



Research Article

Geopolitical Designs in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT-This paper highlights the geopolitical rivalry during 18th century between former USSR and British. Afghanistan fell again in geopolitical game after 9/11 in which the victim America is the main actor. The September 11 2001 attacks on America were a series of coordinated suicide attacks by terrorists. Some states are of the opinion that the attacks were not carried out by the Al-Qaeda; it was the conspiracy of US administration in order to fulfill some international interests. There are different conspiracy theories regarding these incidents. Now let's see that was 9/11 the work of Osama's Al-Qaeda terrorists or were they merely the cover story of a deeper conspiracy? Network news has shown those planes crashing into the Twin Towers and the Towers' subsequent collapse thousands of times. The official explanation for these tragic events is that 19 of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Centre, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania. The immediate reaction of the US administration was very fast, US launched an operation called 'Operation Enduring freedom' to eliminate the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization operational in different parts of the world especially in Afghanistan. This paper is divided into four sections. It begins with the introduction of the whole geopolitics of the area, and then moves the geopolitical theories. The third section examines the geopolitical developments in Afghanistan and the conspiracy theories against 9/11. The fourth section analyses US interests and objectives in Afghanistan, and impact of US presence there.

Keywords: geopolitics; 9/11; al-Qaeda; rimland; CAR's; NATO; mujahideen; extremism

INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Afghanistan has been fanned first by the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and Great Britain that lasted for more than a century, and later, by the rivalry between the Russia and US. The US interests in Central Asia in general and Afghanistan in particular is comparatively of recent origin. US policy towards Afghanistan was basically reactive and limited to the policy of containing Russia so that it did not spread its influence beyond Afghanistan towards the oil-rich Gulf States. Throughout the 1980's the US tried its best to organize a jihad against the communists in Afghanistan. It deliberately raised a highly militant culture among the Afghan refugees and even went to the extent of making an international Islamic axis possible by recruiting mujahideen from all

over the Muslim world. Once Russia pulled out their troops from Afghanistan, US left the scene and quietly allowed these forces to regroup under Taliban. Not only the Taliban but also Al-Qaeda came into existence under the leadership of Osama bin Laden.

Following the 9/11 attacks on America, Bush administration launched anti-terrorist coalition which provided opportunity to Afghanistan to thwart the Taliban threats. These incidents changed the whole security scenario of the world. Afghanistan initially supported and welcomed US military presence in fighting terrorism but later, she showed her disillusionment against the US. The US military presence in Afghanistan had a profound impact on the security dynamics of Central Asia. It affected these states in different ways, for instance, insurgency in some republics like Uzbekistan, or struggle for more and more autonomy to some republics, their economies, trade, foreign investment and their perception towards US. The US has often praised Tajikistan for being a rare example of an



actual secular Islamic governing coalition. The post 9/11 attack on Afghanistan has in fact, made the US policy a headache for the policy-makers.

GEOPOLITICS

„Geopolitics“ examines the political, economic and strategic significance of geography, where geography is defined in terms of the location, size, function and relationships of places and resources. Different scholars have different connotations regarding the term „geopolitics“. In 1890 Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote a book entitled *'The Influence of Sea Power upon History'* in which he discussed, sea power was necessary to facilitate trade and peaceful commerce. Therefore, Mahan believed that the country that could control the sea would possess power. Thus, the development of a strong navy was an essential ingredient to a powerful state as was the country's location. He believed that the country with the most power would be one whose relative location was accessible and connected with a long coastline and good harbours.

The doctrine of geopolitics gained attention largely through the work of Sir Halford Mackinder in England. His proposal has become the most widely discussed concept of geopolitical studies. Mackinder was interested in political motion and he observed that the spatial distribution of strategic opportunities in the world was unequal. Advances in technology were forcing a re-evaluation of spatial concepts and military strategies. With the advent of rail roads, countries no longer depended on the navy to move large armies. Thus, Mackinder believed that the focus of warfare would be shifted from the sea to the hinterland (interiors). Later in 1904, he developed and formulated a Heartland Theory. He says, “He who controls the „Heartland“ controls the World Island (Eurasia and Africa); He who controls the World Island, controls the world”.

In 1897 German natural scientist Friedrich Ratzel developed his “Organic Theory”. This theory contents that the state is like an organism attached to the earth that competes with other states to thrive more and more from other states. Like all living organisms, the state needs lebensraum – living space. General Karl Hauschofer was a leading proponent of Mackinder's Heartland Theory and he developed a theory of Pan Regions. Hauschofer divided the world into three pan regions which were blocs of power based on complementarity between the North and South.

Nicholas Spykman was a proponent of environmental determinism. Spykman eschewed the theory that from economic, political and military point of views, the northern half of the world would always be more important than the southern half, and that the location of a state north or south of the Equator would play a large part in determining the significance of the state. Here Spykman disagreed with Mackinder's Heartland Theory. He believed that both sea and land power were important. He saw that the real potential of “Eurasia” was in the “inner crescent” Spykman called this region Rimland.

Cold War policy makers used the Rimland Theory as justification for the policy of containment of the spread of communism. In America, geopolitics was simplified and distorted to serve political ends. Geopoliticians came from international relations and history or from the military but not from the field of geography. The world was seen as being composed of two blocs with no overlapping areas (Western and Eastern blocs or Russian or American bloc).

A P de Seversky saw that the development of air power made land battles obsolete. Thus, he concluded that whoever controls the skies would be the world power. He used an azimuthally equidistant projection centered on the North Pole to show the air dominance of the US and USSR. There was an area, he called the “area of decision” and believed that whoever controlled this area would be dominant. In 1970's Immanuel Wallerstein developed his



“World System Theory”. According to him, there are two varieties of World System: world empires in which there is a single political system over most of the area; and those systems in which such a single political system does not exist over all of the space. The term used to describe this type of world system is “World – economy”. Within this world system are three geographic areas. Core states are advanced areas of the World – economy. They have strong state structures and a national culture, and its peoples are integrated. Core states are economic powers connected by trade and technology, and they are exploiters of the periphery. Peripheral states are weak states; either colonial states or states with a low degree of autonomy. The third region is comprised of the semi-peripheral areas; those that act as a buffer between the core and the periphery. Wallerstein’s World System also reflects determinism as he believed that since the World System had been fully developed by the 1950’s, no country would be able to enter the system and be able to successfully compete and that those countries in the periphery would probably never be able to catch up economically to the core countries.

Today geographers now view the world in terms of spatial patterns that are not containable within national boundaries. They see the world as an interdependent system and the nation – state as part of a world that is a shared area. The proponent of this theory is Saul Cohen. He divides the world into geo-strategic region. The main regions are the Maritime, which is dependent on trade, and in the Eurasian Continental Realm, which is interior in direction. Within each realm are first – Order states (the ones that are the most powerful within the region). In his model shatter belt states separate the realms or regions with the realms. There are also independent states such as Pakistan, India, Thailand, and Vietnam. Gateway states lie between realms or regions and act as linkages. Asymmetrical states are in a region but they behave differently than the others.

Throughout the study of geopolitics, the Middle East has always been a region of strategic importance as it connects Eurasia and Africa. Whether part of Mackinder’s World Island or Spykman’s Rimland, the Middle East has always been seen as a region of strategic importance. In Cohen’s model, the Middle East is a shatter belt where the maritime realm meets the continental realm. Once, a powerful region of great empires and an important trade region, the Middle East found itself susceptible to foreign influence in the form of colonial domination and as a pawn in an international chess game between the Soviet Union and the United States. The tri-continental position of the Middle East will always be important geographically. It is unclear if the Middle East will be able to overcome its economic and social difficulties to be able to re-establish itself as an important region of trade and culture or if it will continue to be a shatter belt caught between colliding external cultural and political forces.

GEOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

The case of Afghanistan, both in its historical and present context, is a complex mixture of social, political and geographical determinants which have shaped the development of Afghan society, Afghanistan has been located at the crossroad of British and Russian rivalry which resulted in Three Anglo-Afghan wars in the 19th and early 20th century. In a state where there would be absence of sincere leadership and solid vision, there is loss of identity and direction for that nation. Once the direction is lost, outcome is the very purpose for that nation’s existence being lost. A quick glance at Afghan history shows all these things. This is one aspect which can not be neglected while talking on Afghanistan. Another positive aspect is partly due to difficult geopolitical conditions and the independent mood of the populations, Afghanistan managed to maintain most of its sovereignty and autonomy throughout these



imperialist wars and World War II, in which she remained neutral.

Since its inception, the great powers have always tried to disturb Afghans due to its geographical location. Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan was one chapter of such mission. The Soviet decision to intervene in Afghanistan was hardly accidental, but based on quite thorough advance preparation. The Soviet leaders apparently had fairly reliable information on the developments in Afghanistan because of the presence of some thousands of Soviet military and technical experts in the country and because of the high level missions which were sent out to explore the prevailing situation. Probably after a relatively difficult process of decision-making the stakes were finally considered so high that the dilemma was resolved by resort to military means. It was no doubt expected that the operation would result in some tangible costs, but in the light of later developments, in particular regarding US policy, they were probably under-estimated. US behaviour before the intervention obviously did not give reason to anticipate so tough a reaction.

The Soviet policy in Afghanistan is based on geopolitical thinking, which appears to have a sort of renaissance in international relations in general. The Soviet Afghan border is some 12,00 km long; and south of this border an unstable and unpredictable Muslim state was about to emerge. This created considerable anxiety in Moscow, especially among the military elite. Fears that Muslim nationalism might spread to the Soviet Union were less central in this context. Soviet thinking appears to be based on an idea of „maximum security“; not only real but also potential threats to the security of the Soviet Union have to be removed. At the same time the Muslim opposition was gaining strength, partly because of the economic and military support which they received from outside the country. It is a fairly well-established fact that the Arab states and, to varying degrees, Pakistan, China,

Iran and the United States, have supported Muslim rebels in Afghanistan who were also able to operate over the Afghan-Pakistan border.

The US attitude to the Soviet role in Afghanistan was extreme in the sense that they were desirous to contain erstwhile Soviet Union. The decision-makers in the United States were unhappy about the growing Soviet role in Afghanistan, but partly because of their own problems in Iran they did not want to take any drastic measures. During the summer of 1979, the policy of the Carter Administration became, partly due to factors connected with the forthcoming presidential election campaign tougher, means to utilize economic and military coercion were considered. In addition, the US response has also been based on geopolitical approach which is visible in the declaration by the Carter administration that the Persian Gulf now belongs to the immediate US, sphere of interest.

Geopolitics and spheres of interests are practically always detrimental to the interests of smaller powers which prefer peaceful and equitable relations with major powers. Same is the case with Afghanistan, economically, is of no importance. Its importance lies in its geopolitical location as already said. Russia may be fashioning a strategic alliance with India and Iran to keep Pakistan China out of Afghanistan. There is another reason why Moscow would like to include Islamabad. The latter would like to tap into Central Asian oil and gas. Supplies would come through pipelines across Afghanistan. If Moscow can prevent these pipelines from becoming reality, Central Asian hydrocarbons will have to pass through Russia to reach the outside world. America can no longer rely on Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states for oil supplies. Within five years Russia and Central Asia can supply America with the oil it gets at present from the Gulf. The Soviet Union obviously wanted in Afghanistan a government which leans rather heavily to Moscow or at least understands her security concerns. It is perhaps too easy to make use of the



argument that the Soviet motive is and has been to defend its interests in Afghanistan against the intrusion by other leading powers, such as Great Britain in the past.

It is, however, difficult to believe that the motives of Soviet operations would have extended beyond Afghan borders to, for example, the shores of the Indian Ocean or the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. The Soviet military operations in Afghanistan apparently aim at giving support to the Afghan troops to clear the country of opposition elements inimical to the Babrak regime and to the Soviet Union, since these elements potentially threaten- not so much alone but rather in coalition with other great power interests- the security of the Soviet Union's Southern regions.

After 1989, Najibullah continued in power. He stayed with the communist government until it fell in 1992. Then he joined mujahideen forces commanded by Ahmad Shah Masoud. Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) suspects that he organized the attack on the Pakistani embassy in Kabul, in 1996. He was then the chief of security of the Northern Alliance (an anti-Taliban Afghan military coalition) when it ruled the Afghan capital from 1992 to 1996. Moscow backed the Northern Alliance in its attempts to be recognized as the government of Afghanistan. The then Defence Minister of Russia, Sergei Ivanov, called the Northern Alliance the „legitimate government of Afghanistan“. Hence Moscow does not appear to have much interest in a broad-based coalition government in Kabul wielding real power. The Northern Alliance and Russia have much to gain from close collaboration. On the other hand, Pakistan is the main supporter of the Pashtuns. Russia is forging a new India-Iran-Russia strategic partnership, the object of which is to encircle Pakistan. The latter was the main sponsor of the Taliban which caused so many security headaches for Moscow. Pakistan hopes to gain access to Central Asian oil and gas supplies, a tangible reward for backing the US. The

new partnership is attractive to Iran as it increases security on its eastern border and affords some influence over the evolution of Afghanistan.

After 9/11 almost all the states changed their foreign policies. The old geo-strategic patterns of relations with regional countries, including Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, are redefining their interest's vis-à-vis Afghanistan. This would most likely set the mode of their respective future relations with Afghanistan, which presently is also re-orientating its foreign relations with the regional and neighbouring countries. Much depends on how neighbouring and regional countries redefine their own foreign policy imperatives with the present Afghan interim government. Other key players are the developed countries. US involvement in Afghanistan is not for the sake of staking itself; the strategic aim was to penetrate the Heartland. After 9/11 it seems that US may entrench itself in the Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan or IRAFPAK zone. The chance the history has given the country for the first time was too good to be missed: "American foreign policy must remain concerned with the geopolitical dimension and must employ its influence in Eurasia in a manner that creates a stable continental equilibrium, with the United States as the political arbiter." The America in Eurasia should fight the forces of turbulence and plant geopolitical pluralism in this vast region. There is neither a straightforward nor a mechanical process: the Heartland can only be reached through the countries adjacent to Russia. Reliance on "key states," Uzbekistan in the first place, is the solution. The US interests in Central Asia in general and Afghanistan in particular is comparatively of recent origin. As the relationship between the governing elite in Afghanistan and the communist regime in the then USSR warmed up during the 1970's, it rang the alarm bells in US. Since then till the recent discovery of oil in Central Asian Republics (CAR's), US policy towards Afghanistan remained reactive and limited to the policy of containing USSR. So that it did not



spread its influence beyond Afghanistan towards the oil-rich Gulf States. Throughout the 1980's the US tried its best to organize a jihad against the communists in Afghanistan. It deliberately raised a highly militant culture among the Afghan refugees and even went to the extent of making an International Islamic axis possible by recruiting mujahideen from all over the Muslim World. Once Soviet Union pulled out their troops from Afghanistan, US left the scene and quietly allowed these forces to regroup under Taliban and provide shelter to another Saudi mujahid Osama Bin Laden, who had chosen to turn against US as the principal enemy of Islam.

Oil and gas are not the reason the US has attacked Afghanistan, but Afghanistan has long had a key place in US plans to secure control of the vast and landlocked oil and gas resources of Central Asia. Much was at stake militarily, but the objectives of intervention in Afghanistan had not been defined coherently. The following were considered to be the key to ending the cycle of violence in Afghanistan and helping it emerge as a viable state: a) regime change, b) de-escalation of conflict, c) post-war reconstruction, d) democratization and good governance and, e) arms decommissioning.

Though the primary motivation is to destroy Osama Bin Laden sanctuary in Afghanistan, another, rather more pecuniary objective is also on the agenda, particularly in the search for an alternative government in Kabul. With the Taliban out of Kabul and the search for a new Afghan government on centre stage, one criterion on Washington's mind will be how best to make Afghanistan safe for a couple of billion-dollar pipeline investments.

In the case of the great natural gas and oil fields of Turkmenistan, immediately north of Afghanistan, the US government has for a decade strongly supported plans by US-led business groups for both an oil pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea via Afghanistan and a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Such pipelines would serve important US interests in a number of ways:

- a. drawing the Central Asian oil states away from the Russian sphere of influence and establishing the foundation for a strong US position;
- b. thwarting the development of Iranian regional influence by limiting Turkmenistan-Iranian gas links and thwarting a plan for a Turkmenistan-Iran oil pipeline to the Arabian Sea;
- c. diversify US sources of oil and gas, and, by increasing production sources, help keep prices low;
- d. benefiting US oil and construction companies with growing interests in the region;
- e. providing bases for much-needed economic property in the region, which might provide bases for political stability.

After the Taliban has been dethrone, there is intense external involvement in Afghanistan especially of US-led military campaign with three dimensions: first, the continuing campaign against Al-Qaeda and Taliban cadres, second, providing security to the Afghan government and the Afghan state, and third, stabilizing the new Afghan political dispensation, and in parallel, providing across-the-board assistance for national reconstruction, economic development and the creation of stable democratic institutions.

For gas exporters, cost rises with length of pipeline. The shortest and cheapest export route for Turkmenistan oil and for its vast gas reserves is through Afghanistan, and serious planning for both oil and gas pipeline construction by its companies has long been in place. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed in 1997 to build a large Central Asian Gas pipeline through the less mountainous southern parts of Afghanistan to Pakistan, and then possibly on to the growing market of India. The Central Asian Gas Pipeline consortium was



made up of UNOCAL (US, 47% share), Delta Oil (Saudi Arabia 15%), Government of Turkmenistan (7%), Itochu Oil exploration (Japan 6.5%), Hyundai Engineering and Construction (5%), and the Crescent Group (Pakistan 3.5%).

The more immediate objective of the US presence is to mop up remnants of Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan. As envisaged by the major powers, the US-led coalition military force would focus on the anti-terrorist war. At the same time, a combined military force led by Britain, consisting of troops from western democracies, would function as peace keeping and internal security force the stabilization of Afghanistan.

The US and its allies have taken upon themselves the multi-fold tasks of helping to increase the size and capability of the Afghan security forces; strengthening the NATO force in Afghanistan; improving provincial governance and developing Afghanistan's rural economy; controlling the increase in poppy cultivation that is aiding the Taliban; assisting the Afghan government in fighting corruption and reforming the judicial system. Along with all of these, the US strategy in the tribal borderlands of Pakistan is also of extreme significance, keeping in mind the resurgent Al-Qaeda operating inside Pakistan, launching attacks on government and US and coalitions targets within Afghanistan from across the border. US-led operations in Waziristan and Bajaur in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan are a natural extension of the operations against the Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. However, that further has extended the scope of the Afghan involvement, to assist and support the then President Parvez Musharraf to defy immense internal opposition to these operations and ensure stability within the frontline state as well. The long trail of American commitments to fight the war against terror is only extending further and American presence in the region is all

set for a long haul, despite several quarters in Washington urging for expediting their exit.

During his visit to Afghanistan in April 2006 the then British Defence Secretary John Reid clearly ruled out counter-terrorism as a mission of British forces and instead claimed: „we should be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing one shot because our job is to protect the reconstruction.“ Later, in July 2006, on the eve of the NATO-led force taking over anti-Taliban operations in the southern provinces, the then British commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General David Richards, admitted that the North Atlantic „probably did not know what they were getting into.“ NATO's Afghan mission has since been full of contradictions and crippled by perpetual logistical deficiencies.

Oil and gas are not the direct causes of the war in Afghanistan, but understanding the motives of long-term US policy towards that country is important. The pursuit of hydrocarbon interests has been a constant of US policy in the region for more than half a century. In order to gain the stability necessary for oil and gas operations, it flirted with the Taliban, until finally the whirlwind its earlier support for the mujahideen had created came blowing back home as a terrorist horror.

Afghanistan stands at a critical juncture in its nation-building exercise. It is poised between hope and despair and only time will tell which one will triumph. Military operations against the Taliban and other anti-government elements continue, and violence has increased, resulting in a high number of civilian and military casualties. The killing of Afghan civilians in operations conducted by the NATO-led ISAF and US-led coalition forces has becoming a particularly sensitive issue for the Afghan government. NATO is probably the most confused component in the American counter-terrorism mission in Afghanistan. US has tried to achieve this milestone by using war tactics.



To conclude we can say that The attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on September 11, 2001 the launching of the US-led anti-terrorist coalition, provided opportunities to the Central Asian Republics and South Asian states to thwart the Taliban threats and rising Islamic Radicalism. While welcoming stronger strategic ties with the US, the leaders of Central Asian republic were hoping in part that such cooperation would lead to greater US economic assistance, boosting of economic development and sustaining of the democratic reforms in the region. However, with the acquisition of military air bases in the Central Asian region, the US has become a big player in the “New Great Game”. The Anglo-American “New Imperialism” in Afghanistan and the newly discovered interest of the US for Central Asia by establishing military bases there did provoke China as well as Russia to take steps to counter the threats posed to their security. Thus Russia declared the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a defence bloc, as a commendable anti-terror group in a purely regional context. Now the US needs to develop a sound strategy towards South, Central and West Asia. a serious move to bring about a resolution of the Afghan conflict, with support from Russia, Iran, India and Central Asia, is most likely to benefit not only the cause of long term stability, but also Americas wider interests in the region. A failure to do so many occasions America to regret the passing of a valuable opportunity.

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