

**The Great Game
Reconstructed**

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Introduction

The American attack on Afghanistan had two publicly announced agendas: 1) The annihilation of Osama bin Laden and his network, and 2) the dismantling of the Taliban organization and toppling of their government. To couch it in modern political parlance, the American foreign policy towards Afghanistan after September 11, 2001 concentrated on *regime change* in Afghanistan. In reality, the new conflict in Afghanistan had to do more with the American interests disguised under the cloak of democracy and waging a war on terrorism. What the Americans really want is unbridled access to gas and petroleum resources and control over the pipeline routes. The American interests in Afghanistan and the Central Asian gas and oil reserves can be described to be economic with a strategic positioning agenda to control the transport route via Afghanistan and monitor military activities and development in Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and the region as a whole.

The vast amounts of gas and oil in the Caspian and Central Asian countries have attracted the United States' security and economic interests. Policymakers in Washington and the oil magnates in America have tried to gain control over the production and transport of these immense gas and oil reserves. Even though the rage, which existed in the United States after September 11 attacks, cannot be ignored or underestimated, but looking into the history of American involvement in the region and the issue of gas-and-oil-pipeline, one can conclude that eliminating Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network, and rooting-out terrorism from Afghanistan were pretenses to implement the oil and gas policy in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

After years of negotiations and dealings with the Taliban, the Taliban were not cooperating with the United States. Therefore, it was deemed necessary that they be replaced by a government which would the interests of the United States' in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The rushed and secretive signing of the US-Afghanistan Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan in 2012 and the current US pressure on President Hamid Karzai and the Afghan government to sign the Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement granting authorization to the United States to keep military bases after 2014 in Afghanistan, are clear indicators of surging American expansionist policy backed by the United States government and skillfully engineered by the energy magnates behind the scene.

A Great Game Battleground

Afghanistan was the focus and the center of the Great Game in the nineteenth century, when Imperial Russia and Great Britain tried to exert influence on Afghanistan and in the region. Russia wanted to reach the warm waters of the Indian Ocean via Afghanistan and make advances into British India, whereas Great Britain wanted to encourage and support the resistance against Russia in Central Asia. One of the objectives of the Great Game was not only to exert influence and control in an area or a region, but also to deny access and control to the opponents. Both Russia and Great Britain decided to resolve their border issues and regional claims permanently and jointly to “curb Germany's eastward march.”¹ The Great Game divided the land of Afghanistan in the north (Punjdeh), the east (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), and the south (Baloochistan). Furthermore, the areas of the Great Game were divided between the two rivals to exercise their influence in their respected areas.

Amidst this competition, Afghanistan's foreign policy for a century was “dictated by the country's position between two aggressive and antagonistic powers,” Great Britain and Russia, “and the necessity of preserving its independence.”² Both Russia, later the Soviet Union, and Great Britain sought several concessions and favors in various times, but the Afghan government fought these measures and made sure that neither country could gain a foothold in Afghanistan, or establish contacts within its borders. Arnold Fletcher argues that:

Thus, for all proximity of the Russians and of the British in India and the technical ability of Soviet and British nationals, no more than a few Britons and no Russians have ever been employed by the Afghan government. Both Great Britain and the U.S.S.R. maintained sizable embassies in Kabul, but these, and particularly the Soviet Embassy, were kept out of bounds for most Afghans as though they were nurseries of bubonic plague; and the diplomats and embassy personnel were kept under constant surveillance by the police.³

From the beginning of the Great Game until the late 1960s, Afghanistan played a balancing role in the region and emphasized its policy of non-interference.⁴ According to the Afghan rulers, this was better achieved if Afghanistan would replace the Soviet Union and Great Britain with the United States and other Western countries as a source of economic and military aid. To obtain any aid, the Afghan policy makers faced the task of convincing the United States of the strategic importance of Afghanistan, the need to launch social and economic development, and modernize the armed forces.

The Afghan government under the leadership Mohammad Daud Khan was not only taking advantage of the Soviet Union's assistance to proceed with its economic development and modernize the Royal Army and the Royal Air Force, but also wanted to balance the Soviet Union's aid with assistance from the United States, Western European countries, and the United Nations. As a result, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Americans, Russians, and West-Germans were competing for political and economic influence in Afghanistan. These countries built Afghanistan's road and highways, hydroelectric dams, funded the national airline Ariana, established telecommunication, and broadened Radio Afghanistan broadcasting by providing more equipment. These countries also helped by promoting the education system. Furthermore, the United Nations, France, Japan, China, and Britain also provided assistance in different areas of development. Richard S. Newell argues that "Afghan development to date has been dominated, if not overrun, by foreign money and foreign ideas. Foreign commodities, credits, cash, and services account for at least three quarter of the investment

already made.”⁵

Afghanistan became a battlefield for the Cold War competition via economic tools. Each of the involved countries, especially the United States, the Soviet Union, and West Germany, tried to exert pressure on the Afghan leadership to influence the political orientation and direct the path of economic development and modernization in Afghanistan. The competing powers in Afghanistan were trying to undermine each other as much as possible but were not willing to cross the line and step over each others’ toes. Richards S. Newell states that “overlooking the impact of this multisided generosity upon the Afghans themselves, the spectacle of this bizarre group of aiding bedfellows making room for each other in a small and still strategic country is rare enough to be remarkable at a time of almost universal tension.”⁶ The competing countries were aware of one another’s options, capabilities, and position in Afghanistan, and therefore guided their work of influencing Afghan politics and economy so carefully as to not create obstacles for their mission. At the same time, the Afghan rulers were aware of the ambitions of the donating countries and played important roles in brokering deals with all countries in ways that will not upset the balance and relations with the others. Newell states that:

in treating with its donors the Afghan government has been able to transform the often vitriolic rivalries expressed elsewhere into a grudging acceptance of competition of popularity through assistance. This has worked, primarily because the donors are convinced that Afghanistan is important enough—largely because of its strategic location—to try to influence, but it is not valuable enough to risk dominating. This observation, particularly applies to the Russians, but it affects their rivals to varying degrees.⁷

The culture of the Cold War in the 1970s, the 1978 coup d’état in Afghanistan, and the fall of the Iranian Shah in 1979, changed the United States’ perception of Afghanistan’s strategic and geopolitical importance. The United States became concerned about the extensive and extended Soviet influence in Afghanistan and the region. After the Islamic revolution, Iran left the American camp and established close

ties with the Soviet Union. During this period Afghanistan was ruled by a Communist regime. These changes made policy makers in Washington believe, if Afghanistan had fallen into the hands of the Soviet Union and Iran had moved to the Soviet's sphere of influence, it would have a domino effect. As a result, the remaining countries in the region, and other noncommunist and pro-Western countries would consequently end up becoming communist or under the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. This concern is clearly stated when the National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned President Jimmy Carter that the Soviet Union will influence the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, and bring changes in these regimes. Eventually the entirety of South Asia would be dominated by the Soviet Union. Brzezinski suggested that the United States must take all necessary measures to stop the countries in the region from becoming communist. In Afghanistan, the Communists' coup d'état of 27 April 1978 had already taken place. According to White House records, Washington's officials become concerned about the situation in Afghanistan. The United States immediately concentrated on the new developments. The Carter administration undertook various initiatives to involve the Soviet Union militarily in Afghanistan. According to Brzezinski, the United States Central Intelligence Agency started aiding the Mujaheddin secretly in 1979, knowing it would probably draw the Soviet Union into a military intervention in Afghanistan. He further writes "it was on July 3, 1979 that President Jimmy Carter signed the first directive on clandestine aid to opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. On that day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained that in my view, this aid would bring a military intervention by the Soviets."⁸ This argument shall not be understood to excuse the Soviet naked aggression in Afghanistan, but only to confirm the United States involvement in Afghanistan. The Soviet aggression of Afghanistan is a discussion on its own.

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on 27 December 1979, the United States provided weapons, ammunition, and money to the Mujaheddin through Pakistan. The Reagan administration, not concerned about its consequences, supported the extremist elements of the Mujaheddin groups. Rosanne Klass states:

A disproportionately large share of U.S. aid went to

the most extreme, radical, anti-Western groups, which had no broad base of political support among the Afghan people, but drew their strength from the financing they received from Libya, Iran, elements in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the radical international Muslim Brotherhood, and the United States.⁹

The 1980s opened a new chapter in the foreign policy orientation of the United States toward Afghanistan. To achieve its strategic objectives and assert the primacy of its national interests, the United States throughout the years, either through direct involvement or through covert operations of the CIA made heroes out of surrogates. President Jimmy Carter in his 1980 State of Union Address declared that “at this moment, massive Soviet troops are attempting to subjugate the fiercely independent and deeply religious people of Afghanistan.” This act “of military aggression presents a serious challenge to the United States of America and indeed to all the nations of the world. Together, we will meet these threats to peace.”¹⁰ The United States covertly channeled cash and weapons to Pakistan to be distributed to the Afghan Mujaheddin, allowing Pakistan to monitor its distribution. The Pakistani government and the ISI interfered with Mujaheddin politics, creating and supporting resistance groups that not only fought the Communist and Soviet forces in Afghanistan, but also advanced and safeguarded Pakistani interests.

Even though the United States did not believe that the Afghans would be able to defeat the Soviet Union, the United States was willing to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan to the last Afghan. The American policy makers wanted to hurt and bleed the Soviet Union and avenge Vietnam. President Ronald Reagan reemphasized his commitment to the Afghan resistance groups in 1985 in his address to the Congress. “We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives- on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua- to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights, which have been ours from birth.”¹¹ The United States wanted to create a non-healing wound for the Soviet Union. Billions of dollars and sophisticated weapons such as the Stinger missiles were flown to Pakistan to be provided to the Afghan Mujaheddin. The CIA operatives were actively monitoring and in some cases directly participating in the evaluation of the war in

Afghanistan. As a result, it created the Soviet Vietnam in Afghanistan. But to the Americans' and the world's surprise the Afghans defeated the Soviet Union, causing the Soviets to withdraw their last troops in February 1989 from Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal and especially after the collapse of Najibullah's regime in 1992 when the Afghans needed economic assistance and political cooperation the most, the United States' turned its back to the Afghan people and left the country in destruction and disarray.

Beside America's lack of interest, there were three additional reasons responsible for this disarray and fragmentation of Afghanistan. First, the Mujaheddin groups were never united politically or militarily. The only common front they had at the time of Jihad was fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Once this common denominator disappeared, the Mujaheddin competed with one another, each trying to undermine the other and gain power in Kabul. Second, the United States deliberately did not allow the Mujaheddin to "an outright military victory" and their "march into Kabul."¹² Third, it was not the objective of the United States to install a stable government in Afghanistan, after the communists and the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan. The United States main objective was to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan. According to Peter Thomson, "once Najibullah's regime was defeated, it was not important to the Americans, what happens in the future and who comes to power."¹³ As a result, matters of Afghanistan's affairs and conflict were left in the hands of Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

After two years of civil war and the destruction of the city of Kabul, the United States once again became interested in Afghanistan. This time the interest was more of an economic nature, rather than political: The extension of the Gas Pipeline from Turkmenistan, via Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. "The pipeline project Chardzhu-Gwadar would cross Afghanistan, passing through the city of Herat... and the pipeline project between Daulatabad (Turkmenistan) and Multan (Pakistan) would run through the Afghan valleys, most notably near Kandahar."¹⁴ By this time security and political situation in Afghanistan were getting out of hand resulting in the emergence of the Taliban.

The Rise of the Taliban

The emergence and rise of the Taliban is a long discussion outside the scope of this paper. But when the Taliban emerged as an organized military movement in response to the failure of the Mujaheddin government (Islamic State of Afghanistan) to establish a central government, stable political system, and economic infrastructure, the Taliban attracted the attention of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States as a stabilizing force in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia directly, and the United States indirectly, provided financial and military assistance, which made the Taliban an effective military force. Initially, Pakistan saw the Taliban as a military and political force capable of securing the trade route to the newly independent Central Asian countries north of Afghanistan. Later the Pakistani policy had expanded to the issue of gas and oil in Central Asia, balance against India and Iran, and a pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan. The “Pakistani Army supported the movement by providing fuel and food, and by facilitating the movement of students from Pakistan.”¹⁵ The fighting force of the Taliban, which started with a handful, grew to 15,000 by the time they entered Kabul. At the same time, because of their familiarity with Pakistan’s political institution and military structure and their ties with the Pakistani Maddaris, the Taliban were able to influence some Pakistani policies toward Afghanistan to their advantage. This should not be translated into them being puppets of Pakistan. Ahmad Rashid argues that “the Taliban have never been anyone’s puppet, and their strings are certainly not pulled in Islamabad.”¹⁶

At the regional level, where Pakistan perceived the Taliban government as a sign of security, stability, and peace in the region, Iran saw “an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban as a threat to Iran’s national security and economic and political interests not only in Afghanistan but, more importantly, in oil-rich Central Asia.”¹⁷ Iran, throughout the recent history tried and in many cases managed to influence Afghanistan through the expansion of the Persian language and culture. Iran considered the Taliban as a purely Pashtun force, which created a threat and impediments to Iran’s influence in Afghanistan. Iran’s concern was proven to be justified. The Taliban did not allow the political influences of Iran to shape their policy. The Taliban also

minimized the influence of the Persian language and culture in Afghanistan's administrative and social structure.

The Clinton administration was sympathetic to the Taliban, because it saw the Taliban as an anti-Iranian force. Prior to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the US Congress had authorized a covert US \$20 million budget and ordered the CIA to destabilize Iran. In addition to the fact that the Taliban were seen as an anti-Iranian force and a successful group capable of freeing Pakistani truck caravan from highway robbers, bandits and warlords, they also presented a viable force in Afghanistan that could establish peace and security in the country. The Taliban were seen as people who could bring normal trade and commerce condition to the war-torn country. "The US primary objective in supporting the Taliban has been to persuade international oil companies to consider Afghanistan rather than Iran as the exit-route for oil and gas from Central Asia to world markets."¹⁸

The United States also supported the Taliban, because according to the Taliban's rhetoric, they were going to disarm the warring factions in Afghanistan, drive out "international terrorism" from Afghanistan, fight the Islamic parties, ban drugs and drug trafficking, clear the unexploded land mines, and reunite Afghanistan under a single rule. This came at a time when the Clinton Administration and some Afghans were working closely with some Congressmen who had an eye on the old monarch Mohammad Zahir Shah. The State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns acknowledged that the United States government had contacts with the Taliban and welcomed their coming to power as a moderate force for peace and security. The United States government described the Taliban as anti-modernist instead of anti-Western and argued that they are keen to restore a traditional society rather than exporting Islam. Also, a former State Department official who later became the United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad argued that "the United States should assist the Taliban because even though it is fundamentalist, it does not practice the anti-US style fundamentalism of Iran."¹⁹

The United States government was concerned about its interests in the area, especially the issue of gas and oil from the Central Asia. Therefore, it took various steps to contact and possibly recognize the Taliban regime as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and

considered the possibility of reopening the American embassy in Kabul. This is why:

Hours after the Taliban took Kabul in Sep. 1996, Acting State Department Spokesman Glyn Davis said that the United States could see nothing objectionable about the version of Islamic law the Taliban has imposed in the areas they then controlled. In an address to the United Nations two months later, the then Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Robin L. Raphael, conceded international misgivings about the Taliban, but insisted the Taliban had to be acknowledged as an indigenous movement that had demonstrated staying power.²⁰

The United States delayed the issue of recognition until the Taliban's capture of northern Afghanistan. If the Clinton Administration had recognized the Taliban regime as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, it would have raised questions. The capture of the northern part of the country, especially Mazar-e Sharif would have been important in two accounts. First, it would have justified the United States recognition of the Taliban regime as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, because Afghanistan would have been controlled by one military faction. Second, the capture of the northern cities and towns of Afghanistan by the Taliban would have opened ways for the implementation of the Gas-Pipeline Project from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. "The project could not kick off because of fighting in Afghanistan and with no one government in power, the consortium²¹ was having to negotiate transit rights with both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance members."²² After the Taliban failed to capture the northern part of the country, especially the city of Mazar-i Sharif in 1997, and rejected the UNOCAL proposal for gas pipeline project, the Clinton administration lost patience with and faith in the Taliban regime.

Despite problems and disagreements, the Clinton Administration continued to support the Taliban, but to exercise pressure on the Taliban, the administration's policy moved from pushing the UN-sponsored peace plan to active criticism of the Taliban and building a broad base government. The Taliban regime was criticized for their

human rights abuses, bans of education and work, especially that of women, and drug trafficking. This was specifically apparent in the 20 July 2000, US Senate hearing. Senator Sam Brownback in his opening remarks stated that the Taliban are still exporting heroin²³ and exporting Islamic fundamentalism to Pakistan.²⁴ At the same hearing, Karl F. Inderfurth, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, criticized the Taliban for creating many of the country's problems. He argued that the Taliban "have failed to end the civil war. And they have failed to offer the Afghan people a better life."²⁵

Not only were the Taliban criticized for their policies, but they were also linked with Osama bin Laden and his activities. The Clinton Administration argued that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the 7 August 1998, bombing of the United States' embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es Salam, Tanzania and demanded from the Taliban government to hand him over to the United States authorities. The Taliban government denied the charges and argued, if the United States has any proof it must be provided to them. The lack of evidence was also strengthened by Congressman Whitefield's statement. Congressman Ed Whitfield (R-KY) "pointed out that there was little evidence, if any, that the Sudan factory was either producing chemical weapons or was associated with bin Laden's group."²⁶ The PBS and The New York Times joint report of 13 April 1999 showed that the United States' attack on Afghanistan and Sudan, labeled as Operation Infinite Reach, on 20 August 1998 was carried out on false conclusions. According to the report, the CIA, the FBI, and other United States authorities had no solid proof, which could have linked Osama bin Laden to the bombing of U. S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The United States government at that time concluded from the theories of the "experts" in the Middle Eastern affairs and terrorism, without any reliable information or any proof what-so-ever that the bombing was carried out by Osama bin Laden.²⁷ No attention was paid to the reports that proved the opposite of the conventional belief at that time or thereafter. Similarly, on 21 September 1998 Tim Weiner and James Risen wrote in The New York Times that there are "serious questions regarding the accuracy of intelligence information on which the decision was made and the credibility of statements made by senior officials in the Clinton Administration as they sought to justify their

decision after the bombing.”²⁸

When the change of administration took place in the United States (Clinton to Bush), the policy of backdoor communication and negotiation continued. According to Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie, to protect the US Oil companies’ interests, the Bush administration initially blocked the FBI investigation into terrorism. The Bush administration bargained with the Taliban regime to deliver Osama bin Laden to the United States justice system in exchange for political recognition and economic aid. According to a German ZDF television documentary, United States’ officials met secretly with members of the Taliban regime in Frankfurt one year before the September 11 attacks to discuss the handover of Osama bin Laden. ZDF television quoted Kabir Mohabbat, an Afghan-American businessman, who quoted Taliban foreign minister Mullah Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil as saying: "You can have him whenever the Americans are ready. Name us a country and we will extradite him.”²⁹ The Bush administration saw the Taliban regime as a source of stability in Central Asia. Through this stability, the U.S. oil companies would be able to implement the construction of the oil and gas pipeline.³⁰ The Taliban were also considering offers from the Argentinean company Bidas. Even though, 11 September 2001 brought an end to the act of direct negotiation with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, one round of negotiations did take place “five days after the attacks, in the Pakistani city of Quetta. The Americans pressed in Quetta for the handover of bin Laden within 24 hours, but the Taliban were unable to meet that demand.”³¹ When the Taliban regime refused to accept the United States conditions, the focus was moved from economic attractions to military force. This shift in policy was the result of policy-makers’ choices influenced by the pressure of retaliation at home and the economic realities of Central Asia.

Regime Change

Regime change in a country is caused by the dynamism of domestic political systems, which is a function of causal forces originating from national, regional, and international sources. The impact of domestic political system on domestic and world politics varies spatially and temporally. Regime change is a transition from one political system to

another. A regime transition from authoritarianism to democracy undergoes the process of withdrawal and initiation, democratization, and consolidation.

The September 11th attacks created a new security situation in the United States to which it had to respond, but the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban regime had more to do with economic reasons than terrorism. The United States competed with Russia to influence Central Asia and the Caucuses. The United States tried to create a military balance against Russia, China, and India in the region. As Robert J. Lieber concluded from President Bush's address to the joint session of Congress in January 2002, "the United States would not allow its global military strength to be challenged by any hostile foreign power."³² Energy played an important role in preserving the American military strength. Energy politics was the most decisive factor determining the strategic orientation of American foreign policy in Afghanistan and in the region. According to the United States Department of Energy's December 2000 and 2001 fact sheet, Afghanistan is important from the energy standpoint, because its geographic position makes Afghanistan a potential transit route for oil and natural gas export from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea.³³

On 11 September 2001, even though President Bush declared the Twin Tower attacks as an "act of war," which he promised he would win, he only demanded that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States authorities. In a meeting, which took place in the White House Cabinet room President Bush stated that the war against terrorism "will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail." He further added that "this battle will take time and resolve, but make no mistake about it, we will win."³⁴ No public statement was issued or any decision was made at the meeting that the Taliban regime should be changed. The administration hoped that the Taliban would cooperate with the United States by handing over Osama bin Laden to the United States' authorities. In a matter of few days, the demand of handing over Osama bin Laden changed to bin Laden and his lieutenants and consequently to the al-Qaeda network, but the Taliban were still not considered terrorists or a target.

President Bush in his address on 21 September 2001 stated that "by aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing

murder. And tonight the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban; Deliver to United States' authorities all of the leaders of Al Qaeda who hide in your land; Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. And hand over every terrorist and every person and their support structure to appropriate authorities. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion."³⁵ At this point, the United States was obviously not interested in regime change or nation-building, because they did not have the people to replace the Taliban. "As pressure mounted on the Taliban, which ruled most of Afghanistan, Bush said he was not interested in nation-building... White House officials were unclear about what the administration expected to occur if control there is wrested from the fundamentalist Muslim leadership."³⁶

According to the Frontier Post, on 16 September 2001, "the head of the Taliban diplomatic mission Aziz ur-Rahman has turned down the possibility of making a deal with the United States on extradition of Osama bin Laden so as to avoid acts of vengeance planned by the Pentagon and NATO. The deal is impossible because it has no legitimate grounds - no proof of Osama bin Laden's guilt has been provided yet, he said in an interview with Abu Dhabi satellite television."³⁷ Thereafter, the Bush Administration changed orientation and concentrated on regime change in Afghanistan. The United States used the show of force and selective punitive military action as a tool of foreign policy to solve international crisis. The Bush administration launched its first war in Afghanistan to capture or eliminate Osama bin Laden, root out his organization, and topple the Taliban regime. From the end of the first Great Game, "more than one hundred years later, great empires once again position themselves to control the heart of the Euroasia landmass, left in a post-Soviet power vacuum. Today there are different actors and the rule of the neocolonial game are far more complex than those of a century ago. The United States has taken over the leading role from the British."³⁸ With the start of the American invasion of Afghanistan, the Great Game, which was reconstructed in the 1990s, came its first implementation stage.

The Great Game Reconstructed

The decision-making process of the American policy makers regarding Afghanistan prior to the September 11th attacks was based on ascription of causality rather than a structured approach. The policy makers in Washington ascribed to the causation of events, even when the evidence only suggested correlations. For example, Osama bin Laden was labeled as the number one enemy of the United States; therefore, there was a tendency to believe that all acts of violence against the United States were perpetrated by him. Furthermore, it was simplified, since bin Laden lived in Afghanistan; therefore, the Taliban must be party to bin Laden's acts. After the September 11th attacks, decision-makers in Washington acted under time pressure and higher stakes. In analyzing Kenneth Waltz's proposition, Shibley Telhami described this scenario as a security threat and stated that "when a state's security is at stake, then this consideration dominates all other in determining the behavior of the state."³⁹ This time pressure and security threat lead to an increase in ambiguity in the decision-making process.

The policy analysts and the policy makers used intuitive decision-making processes, a process that fit into the set of indicators, which they selected, based on their experience and immediately arrived at a satisfactory course of action without weighing the alternatives. Once in Afghanistan, the policy makers attributed their initial success of toppling the Taliban regime to their abilities and talents. When the Americans failed to capture or kill Osama bin Laden, root out al-Qaeda, establish a strong central government, and materialize the pipeline project, they attributed their failure to bad luck and external factors. The later killing of bin Laden did not change the mindset of American policy-makers.

As stated before, the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban regime was more about the control and transport of the immense oil and gas resources in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the strategic location of Afghanistan in the region than eliminating Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization and rooting-out terrorism. According to Ted Rall, "the United States invaded Afghanistan in order to secure access to the world's largest unexploited energy resources, those of the Caspian Sea."⁴⁰

The vast amount of gas and oil in the Caspian and Central Asian

countries attracted the United States' security and economic interests in the region. The policy makers in Washington and the oil magnates in America tried to gain control over the production and transport of the gas and oil reserves. The invasion took place because the American world dominance is partly based on its dominance and hegemonic influence over the world oil and gas economy. As Lutz Kleveman states that "the war against Al Qaeda focused international attention on the Caspian region as an area of strategic importance. However, the Afghan campaign is only an episode, albeit an important one, in a much larger struggle: the New Great Game."⁴¹

In NATO meeting, which took place in Rome, on 8 November 1991, it was stated in the Rome Declaration on Peace and Security that "we no longer face the old threat of a massive attack... Our strategic concept underlines that Alliance security must take account of the global context. It points out risks of a wider nature, including proliferation of weapon of mass destruction, disruption of the flow of vital resources, and actions of terrorism and sabotage."⁴² Once again, in the twenty-first century, because of its geographic location between the Central Asian countries especially Turkmenistan, and South Asia, Afghanistan became the center of attention and the focus of a new Great Game.

The potential transit route for natural gas and oil pipeline, from Turkmenistan to the Indian Ocean, makes Afghanistan an extremely important piece of property of the global strategy. Therefore, the United States' military presence in Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries is a major strategic gain, because the United States would be able to exert influence and manipulate policies from Turkey to Tajikistan. Paul Starobin, Catherine Belton, and Stan Crock argue that "American soldiers, oilmen, and diplomats are rapidly getting to know this remote corner of the world, the old underbelly of the Soviet Union and a region that's been almost untouched by Western armies since the time of Alexander the Great. The game the Americans are playing has some of the highest stakes going. What they are attempting is nothing less than the biggest carve-out of a new U.S. sphere of influence since the U.S. became engaged in the Mideast 50 years ago."⁴³ In other words, the enormous gas and oil reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia and the creation of fronts and power bases against China,

Iran, India, and Russia are the dominant factors influencing American involvement in Afghanistan. As Andy Rowell states “as the war in Afghanistan unfolds, there is frantic diplomatic activity to ensure that any post-Taliban government will be both democratic and pro-West. Hidden in this explosive geopolitical equation is the sensitive issue of securing control and export of the region’s vast oil and gas reserves.”⁴⁴

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the newly independent Central Asian countries tried to launch policies independent from Russia. These countries succeeded to some extent, but due to the long-standing Soviet influence, Russia was able to influence on domestic and foreign policies of these countries. At the same time, the United States became preoccupied with establishing its predominance over its rival Russia in Central Asia. The policy makers in Washington tried to undercut the Russian monopoly over Central Asia and at the same time tried to prevent China and Iran from establishing an alternative route for the gas and oil pipeline in the region. The United States wanted to undermine the Russian monopoly, and therefore was not ready to use the existing Russian pipeline system. Sheila Heslin, the energy expert at the National Security Council attested to this fact in a hearing before the Senate on 17 September 1997. She stated that the United States’ policy in Central Asia was designed to “break Russia’s monopoly control over the transportation of oil [and gas] from that region, and frankly, to promote Western energy security through diversification of supply.”⁴⁵

According to James Dorian, the energy and resources economist who works with the State of Hawaii in Honolulu, “those that control the oil routes out of Central Asia will impact all future direction and quantities of flow and the distribution of revenues from new production. The extent of new pipeline construction or refurbishment will also affect levels of foreign investment in the region.”⁴⁶ There was one big problem though, how gas and oil from the landlocked countries of central Asia would be transported and made available for the world market. A route available at that time was to use the existing Iranian pipeline system to deliver the gas and oil to the Persian Gulf. The pipeline from Turkmenistan could have been connected with the existing Iranian pipeline with a far less cost than that through Afghanistan. The United States did not approve of this alternative.

Consequently, the United States government officials and the oil and gas companies explored a series of alternative pipeline routes. One possibility was to extend a pipeline through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea. This route, which is known as Baku-T'billis-Ceyhan turned out to be impractical. First, the route was 1040 miles long, making the export expensive. Second, the Bosphorus Straits, which the pipeline was leading to, was already congested. Turkey was concerned that the Strait would not be able to handle the traffic of new tankers. Third, the pipeline on average, handled only 210,000 bbl/day.⁴⁷ The second alternative was to go east through Kazakhstan and China to the Pacific Ocean. The United States disapproved of this route because it would have given China control over the pipeline route and would have increased China's economic and strategic capabilities. The third alternative, a bit expensive, but the most direct and easily controllable by the United States and the oil companies was a route to the south. The experts of the involved parties suggested that a pipeline could be extended south from Turkmenistan, across western Afghanistan and Balochistan (Pakistan) to the Indian Ocean. This route was supported by the United States government and UNOCAL, which engaged in negotiations with both Burhanuddin Rabani and the Taliban regime. As it has always been the case since the 1950s, "the issue for Washington wasn't access to oil, but control over oil. Without control, there is no guarantee of access."⁴⁸

One of the reasons why the United States became engaged with the Northern Alliance and with the Taliban at the same time and did not wait for the Taliban to capture more territory, was the fear that Iran could build a pipeline before the United States would even start working on its proposal. This concern was reinforced by the Iranian military and economic support to Burhanuddin Rabani's government. The U.S. government and UNOCAL negotiated with the Rabani government and other warlords to convince them that a pipeline project through Afghanistan instead of Iran would benefit Afghanistan. Consequently, UNOCAL announced that it would give aid to the Afghan warlords once they would agree to form a council to supervise the pipeline project.⁴⁹ While UNOCAL was negotiating with Rabani and other warlords, the United States government was finding alternative solutions to implement the pipeline project through

Afghanistan. According to policy makers and analysts in Washington, the optimal way to deny Iran the opportunity to build a pipeline was to support the opponent of the Rabani regime, i.e., the Taliban. When the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996, the United States “appeared willing to re-engage and develop positive ties with them. Washington was hoping that the Taliban—regarded as relatively clean when compared to other mujahedin factions—would end Afghanistan’s civil war and bring about stability.”⁵⁰ Stability and security was an important factor for the materialization of the pipeline project through Afghanistan, which brings us to the American invasion of Afghanistan.

The Current Conquest

The current conquest of Afghanistan has been planned since early 1998 when the reconstructed Great Game was ready to be implemented in Afghanistan and in the region. Looking into the speed of victory and the degree of success of the US-backed forces in Afghanistan indicates that careful planning and preparation to overthrow the Taliban regime had taken place prior to the 11 September 2001 attacks. Furthermore, the success indicates, before the American invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban regime, the Bush Administration had concentrated on reinstating the Northern Alliance and other warlords to the seat of power in Kabul. “The United States begun undermining the Taliban regime using covert CIA military operatives within Afghanistan more than a year before 9-11. By the summer of 2001, the U.S. government, amplifying policies previously in place under President Bill Clinton, had decided to replace the Taliban regime, and had developed their air strategy to do so.”⁵¹ The policy makers in Washington had decided to remove the Taliban from power, after they stopped cooperating with the United States on the issue of Osama bin Laden and the oil and gas-pipeline project. The removal would have taken place without the 9/11 attacks, but the attacks speeded up the process of the Taliban’s removal.

To clarify this issue in details, one needs to go back in history. The renewed American involvement in Afghanistan did not start with the rise of the Taliban, but goes back to the beginning of the 1990s when the Northern Alliance was controlling Kabul. The Taliban period is significant, because once the foundations of the new Great Game

were laid down in the early 1990s, the New Great Game started to take shape when the Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996. As discussed before, the primary factors determining American policy orientation in Afghanistan were finding ways to exploit opportunities after the discovery of large deposits of oil and gas in Central Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States started to compete with Russia, China, Europe, and Japan for political and economic influence in Central Asia, a key strategic area. It is important, both economically and strategically, who would receive the right to exploit the world's largest untapped oil and gas reserves in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Before the United States became involved in the gas and oil business with the Central Asian countries, Rabani, and the Taliban, the Argentine company Bidas had been already active on the ground. The company was invited by the Turkmen government to investigate oil and gas exploration in Turkmenistan. In January 1992, Bidas was able to secure an agreement and the rights to explore gas in Yashlar in eastern Turkmenistan. It was agreed that the profit would be split 50-50 between Bidas and the Turkmen government.⁵² This attractive and exclusive agreement encouraged Bidas to concentrate on exploration in other parts of Turkmenistan and possibly extend its activities to other Central Asian countries. As a result, in February 1993 Bidas secured another agreement for the Keimir Oil and Gas Block in western Turkmenistan. This time the profit was to be split 75-25 in favor of Bidas.⁵³ The discovery of large oil and gas deposits, access and control of these resources, the terms of the contracts given to Bidas, and the influence of the Argentine company in Central Asia alarmed politicians and the energy magnates UNOCAL in the United States. The United States government and UNOCAL started pressuring Turkmenistan. As a result, in September 1994 the Turkmen government was pressured to prevent Bidas from exporting oil from the Keimir Block.⁵⁴ This marked the beginning of the Americans' active involvement in the gas and oil business in Central Asia.

When the Taliban were still battling in southern Afghanistan and were making their move towards Kabul, Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Turkmen President Saparmurad Niyazof met in

March 1995 to conduct a feasibility study of a pipeline through Afghanistan. At the same time, Turkmenistan agreed with Iran to build the first 180 miles of a proposed pipeline via Iran to Turkey. Due to the hostile relations between Iran and the United States, this move of Turkmenistan was objected to by the United States government and UNOCAL. The United States declared that it would not finance the project.

The Bidas pipeline project was not going smoothly and was facing obstacles created by UNOCAL. The Turkmen government, at the request of Bidas, met with the representatives of Bidas in Texas in April 1995. While in Texas, the Turkmen government representatives also met with UNOCAL officials.⁵⁵ The Turkmen government was facing a dilemma. UNOCAL did not come up with a plan, a proposal, or an offer to implement the extraction and transportation of the oil and gas. At the same time, it tried to block Bidas from implementing its plan. For the time being, the Turkmen government continued to work with Bidas. Bidas discovered oil and gas in August 1995 in Yashlar,⁵⁶ and immediately started investigating ways to export the product to the world. At this stage of Afghanistan's history and conflict, the Taliban were making advances toward Kabul. Bidas representatives deemed it necessary and crucial to meet with the Taliban for the first time, besides meeting with different members and factions of the Rabani regime. Seeing the new discoveries, Bidas' activities in the region and its negotiation with the warring factions in Afghanistan alarmed the United States once again and pressured the Turkmen government for the second time. As a result, Turkmenistan imposed a ban on Bidas' oil export for the second time. Despite the ban, Bidas was convinced that it would be able to close a deal with Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. To Bidas dismay, "on October 21, 1995 executives from UNOCAL and Delta Oil signed an agreement with the President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Niyazof, based on gas exports evaluated at \$8 billion-which included a plan for the construction of a gas pipeline that would cross Afghanistan. The cost of the undertaking was estimated at \$3 billion. At that point, support for the Taliban was not only geostrategically important, it was an economic priority."⁵⁷ Consequently, the Turkmen government put another ban on Bidas for exporting oil from Keimir. Despite the new

revelations, Bidas was not discouraged and was able to secure an agreement with Burhanuddin Rabani in February 1996. Since Rabani controlled only a part of the city of Kabul and a few other areas, Bidas also contacted Abdul Rashid Dostam in Mazar-i Sharif, Ismael Khan in Herat, and other warlords in western Afghanistan to secure their agreements for the gas-pipeline project.

Despite these agreements, the stability and security in Afghanistan were stalling the implementation of the pipeline project, and was redefining United States' relations with the Central Asian countries in terms of gas and oil. The policy makers in Washington were concerned about both the progress and the direction of the pipeline project. In a hearing before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Robin L. Raphael expressed concerns about the United States interests and policies in Afghanistan. She stated on 6 June 1996 that "the conflict in Afghanistan prevents the new Central Asian states from establishing trade and oil and gas outlets to the south."⁵⁸ To implement the gas and oil pipeline project and extract the untapped energy resources in Central Asia, security and stability was needed in Afghanistan.

When the United States initially involved itself in finding ways to build the oil and gas pipelines, it hoped that it would be able to convince the Rabani government in Kabul to sign an agreement with UNOCAL. The Rabani government, however, did not possess any authority beyond areas under his immediate control,⁵⁹ making the feasibility of the pipeline project impractical. The country was carved out between warring factions, local militias, and warlords. The economy, social fabric, and institutional construct of the country were in ruins. Neighboring countries, and other countries in the region and abroad interested in Afghanistan, financed their respective groups. Pakistan supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whereas Iran supported the Rabani government, Ahmad Shah Massood and the Shia groups. Saudi Arabia provided assistance to the Wahhabi elements in Afghanistan. The Central Asian countries and Turkey supported Abdul Rashid Dostam and their ethnic brethren in Northern Afghanistan. Furthermore, Russia and India provided military and economic assistance to Rabani and Massood.⁶⁰ The United States supported individuals, warlords, and factions that were willing to switch sides. In

the midst of these rivalries and competition, the Taliban emerged as a possible solution to the problem. All sides agreed that the materialization of a pipeline project is only possible if a central authority is established throughout Afghanistan. It is important to point out that the emergence of the Taliban was neither a creation of the United States or Pakistan, nor the creation of the oil magnates involved in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Their rise, growth, and success were mainly due to the social and political predicaments that existed in Afghanistan between 1992 and 1996. But once successful, the Taliban attracted the attention of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

The American ambition of getting control of Turkmenistan's gas and oil did not stop at interfering through UNOCAL, but also tried to use political and diplomatic means. "In March 1996 the American Ambassador to Pakistan Tom Simmons had a major row with Bhutto when he asked her to switch Pakistan's support from Bidas to UNOCAL. Bhutto supported Bidas and Simmons accused Bhutto of extortion when she defended Bidas. Bhutto was furious with Simmons...Bhutto demanded a written apology from Simmons, which she got."⁶¹ Pakistan continued to work with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on the pipeline project, leaning more toward Bidas. However, the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in September 1996 changed the situation. UNOCAL became more involved and in October 1996, it openly supported the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. UNOCAL officials argued that the Taliban's takeover of Kabul made the pipeline project much easier. "A vice-president of UNOCAL said that the victory of the Taliban could help the country if it brought stability. That would allow international investors to fund the pipeline, and eventually brings billions of pounds a year in transit revenues to Afghanistan."⁶²

Bidas continued its efforts and was able to sign an agreement with the Taliban regime and Abdul Rashid Dostam in November 1996 to build the pipeline. The United States was not happy with the latest development. It invited Taliban officials in February 1997 to Washington.⁶³ On this visit, the Taliban requested formal recognition from the United States and met with the UNOCAL officials. The Taliban delegation also traveled to Argentina to meet with Bidas officials. Returning from Argentina, on their way home the delegation

also met with the Saudi Intelligence Chief, Prince Turki al-Faysal, in Jeddah. Following the Taliban's visit, UNOCAL was allowed to set up an office in Kandahar and Bidas was allowed to set up its office in Kabul.⁶⁴ Kandahar was more important than Kabul, because it housed the leadership and the decision-making elite of the Taliban. Due to pressure from the United States, UNOCAL, Saudi Arabia, and Bidas, the Taliban regime was forced to make a choice about the pipeline project. However, the Taliban realized that the materialization of the pipeline project was still in its infancy. Therefore, they did not want to offend anyone, lose future access to any country or company, and harm relations with any party in case one party did not fulfill its obligations. Consequently, the Taliban regime announced in April 1997, the company, which can start the work first, would get the contract.⁶⁵ The Taliban regime announced in August of 1997 that Bidas was offering better terms and conditions and they expected to enter into an agreement with them.⁶⁶ Again, this announcement was not well received in the United States.

After many efforts of persuasion and some intimidation, the United States government and UNOCAL were able to secure a pipeline deal with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan in October 1997. Bidas at this point lost the competition to UNOCAL and was awarded fifty-million US Dollars in January 1998 by the International Court of Arbitration in Paris for their investment in Keimir refinery. This amount was to be paid by the Turkmen government. Even though UNOCAL was guaranteed the rights to explore and export, it hesitated to start the project. Perhaps, this was due to the lack of security and stability in Afghanistan. Northern Afghanistan was still controlled by Abdul Rashid Dostam, the Rabani elements, and other warlords. Therefore, in July 1997 Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and UNOCAL signed a new contract to extend the deadline for UNOCAL until December 1998 to start the pipeline project.

The Taliban representatives met with officials at the State Department and representatives of UNOCAL in Texas in December 1997. On this occasion:

The Unocal officials played host to high-ranking Taliban leaders in Texas. The American oil executives reportedly wined and dined them and took

them on a shopping spree. One of the Unocal representatives dining with the Taliban was Zalmay M. Khalilzad. Khalilzad was working for Cambridge Energy Research Associates on Unocal's behalf and advocating that the Clinton administration "engage" with the Taliban.⁶⁷

This visit did not produce any results for the United States and UNOCAL. The Taliban demanded recognition and financial assistance, which the United States was reluctant to provide. Thereafter, the Clinton Administration started criticizing the Taliban regime more often for their policies. When the Clinton Administration launched the missile attack against bin Laden in Afghanistan on 20 August 1998, UNOCAL suspended the pipeline project in Afghanistan and asked its American workers to leave Afghanistan.⁶⁸ Even though no official diplomatic relations existed between the United States and Afghanistan, the minimal official relations that did exist between the two countries deteriorated after the U.S. missile strike on Afghanistan. Seeing no other way to materialize the gas and oil pipeline project, the United States showed readiness to take military action against Afghanistan. According to the Strategic Assessment Report of 1999, which was prepared for the United States Joint Chief of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State, "energy and resources issues will continue to shape international security" and if there arises a problem in these areas, "US force might be used to ensure adequate supplies."⁶⁹ The strategy to secure energy moved from economic incentives to military threats.

By the end of 1999, the Taliban regime was heavily suffering from the United States' and international community's sanctions. The Taliban regime was not able to convince any country to recognize their legitimacy and establish diplomatic relations except Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan. Furthermore, bin Laden was becoming a bigger liability to the Taliban regime. The United States had informed the Taliban if al-Qaeda would harm any American, the United States would hold the Taliban responsible and target Mullah Mohammad Omar and the Taliban leadership.

According to the United States Embassy's archive in Islamabad, in January 2000 the United States Assistant Secretary of State Karl

Inderfurth met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, an important member of the Taliban's decision-making body, in Pakistan to discuss the issue of Osama bin Laden and the pipeline project. "Muttaqi also met with Tom Simons, the former U.S. Ambassador in Islamabad, who, as time went by, played a leading role in facilitating these discussions. From Washington's point of view, the talks came down to getting their former allies to finally fall into line."⁷⁰ The United States wanted to start the implementation of the pipeline project as soon as possible, because "on August 24-26, 1999 President Jiang visited Bishkek, capital of the Kyrgyz Republic, to attend the fourth five-country (*China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan*)⁷¹ summit. During the summit, he exchanged views with leaders of the other four countries on the international developments, regional security and regional economic cooperation."⁷² When the Taliban regime continued not to cooperate with the United States, the chances of a pipeline deal, increasingly diminished. Thereafter, President Clinton issued an executive order prohibiting commercial transactions with the Taliban regime and freezing the Taliban's assets in the United States.⁷³ The United States policy toward the Taliban regime did not stop at the prohibition of commercial transactions and the freezing of assets of the Taliban regime. Plans were underway to bring about a regime change in Afghanistan. According to The Washington Post report of 19 December 2000, "the United States has quietly begun to align itself with those in the Russian government calling for military action against Afghanistan and has toyed with the idea of a new raid to wipe out Osama bin Laden. Until it⁷⁴ backed off under local pressure, it went so far as to explore whether a Central Asian country would permit the use of its territory for such a purpose."⁷⁵ Even though both Russia and the United States agreed on the idea of regime change in Afghanistan, they could not agree who should replace the Taliban in Kabul. Russia was favoring the Northern Alliance and the United States favored the ex-king Mohammad Zahir Shah.

After the change in government in Washington, the Bush Administration began negotiating with the Taliban in February 2000. The Bush Administration renewed efforts to convince the Taliban regime to cooperate with the United States and UNOCAL. The United States government representatives and Taliban representatives had

several meetings in Washington, Berlin, and Islamabad to discuss Osama bin Laden and the gas pipeline project. Therefore, the Afghan businessman Kabir Mohabbat went to Kandahar in the summer of 2000 to meet with the Taliban leadership. The Taliban leadership agreed to hand over Osama bin Laden to the International Criminal Court in Hague or a third country, but not the United States. There was only one condition for this agreement; the United States had to lift the sanctions against Afghanistan. According to Reuter and the German ZDF television channel, Mohabbat arranged a meeting between the Taliban delegation and Reiner Weiland of the European Union at the Sheraton Hotel in Frankfurt, Germany. At that meeting, the Taliban made their offer of deportation to Weiland, who promised that he would take the offer to Elmer Brok, the Foreign Relations Director of the European Union. Elmer Brok later confirmed that he helped Mohabbat to make contact with the US government in 1999.⁷⁶ According to Mohabbat, Brok contacted the United States Embassy in Germany and informed the Ambassador about the Taliban's offer. In response, the US State Department contacted Mohabbat to retain his service.⁷⁷

Prior to this contact and discussion, the Taliban initially agreed to hand over Osama bin Laden to Saudi Arabia, but later refused to do so. According to Prince Turki al-Faisal who was sent by the king of Saudi Arabia in June 1998 to discuss the transfer of Osama bin Laden, Mullah Mohammad Omar "agreed in principle and expressed his readiness of handing over bin Laden." They "discussed the way of handing him over as well as the legitimate resolutions that the government of Taliban is expected to follow with regard to a person who has been promised protection and was granted asylum." The only condition Mullah Omar put on the Saudi Arabia was the "formation of a joint Saudi-Afghani committee that would study the legal procedures and the steps that should be followed regarding the handover of a person they received and to whom they promised protection." Two month later, in the second meeting with Prince al-Faisal, Mullah Omar refused to hand over bin Laden. According to Prince al-Faisal, two factors influenced Mullah Omar's decision. "Bin Laden contacted people he knew within the Taliban so that they dissuade Mullah Omar from following this path." The second factor was the United States missile attacks on

Afghanistan in response to the Nairobi and Darussalam embassies bombing. “Mullah Omar considered that the issue was not against bin Laden alone but also against him. He considered that handing over bin Laden after the American bombing would damage his status.”⁷⁸

The contact between the Bush Administration and the Taliban continued and the Bush Administration believed that it would be able to convince the Taliban leadership to hand over Osama bin Laden and finalize the pipeline agreement:

“Between March 18 and March 23, 2001, Mullah Mohammad Omar’s itinerant ambassador and personal advisor, twenty-four-year-old Sayed Rahmatullah Hashimi, made a brief trip to the United States. His visit came just after the Taliban’s destruction of the centuries-old Buddha statues in Bamyan. Despite the tense context, Helms⁷⁹ organized several meetings for the young Afghan dignitary, including ones at the Directorate of Intelligence at the CIA, and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department.”⁸⁰

President Bush appointed his long time oil associate and UNOCAL advisor Zalmay Khalilzad on 23 May 2001 as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the Gulf, Southwest Asia and Other Regional Issues on the National Security Council. Under the Clinton Administration, when Khalilzad was working for UNOCAL, he tried to persuade the Clinton Administration to recognize the Taliban regime and encouraged the Taliban to accept the UNOCAL offer of the pipeline deal. While the Bush Administration was trying to find out ways to convince the Taliban to sign onto the UNOCAL proposal, India and Pakistan set aside their differences and begun discussing the building of the pipeline project through Iran. According to the Wall Street Journal, “Pakistan and India are discussing jointly building a gas pipeline from Central Asian gas fields through Iran to circumvent the difficulties of building the pipeline through Afghanistan.”⁸¹ Concerned about the Indian and Pakistani initiative and worried about the Iranian influence and control over the pipeline route the Bush Administration officials secretly met with Taliban representatives to secure the pipeline deal. After many meetings with the Taliban and the failed efforts to

convince them to cooperate with the United States, the policy makers in Washington came up with two options to deal with the Taliban. Option one was to win the Taliban's cooperation through praising and rewarding their efforts in eradicating the opium fields in Afghanistan. On May 17, 2001, the Secretary of State Collin Powell announced a grant of \$43 million to the Taliban regime for fighting drugs in Afghanistan. The aid was in addition to other recent aid given to the Taliban.⁸²

The second option talked about military intervention and regime change in Kabul. The CIA had already contacted Ahmad Shah Massood, Abdul Rashid Dostam, Gul Agha Sherzai, Qasim Fahim, Ismail Khan, Mohammad Atta, Abdul Qadir, and Badshah Khan Zadran in the spring of 2001 to discuss the outline of a plan to overthrow the Taliban regime. Former Pakistani Foreign Minister Niaz Naik held a four day talk in Berlin in mid-July 2001 with the United States representatives, Tom Simons, former US Ambassador to Pakistan, Karl Inderfurth, former Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Lee Cordon head of the Office of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh Affairs in the State Department until 1997, Moscow's former special envoy on Afghanistan Nikolai Kozyrev, the United Nations special envoy to Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell, and former Iran envoy to the UN Saeed Rajai Khorassani to find a solution to the Osama bin Laden issue. After the meeting Niaz Naik stated that the Bush administration made it clear to him "in case the Taliban does not behave and in case Pakistan also doesn't help us to influence the Taliban, then the United States would be left with no options but to take an overt action against Afghanistan."⁸³

Meeting between the Bush administration and the Taliban regime continued both openly and secretly. The last meeting between the representatives of the United States and the Taliban before the September 11th attacks took place on 2 August 2001 in Islamabad. The meeting, which was an attempt to secure a pipeline deal and bin Laden's handover took place between Christina Rocca, in charge of Asian Affairs at the State Department and Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaef.⁸⁴ In the first days after the September 11th attacks, the United States did not consider the Taliban regime as an enemy or a target of the United States' "war against terrorism." Only

bin Laden and his network were considered as such. After the Taliban refused to meet the United States' demands, they became a target. As discussed before, the United States considered invading Afghanistan and replacing the Taliban regime before 9/11, but it did not have a solution for a post-Taliban regime. After the September 11th attacks, the Bush Administration negotiated with the Northern Alliance and other warlords to remove the Taliban. The United States did have a military plan of how to remove the Taliban, but as before, it did not have a plan as to who would replace the Taliban. The Northern Alliance and the warlords presented themselves as the only alternative in the country. They were able to capitalize on this point and achieved what they wanted, i.e., ministerial positions, military power and the control of provinces. This was and still is a great recipe for inter-and-intra factional fighting, economic disaster, human rights abuses, corruption, power struggle, and above all insecurity and instability.

Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement and Military Bases

Why does the United States insist, pressure, and blackmail President Hamid Karzai to sign the Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement (hereafter the Agreement)? The most obvious answer which we hear in the form of slogans rather than commitment, is the strengthening of the long term strategic cooperation in areas of mutual interests, fostering cooperation in areas of defense and security arrangements, and training, advising and assisting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. But a closer look and analysis of the Agreement indicate that the main purpose of the Agreement seems to be the protection of American strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan and the region. With this Agreement, the United States wants to maintain effective military control over Afghanistan and intends to monitor the region. The strategic location of Afghanistan would allow the United States to keep a close eye on the military activities and development of the countries in the region. Economically, the Agreement will allow the United States to control the region's oil and gas production, transport, and distribution, and undermine the interests of Russia and Iran in developing these resources.

Article 2 of the Agreement states that "the parties shall continue to enhance the ability of Afghanistan to deter internal and external

threats against its sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, national unity, and its constitutional order. To that end, the United States shall undertake supporting activities, as may be agreed, ... ANDSF is responsible for securing the people and the territory of Afghanistan."⁸⁵ Few points are important to be discussed here. In the past twelve years, with billions of dollars in military assistance and over 150,000 foreign troops, the United States, NATO and ISAF forces were not able to enhance the ability of Afghanistan to defend itself, how would this be possible with ten thousand or lesser troops and the uncertain limited amount of military assistance. External aggression against Afghanistan is clear and present danger and a reality. Afghanistan was and still is under attack from Pakistan, but the United States do not deem it necessary to maintain peace and security or respond in any way to the aforementioned conflict. The latest attack on Kunar and the killing of 21 police officer is another example in this category.

How can there be a discussion of sovereignty and territorial integrity when Afghanistan is invaded and occupied by the United States and its allies. According to international norms, sovereignty and national integrity are diminished when a country is occupied by foreign forces. Furthermore, when the United States attacks Pashtuns on the other side of the Durand Line, it undermines the territorial integrity of Afghanistan, unless the United States considers Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan as part of Afghanistan.

From the language of the Agreement, it is clearly derived that there is no guarantee the United States will undertake supporting activities. The United States may not agree with Afghanistan or decide not to support Afghanistan against foreign aggression and threats. In the past twelve years, the United States has not provided support against foreign aggression and there is no guarantee it will do so after 2014. If the United States or NATO forces are not responsible for securing the people and the territory of Afghanistan, then what is the need of American or NATO forces in Afghanistan?

Financially, it is not clear how the necessary funds would be provided to maintain the Afghan security forces and develop the economy. In Article 4 it is stated that "the United States shall have an obligation to seek funds, on a yearly basis to support the training, equipping, advising, and sustaining the ANDSF."⁸⁶ This indicates that

there is no guarantee of funds. With the American economy in decline, resistance in the United States to the war in Afghanistan, and the funds subject to US Congressional approval, there is no certainty Afghanistan will even receive the 4.1 billion dollars needed to maintain the security forces. Afghanistan's current partial security and limited economic development in the area of consumer commodities are donor driven. If the domestic human and natural resources of the country are not developed, the donor-driven and aid-based economy and the fragile political and security structure will likely collapse. The country will experience civil unrest and political and economic strife. The government will lose further support and will eventually collapse.

Article 3 of the Agreement instructs members of American Forces and of its civilian components "to respect the Constitution and laws of Afghanistan and to abstain from any activity inconsistent with the spirit of this Agreement," but it does not order them to abide by the Constitution and the laws of Afghanistan. The word respect in this context becomes a meaningless insertion.

Article 10, which is about the movement of vehicles, vessels, and aircrafts gives the United States free hand of operation. The Afghan government has no say when vehicles, vessels, and aircrafts can enter or leave Afghanistan, which entry and exit route it can use, and what is brought into Afghanistan and what is taken out of Afghanistan. Afghanistan has no right of transport and navigation control, nor does have the right of any inspection. If Afghanistan does not have the right to control and inspect the movement of foreign troop in Afghanistan, what kind of sovereignty does Afghanistan has?

According to Pajhwak News, on 9 February 2014, a military cargo plane crashed in Maidan Shahar, Maidan Wardak province. Both the Afghanistan Ministry of Defense, the International forces, including the Americans do not know whom the plane belonged to. Maidan Wardak is bordering Kabul and is less than 50km from Kabul. The United States and the international forces are controlling the air space of Afghanistan. How is it possible that an airplane can land and take off from an airfield and no one would know, where did it come from, where was it heading to, and which country or which entity did it belonged to. If this is the nature and the degree of ISAF, NATO and American support for Afghanistan with over 150,000 troops,

Afghanistan should be worried with less than 10,000 troops and the inability to control its own air and land entries and exits.

The issues of utilities and communication are discussed in Article 12 of the Agreement. "The United States forces may produce and provide services including but not limited to water, electricity, and other utilities for agreed facilities and areas and for other locations as mutually agreed...United States forces and United States contractors may use Afghan public water, electricity, and other Afghan public utilities..."⁸⁷ The production and use of utilities by the American forces alone have produced millions of tons of hazardous toxic and radioactive wastes, resulting in different types of disease, dysfunctional births, and chronic respiratory problems. This environmental and health disaster is caused by "burning pits, incinerators, burying/landfilling of the waste and ash, intentional dumping, accidental spills, surface runoff, leaking storage tanks, sumps and basins, and latrines."⁸⁸ There are other examples, but it is not in the scope of this paper to discuss the environmental effects of American occupation and war in Afghanistan. The purpose is to show that the Agreement does not address the environmental disaster, the cleanup, and the costs.

The most critical and conflicting issue in the Agreement is Article 13, the Status of Personnel. It reads that:

Afghanistan agrees that the United States shall have the exclusive right to exercise jurisdiction over such person in respect of any criminal or civil offenses committed in the territory of Afghanistan. If requested by Afghanistan, the United States shall inform Afghanistan of the status of any criminal proceedings regarding offenses allegedly committed in Afghanistan by the member of the forces or of the civilian component involving Afghan nationals, including the final disposition of the investigation, or prosecution. If so requested, the United States shall also undertake efforts to permit and facilitate the attendance and observation of such proceedings by representatives of Afghanistan.⁸⁹

Under the existing framework and the framework according to this

agreement, the United States armed forces and its civilian components are not required to abide by any Afghan law. Any conduct by the United States armed forces and its civilian components is decided and executed unilaterally without any check by the Afghan government and the Afghan armed forces. Since the United States armed forces and its civilian components are not bound by Afghan laws, any action they take in Afghanistan cannot be questioned or challenged under this framework. In the past twelve years, contrary to Afghan and international laws, on a regular basis, innocent Afghan people have been killed or imprisoned by the American forces without any due process. This scenario will continue after the signing of the Agreement. None of the perpetrators from the United States armed forces and its civilian components who have committed these crimes are brought to justice. Only Soviet-style staged court proceedings are arranged in the United States, where usually the indicted persons are found not guilty. Some which had to be found guilty for political reasons got away with mild sentences.

In Article 15, the United States have been given entry into and exit out of Afghanistan without any passport, visa, check, and control. The Americans are exempt from any laws, regulations, and registration. The Afghan government will never know who comes into Afghanistan, who goes out of Afghanistan, how many military and civilian personnel will be stationed in Afghanistan in a given time. Afghanistan will not have any opportunity to check the activities of these people. Article 16 of the Agreement gives the United States Forces and the United States Contractors free hand to import into and export out of Afghanistan any commodities and material, without being checked by the Afghan authorities. Even though Article 15 emphasizes, the United States Forces will take measures that items or materials of cultural or historic significance are not exported out of Afghanistan, but considering the history of American Forces' involvement in drugs and artifacts smuggle in Vietnam, Korea, and Iraq, and the last twelve years in Afghanistan, these will continue after 2014. Afghanistan will have no means to control such activities and will have to rely on the United States Forces' information.

The Agreement also obligates Afghanistan to protect and promote human rights and democratic values, commit to inclusiveness and

pluralism, and forbid Afghanistan from any form of discrimination. The Agreement fails to talk about US obligations regarding these issues. The Agreement also emphasizes that the aim of the United States and Afghanistan is to defeat al-Qaeda and its affiliates. As the United States and the world community know, the center of al-Qaeda is located in Pakistan and not in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden was found and killed in Abbottabad, a military town close to the capital, Islamabad, but Pakistan is still considered as a valuable ally in the War on Terrorism. It is not clear how the US intends to fight al-Qaeda and what degree of involvement its forces will have. Presumably the United States will be launching its offensive against al-Qaeda in Pakistan from Afghan soil. Afghanistan will be used as a base to launch an attack on another country, a clear breach of territorial integrity.

The United States wants to establish nine bases throughout Afghanistan to train and advise Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. First, the nine locations the United States has selected has significant strategic position, but not so significant for training and advising purposes. Furthermore, according to the rules and regulations of Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, even when recruitment is initiated and processed in the provinces, the distribution and training takes place in Kabul. Once soldiers and police officers are assigned to their units, their training becomes the responsibility of their local units. What is the need of having nine training facilities, when training by the American forces is provided mainly in Kabul?

Aside from domestic questions and queries there are also regional concerns regarding the Agreement. Neighboring and regional countries are asking many questions and are worried and eager to find out the future US strategy in Afghanistan. Considering the region's strategic and energy importance how does the United States envision its presence in Afghanistan? The regional countries vested interests are challenged by the future presence of the American forces. The exponential growth of the Asian market is transforming the Asian economies to the global center of power in the twenty-first century of global competition. Population growth, economic development, industrialization, and the demand for more resources are causing a power shift from the industrial West to the developing East. China and

India have invested heavily and want to have access to the raw material, minerals and transportation access between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. Both countries are facing fuel shortages and scarcities in water and other needed resources to maintain their economic progress. Therefore, they are looking outward, especially to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The neighboring countries, along with strategic and economic interests, have ethnic ties and interests in Afghanistan, raising the prospects of proxy war.

Russia and Turkey seek to improve their influence in Afghanistan and in the region. Iran and Pakistan as major suppliers of food products, gas, and fuel to Afghanistan, as major players in resources industries, and as trade and transportation network facilitators in Central Asia, are worried about losing access to Afghanistan. The Iranian and Pakistani presence is intended to expand their influence in Afghanistan, but the existence of American forces in Afghanistan after 2014 will reduce this influence and undermine Iranian and Pakistani access to the oil and gas reserves and trade routes. This may lead to an arms-race, power competition, and domination of the region by regional and world powers.

As for Afghanistan, the Agreement is broad and general and does not provide specifics on the US financial and military engagement in Afghanistan. It is not clear how the United States wants to highlight and develop the economic and military relationship with Afghanistan without offering information on the amount of economic assistance and the number of military forces to be stationed after 2014. The Agreement promises to promote development and provide social and economic assistance without any concrete suggestions and financial guarantees as to the approach to be taken. It merely states that the United States will seek funding for social and economic assistance to Afghanistan. The preamble reads that "close partnership will continue beyond the end of the transition period including through NATO and Afghanistan's mutual commitment to work to establish a new NATO-led Mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), and noting here that such a mission will also need to be provided with the necessary authorities, status arrangements, and legal basis."⁹⁰ This indicates that after 2014, beside the Americans, there will also be NATO forces in Afghanistan, whose

status is not defined, their rights, responsibilities and obligations are not outlined and their number is not determined in the agreement. Overall, the agreement does not reflect Afghanistan's economic, political, and security priorities. Therefore, it is merely a maneuver by the United States to legalize its occupation, after the other countries' forces leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Even though this is already happening since the 2001 invasion, but with the signing of the Agreement, the United States will position itself as a nimble actor to exploit opportunities in the region and to adjust its policies to the changing economic, political and strategic realities of the region.

Conclusion

It is a common consensus that what happened on 11 September 2001 was a barbaric and cruel act against humanity which has no place in the basic norms and tenants of Islam. It is only fair and just that the people directly or indirectly responsible for this crime should be brought to justice and be punished. However, the reality is playing otherwise. The secret signing of the US-Afghanistan Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan in the darkness of the night in 2012, and the current pressure and blackmail of the United States to force President Hamid Karzai to sign the Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement are steps toward protecting US interests. The Agreement will authorize the United States to keep military bases after 2014 in Afghanistan. Therefore, one can conclude that the main objective of the United States in Afghanistan was not to annihilate Osama bin Laden and his network, and dismantle the Taliban government, but the surging American economic and military interests in Afghanistan and the region. Even though the United States is threatening Hamid Karzai to sign the Agreement or the United States will withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, in reality it does not intend to withdraw. The United States has declared, it has no hope Hamid Karzai will sign the Agreement, therefore, it will wait for the new Afghan President to sign it. From this, it is obvious that the Great Game continues.

The Great Game which started anew in the 1980s, reconstructed in the 1990s, and implemented in 2000s in Iraq and Afghanistan has to do with the American interests concealed under the slogan of

democracy and waging a war on terrorism. Fighting terrorism requires that we find the root causes of terrorism, arising from injustices throughout the world, oppression of local populations by autocratic governments, suppression of people by various undemocratic regimes, and the imbalanced treatment of various under-developed and developing countries and groups by powerful countries in many areas. But supporting authoritarian and autocratic regime in the world, especially in the Middle East, is in the interests of the United States. They provide the necessary economic and energy needs of the United States. The United States is not really interested in a war on terrorism or the promotion of democracy, but unbridled access to gas and petroleum reserves. By controlling the energy reserves and the transport routes, the United States will deny access to Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan.

The vast amount of gas and oil in Central Asia has attracted the United States' security and economic interests. Gas and oil demand has generated tireless efforts to control energy reserves, resulting in bloody conflicts and the killing of innocent civilians. The Caspian and the Central Asian region containing the world's largest untapped oil and gas reserves, have initiated competition amongst transnational energy corporations backed by their governments. Both policymakers in Washington and the oil magnates in America wanted to gain control over these reserves. As Linda McQuaig accurately states: "*It's the Crude, Dude.*"

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