateral agreement between Afghanistan, Iran, and India on the use of Chabahar Port.

Also, recently, a Chinese cargo train that left eastern China came all the way through Central Asia to Afghanistan. That is another connecting point for us.

Afghanistan is a trade and transit roundabout of four very diverse regions, and we've now nearly completed our national ring road. The condition of that needs to be improved but when it's done, Afghanistan will turn into a true trade and transit hub.

Will you touch on the relationship with areas beyond your immediate region?

Beyond our region, other countries like the United States have been investing a lot in Afghanistan, and because of that investment, Afghanistan is developing its ability to serve the region. U.S. leadership in drawing international support to Afghanistan has been exceptional. All of the investors have their own legitimate interests and we have a number of national, regional, and global players heavily involved in the life of Afghanistan. Kabul needs to increase its capacity to coordinate everybody's legitimate interests in our country.

When it comes to regional and global coordination, we have two Afghan-led regional processes for that: one is the Heart of Asia - Istanbul process, focusing on political and security matters; and the other one, which I helped found in 2005, is known as RECCA, focusing on regional economic cooperation.

With these two processes, we are working to coordinate our own national interests with regional and global interests in our country. In order to do that in the best possible way, we need to develop the infrastructure for regional and global corporations, and that's what we're working towards.

What should people know when it comes to security issues and how they're being addressed?

Security threats are not a homegrown issue for us – it comes from outside. It's region-based, with linkages to global terrorism. Recently the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution on Afghanistan, which addresses the regional security challenges facing the country.

We have the Taliban and their entire leadership along with their safe havens in Pakistan. They have always been there. Leading figures of the Taliban have lived in and been identified in Pakistan, and have been even killed and buried there.

Similarly, leaders of other terrorist organizations, like Osama bin Laden of Al-Qaeda, have lived in and been killed in Pakistan. Two leaders of the Taliban have been found there – one died in a hospital in Karachi and another was killed this year by a U.S. drone attack in Balochistan. So, the peace process with the Taliban has a lot to do with Pakistan.

The question is, what motivates circles within Pakistan to use violence and proxies in pursuit of political objectives? This has links to probably three key factors: the deep-rooted tension between Pakistan and India that makes Pakistan look towards the region and the rest of the world through the lens of that tension with India, which causes unnecessary anxiety that India is doing something in Afghanistan that hurts the interest of Pakistan.

India is a near neighbor for us and we have deep historic ties with them, and they have been a key contributor towards the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan over the past 15 years.

Maintaining normal, fruitful relations with India motivates certain recalcitrant circles within Pakistan to use violence and proxies to counter India, in their minds, through keeping Afghanistan bled, with no respect to our sovereignty.

I believe there is a need for a meaningful dialogue among the three countries. Any ease of tension between Pakistan and India is helpful for us, for the region, and for the world at large.

If that doesn't happen, at least Afghans should have an opportunity to convince both, in particular Pakistan, that we have never allowed our soil to be used against either of them. We're not going to do that now, nor in the future,

and we would like to reach an agreement that would help normalize relations.

The second factor is the tension between the military and civilian government in Pakistan itself, which has been there for the past 68 years throughout the existence of Pakistan. It is up to the people of Pakistan to address this.

For the military to justify its grip on power and its lion's share of the budget, they have to keep security challenges alive so they could go to the civilian government and say that, if they aren't there, Pakistan would be in trouble. Therefore, every time the civilian government takes the initiative to have a dialogue with Pakistan's neighbors, those circles within the military establishment try to sabotage that. They want some security challenges to persist so they can remain in power. Imagine if Kashmir and Afghanistan are solved: what would be the position of the military?

The third factor is, since the creation of Pakistan, a trust deficit has been developing between Pakistan and its neighbors. Little attention has been given to address this issue. The time has come for Pakistan to take the initiative to reduce the deficit, and for the neighbors to welcome them. Because of the existence of the trust deficit, even if there is a paradigm shift on the part of the Pakistani military establishment to change this policy of using violence in pursuit of political objectives, it will take us some time to believe that it's genuine. We need to work on trust and confidence building. A peaceful, democratic, and stable Pakistan is in the interest of all of us.

Additionally, fighting violent extremism and terrorism requires collective response and better regional and global security architecture.

There has been much conversation over the years about the relevance of the UN. From your vantage point, what needs to be done to make sure it's effective going forward?

The UN has played a major role in Afghanistan and it is a story to celebrate. On November 21st, we celebrated the 70th anniversary of our membership to the UN.

The entire journey started with a UN meeting in Bonn, Germany in 2001 where all of the major Afghan parties came together and

gave birth to an administration. The UN played an excellent role in facilitating that. Since then, the UN has continued its facilitating role for political dialogue and in the peace process.

In addition to that, the UN development agencies have played a major role in bringing about positive changes in Afghanistan – agencies like UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, and others have been heavily involved in the life of Afghanistan. If there has been improvement in health and education, for instance, the UN has had a key role in it.

Before this, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979, the General Assembly called for the immediate withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

We also have played our own role in the family of the UN. We became a member in 1946 and, since then, we served as President of the General Assembly from 1966 to 1967, and we chaired a number of UN committees, including the Human Rights Committee and Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Council Reform. Currently, we are a member of ECOSOC. We are a candidate for the Human Rights Council from 2018 to 2020, as well.

It's not a one-way street, where we just expect things from the UN for Afghanistan. We have to be a good member of the UN and defend its charter as well as being a healthy member of the UN family, so we are respectful of that and fulfill our role.

As far as reform in the UN is concerned, that is important. All of us agree that having the UN is a blessing and one of the biggest achievements of mankind. Beyond that, making the UN more relevant to the lives of those who need the UN most is crucial.

This is why, when it comes to the Security Council, having a degree of justice is important because, at day's end, the Security Council must see justice being done. Reform in the Security Council and in the General Assembly is long overdue, and we're looking forward to that.

What attracted you to government work initially and how important is public service today?

If it wasn't for the unfortunate circumstances facing Afghanistan, I would have been a successful architect in my country because that was my dream as a teenager while going to high school in Kabul. Unfortunately, in grade 11, the communist coup took place and a year and a half later, Afghanistan was invaded by the Red Army of the Soviet Union.

Our minds were occupied with defending our country and I became involved in the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as a student at Kabul University, and I had to leave the country because there was a lot of pressure in Afghanistan in those days. I also always had this idea of paying back to my people and my country. I was brought up by parents with the idea that we should always be honest and serve people and our country, so that has always been there.

Whether Afghanistan has had its good or bad days, I have always wanted to be part of the development of my country and this has led me to this point. ●

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