

The Taliban, the US and the resources of Central Asia

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24 October 2001

The target of the latest US military aggression in Afghanistan is the Taliban. However, one searches in vain in the extensive media coverage of the “war on terrorism” for any coherent explanation of the origins of this Islamic extremist organisation, its social and ideological base, and its rise to power. The omission is no accident. Any serious examination of the Taliban reveals the culpability of Washington in fostering the current theocratic regime in Kabul.

The Bush administration rails against the Taliban for harbouring the Islamic extremist Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organisation. But throughout the 1980s, successive US administrations spent billions of dollars funding the Islamic holy war or jihad by Mujaheddin fighters against the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul in order to undermine the Soviet Union. Moreover, until the late 1990s, the US turned a blind eye to the Islamic fundamentalism and regressive social policies of the Taliban, which was backed and funded by two of Washington’s closest allies in the region—Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

The primary factor in determining the twists and turns of Washington’s orientation in Afghanistan has not been the threat from Islamic extremism but how best to exploit the new opportunities that opened up in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Throughout the last decade, the US has been vying with Russia, China, the European powers and Japan for political influence in this key strategic region and for the right to exploit the world’s largest untapped reserves of oil and gas in the newly formed Central Asian republics—Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The key to the huge potential profits in Central Asia was distribution—how to transport the oil and gas from this isolated, backward and landlocked region to the world’s main energy markets. The only existing pipelines were those of the old Soviet distribution network through Russia. As the scramble for resources in the region intensified, the US aims were clear. It wanted to undermine Russia’s economic monopoly while at the same time making sure that other rivals were kept out of the race. The pipelines therefore had to run through countries over which the US could exert substantial political influence, which excluded China and Iran.

The Central Asian republics were previously part of the Soviet Union and had long borders with both China and Iran. So a pipeline that excluded Russia, China and Iran left two alternatives. One was a convoluted route under the Caspian Sea, through the Caucasus via Azerbaijan and Georgia, and then across Turkey. The second through Afghanistan and Pakistan was shorter, but immediately raised difficult political questions. With whom was one to negotiate in Afghanistan and how could the political stability necessary to construct and maintain pipelines be guaranteed?

Following the fall of the Soviet-backed regime of Mohammad Najibullah in 1992, Kabul had been turned into a battleground by competing Mujaheddin militia. The nominal head of government was Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, who presided over a highly unstable and

shifting coalition, based mainly on ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks from northern Afghanistan. The rival Hizb-e-Islami militia, drawn from the Pashtun majority in southern Afghanistan, was also entrenched in the suburbs of Kabul. Led by Gulbuddin Hikmetyar, it was subjecting government positions in the capital to withering rocket barrages.

Arrayed on either side of the conflict, which was reducing the capital to rubble and producing wave after wave of refugees, were other militia groups reflecting the country’s myriad of ethnic and religious divisions. The rivalries reflected not only local animosities but the interests of various sponsor states, each seeking to establish its own predominance. Pakistan supported Hikmetyar, Iran backed the Shiite Hazaras, and Saudi Arabia financed a number of groups, particularly those sympathetic to its brand of Islam—Wahabbism. The Central Asian republics had connections to the ethnic groups in northern Afghanistan and, in the background, India, Russia and the US all had a hand in Afghani political affairs.

The situation in Kabul was a microcosm of the country as a whole. The Rabbani government exercised no real authority beyond the areas under its immediate military control. The country was carved up among rival militia, the economy was in ruins and the social fabric in tatters. Over a million people died in the war against the Soviet-backed regime in the 1980s and many more were refugees. By the mid-1990s, life expectancy was just 43-44 years and a quarter of all children died before the age of five. Only 29 percent of people had access to health care and a mere 12 percent to safe water.

The Pashtun areas in the south, where the Taliban emerged in 1994, were among the most chaotic. Kandahar, the country’s second largest city, was divided between three rival warlords, and the surrounding areas were subject to the arbitrary and often brutal rule of dozens of militia commanders. The region, which was one of Afghanistan’s most economically backward and socially conservative, had traditionally provided the country’s royal rulers. Local resentment towards Kabul’s new Tajik and Uzbek leadership was intertwined with desperation produced by the intolerable economic and social conditions.

Southern Afghanistan was, however, also the preferred route for a number of proposed pipelines from Turkmenistan to Pakistan. An Argentinean corporation, Bidas, was the first to enter the race. The company obtained rights in Turkmenistan in 1992 and 1993 to explore and exploit the country’s gas fields, and in 1994, opened up discussions with the Turkmen and Pakistani governments over the construction of a gas pipeline, leading to the signing of an agreement for a feasibility study in early 1995. Bidas initially attempted to involve US energy giant, Unocal, in the project. Unocal had plans of its own and later that year signed a separate pipeline agreement, triggering sharp rivalry and a legal battle between the two companies.

All of the pipeline plans assumed that a political solution could be found to the chaotic conditions that existed along the proposed route. Other lesser business interests were also keen to clear out the petty warlords and militia. The road from Quetta in Pakistan through Kandahar and Herat to

Turkmenistan offered the only alternative transport route to the northern road to Central Asia through embattled Kabul. The transport companies and truck owners involved in the profitable Central Asian trade and smuggling rackets were compelled to pay large tolls to each militia commander as their vehicles crossed his turf—a situation they wanted to end.

The origins of the Taliban

In the midst of these discussions, the Taliban movement appeared as a possible solution. That is not to say that the Taliban—students or “talibs” drawn from Islamic schools or “madrassas”—was simply a creation of governments and business interests. The sudden emergence of this new movement in 1994 and the rapidity of its growth and success was the product of two factors—firstly, the social and political quagmire that produced a ready supply of recruits, and secondly, external aid from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, in all likelihood, the US, in the form of finance, arms and advisers.

Although a number of Taliban leaders had fought in the US-sponsored “jihad” against the Soviet Union, the movement was not a breakaway from, or an amalgamation of, other Mujaheddin factions. It was largely based on a new generation who had not been directly involved in the fighting of the 1980s. They were hostile to what they saw as the corrupt rule of petty Mujaheddin despots who had brought nothing but misery to the lives of ordinary Afghans in the wake of Najibullah’s fall. Their own lives had been torn apart by war. Many of them had grown up in the refugee camps inside Pakistan and received a rudimentary education in the madrassas run by various Pakistani Islamic extremist parties.

One author provided the following description: “These boys were a world apart from the Mujaheddin whom I had got to know during the 1980s—men who could recount their tribal and clan lineages, remembered their abandoned farms and valleys with nostalgia and recounted legends and stories from Afghan history. These boys were from a generation who had never seen their country at peace—an Afghanistan not at war with invaders and itself... They were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge...

“Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they had to hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning. Untrained for anything, even the traditional occupations of their forefathers such as farming, herding or the making of handicrafts, they were what Karl Marx would have termed Afghanistan’s lumpen proletariat” [*Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, Ahmed Rashid, I.B Tauris, 2000, p.32].

The Taliban’s ideology was a jumble of ideas that had evolved to appeal to these social layers. From the very outset, the movement was profoundly reactionary. It looked backward for its social solutions to a mythical past when the precepts of the prophet Mohammad were strictly observed. It was deeply imbued with the virulent anti-communism that had been generated by the brutality and repression of successive Soviet-backed regimes in Kabul, which had falsely ruled under the banner of “socialism”.

Like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the Taliban reflected the suspicion and hostility of oppressed rural layers towards urban life, learning, culture and technology. Its leaders were semi-educated village mullahs, not learned Islamic scholars versed in the scriptures and religious commentaries. They were hostile to other Islamic sects, particularly the Shias, and to non-Pashtun ethnic groups. The Taliban’s regressive social

code drew as much from Pashtun tribal laws, or Pashtunwali, as from any Islamic tradition. In as much as its ideology had an Islamic base it was Deobandism—an influential 19th century reform movement—but in a form that was stripped of anything remotely progressive.

The Taliban emerged in war-ravaged Afghanistan as a type of clerical fascism. It reflected the despair and desperation of uprooted and declassed layers of the rural petty bourgeoisie—the sons of mullahs, petty officials, small farmers and traders—who could see no alternative to the social evils that abounded in Afghanistan other than through the imposition of a dictatorial Islamic regime.

The Taliban’s own account of its origins provide an insight into its appeal. In July 1994, the Taliban’s top leader Mohammad Omar, then a village mullah, responded to pleas for assistance in freeing two girls who had been kidnapped by a local militia commander and raped. Omar, who had fought in one of the Mujaheddin organisations, gathered together a group of his supporters among the religious students of the local madrassas. Armed with a handful of rifles, the group released the girls, captured the commander and hung him from the barrel of his tank.

Whatever the truth of the story, the Taliban portrayed themselves as religious vigilantes, intent on righting the wrongs inflicted on ordinary people. Its leaders insisted that the movement, unlike the Mujaheddin organisations, was not a political party and not out to form a government. They claimed to be clearing the way for a true Islamic administration and, on that basis, demanded great sacrifices from their recruits, who received no pay, only weapons and food.

Pakistani assistance

There was always, however, a large gulf between the image and reality. If the Taliban were to be more than a group of armed religious zealots engaged in hit-and-run guerrilla warfare, the movement required large amounts of money, arms and ammunition, as well as considerable technical and military expertise—none of which would be forthcoming from its impoverished recruits.

From the outset, the Taliban’s most prominent sponsor was Pakistan. Pakistan’s powerful Interservices Intelligence (ISI), which had been the principal conduit for US money, arms and expertise to the Mujaheddin groups throughout the 1980s, was deeply enmeshed in Afghani politics. By 1994, the government of Benazir Bhutto had held talks with the Argentinean company Bidas, but was no closer to clearing a route through southern Afghanistan. Pakistan’s main proxy, Hikmetyar, was bogged down in the fighting in Kabul and was unlikely to provide a solution.

Casting around for an alternative, Bhutto’s Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar hit upon the idea of using the Taliban. In September 1994, he organised a team of surveyors and ISI officers to survey the road through Kandahar and Herat to Turkmenistan. The following month, Bhutto flew to Turkmenistan where she secured the backing of two key warlords—Rashid Dostum, who controlled areas of Afghanistan near the Turkmen border, and Ismail Khan, who ruled over Herat. In a bid to attract international financial support, Pakistan also flew a number of foreign diplomats based in Islamabad to Kandahar and Herat.

Having secured a measure of support for his plan, Interior Minister Babar organised a trial convoy of 30 military trucks, manned by ex-army drivers under the command of a senior ISI field officer and guarded by Taliban fighters. The trucks set off on October 29 1994, and, when the path was blocked, the Taliban dealt with the militia responsible. By November 5, the Taliban had not only cleared the road but, with minimal fighting, taken control of Kandahar.

Over the next three months, the Taliban took control of 12 of Afghanistan's 31 provinces. At least some of its "victories" were secured with large bribes to local militia commanders. After suffering military reversals in mid-1995, the Taliban rearmed and reorganised with Pakistani assistance and in September 1995 entered Herat, effectively clearing the road from Pakistan to Central Asia. The following month, Unocal signed its pipeline deal with Turkmenistan.

Pakistan has always been cautious about admitting any direct support for the Taliban, but the links are quite open. The Taliban has close connections with the Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam (JUI), a Pakistani-based Islamic extremist party, which ran its own madrassas in the border areas with Afghanistan. The JUI has provided the Taliban with large numbers of recruits from its schools, as well as a communication channel into the upper echelons of the Pakistani military and ISI.

The most telling sign of outside involvement was the military success of the Taliban. In little more than a year, it had grown from a handful of students to a well-organised militia that could muster up to 20,000 fighters, backed by tanks, artillery and air support, controlling large swathes of southern and western Afghanistan.

As one writer observed: "It is also inconceivable that a force composed mostly of former guerrillas and student amateurs could have operated with the degree of skill and organisation which the Taliban showed almost from the outset of their operations. While there were undoubtedly former members of the Afghani armed forces among their numbers, the speed and sophistication with which their offensives were conducted, and the quality of such elements as their communications, air support and artillery bombardments, lead to the inescapable conclusion that they must have owed much to a Pakistani military presence, or at least professional support" [*Afghanistan: A New History*, Martin Ewers, Curzon, 2001, pp182-3].

Pakistan was not the only source of assistance. Saudi Arabia also provided substantial financial and material aid. Shortly after the Taliban took control of Kandahar, JUI head Maulana Fazlur Rahman began to organise "hunting trips" for royalty from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. By mid-1996, Saudi Arabia was sending funds, vehicles and fuel to support the Taliban's push on Kabul. The reasons were two-fold. On the political plane, the Taliban's fundamentalist ideology was close to the Saudi's own Wahabbism. It was hostile to the Shiite sect and thus to Riyadh's major regional rival—Iran. On a more prosaic level, the Saudi oil company, Delta Oil, was a partner in the Unocal pipeline and was pinning its hopes on a Taliban victory to get the project off the ground.

The US and the Taliban

Like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the US has repeatedly denied any support for the Taliban. Given the close involvement of the CIA with Pakistan and the ISI throughout the 1980s, however, it is highly implausible that Washington did not know of, and give tacit approval to, the Bhutto government's plans for the Taliban. Pakistan's support for the Taliban was an open secret, yet it was only in the late 1990s that the US began to put pressure on Islamabad over its relations with the regime.

Further indirect evidence of US-Taliban relations comes from the efforts of US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, a member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, to obtain access to official US documents related to Afghanistan since the Taliban's formation. Rohrabacher, a supporter of the Afghani king, certainly had an axe to grind with the Clinton administration. But the response to his demands was significant. After two years of pressure, the State Department finally handed over nearly one thousand documents covering the period after 1996, but has stubbornly

refused to release any dealing with the crucial earlier period.

While exact details of early US contacts with the Taliban or its Pakistani handlers are unavailable, Washington's attitude was clear. Author Ahmed Rashid comments: "The Clinton administration was clearly sympathetic to the Taliban, as they were in line with Washington's anti-Iran policy and were important for the success of any southern pipeline from Central Asia that would avoid Iran. The US Congress had authorised a covert \$20 million budget for the CIA to destabilise Iran, and Tehran had accused Washington of funnelling some of these funds to the Taliban—a charge that was always denied by Washington" [*Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, p. 46].

In fact, the period from 1994 to 1997 coincided with a flurry of US diplomatic activity, aimed at securing support for the Unocal pipeline. In March 1996, prominent US senator Hank Brown, a supporter of the Unocal project, visited Kabul and other Afghan cities. He met with the Taliban and invited them to send delegates to a Unocal-funded conference on Afghanistan in the US. In the same month, the US also exerted pressure on the Pakistani government to ditch its arrangements with Bidas and back the American company.

The following month, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Robin Raphel visited Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, urging a political solution to the continuing conflict. "We are also concerned that economic opportunities here will be missed, if political stability cannot be restored," she told the media. Raphel did not hold talks with the Taliban leaders or offer any other indication of official support. But neither was the US stridently criticising the Taliban on women's rights, drugs and terrorism, which were to form the basis of its ultimatums to the regime in the late 1990s. On all three issues, there was an abundance of evidence, unless one chose to deliberately ignore it.

* Ever since the seizure of Kandahar it was obvious that the Taliban would not countenance even the most basic democratic rights. Girls were banned from schools and women from working—measures which created enormous hardships. A strict, even absurd, dress code was imposed on men and women and virtually all forms of entertainment, from video and TV to kite flying, were banned. A religious police enforced the social code, meting out arbitrary justice on the street to offenders. Public executions were carried out for a wide range of crimes including adultery and homosexuality. The purpose of the entire system of repression was to terrorise people into accepting the Taliban's theocratic dictatorship in which no one had any say except the Taliban's mullahs. Even their decisions were subject to veto by Mullah Omar in Kandahar.

* In the case of the huge Afghani heroin industry, the US played a major role in its expansion. Throughout the 1980s, the Mujaheddin groups and their Pakistani handlers exploited the covert supply lines, set up with CIA assistance to get arms into Afghanistan, in order to smuggle large quantities of opium out of the country. The CIA ignored the drug trade in the interests of prosecuting the war against the Soviet army. By the early 1990s, Afghanistan rivalled Burma as the world's largest producer of opium. The US took much the same attitude to the Taliban, which initially pledged to outlaw opium cultivation but quickly reversed its decision after realising that there were few alternative sources of income in Afghanistan's ruined economy. After the Taliban took Kandahar, opium output from the surrounding province increased by 50 percent. As its forces moved further north, estimated output for the country as a whole increased to 2,800 tonnes in 1997—up at least 25 percent from 1995. None of this provoked public denunciations in Washington at the time.

* The US attitude to the threat of Islamic extremism was just as hypocritical. In the 1980s, the US not only gave support to the Mujaheddin generally, but also, in 1986, specifically approved a Pakistani plan to recruit fighters internationally to demonstrate that the whole Muslim world supported the anti-Soviet war. Under the plan, an estimated 35,000 Islamic militants from the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and

the Philippines were trained and armed to fight in Afghanistan. Prominent among the Arab Afghans, as they were dubbed, was Osama bin Laden, the son of a wealthy Yemeni construction magnate, who had been in Pakistan building roads and depots for the Mujaheddin since 1980. He worked with the CIA in 1986 to build the huge Khost tunnel complex as an arms dump and training facility, then went on to build his own training camp and, in 1989, established Al Qaeda (the Base) for Arab Afghans.

The fall of Kabul

In the mid-1990s, the US attitude to the Taliban was not determined by bin Laden, drugs or democratic rights. If US official Robin Raphel was ambivalent about officially embracing the Taliban in mid-1996, it was because Washington was uncertain whether Taliban fighters were capable of defeating their opponents and providing a stable political climate for the Unocal project.

After the capture of Herat in 1995, the Taliban shifted the focus of its attack to Kabul. All sides were involved in arming their proxies inside Afghanistan for the anticipated showdown. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supplied the Taliban, upgraded Kandahar airport, and built a new telephone and radio network. Russia and Iran flew in arms, ammunition and fuel to the Rabbani regime and its allies via Bagram air base, just north of Kabul. India indirectly aided Rabbani by refurbishing Afghanistan's national airline and providing money.

Attempts by the UN, the US and other countries to mediate a deal between Rabbani and the Taliban failed. In August 1996, Taliban troops seized Jalalabad on the Pakistan border and then finally forced opposition forces to withdraw from Kabul the following month. One of its first acts was to brutally torture and murder Najibullah and his brother, who since 1992 had been living under diplomatic immunity in the UN compound in the capital, and to hang their mutilated bodies in the street. Washington's reaction is described as follows:

"[W]ithin hours of Kabul's capture by the Taliban, the US State Department announced that it would establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban by sending an official to Kabul—an announcement it also quickly retracted. State Department spokesman Glyn Davies said the US found 'nothing objectionable' in the steps taken by the Taliban to impose Islamic law. He described the Taliban as anti-modern rather than anti-Western. US Congressmen weighed in on the side of the Taliban. 'The good part of what has happened is that one of the factions at last seems capable of developing a government in Afghanistan,' said Senator Hank Brown, a supporter of the Unocal project" [p.166].

Unocal's response was almost identical. Company spokesman Chris Taggart welcomed the Taliban's victory, explaining that it would now be easier to complete its pipeline project—then quickly retracted the statement. The meaning was obvious. The US saw the Taliban as the best means for ensuring the stability required for the Unocal project, but were not prepared to overtly back the new regime until its control was unchallenged.

Speaking in a closed-door UN session in November 1996, Raphel bluntly explained: "The Taliban control more than two-thirds of the country, they are Afghan, they are indigenous, they have demonstrated staying power. The real source of their success has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security, even with severe social restrictions. It is not in the interests of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated."

Unocal, with the support of Washington, continued to actively woo the Taliban leaders who, in an effort to obtain the most lucrative deal, were

playing the American company off against Bidas. Unocal provided nearly \$1 million to set up the Centre for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Omaha as a front for an aid program in Taliban-held Kandahar. The main outcome of the company's "aid" was a school to train the pipefitters, electricians and carpenters needed to construct its pipelines. In November 1997, a Taliban delegation was feted by Unocal in Houston, Texas and met with State Department officials during the visit.

Washington's political shift

But the political winds were already shifting. The key turning point came in May 1997 when the Taliban captured the major northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and attempted to impose their religious and social strictures on a hostile and suspicious population of Uzbeks, Tajiks and Shiite Hazaras. Their actions provoked a revolt in which some 600 Taliban troops were killed in intense fighting in the city. At least 1,000 more were captured as they attempted to escape and were allegedly massacred. Over the next two months, the Taliban were driven back along the northern fronts, in what became their worst-ever military defeat. In 10 weeks of fighting, they suffered more than 3,000 dead and wounded, and had another 3,600 fighters taken prisoner.

Mazar-e-Sharif was not simply a military setback. The Taliban regrouped, seized the city again in August 1998, butchered thousands of Shiite Hazaras—men, women and children—and almost provoked a war with Iran by murdering 11 Iranian officials and a journalist. However, the events of May 1997 revealed the deep animosity among non-Pashtuns towards the Taliban. It signified that the civil war would inevitably be a protracted one and, even if the Taliban succeeded in taking the opposition strongholds in the north, rebellions and further political instability were likely.

In the immediate aftermath of the Mazar-e-Sharif debacle, several crucial decisions were taken in Washington. In July 1997, in an abrupt policy about-face, the Clinton administration ended its opposition to a Turkmenistan-Turkey gas pipeline running across Iran. The following month, a consortium of European companies including Royal Dutch Shell announced plans for such a project. A separate deal struck by Australia's BHP Petroleum proposed another gas pipeline from Iran to Pakistan and eventually India.

In the same period, the US and Turkey jointly sponsored the idea of a "transportation corridor," with a major oil pipeline from Baku in Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey's Ceyhan port on the Mediterranean. Washington began to urge Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to participate in the plan by constructing gas and oil pipelines, respectively, under the Caspian Sea, then along the same corridor.

Unocal's plan for a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan now faced competition. Moreover, these rival proposals were along routes that promised to be, at least in the short-term, more politically stable. Both Bidas and Unocal pushed ahead with their plans in southern Afghanistan but the prospects looked increasingly distant. In late 1997, Unocal Vice-President Marty Millar commented: "It's uncertain when this project will start. It depends on peace in Afghanistan and a government we can work with. That may be the end of this year, next year or three years from now, or this may be a dry hole if the fighting continues."

A parallel shift in Washington's political rhetoric also began to take place. In November 1997, US Secretary of State Madeline Albright set the new tone during a visit to Pakistan. She took the opportunity to denounce the Taliban's policies towards women as "despicable" and to pointedly warn Pakistan that it risked international isolation. Washington began to exert pressure on Pakistan over the Taliban's involvement in the heroin trade and the dangers of "Islamic terrorism".

The change in US policy became complete when, in the aftermath of the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the Clinton administration launched cruise missiles against Osama bin Laden's training camps at Khost in Afghanistan. Bin Laden had returned

to Afghanistan in May 1996 after a six-year absence, during which he had become increasingly bitter over the role of the US in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. He began issuing public calls for a jihad against the US in August 1996. It was only after the African bombings, however, that Washington began to demand, without providing any evidence of bin Laden's involvement, that the Taliban hand him over.

Unocal suspended its pipeline project and pulled all its staff out of Kandahar and Islamabad. The final nail in the coffin came at the end of 1998, when oil prices halved from \$25 to \$13 a barrel, rendering Unocal's pipeline project uneconomic, at least in the short term. At the same time, the Clinton administration's demands for the handover of bin Laden, as well as action on drug control and human rights, became the basis for a series of punitive UN sanctions imposed on the Taliban in 1999 and then strengthened earlier this year.

Despite the intense pressure exerted on the Taliban and also on Pakistan, none of the US demands were met. In 1998 and 1999, the Taliban launched new military offensives and extended its control, driving its opponents into pockets of territory in the north east. But the civil war was no closer to any conclusion, with Russia and Iran continuing to supply and arm the Taliban's opponents. The UN sanctions had the effect of preventing any of Washington's rivals from gaining an advantageous position in Afghanistan, but brought the US no closer to establishing a firm foothold in the region.

The US administration has now seized upon the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington to press ahead with its long-held designs on Central Asia. Without providing any evidence, Bush immediately held bin Laden responsible for the devastation in the US and issued a series of ultimatums to the Taliban regime: hand over bin Laden, shut down Al Qaeda installations and give the US access to all "terrorist training camps". When the Taliban rejected his open-ended demands, Bush gave his generals the signal to unleash thousands of bombs and cruise missiles on Afghanistan, with the openly avowed aim of bringing down the regime.

If one were to believe the Bush administration and the international media, the sole purpose of Washington's extensive and costly war against one of the world's most backward countries is to catch bin Laden and to break up his Al Qaeda network. But as this historical review demonstrates, Washington's objectives in Afghanistan are not determined by fears about terrorism or concerns over human rights. The US has for the first time established a military presence in the Central Asian republics with troops in Uzbekistan and its military campaign ensures that it will dictate the terms for any post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Even if bin Laden were killed tomorrow and his organisation destroyed, Washington has no intention of retreating from these first steps towards the domination of this key strategic region and its vast energy reserves.

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