

US planned war in Afghanistan long before September 11

Patrick Martin
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Insider accounts published in the British, French and Indian media have revealed that US officials threatened war against Afghanistan during the summer of 2001. These reports include the prediction, made in July, that “if the military action went ahead, it would take place before the snows started falling in Afghanistan, by the middle of October at the latest.” The Bush administration began its bombing strikes on the hapless, poverty-stricken country October 7, and ground attacks by US Special Forces began October 19.

It is not an accident that these revelations have appeared overseas, rather than in the US. The ruling classes in these countries have their own economic and political interests to look after, which do not coincide, and in some cases directly clash, with the drive by the American ruling elite to seize control of oil-rich territory in Central Asia.

The American media has conducted a systematic cover-up of the real economic and strategic interests that underlie the war against Afghanistan, in order to sustain the pretense that the war emerged overnight, full-blown, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11.

The pundits for the American television networks and major daily newspapers celebrate the rapid military defeat of the Taliban regime as an unexpected stroke of good fortune. They distract public attention from the conclusion that any serious observer would be compelled to draw from the events of the past two weeks: that the speedy victory of the US-backed forces reveals careful planning and preparation by the American military, which must have begun well before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The official American myth is that “everything changed” on the day four airliners were hijacked and nearly 5,000 people murdered. The US military intervention in Afghanistan, by this account, was hastily improvised in less than a month. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, in a television interview November 18, actually claimed that only three weeks went into planning the military onslaught.

This is only one of countless lies emanating from the Pentagon and White House about the war against Afghanistan. The truth is that the US intervention was planned in detail and carefully prepared long before the terrorist attacks provided the pretext for setting it in motion. If history had skipped over September 11, and the events of that day had never happened, it is very likely that the United States would have gone to war in Afghanistan anyway, and on much the same schedule.

Afghanistan and the scramble for oil

The United States ruling elite has been contemplating war in Central Asia for at least a decade. As long ago as 1991, following the defeat of Iraq in the Persian Gulf War, *Newsweek* magazine published an article headlined “Operation Steppe Shield?” It reported that the US military was

preparing an operation in Kazakhstan modeled on the Operation Desert Shield deployment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq.

American oil companies have acquired rights to as much as 75 percent of the output of these new fields, and US government officials have hailed the Caspian and Central Asia as a potential alternative to dependence on oil from the unstable Persian Gulf region. American troops have followed in the wake of these contracts. US Special Forces began joint operations with Kazakhstan in 1997 and with Uzbekistan a year later, training for intervention especially in the mountainous southern region that includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan.

The major problem in exploiting the energy riches of Central Asia is how to get the oil and gas from the landlocked region to the world market. US officials have opposed using either the Russian pipeline system or the easiest available land route, across Iran to the Persian Gulf. Instead, over the past decade, US oil companies and government officials have explored a series of alternative pipeline routes—west through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean; east through Kazakhstan and China to the Pacific; and, most relevant to the current crisis, south from Turkmenistan across western Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean.

The Afghanistan pipeline route was pushed by the US-based Unocal oil company, which engaged in intensive negotiations with the Taliban regime. These talks, however, ended in disarray in 1998, as US relations with Afghanistan were inflamed by the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, for which Osama bin Laden was held responsible. In August 1998, the Clinton administration launched cruise missile attacks on alleged bin Laden training camps in eastern Afghanistan. The US government demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and imposed economic sanctions. The pipeline talks languished.

Subverting the Taliban

Throughout 1999 the US pressure on Afghanistan increased. On February 3 of that year, Assistant Secretary of State Karl E. Inderfurth and State Department counterterrorism chief Michael Sheehan traveled to Islamabad, Pakistan, to meet the Taliban’s deputy foreign minister, Abdul Jalil. They warned him that the US would hold the government of Afghanistan responsible for any further terrorist acts by bin Laden.

According to a report in the *Washington Post* (October 3, 2001), the Clinton administration and Nawaz Sharif, then prime minister of Pakistan, agreed on a joint covert operation to kill Osama bin Laden in 1999. The US would supply satellite intelligence, air support and financing, while Pakistan supplied the Pushtun-speaking operatives who would penetrate southern Afghanistan and carry out the actual killing.

The Pakistani commando team was up and running and ready to strike

by October 1999, the *Post* reported. One former official told the newspaper, "It was an enterprise. It was proceeding." Clinton aides were delighted at the prospect of a successful assassination, with one declaring, "It was like Christmas."

The attack was aborted on October 12, 1999, when Sharif was overthrown in a military coup by General Pervez Musharraf, who halted the proposed covert operation. The Clinton administration had to settle for a UN Security Council resolution that demanded the Taliban turn over bin Laden to "appropriate authorities," but did not require he be handed over to the United States.

McFarlane and Abdul Haq

US subversion against the Taliban continued in 2000, according to an account published November 2 in the *Wall Street Journal*, written by Robert McFarlane, former national security adviser in the Reagan administration. McFarlane was hired by two wealthy Chicago commodity speculators, Joseph and James Ritchie, to assist them in recruiting and organizing anti-Taliban guerrillas among Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Their principal Afghan contact was Abdul Haq, the former mujahedin leader who was executed by the Taliban last month after an unsuccessful attempt to spark a revolt in his home province.

McFarlane held meetings with Abdul Haq and other former mujahedin in the course of the fall and winter of 2000. After the Bush administration took office, McFarlane parlayed his Republican connections into a series of meetings with State Department, Pentagon and even White House officials. All encouraged the preparation of an anti-Taliban military campaign.

During the summer, long before the United States launched airstrikes on the Taliban, James Ritchie traveled to Tajikistan with Abdul Haq and Peter Tomsen, who had been the US special envoy to the Afghan opposition during the first Bush administration. There they met with Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, with the goal of coordinating their Pakistan-based attacks with the only military force still offering resistance to the Taliban.

Finally, according to McFarlane, Abdul Haq "decided in mid-August to go ahead and launch operations in Afghanistan. He returned to Peshawar, Pakistan, to make final preparations." In other words, this phase of the anti-Taliban war was under way well before September 11.

While the Ritchies have been portrayed in the American media as freelance operators motivated by emotional ties to Afghanistan, a country they lived in briefly while their father worked as a civil engineer in the 1950s, at least one report suggests a link to the oil pipeline discussions with the Taliban. In 1998 James Ritchie visited Afghanistan to discuss with the Taliban a plan to sponsor small businesses there. He was accompanied by an official from Delta Oil of Saudi Arabia, which was seeking to build a gas pipeline across Afghanistan in partnership with an Argentine firm.

A CIA secret war

McFarlane's revelations come in the course of a bitter diatribe against the CIA for "betraying" Abdul Haq, failing to back his operations in Afghanistan, and leaving him to die at the hands of the Taliban. The CIA evidently regarded both McFarlane and Abdul Haq as less than reliable—and it had its own secret war going on in the same region, the

southern half of Afghanistan where the population is predominantly Pushtun-speaking.

According to a front-page article in the *Washington Post* November 18, the CIA has been mounting paramilitary operations in southern Afghanistan since 1997. The article carries the byline of Bob Woodward, the *Post* writer made famous by Watergate, who is a frequent conduit for leaks from top-level military and intelligence officials.

Woodward provides details about the CIA's role in the current military conflict, which includes the deployment of a secret paramilitary unit, the Special Activities Division. This force began combat on September 27, using both operatives on the ground and Predator surveillance drones equipped with missiles that could be launched by remote control.

The Special Activities Division, Woodward reports, "consists of teams of about half a dozen men who do not wear military uniforms. The division has about 150 fighters, pilots and specialists, and is made up mostly of hardened veterans who have retired from the US military.

"For the last 18 months, the CIA has been working with tribes and warlords in southern Afghanistan, and the division's units have helped create a significant new network in the region of the Taliban's greatest strength."

This means that the US spy agency was engaged in attacks against the Afghan regime—what under other circumstances the American government would call terrorism—from the spring of 2000, more than a year before the suicide hijackings that destroyed the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon.

War plans take shape

With the installation of George Bush in the White House, the focus of American policy in Afghanistan shifted from a limited incursion to kill or capture bin Laden to preparing a more robust military intervention directed at the Taliban regime as a whole.

The British-based *Jane's International Security* reported March 15, 2001 that the new American administration was working with India, Iran and Russia "in a concerted front against Afghanistan's Taliban regime." India was supplying the Northern Alliance with military equipment, advisers and helicopter technicians, the magazine said, and both India and Russia were using bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for their operations.

The magazine added: "Several recent meetings between the newly instituted Indo-US and Indo-Russian joint working groups on terrorism led to this effort to tactically and logistically counter the Taliban. Intelligence sources in Delhi said that while India, Russia and Iran were leading the anti-Taliban campaign on the ground, Washington was giving the Northern Alliance information and logistic support."

On May 23, the White House announced the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad to a position on the National Security Council as special assistant to the president and senior director for Gulf, Southwest Asia and Other Regional Issues. Khalilzad is a former official in the Reagan and the first Bush administrations. After leaving the government, he went to work for Unocal.

On June 26 of this year, the magazine *IndiaReacts* reported more details of the cooperative efforts of the US, India, Russia and Iran against the Taliban regime. "India and Iran will 'facilitate' US and Russian plans for 'limited military action' against the Taliban if the contemplated tough new economic sanctions don't bend Afghanistan's fundamentalist regime," the magazine said.

At this stage of military planning, the US and Russia were to supply direct military assistance to the Northern Alliance, working through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in order to roll back the Taliban lines toward

the city of Mazar-e-Sharif—a scenario strikingly similar to what actually took place over the past two weeks. An unnamed third country supplied the Northern Alliance with anti-tank rockets that had already been put to use against the Taliban in early June.

“Diplomats say that the anti-Taliban move followed a meeting between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and later between Powell and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in Washington,” the magazine added. “Russia, Iran and India have also held a series of discussions and more diplomatic activity is expected.”

Unlike the current campaign, the original plan involved the use of military forces from both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as Russia itself. *IndiaReacts* said that in early June Russian President Vladimir Putin told a meeting of the Confederation of Independent States, which includes many of the former Soviet republics, that military action against the Taliban was in the offing. One effect of September 11 was to create the conditions for the United States to intervene on its own, without any direct participation by the military forces of the Soviet successor states, and thus claim an undisputed American right to dictate the shape of a settlement in Afghanistan.

The US threatens war—before September 11

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, two reports appeared in the British media indicating that the US government had threatened military action against Afghanistan several months before September 11.

The BBC’s George Arney reported September 18 that American officials had told former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Niaz Naik in mid-July of plans for military action against the Taliban regime:

“Mr. Naik said US officials told him of the plan at a UN-sponsored international contact group on Afghanistan which took place in Berlin.

“Mr. Naik told the BBC that at the meeting the US representatives told him that unless Bin Laden was handed over swiftly America would take military action to kill or capture both Bin Laden and the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar.

“The wider objective, according to Mr. Naik, would be to topple the Taliban regime and install a transitional government of moderate Afghans in its place—possibly under the leadership of the former Afghan King Zahir Shah.

“Mr. Naik was told that Washington would launch its operation from bases in Tajikistan, where American advisers were already in place.

“He was told that Uzbekistan would also participate in the operation and that 17,000 Russian troops were on standby.

“Mr. Naik was told that if the military action went ahead it would take place before the snows started falling in Afghanistan, by the middle of October at the latest.”

Four days later, on September 22, the *Guardian* newspaper confirmed this account. The warnings to Afghanistan came out of a four-day meeting of senior US, Russian, Iranian and Pakistani officials at a hotel in Berlin in mid-July, the third in a series of back-channel conferences dubbed “brainstorming on Afghanistan.”

The participants included Naik, together with three Pakistani generals; former Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Saeed Rajai Khorassani; Abdullah Abdullah, foreign minister of the Northern Alliance; Nikolai Kozyrev, former Russian special envoy to Afghanistan, and several other Russian officials; and three Americans: Tom Simons, a former US ambassador to Pakistan; Karl Inderfurth, a former assistant secretary of state for south Asian affairs; and Lee Coldren, who headed the office of

Pakistan, Afghan and Bangladesh affairs in the State Department until 1997.

The meeting was convened by Francesc Vendrell, then and now the deputy chief UN representative for Afghanistan. While the nominal purpose of the conference was to discuss the possible outline of a political settlement in Afghanistan, the Taliban refused to attend. The Americans discussed the shift in policy toward Afghanistan from Clinton to Bush, and strongly suggested that military action was an option.

While all three American former officials denied making any specific threats, Coldren told the *Guardian*, “there was some discussion of the fact that the United States was so disgusted with the Taliban that they might be considering some military action.” Naik, however, cited one American declaring that action against bin Laden was imminent: “This time they were very sure. They had all the intelligence and would not miss him this time. It would be aerial action, maybe helicopter gunships, and not only overt, but from very close proximity to Afghanistan.”

The *Guardian* summarized: “The threats of war unless the Taliban surrendered Osama bin Laden were passed to the regime in Afghanistan by the Pakistani government, senior diplomatic sources revealed yesterday. The Taliban refused to comply but the serious nature of what they were told raises the possibility that Bin Laden, far from launching the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon out of the blue 10 days ago, was launching a pre-emptive strike in response to what he saw as US threats.”

Bush, oil and Taliban

Further light on secret contacts between the Bush administration and the Taliban regime is shed by a book released November 15 in France, entitled *Bin Laden, the Forbidden Truth*, written by Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie. Brisard is a former French secret service agent, author of a previous report on bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network, and former director of strategy for the French corporation Vivendi, while Dasquie is an investigative journalist.

The two French authors write that the Bush administration was willing to accept the Taliban regime, despite the charges of sponsoring terrorism, if it cooperated with plans for the development of the oil resources of Central Asia.

Until August, they claim, the US government saw the Taliban “as a source of stability in Central Asia that would enable the construction of an oil pipeline across Central Asia.” It was only when the Taliban refused to accept US conditions that “this rationale of energy security changed into a military one.”

By way of corroboration, one should note the curious fact that neither the Clinton administration nor the Bush administration ever placed Afghanistan on the official State Department list of states charged with sponsoring terrorism, despite the acknowledged presence of Osama bin Laden as a guest of the Taliban regime. Such a designation would have made it impossible for an American oil or construction company to sign a deal with Kabul for a pipeline to the Central Asian oil and gas fields.

Talks between the Bush administration and the Taliban began in February 2001, shortly after Bush’s inauguration. A Taliban emissary arrived in Washington in March with presents for the new chief executive, including an expensive Afghan carpet. But the talks themselves were less than cordial. Brisard said, “At one moment during the negotiations, the US representatives told the Taliban, ‘either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs.’”

As long as the possibility of a pipeline deal remained, the White House stalled any further investigation into the activities of Osama bin Laden,

Brisard and Dasquie write. They report that John O'Neill, deputy director of the FBI, resigned in July in protest over this obstruction. O'Neill told them in an interview, "the main obstacles to investigate Islamic terrorism were US oil corporate interests and the role played by Saudi Arabia in it." In a strange coincidence, O'Neill accepted a position as security chief of the World Trade Center after leaving the FBI, and was killed on September 11.

Confirming Naiz Naik's account of the secret Berlin meeting, the two French authors add that there was open discussion of the need for the Taliban to facilitate a pipeline from Kazakhstan in order to insure US and international recognition. The increasingly acrimonious US-Taliban talks were broken off August 2, after a final meeting between US envoy Christina Rocca and a Taliban representative in Islamabad. Two months later the United States was bombing Kabul.

The politics of provocation

This account of the preparations for war against Afghanistan brings us to September 11 itself. The terrorist attack that destroyed the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon was an important link in the chain of causality that produced the US attack on Afghanistan. The US government had planned the war well in advance, but the shock of September 11 made it politically feasible, by stupefying public opinion at home and giving Washington essential leverage on reluctant allies abroad.

Both the American public and dozens of foreign governments were stampeded into supporting military action against Afghanistan, in the name of the fight against terrorism. The Bush administration targeted Kabul without presenting any evidence that either bin Laden or the Taliban regime was responsible for the World Trade Center atrocity. It seized on September 11 as the occasion for advancing longstanding ambitions to assert American power in Central Asia.

There is no reason to think that September 11 was merely a fortuitous occurrence. Every other detail of the war in Afghanistan was carefully prepared. It is unlikely that the American government left to chance the question of providing a suitable pretext for military action.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, there were press reports—again, largely overseas—that US intelligence agencies had received specific warnings about large-scale terrorist attacks, including the use of hijacked airplanes. It is quite possible that a decision was made at the highest levels of the American state to allow such an attack to proceed, perhaps without imagining the actual scale of the damage, in order to provide the necessary spark for war in Afghanistan.

How otherwise to explain such well-established facts as the decision of top officials at the FBI to block an investigation into Zaccarias Massaoui, the Franco-Moroccan immigrant who came under suspicion after he allegedly sought training from a US flight school on how to steer a commercial airliner, but not to take off or land?

The Minneapolis field office had Massaoui arrested in early August, and asked FBI headquarters for permission to conduct further inquiries, including a search of the hard drive of his computer. The FBI tops refused, on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence of criminal intent on Massaoui's part—an astonishing decision for an agency not known for its tenderness on the subject of civil liberties.

This is not to say that the American government deliberately planned every detail of the terrorist attacks or anticipated that nearly 5,000 people would be killed. But the least likely explanation of September 11 is the official one: that dozens of Islamic fundamentalists, many with known ties to Osama bin Laden, were able to carry out a wide-ranging conspiracy on three continents, targeting the most prominent symbols of American

power, without any US intelligence agency having the slightest idea of what they were doing.



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