

Central Asia gas deal underscores the real reasons for the Afghan war

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A little publicised agreement signed in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad last week has highlighted once again the real motives behind the US military intervention into Afghanistan—access to and domination of Central Asian oil and gas.

The deal between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Central Asian republic of Turkmenistan establishes the basis for construction of a \$1.9 billion pipeline from the Turkmen natural gas fields at Daulatabad through to the south-western Pakistani port of Gawadar. A parallel oil pipeline as well as road and rail connections are also being considered, along with processing facilities at Gawadar to enable the shipment of liquified gas.

All three leaders—Interim Afghan Prime Minister Hamid Karzai, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Turkmen President Saparmurad Niyazov—anticipate substantial benefits from the project. War ravaged Afghanistan is hoping to garner at least \$100 million a year in government revenue from transit fees and to create up to 10,000 jobs in the construction and maintenance of the pipeline and associated industries. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have already indicated backing for the project.

The lion's share of the profits, however, will not go to the three countries but to the transnational energy giants that have been scrambling for ways to exploit the huge oil and gas reserves in Central Asia—the world's second largest after the Middle East. Turkmenistan alone has more than 250 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—about half in the huge Daulatabad-Donmez field.

Far more is at stake, however, than exports of natural gas from Turkmenistan—an impoverished desert state of about five million people. Pipelines are the key element in exploiting the oil and gas reserves throughout Central Asia, which is landlocked and dependent at present on Soviet-era infrastructure. The route of any new pipelines is not only an economic issue but also, given the crucial role of oil and gas in modern society, a key strategic question.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US has been preoccupied with establishing its predominance over its rivals in Central Asia. Washington's plans for Central Asia have focused on undercutting the current monopoly enjoyed by Russia and preventing China and Iran establishing alternative pipeline routes through the region. There are only two alternatives—a long, tortuous route to the west through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, or a shorter southern route through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Last week's deal signed by Karzai, Musharraf and Niyazov is

not a new idea. In the mid-1990s, two consortiums—one headed by the US energy giant Unocal and the other by the Argentinean-based Bidas—vied with each other to build a pipeline through Afghanistan. Unocal, which had the full backing of the Clinton administration, won out, but was forced to abandon its plans in 1998.

The key factor in Unocal's decision to pull out was not the success of the Taliban. In fact, the Clinton administration and Unocal both regarded the Taliban as a means for stabilising Afghanistan and ending the anarchic rule of a myriad of warlords and militia leaders. Unocal feted Taliban officials at their headquarters in Texas and indirectly funded the establishment of facilities in the southern city of Kandahar to train the necessary technicians for pipeline construction.

The Taliban's Islamic fundamentalism, contempt for basic democratic rights and involvement in opium production were all downplayed as long as the regime offered the best prospects for stability. But in 1996 and 1997, its military advance was thwarted by the Northern Alliance and the Taliban failed to seize control of the remainder of the country. As the battles dragged on, Washington's attitude shifted. A turning point was reached in 1998 when Clinton launched cruise missile strikes against Afghanistan, following the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania allegedly by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. Amid falling world prices for oil and gas and a deteriorating political situation, Unocal shelved the project.

Washington, however, never dropped the plan completely. Afghanistan has remained a crucial element in US strategy in Central Asia. In fact, as has now been revealed, the plans for US military intervention in Afghanistan were on President Bush's desk in the days prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York. The Bush administration seized on the attacks to set its operation into motion, oust the Taliban and install a pliable regime headed by Karzai who has long had close connections to Washington.

Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney's ties to the US oil industry are well known, but the connections do not stop there. Bush's special envoy to Afghanistan is Zalmay Khalilzad, also a key adviser to the National Security Council. In the mid-1990s, Khalilzad was the Unocal consultant hired to push through the pipeline project in Afghanistan.

Ten days after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 1996, he wrote a comment in the *Washington Post* extolling the virtues of the

pipeline for Afghanistan. But he added, referring to the Taliban: “These projects will only go forward if Afghanistan has a single authoritative government.” The political tune may have since changed but the overall objective in Washington has not.

Unocal itself appears somewhat coy about the new pipeline project, which is hardly surprising given the controversy surrounding its previous involvement in Afghanistan and its obvious connections to the Bush administration. Spokeswoman Teresa Covington declared last week that the company was not interested at least “not for the foreseeable future,” but then qualified the statement by adding: “I don’t think it would serve me to say ‘forever.’”

Afghanistan’s Deputy Minister of Mines and Industries Mohammad Ebrahim Adel was far more forthright, however. “Naturally, Unocal is economically and technically stronger... We are sure Unocal will win, because it has big potential and can work better,” he said, adding: “Business has its secrets and mysteries. And maybe, before there is a real contract, they don’t want it to be disclosed in the media.”

The proposal to construct a pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan is a key component of far broader US plans in Central Asia. The Bush administration, the Pentagon and major US oil corporations have all exploited the opportunity opened up by the “global war on terrorism” to accelerate American intervention in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The May 27 issue of the US-based *BusinessWeek* magazine featured a cover story entitled “The Next Oil Frontier” which outlined the scope of the US business and military commitment to the region.

“American soldiers, oilmen, and diplomats are rapidly getting to know this remote corner of the world, the old underbelly of the Soviet Union and a region that’s been almost untouched by Western armies since the time of Alexander the Great. The game the Americans are playing has some of the highest stakes going. What they are attempting is nothing less than the biggest carve-out of a new US sphere of influence since the US became engaged in the Mideast 50 years ago. The result could be a commitment of decades that exposes America to the threat of countless wars and dangers. But this huge venture—call it an Accidental Empire—could also stabilise the fault line between the West and the Muslim world and reap fabulous energy wealth for the companies rich enough and determined enough to get it,” the magazine declared.

There is nothing accidental about the new American empire being carved out in Central Asia nor will it do anything to stabilise the region—in fact, precisely the reverse is taking place. But the article’s crowing tone does reflect a sentiment in ruling circles that September 11 has proved a boon to US ambitions to dominate Central Asian resources. As *BusinessWeek* explained, “A year ago, not a single US soldier was in the region. Today roughly 4,000 servicemen and women are building bases, assisting the Afghan war, and training anti-insurgency troops along a rim of peril stretching 2,000 miles from Kyrgyzstan, on China’s border, to Georgia, on the Black Sea.”

Most of the major energy giants including ChevronTexaco, Exxon Mobil, BP and Halliburton have invested substantial sums in the region. Over the last five years, total US investment in Central Asia has risen from “incidental sums” to \$20 billion, with

the largest amounts destined for oil-rich Kazakhstan. And while it pays lip service to the “war on terrorism,” the magazine pointed to the underlying purpose of the US military presence. “What is fast evolving is a policy focused on guns and oil. The guns are to protect the local regimes from Islamic radicals and to provide a staging area for attacks on Afghanistan... The guns, of course, will also protect the oil—oil that Washington hopes will lessen the West’s dependence on the Persian Gulf and also lift the nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia out of their grinding poverty.”

The US military presence directly assists American business interests against those of its rivals. *BusinessWeek* cited the case of Kazakhstan where China has been seeking to seal oil and mineral agreements. “The Chinese can play the power game, but in this chess match the US has more pieces,” the magazine commented. “Uzbek President Islam A. Karimov is grateful that the Pentagon-led campaign in Afghanistan has dealt a blow to the local Islamic guerilla group that fought alongside the Taliban. Now, he is opening up the country’s state-owned gold mines to \$100 million in investment from Denver’s Newmont Mining Corp, the world’s biggest gold miner.” According to company manager Tim Acton, “This is a strategic investment that has the potential to become a large core asset.”

But while gold, uranium and other minerals offer large profits, the focus is on oil and gas and the means to export them. As *BusinessWeek* explained: “Key to the game are the pipelines, where diplomacy and oilcraft meet. The Caspian is a landlocked region. Its vast oil output must be piped overland to the Black Sea, the Mediterranean or the Persian Gulf before it can be pumped into tankers. The US wants a pipeline that will help its friends in the region and freeze out its enemies—especially the Iranians, also located on the Caspian. That’s why Washington is strongly discouraging plans by some oil majors to lay a pipeline across Iran, lobbying instead for a proposed \$3 billion, 1,090 pipeline to carry up to one million barrels of oil a day from Baku through Georgia to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in NATO ally Turkey.”

In that context, the prospect of a shorter, cheap pipeline through Afghanistan for gas and, in the future oil, offers an attractive and potentially highly lucrative alternative to the present Baku-Ceyhan proposal. It also underscores the fact that the American military presence in Afghanistan has always been aimed at securing far-reaching US strategic and economic goals throughout the region—particularly in Central Asia.



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