The Taliban, the US and the resources of Central Asia

Part 2

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The following is the second article in a two-part series on the history of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. The first part was published yesterday.

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 Bridas 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.

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 Rabbini 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 Taggert 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 Bridas. 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.

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 Bridas 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.