

US exploits chaos to push its own political agenda in Afghanistan

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Following the collapse of the Taliban regime over the last week, Afghanistan is rapidly reverting to the political pattern that existed in the early 1990s, with rival ethnic and religious groups, tribal clans and militia leaders all staking their claim to power.

In the north of the country and Kabul, the loose coalition of ethnic-based militia known as the Northern Alliance, or United Front, is in control. In key cities, the former warlords are back in the saddle—Ismail Khan in Herat and Abdul Rashid Dostum in Mazar-e-Sharif. In the capital, factional tensions have begun to reemerge. Late last week a large, heavily armed group of ethnic Hazaras marched towards Kabul insisting that they were concerned to protect their community in the capital.

In the south and east, including the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, there is no clear authority. A patchwork of local militia led by rival tribal and religious leaders are vying to establish their hold over areas. In the eastern city of Jalalabad, several militia commanders including former Mujaheddin leader Yunis Khalis are bidding for control. Different Pashtun tribal groups have reportedly claimed power in the town of Gardez and in the southern province of Oruzgan.

Having encouraged and supported each of the groups, the Northern Alliance in particular, as the means of ousting the Taliban, the US and its allies are now piously warning about the dangers of ethnic conflict. In the chaos that is of its making, Washington, through the auspices of the UN, is now insisting on dictating the terms of any political settlement and calling for a “broad-based, multi-ethnic” government.

While nominally agreeing to the US plans for Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance is rapidly establishing itself as the de-facto administration in Kabul. Its leader Burhanuddin Rabbani returned to the capital on Saturday and declared himself the head of state. He became president shortly after the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992 and is still recognised as such by the UN which refused to endorse the Taliban regime.

The Northern Alliance has taken control of Radio Kabul and key ministries, including defence, interior and foreign affairs, and is seeking to put its stamp on the capital. Its interior minister Yonus Qanooni has announced a regulation barring anyone from carrying weapons in the capital, other than their own designated military forces and police. Rabbani has supported US and UN proposals for a meeting of all Afghan factions to establish a political framework for the country, but wants the gathering held in Kabul, calculating it would give the Northern Alliance an advantage.

Washington, however, is not about to let the Northern Alliance, which has been backed by Russia, Iran and India, establish its domination. As a senior US state department official rather contemptuously told the *Los Angeles Times*: “The Northern Alliance

is feeling its oats, but they were nothing without us, and they’d still be stuck where they were a couple of months ago if we hadn’t intervened. So we’re delivering a strong message to make sure they understand what is at stake.”

The US and UN are planning to include various groups and leaders based among the majority Pashtun in any administration alongside the Northern Alliance, which draws its support mainly from northern ethnic groups—Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and others. Notwithstanding the current UN recognition for Rabbani, the proposal includes the return of former king 87-year-old Zahir Shah, who has been in exile in Rome since 1973, to preside as a figurehead over the whole affair.

Most of the factions inside Afghanistan are backed by different powers. Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran have all backed the Northern Alliance and have close ties with particular groups in the coalition. India also backed the Northern Alliance as a counter to its rival Pakistan, which supported the Taliban and is now seeking to resurrect other Pashtun groups. Saudi Arabia has supported a number of factions as a means of foiling rival Iran.

Without an obvious proxy of its own in Afghanistan, Washington wants to ensure that no one group or coalition has a monopoly. Under the guise of preventing rivalry, the US is seeking to establish what Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage described last week as “a very loose central government with very little central authority”. Such a scheme would maximise the ability of the US to neutralise the influence of other powers and manipulate events inside the country.

It is not clear, however, that the Northern Alliance can be pressured to agree. In that event, other options are already being readied. Significantly 160 British Marines and US special operations troops were flown into the Bagram airfield on Friday, a key strategic point just north of Kabul. While the move was justified as necessary to ensure an airlift of relief supplies, the obvious purpose is to establish a bridgehead for a rapid influx of foreign troops. Northern Alliance officials protested that they were not even informed and have insisted that an international “peacekeeping” force was not necessary.

The US and UN has ignored these protests and are rapidly assembling such a force, nominally under the control of Muslim countries. Turkey, Jordan and Indonesia have already offered soldiers. The US is also holding discussions with Bangladesh and Malaysia, along with a number of other countries. While the UN speaks about not imposing a political solution on Afghanistan, UN special envoy Francesco Vendrell, who is en route to Kabul, commented over the weekend that the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force was “the easiest and most practical way” of filling the dangerous political gulf.

The pretext for such a military intervention is also being prepared.

Having maintained a studious silence about the record of Washington's anti-Taliban allies for weeks, the media is shifting gear in line with the new political agenda. Commentators are sounding a warning about the dangers of a return to warlordism, arguing that a "peace-keeping force is necessary to maintain order. References are now routinely made to the period between 1992 and 1996 when the Northern Alliance held sway in Kabul. An estimated 50,000 civilians died in factional fighting and much of the capital was levelled.

A comment in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Thank the Northern Alliance, but also rein it in," for example, pointed out that its "human rights record [is] as bad as that of the Taliban" and warns that "the US could be held responsible". On that basis the writer called for the imposition of foreign troops and inclusion of other groups in a "broad-based" government.

While the US is continuing to cooperate with the Northern Alliance that could easily change if Rabbani fails to fall into line with Washington's plans for a broader government. The media would no doubt quickly follow suit. It is not difficult to imagine Rabbani and others being transformed from ally to demon—in much the same manner as Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the leadup to the Gulf War.

None of the groups and leaders being proposed by the US for the new administration have a record any different from that of the Northern Alliance and its various components. The more fundamental issue of how and why these rival rightwing ethnic and religious factions arose is never addressed. Virtually all of them have their origins in the holy war or jihad waged in the 1980s against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Many of them were directly armed and financed by the US CIA working in conjunction with the Pakistan government and its powerful military intelligence organisation—the ISI.

Washington along with Saudi Arabia funnelled an estimated \$6 billion in arms and finance to various anti-Soviet Mujahedeen groups. From 1986, the arms shipments increased to around 65,000 tonnes a year and included sophisticated Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Afghanistan was so awash with arms that many ended up in arms bazaars where it was possible to buy anything from rocket-launchers to mortars. The US was even forced to implement a "buy-back" policy, allocating \$55 million for its agents to repurchase Stinger missiles on sale in these markets.

The US and Pakistan provided support to seven groups in Afghanistan including Rabbani's Jamiat-e-Islami, which was one of the strongest. Following the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime of Mohammad Najibullah in 1992, the Jamiat militia led by Ahmad Shah Massoud were the first into Kabul and sought to establish their preeminence in a new administration. Under an accord struck between the factions in Pakistan, Rabbani was installed as president—after a brief interlude under an interim figure.

But the agreement rapidly broke down. Pakistan's main proxy in Afghanistan—Hizb-e-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—refused to accept the role allocated to it, and stirred up enmities among its Pashtun supporters against the predominantly Tajik Jamiat-e-Islami. Hekmatyar's militia entrenched in the southern suburbs of Kabul launched devastating rocket attacks on Massoud's positions killing thousands of people.

The Northern Alliance includes the Hezb-e-Wahdat—an alliance of groups based among the Hazara ethnic group. The Hazaras are mainly from the Shiite sect of Islam rather than the Sunni branch to which most Afghans adhere. Hezb-e-Wahdat was backed by Iran and had its own bases in Kabul. Initially it supported Rabbani then switched sides

to Hekmatyar in the course of the fighting.

The other main group in the Northern Alliance is led by the notorious Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who prior to 1992 led what amounted to a mercenary force in support of the pro-Soviet regime. He switched sides when it was clear that Najibullah was about to fall and has over the last decade allied himself at different times with just about every other faction—including the Taliban—in a bid to maintain his grip over his northern stronghold.

The result of the US-backed jihad was a country that was economically devastated and riven by ethnic and religious rivalries, all of which had been stirred up and exploited as a means of ousting the Soviet-backed regime. With no effective central authority, Afghanistan was carved up between heavily-armed militias, each vying for influence. The situation was particularly chaotic in the economically backward Pashtun areas in the south where dozens of individual commanders ruled the roost, extorting money and levying their own taxes.

The Taliban emerged in the southern areas around Kandahar in 1994 in response to this crisis. Drawing support from the religious schools based among Afghani refugees in Pakistan, the Taliban, or students, had the character of rightwing vigilantes—opposed to all of the militia factions and their corruption and intent on imposing their own extreme form of Islamic fundamentalism. Their rapid expansion was heavily dependent on finance, arms and technical expertise from the Pakistani government and ISI, who viewed them as a useful tool to push their interests inside Afghanistan.

The US, which has spent the last two months engineering the Taliban's collapse, tacitly went along with the Pakistani plan, turning a blind eye to the Taliban's treatment of women, their involvement in the opium trade and their espousal of Islamic fanaticism. Washington was banking on a stable regime to enable the construction of pipelines to exploit the huge oil and gas reserves of Central Asia. The US only became sharply critical of the Taliban towards the end of 1997 when the regime no longer appeared to guarantee the necessary stability.

The same considerations govern the current US operations and political manoeuvres in Afghanistan. The proposals for a new "broad-based" regime in Kabul are not aimed at ending the suffering inflicted on the Afghani people over the last two decades but to secure a foothold in the key strategic and resource-rich region.



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