

# Washington “discovers” Afghanistan’s mineral wealth

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For anyone who was still undecided, the *New York Times* has made it official: the war in Afghanistan is an imperialist war of plunder. This is the inescapable conclusion of yesterday’s lead article, “US Discovers Mineral Riches in Afghanistan,” on Pentagon plans to hand over Afghan mineral resources to major mining corporations and financial firms.

The *New York Times* cited “senior American government officials” saying that US surveying teams had found “nearly \$1 trillion in untapped mineral deposits in Afghanistan.” At current market prices, this includes \$421 billion in iron ore, \$274 billion in copper, \$81 billion in niobium (a metal used in producing superconducting steel), \$51 billion in cobalt, \$25 billion in gold, \$24 billion in molybdenum, and \$7.4 billion in “rare earth elements.” The *Times* left out the value of Afghanistan’s extensive supplies of gemstones and natural gas.

Nonetheless, it concluded that Afghanistan might “be transformed into one of the most important mining centers in the world.”

This bonanza is safely in the hands of the US military and major transnational corporations, the *Times* explained. “International accounting firms” are consulting with the Afghan Ministry of Mines to prepare technical data “to turn over to multinational mining companies and other potential foreign investors. The Pentagon is helping Afghan officials arrange to start seeking bids on mineral rights by next fall, officials said.”

Under-Secretary of Defense Paul Brinkley told the *Times*: “The Ministry of Mines is not ready to handle this. We are trying to help them to get ready.”

The claim that the Pentagon is “helping” the Ministry of Mines is a lie. In fact, the Ministry of Mines is apparently being kept in the dark about the contents of the survey. Contacted yesterday by Bloomberg News to obtain a statement on the *Times* report, Deputy Mines Minister Abdul Qudus Hamidi said the Ministry of Mines could not “comment until it receives a copy of the survey.”

More broadly, the Pentagon is mainly interested in “helping” the Ministry of Mines decide who will get Afghanistan’s riches. US officials and the *Times* both made clear that Chinese mining firms are not acceptable buyers.

The *Times* wrote: “Just last year, Afghanistan’s minister of

mines [Muhammad Ibrahim Adel] was accused by American officials of accepting a \$30 million bribe to award China the rights to develop its [Aynak] copper mine. The minister has since been replaced. ... American officials fear resource-hungry China will try to dominate the development of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, which could upset the United States.”

Such statements suggest some of the broader geopolitical interests motivating Washington’s occupation of Afghanistan. In the struggle to grab Afghanistan’s raw materials and cheap labor and deny them to its rivals, Washington intends to fully exercise its one main advantage: it has more boots on the ground than its rivals.

This February, after Adel was forced out over the Aynak license, Kabul canceled bidding on the massive Hajigak iron mine. *Business Week* explained, “Indian and Chinese companies eager to tie up resources for the world’s two fastest-growing major economies had sought the Hajigak deposit ... China has wrestled with the world’s main iron ore suppliers—Brazil’s Vale SA, London-based Rio Tinto Plc and Australia’s BHP Billiton Ltd—in an attempt to circumvent rising global prices.”

Iron ore prices have skyrocketed as BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, and Vale have succeeded in bidding up prices in recent years, since the main importer of iron ore—China—is completely dependent on their supplies. They demanded 90-100 percent price increases for iron ore this spring, after several years of comparable price increases. Xinhua reported that Chinese steel firms would pay \$110-\$120 per ton of imported iron ore, compared to \$62 per ton last year.

Nor is the iron ore market the only one in which control of Afghan mines might prove decisive. The *Times*’ article yesterday reported that deposits of lithium—an essential material for laptop and smart-phone batteries—in Afghanistan’s Ghazni province alone could rival those of Bolivia, which currently has the world’s largest reserves. The *Times* cited an internal Pentagon memo describing Afghanistan as the “Saudi Arabia of lithium,” that is, a country whose production (of oil, in the Saudi case) would determine world market prices.

A frank exposition of how US wars benefit parasitic corporate and financial interests would provoke mass outrage, in the US and abroad. As a result, the *Times* ludicrously

presented Washington's interest in Afghan mineral wealth as the product of the lucky work of a few isolated US geologists, who arrived in Afghanistan in 2004.

Having "stumbled across an intriguing series of old charts" in Afghan libraries, they commandeered an "old Navy Orion P-3 aircraft" that—in a fit of absent-mindedness, perhaps?—had been fitted with "advanced gravity and magnetic measuring equipment." Having flown over "70 percent of the country," they produced a report noting that they had discovered "astonishing" mineral wealth, and returned with a more sophisticated British aircraft for further exploration in 2007. Their work, according to the *Times*, then "gathered dust" for two years in US offices.

In fact the US government was well aware, as it invaded Afghanistan, that it was invading a country with vast mineral riches. Despite the *Times*' deceptive presentation of the matter, its account objectively shows that US and NATO officials have been carefully studying and documenting these resources for years, as the war progressed. As for the *Times*' absurd presentation, US documents show that Washington has long been aware of Afghanistan's riches.

Under "Resources," the first chapter of the US government's 1986 *Country Study* on Afghanistan lists the following: "Wide variety of mineral resources—natural gas, coal, copper, iron, barite, chrome, and lapis lazuli. Petroleum discoveries and uranium finds reported."

A 2002 State Department report, quoted by the WWS, noted: "Afghanistan is endowed with a wealth of natural resources, including extensive deposits of natural gas, petroleum, coal, copper, chromite, talc, barites, sulfur, lead, zinc, iron ore, salt, and precious and semiprecious stones" (See: "Oil and 'conspiracy theories': a reply to a liberal apologist for the US war in Afghanistan").

This begs the question of why the US government and the *Times* have waited until now to report this discovery. What are the reasons for this sudden announcement?

The *Times* writes, "American and Afghan officials agreed to discuss the mineral discoveries at a difficult moment in the war in Afghanistan. Noting the failure of NATO military operations to crush resistance in the Afghan city of Marja, it adds, "the Obama administration is hungry for some positive news to come out of Afghanistan." In other words, this is a bit of "good news" that NATO governments think they can peddle to their populations to reconcile them to an unpopular war.

At the same time, the *Times* makes it clear it hopes the announcement will inspire even greater violence against anti-occupation forces.

It laid out this policy in its lead editorial yesterday, calling for a more aggressive policy in Afghanistan. Frustrated with Afghan President Hamid Karzai's negotiations with the Taliban and US General Stanley McChrystal's decision to put off an offensive against the city of Kandahar until autumn, it wrote: "We don't know if the Taliban leaders will ever

compromise. But we are sure they will only consider it under duress. General McChrystal is going to have to do a much better job in Kandahar. Mr. Karzai is going to have to drop his illusions and commit to the fight."

From the standpoint of intensifying combat between Karzai's troops and the Taliban, the mineral announcement also could help. As the *Times* notes, "newfound mineral wealth could lead the Taliban to battle even more fiercely to regain control of the country." In short, the news may provoke more bloodshed, which the *Times* wants—and help keep Karzai in line with US demands, by implicitly offering him a piece of the mining money, if he wins.

These events powerfully confirm the critique of the social character of American militarism made by the *World Socialist Web Site* prior to the September 11 attacks that marked the beginning of the US "war on terror."

After the 1999 US war against Serbia, the statement "After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of the Balkan War" addressed the rising inter-imperialist conflicts of the time. Noting the origins of World War I and World War II in the struggle of "different imperialist countries over markets, raw materials, and related strategic interests," it stated:

"The increasing frequency of military outbreaks during the 1990s is an objective symptom of an approaching international conflagration. Both World War I and World War II were preceded by a series of local or regional conflicts. As the major imperialist powers seek to expand their influence into the regions opened up for capitalist penetration by the collapse of the USSR, the likelihood of conflicts between them increases. At stake in major disputes—such as those that will inevitably arise over the allocation of booty from the oil of the Caspian and Caucasian regions—will be life-and-death issues of world power and position. Such issues do not, by their very nature, lend themselves to peaceful resolution. The basic tendency of imperialism moves inexorably in the direction of a new world war."

With the *Times*' recent article, the same contradictions emerge publicly today. The difference, as the WWS statement predicted, is that the world is far closer to direct conflict between the major powers—with international relations destabilized by the world economic crisis, US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the entire Middle East on hair-trigger alert—as the US, other NATO countries, and the rising powers in Asia continue to compete for access to raw materials, labor and markets worldwide.



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