

US WAR ON TERROR IN AFGHANISTAN: EVALUATING THE OIL CLICHÉ

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***Abstract:** War in Afghanistan ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union; but events in Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal created a new post-cold war threat for the world peace – the Taliban – which teamed up with Al-Qaeda to challenge the US hegemony on the eve of the twenty-first century. Even prior to the incidents of 9/11, the Al-Qaeda had attacked US installations in 1993, 1996, 1998, and 2000 – latter two of which were carried out while Al-Qaeda was headquartered in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were the primary supporters and sponsors of these two groups. Now the question arises that why didn't the US do something about the Taliban during this phase? Why didn't the US turn against the Taliban? Rather, they kept making offers including at times formal US recognition, if they handed over Osama bin Laden. Why didn't the US put pressure on Pakistani and Saudi sponsors, or not supported anti-Taliban groups in Afghanistan, and why there was no hostility in the US towards Taliban regime prior to 9/11? There are several hackneyed clichés about it. This paper attempts to evaluate the one assuming the oil interests in Caspian Sea as the primary spoil of the game.*

Keywords: US foreign policy, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Taliban, Osama bin Laden, War on Terror, 9/11, oil interests, gas pipelines, Caspian oil

Introduction

The ouster of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto resulted in yet another martial law in Pakistan. General Zia, no wonder, “didn't keep his promise of holding new elections to return the army to the barracks and extended his martial law indefinitely to carry out his ‘definite’

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image of Pakistan's future."¹ General Zia's takeover coincided with Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and defined the future course of global politics in general and that of Pakistan in particular. The presence of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan was perceived as a security threat in Pakistan, as it was portrayed that the Soviets would proceed to Pakistan after consolidating their control in Afghanistan.

These two developments concurred with Islamist resistance to communism in Afghanistan going on prior to Soviet invasion,² which was the result of "an Islamic renaissance that moved from North Africa through the Middle East to South and Central Asia and on to Southeast Asia."³ President Ronald Reagan's doctrine of rollback, instead of containment, of the 'evil empire'; Zia's policy of Islamization as recipe for national integration through religious unity – not to mention a move to perpetuate his rule; Iranian

¹ Muhammad Usman Amin Siddiqi, "The US Foreign Policy towards Pakistan: A Blame Game or A Great Game," (M.Phil thesis, GCU Lahore, 2011), 146.

² Muslim Youth Organization, founded in Kabul University, had become an important political force in the country by 1970. Gulbaddin Hikmetyar and Ahmad Shah Masood, along with others, emerged as prominent leaders of Muslim Youth in Afghanistan, extending their influence among the madrassa students (Talibs) and Muslim intelligentsia. Islamist forces were active first against Monarchy in Afghanistan, then against Sardar Muhammad Daud's Republic government; and later turned themselves into mujahidin when Noor Muhammad Tarakai was installed as a result of a communist coup against Daud's regime. Later, "Hafizullah Amin's killing of Mohammad Taraki and the intensification of mujahidin attacks on Soviet operations in Afghanistan caused the Kremlin to send the Red Army across the Amu Darya in December 1979 and to install Babrak Karmal at the helm of affairs." For details, see Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan: At the Crosscurrent of History* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2003), 177–79. Also see Siddiqi, "US Foreign Policy," 146–52. For the foundation, development and working of Muslim Youth Organization, see David B. Edwards, "Print Islam: Media and Religious Revolution in Afghanistan," in *Social Movements: An Anthropological Reader*, ed. June Nash (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 100–112.

³ Ziring, *Pakistan*, 177.

revolution and Saudi apprehensions regarding its spread in the region; and resistance to Soviet invasion from within Afghanistan were the developments that helped positioning the chessboard pieces in place and were to determine the future configurations of the region.

The ensuing call to jihad in Afghanistan against the ‘godless’ Soviets intrigued mujahidin from Middle East and Africa seeking path to glory, volunteers on humanitarian mission, and some ‘psychopaths’.⁴ These foreigners were trained in Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan with the help of American and Saudi money and weapons, being funneled through ISI, which made it sure that the money and weapons get to pro-Pakistan factions in Afghanistan. “As the war dragged on, a number of Arab states discreetly emptied their prisons of homegrown troublemakers and sent them off to the jihad with the fervent hope that they might not return.”⁵

Afghan mujahidin commanders did not like these ‘imported’ brands of mujahidin as the very idea of bringing them in not only ignored socio-cultural dynamics of Afghan society, which has never reconciled with the idea of non-indigenous rule, but also changed its demography by introducing chaste Saudi version of Islam in already ethnically troubled tribal society. Pakistani society was obviously not immune to what was happening in neighboring Afghanistan. Saudi sponsored madrassas along the Duran Line, exposed to *Wahhabi* ideological mutations, speciated a young generation of harsh fundamentalist Muslims on both sides of the border – the Taliban. Hailing primarily from Jalalabad and Kandahar, this politico-ethno-sectarian fundamentalist Muslim species has not only spread to almost whole of Afghanistan in the north and southern Punjab and Sindh in the south, but is now found in its other ethnic variants as well – Punjabi Taliban.

⁴ Milton Bearden, “Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires,” *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6 (November–December 2001): 23–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20050325>.

⁵ *Ibid.* Saudi princes sought out Afghanistan as new hunting grounds for bustards or plain turkeys. See Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 11.

Positioning of the Chessboard Pieces prior to 9/11

The proxy war ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, reasons of which are not restricted to war in Afghanistan but were also related to, in the words of John F. Kennen, inherent seeds of destruction in the Soviet communist system. Following Soviet collapse, Russian government ceased its support to communist regime in Afghanistan headed by Najibullah, the immediate aftermath of which was loss of major cities to the insurgents and frequent terrorist attacks in Kabul as the most powerful part of the Afghan military – Afghan Air Force – was grounded for lack of fuel. The tumultuous backwashes forced Najib to resign and hand over power to Abdul Rahim Hatf as acting president. Almost all the warring factions (except that of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) agreed to the terms of peace and power-sharing in Peshawar Accord in April 1992, which established Islamic State of Afghanistan with Sibghatullah Mujaddidi as its president, who was replaced by Burhanuddin Rabbani in June 1992.

The “ethnic conflicts and tribal rivalries, subdued by the presence of a foreign and common enemy (the Soviets), reemerged after the Soviet withdrawal; and by 1994, Afghanistan had turned into a cacophony of warring warlord fiefdoms.”⁶ Rabbani government’s control was limited to Kabul and northeast of the country, while the rest of the country was under the control of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Rashid Dostum, Ismael Khan, and other commanders.⁷ Add to this “the horrendous brutality, murder, rape, drug trafficking, and robberies, and the picture of Afghan civil war in early 1990s is complete.”⁸ The Islamabad Accord between Islamic State of Afghanistan and militant coalition under Hekmatyar – resulting in Ahmad Shah Massoud’s resignation as Defense Minister and appointment of Hekmatyar as Prime Minister – could not last more than a week. Pashtun forces under Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Hazara forces of Hezb-e-Wahdat, supported by Saudi Arabia

⁶ Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 153.

⁷ For details of areas of influence of various commanders and ethnic identities, see Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 12.

⁸ Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 153.

and Iran respectively, continued fighting – Hekmatyar, Dostum, Massoud, and other groups soon resumed their positions.

The rise of the phenomenon of Taliban was apparently an indigenous reaction to this civil war – the patronage by Saudi and Pakistani kingmakers cannot be ruled out obviously. Taliban were students of the abovementioned madrassas in Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Eastern provinces – trained, inter alia, for guerilla warfare. Their primary objectives were restoration of peace and enforcement of *Sharia*. The Taliban, under Mullah Mohammed Omar, seized “Kandahar in the winter of 1994, and then rapidly spreading north and west, captur[ed] Herat in 1995, and Kabul in 1996.”⁹ Ahmad Shah Massoud and other leaders of warring factions fled and took refuge in Iran, Turkey, and Europe. The forces under Ahmad Shah Massoud, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, Haji Abdul Qadir, and Abdul Haq formed United Front – popularly known as Northern Alliance – to resist Taliban in the remaining areas.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were the only countries to extend recognition to newly formed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Taliban – while all three of them had their own reasons and aims in Afghanistan, dreaded Indian influence in Afghanistan was primary stimulus for what Pakistan had been doing in this regard. Pakistan witnessed cordial relations with Afghanistan during Taliban regime. Contrary to that, Indian relations with Afghanistan in this period were at the lowest ebb, to say the least. Every regime in Afghanistan had enjoyed Indian recognition; but following Soviet withdrawal, New Delhi patronized anti-Pakistan factions in Afghanistan – obviously for the same reasons Pakistan supported Taliban. With the rise of the Taliban and public execution of Najibullah, India started extending every possible support to the Northern Alliance.¹⁰

⁹ Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 14.

¹⁰ See Timothy D. Hoyt, “The War on Terrorism: Implications for South Asia,” in *South Asia in World Politics*, ed. Devin T. Hagerty (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 284.

Osama bin Laden¹¹ and his colleagues, thrilled with their achievements in Afghanistan, excitedly went back to their native countries to radically reform their societies, failing in which resulted in their exile – self-imposed or otherwise – mostly to eastern European states. Osama bin Laden found a safe haven in Sudan, from where he was expelled by Sudanese government under American and Saudi pressure. The only place left for him to take refuge and make future plans was Afghanistan under Mullah Omer, as he had invited bin Laden to “live with him in Kandahar in the autumn of 1996.”¹²

Afghanistan – a tribal society-at-arms lacking strong state structure – offered Osama a perfect hideout:

During 1980s, Islamic extremist overtones and their fallouts had already created a raw genotype in Afghanistan and its vicinity [northern areas of Pakistan, for example], exhibiting phenotype characteristics ideal for recruitment in his ‘holy army’. Taliban’s horrendous human rights violations

¹¹ A young Saudi student and son of a Yemeni construction magnate, Mohammed Bin Laden, who was a close friend of late King Faisal, and whose company had become fabulously wealthy on the contracts to renovate and expand the Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina. The ISI had long wanted Prince Turki Bin Faisal, the head of *Istakhbarat*, the Saudi Intelligence Service, to provide a Royal Prince to lead the Arabs in Afghanistan in order to show Muslims the commitment of the Royal Family to the jihad. Only poorer Saudis, students, taxi-drivers, and Bedouin tribesmen had so far arrived to fight. But no pampered Saudi Prince was ready to rough it out in the Afghan mountains. Bin Laden, although not a royal, was close enough to the royals, and certainly wealthy enough to serve the purpose. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (London: New Haven, 2001), 131.

¹² Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 15. In May 1996, “Bin Laden travelled back to Afghanistan, arriving in Jalalabad in a chartered jet with an entourage of dozens of Arab militants, bodyguards and family members, including three wives and 13 children. Here, he lived under the protection of the Jalalabad Shura until the conquest of Kabul and Jalalabad by the Taliban in September 1996.” Rashid, *Taliban*, 133.

were rapidly isolating Afghanistan from the rest of the world, and therefore, fewer chances of Osama's being traced and monitored by international media and intelligence agencies. Above all, his sympathizers were in power in Afghanistan, by virtue of which he could use the entire country as a base for his operations. All he needed to do was to pour in money and gather his old allies of the Soviet war. He did exactly the same.¹³

Osama bin Laden "furnished fighters, cash, and ideological advice to the Taliban; congregated his Arab allies left behind in the region during 1980s; rallied more militants from other Muslim countries; and brought into being a global terrorist organization: the Al-Qaeda."¹⁴ The most prominent and most frightening terrorist organization in the world – Al-Qaeda – was initially a loose coalition of insurgent groups that had struggled against the Soviet control of Afghanistan in 1980s. Al-Qaeda "got closely allied to the Taliban and emerged as a pivotal terrorist force directed against the US in 1990s."¹⁵

Ahmed Rashid, a very well-renowned writer on Afghan politics, holds that Osama bin Laden consciously marooned the Taliban from the rest of the world; so that Mullah Omer would face Hobson's choice of defending bin Laden and his allies after 9/11. He considers the assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud, two days before the incidents of 9/11, a part of Osama's post-9/11 strategy. It is because Ahmed Shah Massoud was the only leader capable of providing leadership for US backed regime that would have been installed in Afghanistan after Taliban's defeat by US forces following 9/11. Furthermore, as the international community was mounting pressure on the Taliban for handing over Osama bin

¹³ Siddiqi, "US Foreign Policy," 155.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 156. For details, see US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, April 2003), 118–19, cited in Hoyt, "War on Terrorism," in Hagerty, *South Asia*, 283–84.

Laden to the US, the Northern Alliance had started resurfacing under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud and making coalition with other groups who had fled Afghanistan, including that of Ismael Khan, Rashid Dostum, and others. With Ahmad Shah Massoud dead, Northern Alliance was not likely to be strong enough to take control of Afghanistan from the Taliban in the wake of anticipated US attack after 9/11.

Prior to the incidents of 9/11, “Al-Qaeda had been accused of an attack on the World Trade Centre in February 1993; Khobar Barracks blast in June 1996; bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998; and US Cole assault in October 2000.”¹⁶ The latter two attacks were carried out when Al-Qaeda was headquartered in Afghanistan,¹⁷ and was in tandem with the Taliban. In response to bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the US responded with firing cruise missiles into Sudan (hitting Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory) and Afghanistan (hitting four sites of training camps, primarily run by Al-Qaeda).

Now the question arises that why the US was not doing anything about the Taliban in this period? The abovementioned missiles were primarily meant for Al-Qaeda installations and not the Taliban.¹⁸ These attacks were rather used by Osama bin Laden to win over the hearts and minds of the Taliban and complete obedience of Mullah Omer by interpreting these attacks as an attempt to overthrow Taliban regime. On the contrary, the US was demanding Taliban that bin Laden be handed over to them; and was offering in exchange anything “including, at times, formal US

¹⁶ Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 157.

¹⁷ Hoyt, “War on Terrorism,” in Hagerty, *South Asia*, 284.

¹⁸ The missiles were primarily mean to assassinate bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders. According to CIA bin Laden left one of those sites few hours before the missiles hit. Some reports say that one of those training camps was run by Pakistan-based militant group, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, killing five ISI officers and twenty trainees (volunteers for Kashmir Struggle). For details, see Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 27–28 and 209–10. Also see Hoyt, “War on Terrorism,” in Hagerty, *South Asia*, 284–85.

recognition.”¹⁹ Scholars (e.g., Tariq Ali and Ahmed Rashid) are of the view that there was no resentment in the US towards Taliban regime prior to 9/11.²⁰

Pakistan, “during all this, was allegedly not only supporting the Taliban, in terms of money and weapons, but was furnishing fighters, whenever needed to shore up Taliban stronghold against pro-India Northern Alliance and other opposing groups.”²¹ For instance, in September 2000, “the ISI provided more than hundred Pakistanis from the Frontier Corps to manage artillery and communication,”²² during Taliban’s campaign to take control of Taloqan – Ahmed Shah Massoud’s stronghold. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, despite being a trusted ally of the US, was continuously supporting the Taliban in terms of finances; and apparently, the US was not unhappy with the Saudis either.²³

The lack of a firm reaction from the US to Saudi and Pakistani support system to Taliban amounted to a tacit US approval of what was going on in Afghanistan. United States’ silence let the Taliban freehandedly capture almost all of Afghanistan by squeezing the opposing factions. In short, Washington, despite being and flaunting about its *sole* superpower status in the world, failed in devising a concrete strategy to check the spread of extremism and terrorism along with that of the Taliban phenomenon – and later their deadly liaison with Al-Qaeda.

¹⁹ Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 16.

²⁰ See, for example, Tariq Ali, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 225.

²¹ Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 156.

²² Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 17. Also see Hoyt, “War on Terrorism,” in Hagerty, *South Asia*, 284.

²³ For details of Osama bin Laden’s alliance with the Taliban, and Pakistani and Saudi support to them, see Global Jihad: The Arab-Afghans and Osama Bin Laden, Chapter 10, in Rashid, *Taliban*, 128–40. According to Timothy D. Hoyt, the best work on this relationship is of Rohan Gunaratna. (Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Let alone taking any action against the Taliban themselves, it did not even occurred to the US leadership to support anti-Taliban factions in Afghanistan. For example, “Ahmed Shah Massoud and Ahmed Karzai were used to criticize US policy of leaving the Taliban in place, without supporting anti-Taliban groups or putting pressure on their Saudi and Pakistani sponsors. They had reportedly warned the Americans of dangers of the Al-Qaeda-Taliban alliance, but nobody was interested at that point in time.”²⁴

Even after the planes hit the twin towers in September 2001, Washington asked Islamabad to convince the Taliban to hand over bin Laden to avoid occupation. Islamabad was reportedly given assurance by Washington that “if Al-Qaeda leaders were handed over to the US, the Taliban regime could stay,”²⁵ as they surprisingly had no problem with the Taliban and their policies home and abroad.

Spoils of the Game: Evaluating the Oil Cliché ²⁶

Now the question arises, what made the US so complaisant towards Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the latter half of 1990s? There are several explanations for this. One of them, we are referring here as ‘Oil Cliché’, simply assumes that it was because the Taliban mattered in the ‘New Great Game’. They were positioned at an exceedingly important square of the new great game chessboard that had catapulted them to a position of higher geo-strategic significance in the US policy calculus. Thus, the US did not want rather afford to displease them.

What this new great game was all about? The answer is hydrocarbons. Like the earlier ‘Great Game’ between Russia and the Great Britain for supremacy in Central Asia, the ‘New Great Game’ was about capturing the hydrocarbons in Central Asia, especially

²⁴ Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 16, cited in Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 158.

²⁵ Ali, *Duel*, 225, cited in Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 158.

²⁶ The following part of the paper has been taken from the Author’s MPhil Thesis (Siddiqi, “US Foreign Policy,” 157–66) as it contains a large number of facts and figures which is difficult to write anew.

Turkmenistan and the regions around the Caspian Basin. Afghanistan, like ever, was the key to that area; and the Taliban were right in the middle of it. So the Taliban had got a strategic value that was pivotal to US oil interests in the New Great Game.²⁷

Energy is a significant concern for any country in the world. But for a superpower like the US, it becomes even more crucial. Oil is pivotal for US corporate expansion in the world. It is also a resource that the US wants to control to maintain its global geopolitical and economic dominance. Most importantly, “the interests of the oil and defense sectors are closely intertwined,”²⁸ as the petroleum consumption is critical for sustaining and nourishing United States’ military-industrial complex and her over-stretched military engagements in the world.

US oil consumption is 18.69 million barrels per day (mb/d), whereas its production stands at 9.056 mb/d, from which it exports 1.704 mb/d; and therefore, has to import 11.31 mb/d. Natural gas consumption in the US is 646.6 billion cubic meter (cu m), whereas its production is 593.4 billion cu m, from which it exports 30.35 billion cu m; and imports 106.1 billion cu m.²⁹ As per the estimate of January 1, 2010, the total proven reserves of oil in the US stood at 19.12 billion and that of natural gas at 6.928 trillion cu m.

Thus, the US imports 11.31 mb/d of oil and 106.1 billion cu m of natural gas. For this, the US depends upon several countries, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and Mexico being the largest exporters. According to the US Energy Information Administration of the US Department of Energy, “net imports of crude oil and petroleum products (imports minus exports) accounted for 49%”³⁰ of total US

²⁷ Bearden, “Graveyard of Empires,” 26.

²⁸ Aziz Choudry, “Blood, Oil, Guns And Bullets,” *Global Research*, last modified November 23, 2003, accessed August 17, 2011, <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/AZI311B.html>.

²⁹ The figures are of 2009, from CIA – The World Factbook, accessed August 16, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html>.

³⁰ Oil Crude and Petroleum Products Explained, US Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy, accessed August 17,

petroleum consumption in year 2010. But according to Lutz kleeveman, the writer of the famous book, *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*, “the US will have to import more than two-thirds of its total energy demand by 2020, mostly from the Middle East.”³¹

The oil embargo of 1973 and subsequent price hike have made the US leadership more and more conscious about secured energy resources, especially oil and gas. Following the 1973 oil embargo, President Nixon’s vows³² to put an end to US dependence on other countries for energy resources by the end of 1970s actually resulted in rise of US oil imports from 3.2 million barrels per day in 1973 to 5.3 million barrels per day in 1980.³³ US oil imports of 9.2 million barrels per day in 2010 and President Obama’s statement on March 30, 2011, that “we will keep on being a victim to shifts in the oil market until we get serious about a long-term policy for secure, affordable energy,”³⁴ present a clear picture of US dependence on foreign countries for energy resources till date.

Despite United States’ all-weather friendship with Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, a strong desire to diversify its energy supplies has always been there in US policy circles. The reasons are simple: The first and the foremost reason

2011, http://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/index.cfm?page=oil_imports.

³¹ Lutz Kleeveman, “The New Great Game,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2003, last modified June 13, 2008, accessed August 16, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2003/oct/20/oil>.

³² President Richard Nixon’s statement in 1974: “At the end of this decade, in the year 1980, the United States will not be dependent on any other country for the energy we need to provide jobs, to heat our homes, and to keep our transportation moving.” See Anthony H. Cordesman, “US Oil and Gas Import Dependence: Department of Energy Projections in 2011,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, New York, last modified April 29, 2011, accessed August 15, 2011, <http://csis.org/publication/us-oil-and-gas-import-dependence-department-energy-projections-2011>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

remains the memories of 1973 oil embargo. The US does not want this to happen again. Moreover, though the United States headquarters numerous big oil companies, but private oil companies of the US, like ExxonMobil, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, or for that matter BP (UK), are not the biggest in the world. Surprisingly, the biggest oil companies in the world are mostly state-owned, like Saudi Aramco, National Iranian Oil Company, and Petroleos Mexicanos. Dependence upon state-owned oil companies renders the US vulnerable to possible oil embargos in case of deteriorated US relations with the respective states.

Furthermore, the oil reserves outside Middle East are rapidly depleting, and the global oil consumption is rising day by day. This is helping the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to expand its share of the world market. This development disturbs many in Washington. Ever expanding market share of the OPEC means growing power of Iran and Saudi Arabia – two big giants in OPEC. In addition to the fears of Iranian growth, whose relations with the US are at the lowest ebb, many in Washington also see growth of Saudi Arabia and the increasing US dependence on Saudi oil as alarming. Paranoid by the Islamic extremism, many in Washington fears that an extremist coup in Saudi Arabia can discontinue the flow of oil to ‘infidels’.³⁵

So, the US needs to find other secure oil resources for diversification of oil supplies. The oil reserves in Middle East and Persian Gulf are mostly state-owned. Exploration in other regions of the world is also not trouble-free. In some regions, like Nigeria, the disgruntled natives present problems like pipeline explosions, kidnapping of workers, and other sabotaging activities. Exploring oil from far-flung places needs costly technology that makes it uneconomical; the best example is the oil under the deep waters of Brazil. Last, but not least, oil reserves in Russia – still a potential rival – are not considered secure either.

In this situation, untapped oil and gas resources of Central Asia and Caspian Sea appear perfectly suitable for the US – for both US consumption home and abroad and as a vital resource to get

³⁵ Kleveman, “New Great Game.”

control of to maintain her global hegemony. These resources appeared accessible to the outside world in 1991–92, when the region was stripped off of Soviet blanket. A stark rivalry among oil companies to get hold of these resources brought the region in the public eye.

Initially, “the USA estimated that Caspian oil reserves were between 100 to 150 billion barrels (bb).”³⁶ Then, the later estimates stood from as low as 50 bb,³⁷ to as high as above 200 bb,³⁸ whereas the proven reserves, according to Ahmed Rashid, are between 16 and 32 billion barrels.³⁹ Proven reserves of gas are estimated at

³⁶ Rashid, *Taliban*, 144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See Ian Bremmer, “Oil Politics: America and the Riches of the Caspian Basin,” *World Policy Journal* 15, no. 1 (Spring, 1998): 27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209566>. According to Alice J. Barnes and Nicholas S. Briggs, the most conservative estimations of the Caspian basin’s energy wealth set it at 200 billion barrels of oil and natural gas. Most reports agreed that it was closer to 200 billion barrels of oil alone. An amount exceeded only by the reserves of Saudi Arabia. For details, see Alice J. Barnes and Nicholas S. Briggs, “The Caspian Oil Reserves: The Political, Economic and Environmental Implications of ‘Black Gold’ in the World Market,” *EDGE*, Winter 2003, <http://www.stanford.edu/class/e297a/Caspian%20Oil%20Reserves.pdf>. Also see Bruce R. Kuniholm, “The Geopolitics of the Caspian Basin,” *Middle East Journal* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 549, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329543>.

³⁹ The proven reserves of Caspian region between 16 and 32 billion barrels, compared to 22 bb of the USA and 17 bb of the North Sea, gives the Caspian 10–15 times less than the total reserves of the Middle East. The division of oil within Caspian region: Kazakhstan has the largest oil reserves with an estimated 85 bb, but only 10–16 bb proven reserves. Azerbaijan has possible oil reserves of 27 bb, and only 4–11 bb proven reserves, while Turkmenistan has 32 bb possible oil reserves, but only 1.5 bb proven reserves. Uzbekistan’s possible oil reserves are estimated at 1 bb. See Rashid, *Taliban*, 144.

236–337 trillion cubic feet (tcf).⁴⁰ However, there are extreme variations in estimations by different sources.⁴¹

Irrespective of amount of oil and gas, the removal of Soviet obstruction from the region allured various international oil companies, as the region homed last unexploited oil reserves on earth, at least, for all they knew of. “Western oil companies have shifted their interest first to Western Siberia in 1991–92, then to Kazakhstan in 1993–94, Azerbaijan in 1995–97, and finally Turkmenistan in 1997–99.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Compared to reserves of 300 tcf in the US. The division of oil within Caspian region: Turkmenistan has the 11th largest gas reserves in the world with 159 tcf of possible gas reserves, Uzbekistan 110 tcf, Kazakhstan 88 tcf, while Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have 35 tcf each. Ibid.

⁴¹ For diverse variations in estimates of oil and gas reserves, both estimated and proven, see Bremmer, “Oil Politics,” 27–35; and Kuniholm, “Geopolitics,” 546–571. Also see David White, “The Petroleum Resources of the World,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 89 (May 1920): 111–134, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1014212>; R. G. Gidathubli, “Oil Politics in Central Asia,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 5 (January 30–February 05, 1999): 260–263, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407600>; Kamyar Mehdiyoun, “Ownership of Oil and Gas Resources in the Caspian Sea,” *The American Journal of International Law* 94, no. 1 (January 2000): 179–189, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2555242>; Jan H. Kalicki, “Caspian Energy at the Crossroads,” *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (September–October 2001): 120–134, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20050255>; Trent Leach, “The Great Game, Caspian Oil & Pipeline Politics,” *Australian Quarterly* 75, no. 6 (November–December 2003): 29–31, 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20638219>; Kent E. Calder, “Asia’s Empty Tank,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 2 (March–April 1996): 55–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20047488>; and Rama Sampath Kumar, “Impact of US-Led War on Terrorism,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 33 (August 17–23, 2002): 3414–3419, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412486>.

⁴² Rashid, *Taliban*, 144.

As the region's oil and gas reserves were not being explored, and more importantly, not exported to the outside world⁴³ to bring fruits to the host Central Asian countries; there was a downright and pressing need for pipelines. Within a few months of Soviet collapse, Central Asian economies went from bad to worse; and the oil resources became all the more important, making the need for pipelines simply irresistible. They initiated negotiations with the Western oil companies that were to shape the future geo-politics of the region. As many as 24 companies from 13 different countries signed deals in the region from 1994 to 1998.⁴⁴

Predatory interests of big powers, like the US and Russia, for oil and influence in the region; complex conundrum of the enmeshed concerns of regional states like Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Iran, and Turkey; obsession of the Central Asian leaders with the projected pipelines and their prospect dividends; and rapacious promptitude of international oil companies culminated into what we are referring here as 'Great Game'.⁴⁵ The other stakeholders were the militant groups in Afghanistan like the Northern Alliance, cross-border armed groups in Central Asia, crime syndicates, and illegal drug and arms cartels.

US interests were to check the rising influence of Russia and China in the region; to control vital energy resources to maintain global hegemony; and to see to it that the pipelines are not routed

⁴³ According to Ahmed Rashid, in 1996, the Caspian region produced one million barrels per day (b/d) of oil, of which only 300,000 b/d was exported - mainly from Kazakhstan. However only half that (140,000 b/d) was exported outside the former Soviet Union. Caspian production still represented only about 4 per cent of total world oil production. The region's natural gas production in 1996 totaled 3.3 tcf, but only 0.8 tcf was exported outside the former Soviet Union - mostly from Turkmenistan.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ahmed Rashid claims to first coin the term 'The New Great Game', for the race to gain control of the resources in Central Asia and Caspian Sea, in his article, "The new Great Game - the Battle for Central Asia's Oil," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 10, 1997. See Rashid, *Taliban*, 145.

through the undesirable countries like Iran, Russia, or China. Russia wanted to retain her traditional hegemony in Central Asian region and to make sure that the pipelines pass through its territory, bringing her “\$5.5 billion in dividends, \$18.4 billion in taxes, and an annual \$900 million in transport fees.”⁴⁶

China, whose Xinjiang region could have spillover effects from Central Asia, wanted to secure stability in the region along with energy for its phenomenally growing economy – not to mention her desire for wider political influence that also dictated her moves. Other regional states like Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran were also aspiring to be preferred routes of the pipelines. CARs, as mentioned earlier, were engrossed with oil politics in the region, not to forget their internal ethnic and traditional rivalries, which made the game even more venomous. Above all, alacrity and promptitude of various national and multinational oil companies from the US, Europe, and Asia ushered in a fierce competition in the region.

Simplifying for the purpose of this paper, the game was about politics over the routes of proposed pipelines. There were several plans for pipelines.⁴⁷ Intricately enmeshed interests of various players jeopardized almost all plans; as Russia and Iran were not acceptable to the US; Afghanistan had no government to deal with; and all the other routes were not suitable from business point of view, for example, a pipeline from Turkmenistan through China would have cost \$20 billion.

The two similar proposals, one by the Argentinean oil company (Bridas) and the other by the US oil company (Unocal), in 1994 and 1995 respectively, drew Afghanistan, or more precisely the Taliban, into the what we are referring here as great game. The proposal was to lay a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Indian Ocean

⁴⁶ Barnes and Briggs, “Caspian Oil Reserves,” 14. The Russians were in desperate need of the income, an endorsement of their pipeline route would generate. This meant that they would go to any lengths to convince investors to back their proposed route over the US route.

⁴⁷ For various proposed pipeline routes and their respective shortcomings, see Rashid, *Taliban*, 143–82. For pictorial presentation of proposed pipelines, see Barnes and Briggs, “Caspian Oil Reserves,” 14–15.

through Afghanistan and Pakistan. This phenomenon made this great game even more closely similar to the earlier great game between Russia and the Great Britain, as Afghanistan has been a significant fulcrum in both.

A high-ranking delegation from Afghanistan, comprising Taliban ministers and their advisers, traditionally dressed in shalwar kameez, waistcoats, and turbans, was given VIP treatment during their four-day stay in a five star hotel in Taxes. Unocal (now part of Chevron), with Washington's backing, invited the Taliban to visit them in Texas. It was regarding £ 2 billion contract for building an 876 mile long pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via war torn Afghanistan – the most economical and swift way to export the resources from Central Asia to the outside world. "Invited to dinner at the palatial home of Martin Miller, a vice-president of Unocal, they marveled at his swimming pool, views of the golf course, and six bathrooms."⁴⁸ "The few images recording this event were later immortalized in Michael Moore's '*Fahrenheit 9/11*'."⁴⁹

The Taliban delegation also went to Washington and met government officials.⁵⁰ Washington appeared anxious to please the Taliban in order to get the deal sealed. Desperate to get international recognition, the Taliban also wanted the deal to be finalized. Apart from heavy tax on every million cubic feet of fuel that would pass through their territory, the Taliban were offered generators, fax machines, and other accessories. Unocal also offered the Taliban the human resource development projects in Afghanistan, which would train Afghan population to be hired to work in the project.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Caroline Lees, "Oil Barons Court Taliban in Texas," *The Telegraph* (London), December 14, 1997, <http://www.mapcruzin.com/news/war111901a.htm>.

⁴⁹ Ali, *Duel*, 227.

⁵⁰ See Abdul-Qayum Mohmand, *American Foreign Policy toward Afghanistan: 1919–2001* (Michigan: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 2007), 193.

⁵¹ Caroline Lees, "Taliban in Texas."

Analysis

So the oil cliché surrounding the US war on Terror in Afghanistan assumes that this is what made the US so complaisant towards Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the latter half of 1990s. Taliban's significance in pipeline politics in the Caspian region made the US a silent spectator to Pakistani and Saudi support to the Taliban, which had helped them capturing almost all of Afghanistan. That was why the US did not devise a full fledge strategy to check the spread of terror groups when Mullah Omer invited Osama to Afghanistan. That was why the US was not ready to support anti-Taliban groups in Afghanistan. And that was why the US asked the Taliban to hand them over Osama and, in exchange, their regime could stay even after the 9/11.

“The Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis did. There will be Aramco, pipelines, an emir, no parliament, and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that,” one US diplomat said to Ahmed Rashid.⁵² After all, these Taliban were the extension of the mujahidin who had defeated the ‘godless’ Soviets, and the madrassa system was continuing to churn them out long after the Americans had abandoned the post-USSR Afghanistan. But then in 1997–98 Taliban's violations of human rights, treatment of women, and other atrocities regarding punishments for crimes drew international scorn, which isolated Afghanistan from the rest of the World. This made difficult for Washington to back pipeline projects.⁵³

⁵² Rashid, *Taliban*, 179.

⁵³ Other than above-referred works, for Taliban's encounter with the Oil companies, especially Unocal, see Michael P. Croissant and Bülent Aras, *Oil and geopolitics in the Caspian Sea Region* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 69–71; Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (London: Verso, 2004), 176–80; Jürgen Ruland, Theodor Hanf, Eva Manske, eds., *US Foreign Policy toward the Third World: a Post-Cold War Assessment* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 165–84; Mohmand, *American Foreign Policy*, 184–202; Tabassum Firdous, *Central Asia, security, and strategic imperatives* (New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002), 172–81; William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 244–45; Eric D. Williams,

The problem with the study of international relations is that the motives behind the incidents can only be evaluated by accessing the circumstantial evidences, by going through the declassified documents, by the help of models that are mostly tailor-made for particular incidents, or by speculating about the psyche of the leaders involved. One cannot be sure about the actual reasons of what happened in the realm of international relations. As in this case, all was set for pipeline contracts to be finally signed, when the planes hit the Twin Towers.⁵⁴ That changed everything. There's no evidence of US Oil companies extracting oil from the region or of any of the abovementioned pipelines. What about the oil cliché then?

The Puzzle of 911: An Investigation into the Events of September 11, 2001, and Why the Pieces don't Fit Together (Charleston: Booksurge Publishing, 2006), 104–6; Neamatollah Nojumi, *The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 176–78; Peter Dale Scott, *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007), 166–67; Peter Phillips, *Censored 2003: the Top 25 censored Stories* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 139; Michael C. Ruppert, *Crossing the Rubicon: the Decline of the American Empire at the End of the Age of Oil* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2004), 94–100; William H. Thornton, *New World Empire: Civil Islam, Terrorism, and the Making of Neoglobalism* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 121–22; J. Flash, *An American Savage* (Nebraska: iUniverse, Inc., 2003), 163–64.

⁵⁴ Ali, *Duel*, 227.