

AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES ARE STILL IN AFGHANISTAN. BUT, WHY ?

by George Venturini * (Part 2)

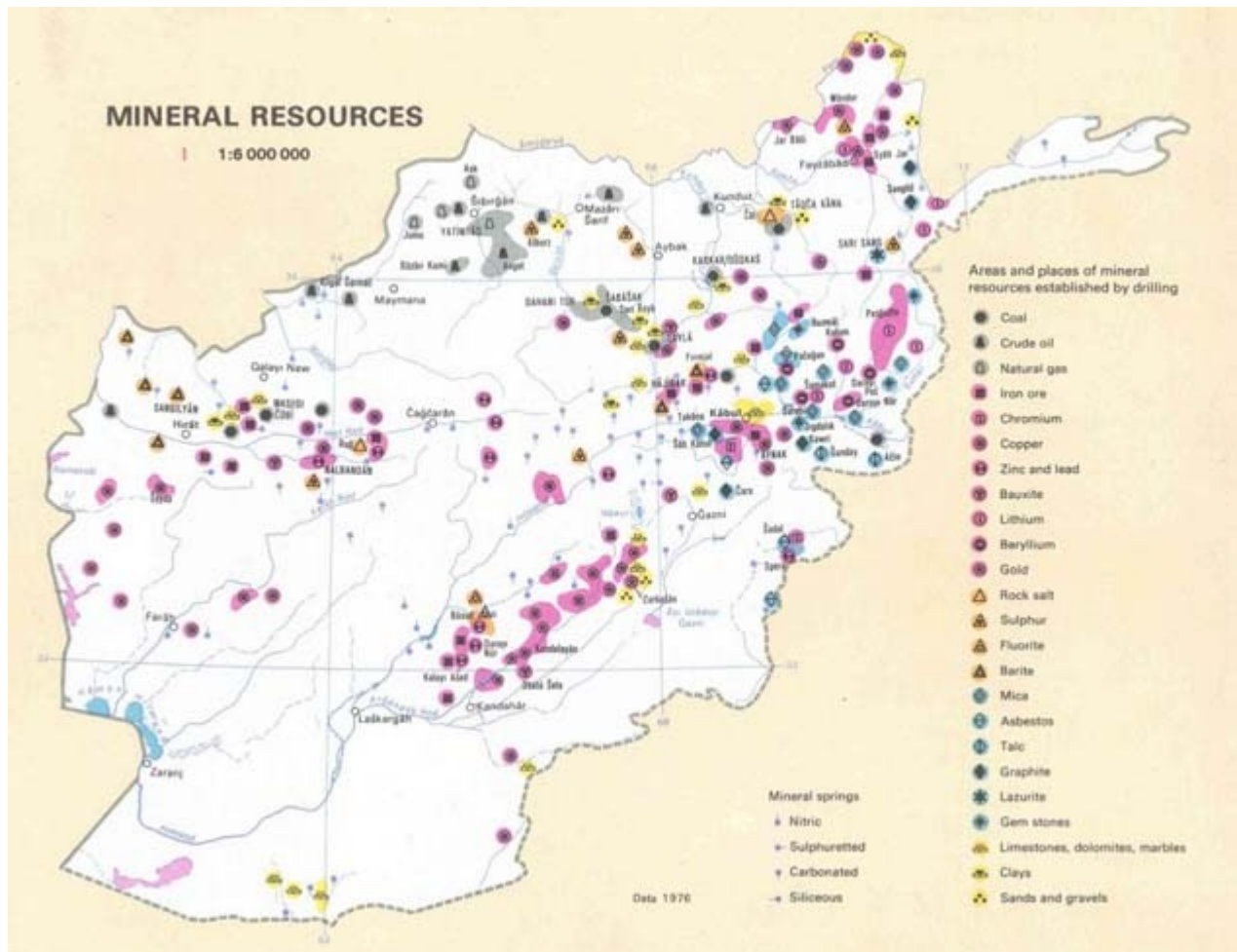
05 December, 2012 Countercurrents.org

General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of N.A.T.O., repeated in a stunning but little-known speech on 3 October 2007 what he had written in his memoir *Winning modern wars* in 2003. He claimed that America underwent a 'policy coup' at the time of the 11 September 2001 attacks. He was privy to information contained in a classified memo: the United States' plans to attack and 'remove' governments in seven countries over five years. After recounting how a Pentagon source had told him weeks after 9/11 of the Pentagon's plan to attack Iraq notwithstanding its non-involvement in 9/11, this is how Clark described the aspirations of the 'coup' being plotted by Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and what he called "a half dozen other collaborators from the *Project for the New American Century*": "Six weeks later, I saw the same officer, and asked: 'Why haven't we attacked Iraq? Are we still going to attack Iraq?' He said: 'Sir, it's worse than that.' He said - he pulled up a piece of paper off his desk: 'I just got this memo from the Secretary of Defense's office. It says we're going to attack and destroy the governments in 7 countries in five years - we're going to start with Iraq, and then we're going to move to Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran'."

THE REAL REASONS FOR THE AFGHAN WAR

When the United States decided to invade Afghanistan, ostensibly to capture Osama bin Laden - and failed, but stayed on like an unwanted guest - could it have known that the Afghans were sitting on some of the world's greatest reserves of mineral wealth ?

Russ Baker, an investigative journalist, raised this question some time ago, noting the dubious 2010 claim, published by *The New York Times*, that “the vast scale of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth was [recently] discovered by a small team of Pentagon officials and American geologists.” Other evidence, and logic, point to the fact that everyone but the ‘western’ public knew for a long time, and before the 2001 invasion, that Afghanistan was a treasure trove.



So, one could ask: was the original impetus for the invasion really Osama - or Mammon?

The failure to pose this question is significant because the pretence of a “recent discovery” serves only to justify staying in Afghanistan now that the troops are already there - while ignoring the extent to which imperial-style resource conquests are the real motive of foreign policy and wars, worldwide.

Continuing to dance around that issue, one will remain mired in disaster.

One should keep in mind the quote from Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006: “I’m saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil.” Who will say the same about Afghanistan and its mineral wealth ? Next, one should remember General Wesley Clark’s claims contained in a stunning but little-known speech on 3 October 2007. Gen. Clark claimed that America underwent a ‘policy coup’ at the time of the 11 September 2001 attacks. In that speech Clark revealed that, right after 9/11, he was privy to information contained in a classified memo: the United States’ plans to attack and ‘remove’ governments in seven countries over five years.

After recounting how a Pentagon source had told him weeks after 9/11 of the Pentagon’s plan to attack Iraq notwithstanding its non-involvement in 9/11, this is how Clark described the aspirations of the ‘coup’ being plotted by Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and what he called “a half dozen other collaborators from the *Project for the New American Century*”: “Six weeks later, I saw the same officer, and asked: ‘Why haven’t we attacked Iraq? Are we still going to attack Iraq?’

He said: ‘Sir, it’s worse than that.’ He said - he pulled up a piece of paper off his desk: ‘I just got this memo from the Secretary of Defense’s office. It says we’re going to attack and destroy the governments in 7 countries in five years - we’re going to start with Iraq, and then we’re going to move to Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran’.”

Clark said the aim of this plot was this: “They wanted us to destabilize the Middle East, turn it upside down, make it under our control.” He then recounted a conversation he had had ten years earlier with Paul Wolfowitz - back in 1991 - in which the then-number-3-Pentagon-official, after criticising Bush the father for not toppling Saddam, told Clark: “But one thing we did learn [from the Persian Gulf war] is that we can use our military in the region - in the Middle East - and the Soviets won’t stop us. And we’ve got about 5 or 10 years to clean up those old Soviet regimes - Syria, Iran [*sic*], Iraq - before the next great superpower comes on to challenge us.” Clark said he was shocked by Wolfowitz’s desires because, as Clark put it: “the purpose of the military is to start wars and change governments ? It’s not to deter conflicts ?”

The current turmoil in the Middle East is driven largely by popular revolts, not by *neocoon* shenanigans. Still, in the aftermath of military-caused regime change in Iraq and Libya, with concerted regime change efforts now underway aimed at Syria and Iran, with active and

escalating proxy fighting in Somalia, with a modest military deployment to South Sudan, and the active use of drones in six different Muslim countries, it is worth asking whether the *neocoon* dream as laid out by Clark is dead or is being actively pursued and fulfilled, albeit with means more subtle and multilateral than full-on military invasions.

One should, further, never forget that the majority of the 9/11 hijackers originated in that very reliable U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia, a country controlled by the Saudi royal family, which itself needs constant external war and strife throughout the Middle East to keep its subjects from focusing on its own despotism and staggering corruption, and to maintain its position as an indispensable ally of 'the West' in these wars. It was the actions of the Saudi-dominated 9/11 hijackers and their Saudi sponsor, Osama bin Laden, which created the justification for this endless series of resource wars.

But the real reasons for the Afghan war are founded on three concrete elements.

* * *

First, paramount, comes oil.

In a rerun of the first 'Great Game' - the nineteenth century imperial rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia - players once again positioned themselves to control the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Today, the United States has taken over the leading role from the British. Along with the Russians, new regional powers, such as China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, have entered the arena, and transnational oil corporations are also pursuing their own interests.

The main spoils in today's 'Great Game' are Caspian oil and gas. On its shores, and at the bottom of the Caspian Sea, according to estimates obtained some ten years ago, lie the world's biggest untapped fossil fuel resources. Estimates range from 110 to 243 billion barrels of crude, worth up to US\$ 4 trillion. According to the United States Department of Energy, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan alone could sit on more than 130 billion barrels, more than three times the U.S.'s reserves. Oil giants such as British Petroleum, ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil have already invested more than US\$ 30 billion in new production facilities.

With a potential oil production of up to 6 million barrels per day by 2015, the Caspian region has become crucial to the U.S. policy of 'diversifying energy supply'. It is designed

to wean the United States off its dependence on the Arab-dominated Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, O.P.E.C. cartel, which is using its near-monopoly position as pawn and leverage against industrialised countries. As global oil consumption keeps surging and many oil wells outside the Middle East are nearing depletion, O.P.E.C is expanding its share of the world market. At the same time, the United States will have to import more than two-thirds of its total energy demand by 2020, mostly from the Middle East.

It is understandable that an American administration other than that of the Bushes, particularly the second one, would feel quite uncomfortable with the growing power of, and American dependence on, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a theocratic monarchy which recognises no distinction within its rule between politics and religion. It adheres to an extremely conservative and paranoid version of Islam known as *Wahabism*, which it tries to promote throughout the world. The United States knows this, and so does Australia. But people 'downstairs' are not supposed, and certainly not allowed, to question what people 'upstairs' do. And recent Australian governments continue to pretend that nothing happens. The American government, of course, is concerned, and continuously fears that radical Islamist groups could topple the corrupt *Sa'ud* dynasty and stop the flow of oil to 'infidels'. Responsible administrators in Washington realise that, to stave off political turmoil, the regime in Riyadh funds the radical Islamic *Wahabi* sect which foments terror against Americans around the world. In a desperate effort to decrease its dependence on Saudi oil sheiks, the United States seeks to control the Caspian oil resources. The situation is complicated by other rivalries. However, fierce conflicts have broken out over pipeline routes. Russia, still regarding itself as imperial overlord of former components of its Union, promotes pipeline routes across its territory, including Chechnya, in the north Caucasus. China, the increasingly oil-dependent waking giant in the region, wants to build eastbound pipelines from Kazakhstan. Iran is offering its pipeline network via the Persian Gulf.

The 'war on terror' is being used as an excuse to further United States energy interests in the Caspian; client-states simply follow.

This is the theatre in which the drama over oil and gas is being played in the Central Asian Region.

If one were to ask Alan Greenspan, Senator John McCain, former president George Bush, former Vice-President Dick Cheney - and assuming that the latter two would tell the truth

- one would see that in May 2001 Cheney recommended in the national energy policy report that “the president makes energy security a priority of our trade and foreign policy”, singling out the Caspian basin as a “rapidly growing new area of supply.” Aspiring vice-president Sarah Palin, some high-level National Security Council officers and many, many others, could confirm that the Afghanistan war was planned well before 11 September 2001 and was for oil - and gas, too. Surviving Taliban could witness to that: the United States threateningly told them that they would either get “a carpet of gold or a carpet of bombs”, the former if they green-lighted a pipeline, the second if they did not.

A well-known *neocoon*, John Bolton, spoken last year about: “The critical oil and natural gas producing region that we fought so many wars to try and protect our economy from the adverse impact of losing that supply or having it available only at very high prices.”

So, the pipeline that the United States wanted to run through Afghanistan prior to 9/11 was to transport [gas as much as oil](#).

The proposed US\$ 7.6 billion, 1,040 mile-/1,674 kilometre-long Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, TAPI natural gas pipeline has a long regional history, having first been proposed even before the Taliban captured Kabul, when in 1995 Turkmenistan and Pakistan initialled a memorandum of understanding. TAPI, with a carrying capacity of 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas a year, was projected to run from Turkmenistan’s Dauletabad gas field across Afghanistan and Pakistan and terminate at the north-western Indian town of Fazilka.

TAPI would have required the assent of the Taliban, and two years after the memorandum of understanding was signed, the Central Asia Gas Pipeline Ltd. consortium, led by U.S. company Unocal, flew a Taliban delegation to Unocal headquarters in Houston, where the Taliban signed off on the project.

The Taliban visit to the United States has been [confirmed](#) by the mainstream media.

Unocal, the leader of the consortium and [Enron](#), with full U.S. government support, continued to woo the Taliban right up until 2001 in an attempt to sweet-talk them into green-lighting the pipeline.

There is documentation un-controversially proving that until August 2001, the United States government saw the Taliban regime “as a source of stability in Central Asia that would

enable the construction of an oil pipeline across Central Asia” from the rich oilfields in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, through Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the Indian Ocean. Until then “the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia [had] been controlled by Russia. The Bush government wanted to change all that.”

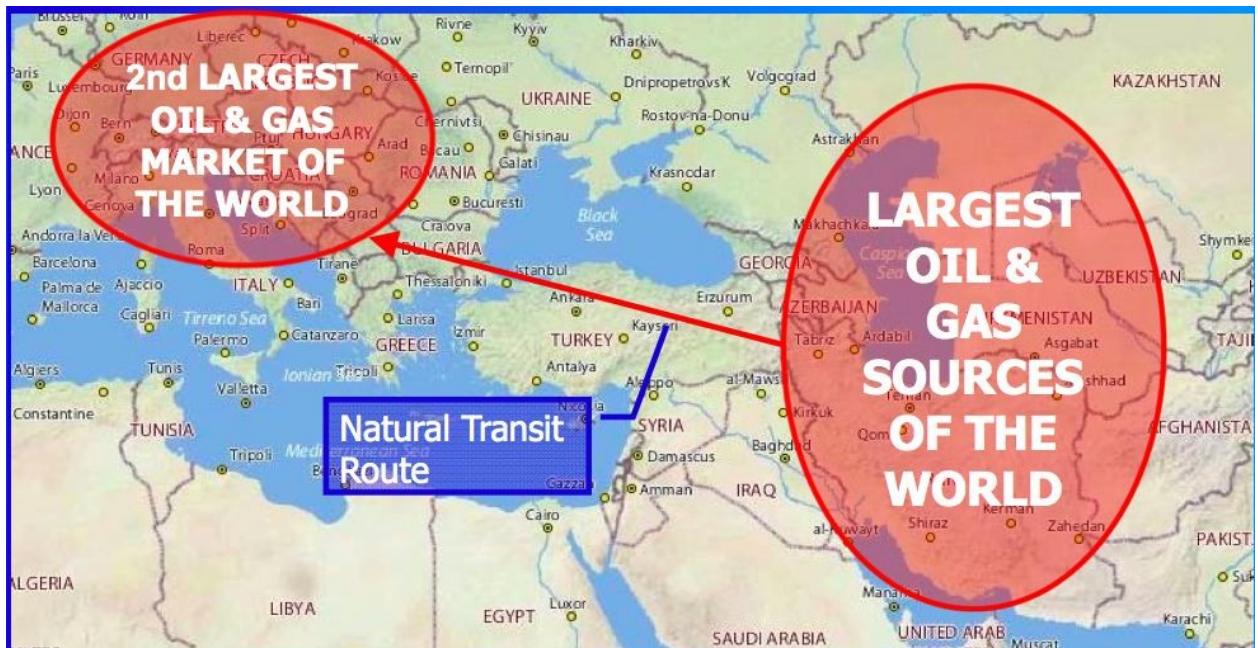
Under newly elected president George W. Bush, Unocal went back into the game and, as early as January 2001, was snuggled up warm and comfortable to the Taliban yet again, this time supported by a star-studded governmental cast of characters, including undersecretary of state Richard Armitage, himself a former Unocal lobbyist.

Negotiations eventually broke down because of the very high transit fees the Taliban demanded. At a Group of Eight summit meeting in Genova in July 2001, ‘western’ diplomats indicated that the Bush administration had decided to take the Taliban down before year’s end. A Pakistani diplomat in Islamabad would later confirm this. The attacks of 11 September 2001 just slightly accelerated the programme.

Soon after the start of the Afghan war, Hamid Karzai, a Unocal consultant, was installed as Kabul deputy sheriff. Just a year later, a U.S.-friendly Afghani regime [signed onto TAPI](#).

India just [formally signed on to TAPI](#). This ended the long-proposed competitor: an [Iran-Pakistan-India](#) (IPI) pipeline.

The intention of the consortium and of its protecting governments was that of transforming the Middle East into a reticulation of pipelines - something better illustrated by the following drawings:



And here are the competing pipelines supported by the United States and by Iran, before India sided with the United States:

Two Proposed Pipelines in South Asia



Map 1 • B-2139 heritage.org

What was happening was part of the great geopolitical battle raging between the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and Russia, China and Iran, on the other hand.

Iran and Pakistan are still discussing a pipeline without India, and [Russia supports the proposal as well](#).

Indeed, the ‘Great Game’ being played right now by the world powers largely boils down to the United States and Russia [fighting for control over Eurasian oil and gas resources](#).

Russia and the United States have been in a state of competition in this region ever since the Soviet Union was dissolved, and Russia is adamant on keeping the Americans out of its Central Asian backyard. Russia aims to increase European gas dominance on its resources whereas the United States wants the European Union to diversify its energy supply, primarily away from Russian dominance. Already three major Russian pipelines are supplying energy to Europe, and Russia has planned two new pipelines.

The situation is now complicated by the emergence of China. The third ‘big player’ in this ‘New Great Game’, China, the emerging colossal power of the Asian Century, is soon to be the world’s biggest energy consumer, which is already importing gas from Turkmenistan through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to its Xinjiang province. This is done by the Central Asia-China Pipeline, which may tilt the balance towards Asia. China’s need for energy is projected to increase by 150 per cent, which explains why it has signed probably the largest number of deals not just with the Central Asian republics but also with the heavily sanctioned Iran and even Afghanistan. China has planned around five west-east gas pipelines, within China, of which one is operational - domestically from Xinjiang to

Shanghai - and others are under construction and will be connected to Central Asian gas reserves.

China is also pushing for an alternative to TAPI: a [Turkmenistan-Afghan-China](#) pipeline.

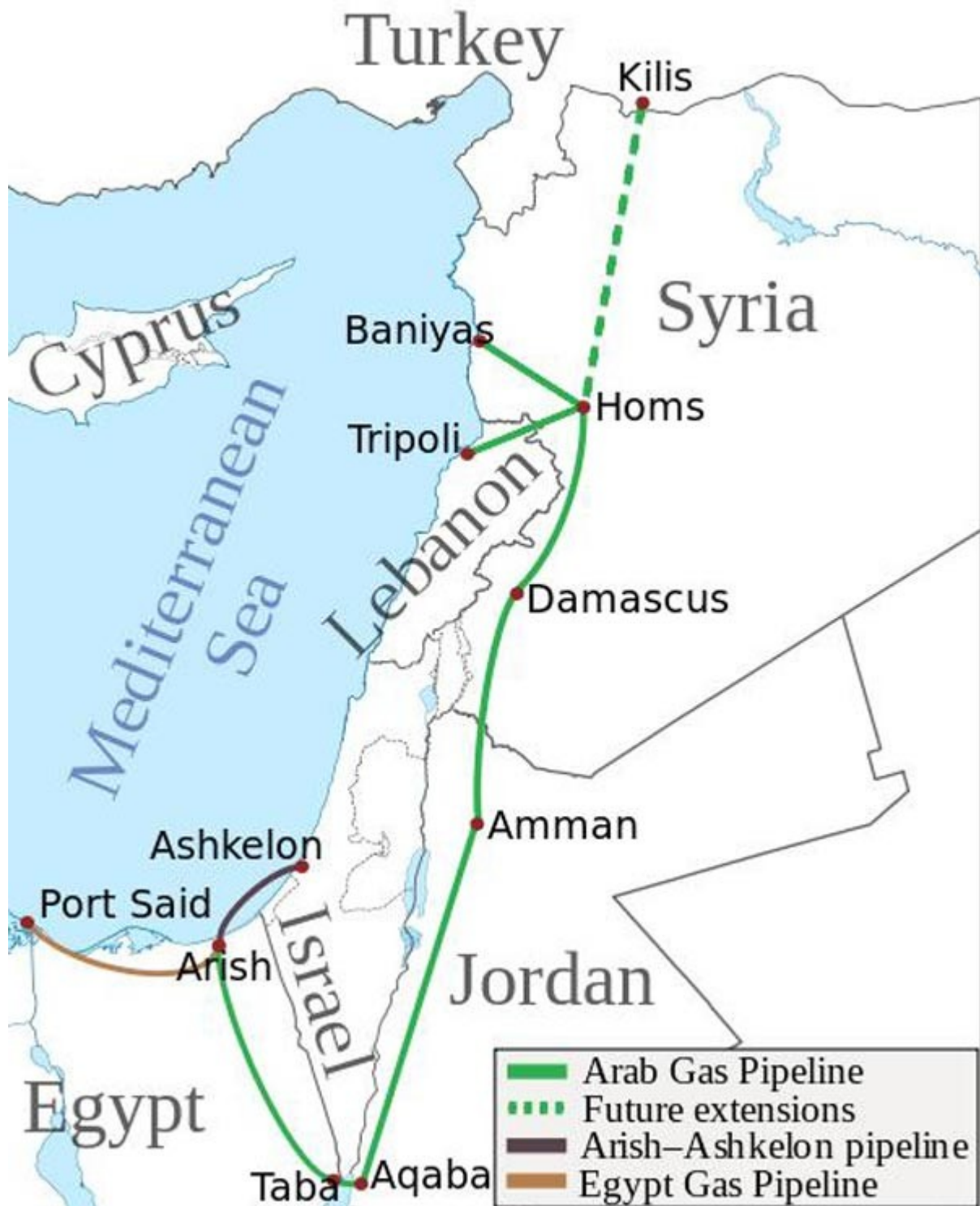
Another important country is Iran. Iran sits on the second largest gas reserves in the world and has over 93 billion barrels of proven oil reserves with a total of 4.17 million barrels per day in 2009. To the dislike of the United States, Iran is a very active player. The Turkmenistan-Iran gas pipeline, constructed in 1997, was the first new pipeline going out from Central Asia. Furthermore, Iran signed a US\$ 120 billion gas exploration deal, often termed the 'deal of the century' with China. This gas deal signed in 2004 covers the annual export to China for 25 years of approximately 10 million tons of Iranian liquefied natural gas. It also gives China's state oil company the right to participate in such projects as exploration and drilling for petrochemical and gas industries in Iran. Iran also plans to sell its gas to Europe through its Persian Gas pipeline which can become a rival to the U.S. *Nabucco* pipeline. More importantly, it is also the key party in the proposed Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline, also formerly known as the 'peace pipeline.' Under this pipeline plan, first proposed in 1995, Iran will sell gas from its mega South Pars fields to Pakistan and India.

China's support for Iran is [largely explained by oil and gas](#).

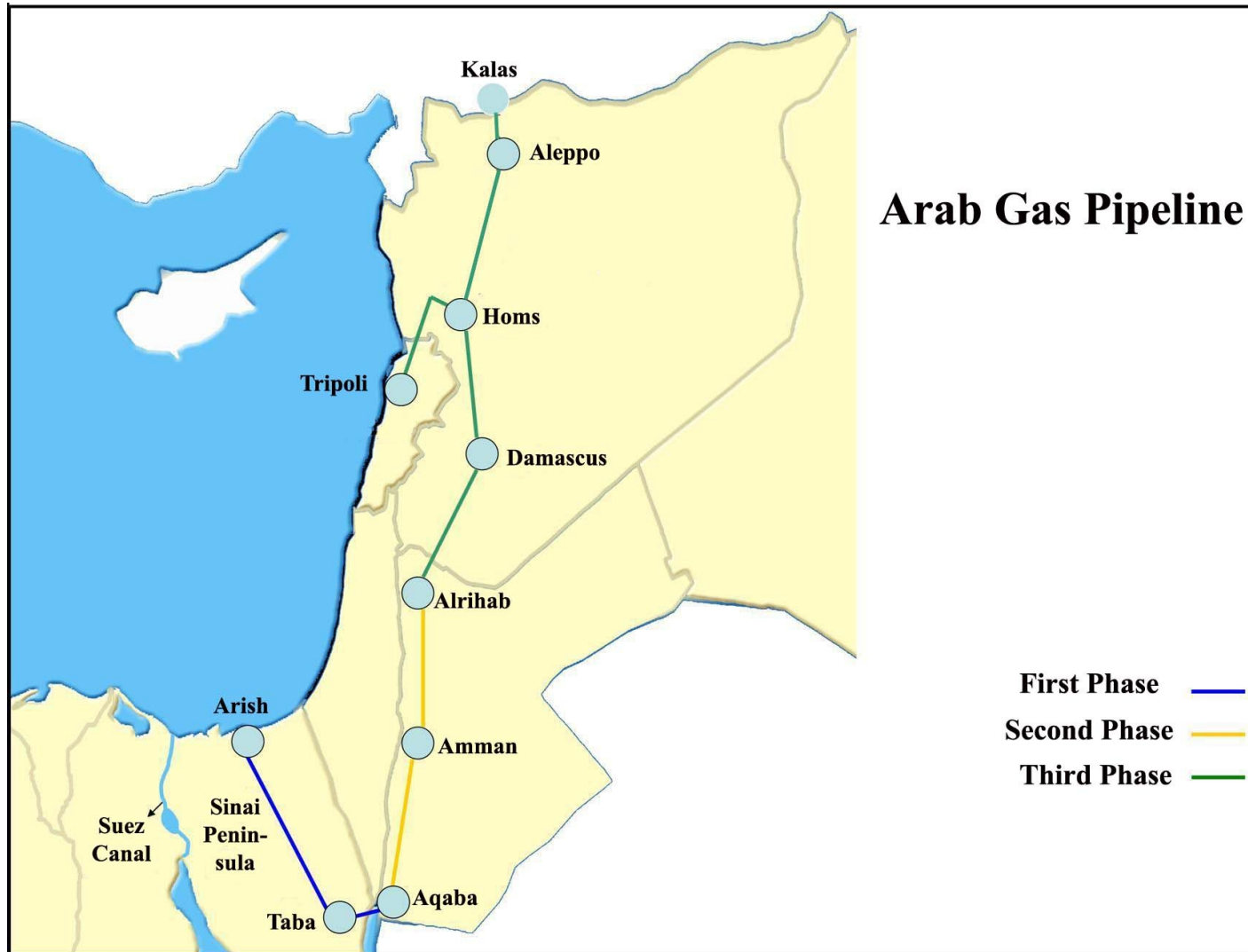
'Isolated' Iran happens to be a supreme matter of national security for China, which has already rejected the latest American sanctions without a blink and that China may be the true winner from America's new sanctions, because it is likely to purchase its oil and gas at a lower price, as the Iranians grow ever more dependent on the China market.

China has also shown interest in the construction of the Iran-Pakistan on the Pakistani side and further expanding it to China. This means that starting at Gwadar, Beijing plans to build another pipeline, crossing Baluchistan and then following the Karakoram Highway northwards all the way to Xinjiang, China's far western area. China is also most likely to gain the construction contract for this pipeline. Chinese firms are part of the consortium awarded the contract for the financial consultancy for the project. Closer participation in the Asian energy projects would also help China increase its influence in the region for its objective of creating a 'string of pearls' across the region, which has often frightened India as an encirclement strategy by the Chinese government.

It is interesting that one of the seven countries the government of which the *neocons* planned to destroy is Syria. And the reason? Syria figured in the scheme of things as one of the places touched by the proposed 1,200 kilometres Arab Gas Pipeline, as can be seen in the following drawing:



Syria was to have become integral part of a combination which would see a pipeline from Kilis (or Kalas) in Turkey and down 'behind' Lebanon and Israel, as it were, and finally to Aqaba on the Persian Gulf, and from there to Taba and Arish.



The pipeline would be built in three phases: first from Arish to Taba and Aqaba, then from Aqaba to Alrihab in Jordan, and finally from Alrihab to Kalas (or Kilis) in Turkey.

This is the present situation:

ARAB GAS PIPELINE PROJECT

syria



- THE EGYPTIAN GAS IS CURRENTLY BEING SUPPLIED TO SYRIA
- THE NETWORK OF TURKEY AND SYRIA WILL BE LINKED WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF REMAINING 230 KM.
- FURTHER GAS SUPPLIES MUST BE SECURED BEFORE PROCEEDING WITH SYRIA – TURKEY INTERCONNECTOR

It is all too clear, then, that the present ‘civil war’ in Syria is a misnomer. The war is from the outside, and attacking Syria was intended some twenty years ago to weaken its close allies: [Iran](#) and [Russia](#) - and indirectly [China](#). Syria’s central role in the Arab gas pipeline is also a key to why it is now being targeted.

Just as the Taliban was scheduled for removal after they demanded too much in return for the Unocal pipeline, Syria’s Assad was targeted because he is not a reliable ‘player.’

It is in the interest of the United States, Israel and Turkey - despite their apparent differences - that there be guaranteed flow of oil through a Syria in which there is a compliant regime, in other words a client-state.

IP - Iran-Pakistan is the original US\$ 7 billion IPI - Iran-Pakistan-India, also known as the ‘peace pipeline’. India parted company in 2009 after non-stop harassment by the Bush and then the Obama administrations. India, meanwhile, was offered access to civilian nuclear technology. Australia has recently promised to supply uranium.

China, for its part, is still eyeing the possibility of extending IP out of Gwadar port, then crossing to Pakistan's north alongside the Karakoram Highway all the way to Xinjiang. China is already helping Pakistan to build civilian nuclear reactors - as part of Pakistan's energy security policy.

The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Ltd., I.C.B.C., China's largest bank and the world's number one lender, was already positioned as financial adviser to IP. But then, contemplating the (sanctions) writing on the wall, it started to show less interest, at least as Pakistan saw the position. Yet, according to a Pakistani Ministry of Petroleum's spokesman, "ICBC is still engaged in the IP project and the negotiations are still going on."

A huge bank such as I.C.B.C. may be wary of defying the American sanction efforts; but other financing options may be found, as in other banks or government-level agreements with China or Russia. Pakistan's Foreign Minister has just made it very clear. Pakistan badly needs oil which should start flowing by December 2014.

Pakistan and Iran have already agreed on pricing. Iran's 900-kilometres stretch of IP is already built; Pakistan's has begun.

For the United States the only alternative possibility is the construction of the long-delayed TAPI - Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India. Even assuming it will find financing; even assuming that the Taliban will content themselves with an 'acceptable' share of the profits - the point over which negotiations with the Clinton then Bush administrations failed, and even assuming it would not be bombed routinely by *mujahideen* or other groups in a likely civil war, TAPI would only be ready, at the very best, by 2018.

On 11 December 2010 a preliminary agreement was signed in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat, by representatives of the TAPI four countries to proceed with plans for the United States and, *semble*, Israeli-supported pipeline. The TAPI pipeline was planned to be built along the Herat-Kandahar highway across western and southern Afghanistan. Construction of the pipeline was to have been completed by 2014.

A 1,680 kilometre pipeline was to supply 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day. Much of this gas was to come from Israeli-owned gas fields in Turkmenistan. The Obama Administration, elected on the promise to withdraw U.S. troops by July 2011, now says that the United States will maintain combat troops in Afghanistan beyond December 2014.

In the long terms, the construction of TAPI is regarded as essential for Europe to diversify its energy supplies and reduce its dependence on oil and gas imports from the Persian Gulf and Russia. Failure in Afghanistan, and by extension in Pakistan, would mean abandoning the construction of TAPI and in turn, pave the way for Russia to reassert its former hegemony in the region.

Should this happen, European dependence on Russian-controlled energy supplies would increase hugely, giving Russia unprecedented leverage over Europe, both economically and politically. A Russia-dependent Europe would damage the transatlantic relationship beyond repair, wean the Europeans away from their former American partner, and split the west into two.

On the other hand, should 'the mission' in Afghanistan succeed and TAPI be built, Europe could continue to deepen its economic and political ties with Russia without running the risk of falling hostage to Russia's geostrategic ambitions - which are still very much alive; it would allow Europe progressively to integrate Russia into a united West.

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Next important reason for the Afghan war is opium.

Occupation is aimed firstly at restoring and controlling the world's largest supply of opium for the world heroin markets and secondly at using the drugs as a geopolitical weapon against opponents - especially Russia. That control of the Afghan drug market is also essential for the liquidity of the bankrupt and corrupt Wall Street financial syndicate.

According to United Nations periodical reports, opium production in Afghanistan has risen dramatically since the downfall of the Taliban in 2001. Data provided by the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime**, UNODC show more opium poppy cultivation in each of the growing seasons from 2004 to date than in any one year during Taliban rule. More land is now used for opium in Afghanistan, than for coca cultivation in Latin America. It is estimated that some 95 per cent of the opiates on the world market originate in Afghanistan. This is no accident.

It is beyond any doubt that the Bush Administration hand-picked Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun warlord from the Popalzai tribe, long in the C.I.A.'s service, brought him back from exile in the United States, created a Hollywood mythology around his 'courageous leadership of his

people.’ According to Afghan sources, Karzai is the opium ‘Godfather’ of Afghanistan today. There is apparently no accident that he was and is today still the American administration’s preferred man in Kabul. Yet even with massive vote buying and fraud and intimidation, Karzai’s days as President could be ending.

The fundamental reason whereby the United States military will remain in Afghanistan long after the world has forgotten even who the mysterious Osama bin Laden and his alleged *al-Qaeda* terrorist organisation were is as a pretext to build a permanent American military strike force with a series of permanent airbases across Afghanistan. The aim of those bases is not to eradicate any *al-Qaeda* cells which may have survived eleven years of war, or to eradicate a mythical ‘Taliban’ which at this point is made up overwhelmingly of local ordinary Afghans fighting to rid their land once more of occupier armies as they did in the 1980s against the Russians.

The aim of the American bases in Afghanistan is to target and be able to strike at the two nations which today represent the only combined threat in the world to an American global *imperium* - to America’s ‘full spectrum dominance’ as the Pentagon calls it.

The U.S. *élites* have lost what in Chinese imperial history is known as the ‘mandate of Heaven’. That mandate is given a ruler or ruling *élite* provided it rule its people justly and fairly. When those *élites* rule as tyrants, oppressing and abusing their people, they lose that ‘mandate’.

If the powerful private wealthy *élites* which have essentially controlled American financial and foreign policy for most of the past century or more ever had a ‘mandate of Heaven’ they clearly have lost it. The domestic developments towards setting up an abusive police state with deprivation of constitutional rights to its citizens demonstrate to the world that they have lost the ‘mandate’.

In this situation, the American power *élites* are increasingly desperate to maintain their control of a global parasitical empire - called deceptively by their media machine ‘globalisation.’ To hold that dominance it is essential that they be able to break up any emerging cooperation in the economic, energy or military realm between the two major powers of Eurasia which conceivably could pose a challenge to future United States sole superpower control - China in combination with Russia. Control and supply of opium is one such means.

On the side of Hamid Karzai was until recently his younger paternal half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, also a prominent politician. Ahmed Wali Karzai formerly lived in Chicago, Illinois, where he worked in a restaurant owned by his family. He returned to Afghanistan following the U.S. occupation of the country in 2001.

He was a key collaborator of the U.S. military in the country's south. This would come easily: on 27 October 2009 *The New York Times* reported that Ahmed Wali Karzai received payments from the C.I.A. for "a variety of services", including the recruitment of the Kandahar Strike Force, an Afghan paramilitary force run by the C.I.A. in the Kandahar region. It also stated that he was paid for allowing the C.I.A. and U.S. Special Forces to rent the former residence of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar. Of course, Karzai denied taking any payment from the C.I.A.

As an elder of the Popalzai Pashtun tribe, he was elected to the Kandahar Provincial Council in 2005, served as its chairman, and exercised influence in the Province to the extent that he was described as 'effectively the governor'.

A June 2009 U.S. embassy cable, published by *The Guardian* on 2 December 2010, alleged that much of the actual business of running the city of Kandahar "takes place out of public sight, where Ahmed Wali Karzai operates, parallel to formal government structures, through a network of political clans that use state institutions to protect and enable licit and illicit enterprises." In addition, James Risen of *The New York Times* stated that Ahmed Wali Karzai may have been involved in the Afghan opium and heroin trade. Of course, this was denied by Karzai, who called the charges political propaganda and complained that he was a victim of vicious politics.

In meetings with President Hamid Karzai, including a 2006 session with former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ronald E. Neumann, the C.I.A.'s station chief and their British counterparts, American officials talked about the rumours in the hope that the president might send his brother out of the country. "We thought the concern expressed to Karzai might be enough to get him out of there." one official said. President Karzai resisted, however, demanding clear-cut evidence of wrongdoing, several officials said. "We don't have the kind of hard, direct evidence that you could take to get a criminal indictment." an American official said. Of course, Ahmed Wali Karzai again dismissed the allegations as politically motivated.

Before the 2009 Afghan presidential election, Wali Karzai and Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, former governor of the Helmand Province and a member of the Upper House of the Afghan parliament, were accused of vote rigging. After the election, reports mentioned that all those running in the election were involved in electoral fraud.

Wali Karzai survived a number of assassination attempts by Taliban militants and at least two attacks against his office in Kandahar: one in November 2008 and the other in April 2009. According to Karzai himself, he had survived a total of nine assassination attempts.

On 12 July 2011 Karzai was killed by his long-time head of security, probably a Taliban sleeper agent. General David Petraeus as well as other top N.A.T.O. personnel serving in Afghanistan, officials at the White House and many world leaders condemned the killing.

It is not beyond the realm of possibilities, that the killing was a C.I.A. in-house work, due to the rivalries between narcotics traffickers.

Before 'everything changed' on 11 September 2001, and before the United States and the Coalition invaded Afghanistan, the Taliban had imposed a ban on opium production. This resulted in opium production collapsing by more than 90 per cent. It was the U.S. supported Northern Alliance which came to the rescue and began protecting the production of raw opium.

C.I.A.-supported *mujahideen* rebels [who in 2001 were part of the Northern Alliance] engaged heavily in drug trafficking while fighting against the Soviet-supported government and its plans to reform the very backward Afghan society.

Under the *interim* government of Hamid Karzai, as established by the new invaders, opium poppy cultivation once again began to skyrocket and opium markets were restored. According to the United Nations Drug Control Program, UNDCP, opium cultivation increased by 657 per cent in 2002 in relation to its 2001 level. The UNDCP estimated 2002 opium poppy cultivation would cover an area between 45,000 and 65,000 hectares. Opium cultivation in 2001 had fallen to an estimated 7,606 hectares.

The 'Golden Crescent' drug trade, launched by the C.I.A. in the early 1980s, continues to be protected by American intelligence, in liaison with N.A.T.O. occupation forces and the British military. In recent developments, British occupation forces have promoted opium cultivation through paid radio advertisements.

“Respected people of Helmand. The soldiers of I.S.A.F. and A.N.A. do not destroy poppy fields.” the radio news item said. “They know that many people of Afghanistan have no choice but to grow poppy. I.S.A.F. and the A.N.A. do not want to stop people from earning their livelihoods.”

Senior Bush Administration officials had displayed a complete lack of interest in the Afghan opium problem ever since 9/11. In fact, the White House and Pentagon went out of their way to avoid taking on the Afghan drug lords from the very outset of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

Not mentioned is the fact that more than 95 per cent of the revenue generated by opium production is siphoned off to business syndicates, organised crime and banking and financial institutions.

“In many instances, drug money is currently the only liquid investment capital.” **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime** Executive Director [Antonio Maria Costa](#) said in early 2009 “In the second half of 2008, liquidity was the banking system’s main problem and hence liquid capital became an important factor.”

Former managing director and board member of Wall Street investment bank Dillon Read & Co., now part of SBC Warburg Dillon Read, Ms. [Catherine Austin Fitts](#), has long charged that the bankers launder imponderable amounts of drug money. “According to the Department of Justice, the U.S. launders between \$500 billion and \$1 trillion annually. I have little idea what percentage of that is narco-dollars, but it is probably safe to assume that at least \$100-200 billion relates to U.S. drug import-exports and retail trade.” wrote Fitts.

The C.I.A. has long secured the lucrative global drug market for Wall Street and for its own operational ‘off-the-books’ purposes. There is sufficient evidence that the C.I.A.’s operational directorate, in other words that is their covert operations, para-military, dirty tricks, has for at least forty years paid for a significant amount of its work through the sales of heroin and cocaine.

The C.I.A. has been in the drug running business since the 1950s. In Afghanistan, [Burma](#), [Laos](#), [Latin America and Vietnam](#) the C.I.A. has kept at the forefront of the international illicit drug trade. The journalist Gary Webb and the *San Jose Mercury News* tied the C.I.A. and the *Contras* to a large crack cocaine ring in Los Angeles. Webb paid with his life for revealing this information to the public.

The public is told that drug dealing in Afghanistan is something engaged in by the evil Taliban, an organisation funded and organised by the C.I.A. and its partner, Pakistan's [Inter-Services Intelligence](#). Not that the Taliban are innocent - they have abandoned their old ways and are now exploiting the opium bumper crop to fund their operations.

It is said, and is amply documented that, out of fear of 'losing stability' in the country, poppy cultivation is tolerated and even supported by American and Coalition forces. In November 2009 the Afghan Minister of Counter Narcotics General Khodaidad Khodaidad actually stated that "the majority of drugs are stockpiled in two provinces controlled by troops from the US, the UK, and Canada." He also said that N.A.T.O. forces are taxing the production of opium in the regions under their control and that foreign troops are earning money from drug production in Afghanistan.

* * *

The third reason for the war is to be found underground.

On 13 June 2010 *The New York Times* announced that the United States had discovered nearly US\$ 1 trillion in untapped mineral deposits in Afghanistan, far beyond any previously known reserves and enough fundamentally to alter the Afghan economy and perhaps the Afghan war itself, according to senior American government officials.

Actually, the existence of such deposits had already been noted. An article by the significant title *The spoils of war: the minerals of Afghanistan*, written in October 2001, had appeared on 7 January 2002 in the *American Free Press*.

It informed that Afghanistan has rich and extensive mineral resources including gold, silver, uranium, beryllium, copper, chrome, lead, zinc, manganese, iron and nickel. Lapis lazuli, amethyst, beryl, ruby, emerald, sapphire, alabaster, tourmaline, jade, and quartz are just some of the precious and semiprecious gemstones which have been mined in the country for centuries.

A California-based geologist, Dr. Bonita Chamberlin who has spent more than 30 years, under five regimes: the monarchy/pre-Soviet invasion, the Soviet occupation, the civil war, the Taliban and now the United States and the Coalition forces, working in Afghanistan, explained how she is convinced that Afghanistan's vast mineral deposits including oil and natural gas and gemstones could bring the nation great wealth.

Dr. Chamberlin said that she had identified 91 minerals, metals, and gems at 1,407 documented potential mining sites in Afghanistan. These sites also contain solid combustible minerals, metallic and non-metallic minerals, rare metals, radioactive elements, precious metals and gemstones, salt and industrial minerals. Beryllium and uranium are among the minerals in Afghanistan of the greatest strategic value, Chamberlin said. Beryllium is a strategic and essential material used in the aerospace, energy, defence, nuclear, automotive, medical, and electronics industries. A unique metal with properties unmatched by any other metal, beryllium is both extremely light and strong. It is one-third lighter than aluminium but six times stiffer than steel. It also has one of the highest melting points of the light metals.

Afghanistan also possesses rich gem deposits, many of which are used in lasers and advanced weapons technologies. Rubies have been used in lasers since laser technology was first developed. "Afghanistan has one of the largest, if not the largest, reserve of natural gas, which was already being tapped by the Soviets prior to their invasion." Chamberlin said. At its peak in the late 1970s, Afghanistan supplied 70 to 90 per cent of its natural gas output to the Soviet Union's natural gas grid through a link through Uzbekistan.

Finally, Dr. Chamberlin noted how Afghanistan occupies a central position in the United States strategy for the economic control of the oil and gas resources in the entire Middle East. With considerable foresight, Dr. Chamberlin appreciated how the prospect of a western military presence in a region extending from Turkey to Tajikistan could not have escaped the geo-political strategists who waged the military campaign in Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime and replace it with a government they could control and protect - with a multinational army. Note the date of the article in the *American Free Press*: October 2001.

In 2004 American geologists, sent to Afghanistan as part of a broader reconstruction effort, had stumbled across an intriguing series of old charts and data at the library of the Afghan Geological Survey in Kabul; the data hinted at major mineral deposits in the country. The geologists soon learned that the data had been collected by Soviet mining experts during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, but cast aside when the Soviets withdrew in 1989.

The deposits, said to be previously unknown - and including huge veins of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals like lithium - are so big and include so many

minerals which are essential to modern industry that Afghanistan could eventually be transformed into one of the most important mining centres in the world, the United States officials believe.

Enthusiasm was such that already American officials were speaking of Afghanistan as a possible ‘Saudi Arabia of lithium’, a key raw material in the manufacture of batteries for electronics.

The vast scale of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth was said to have been discovered by a small team of Pentagon officials and American geologists. The Afghan government and President Karzai had been briefed about the discoveries.

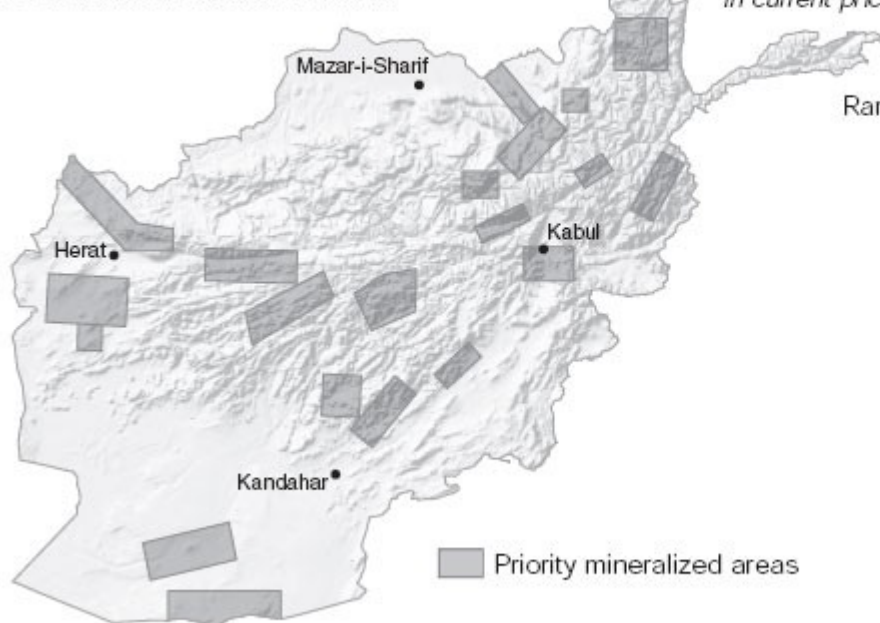
While it could take many years to develop a mining industry, the potential is so great that officials and executives in the industry believe it could attract heavy investment even before mines are profitable, providing the possibility of jobs which could distract from generations of war.

“There is stunning potential here.” General David H. Petraeus, commander of the United States Central Command, said in an interview on 13 June 2010. “There are a lot of ifs, of course, but I think potentially it is hugely significant.”

The promise of riches was blinding. Here is how *The New York Times* of 14 June 2010 graphically presented the possible plunder:

Minerals in Afghanistan

Metal and mineral development could be worth more than \$908 billion.



Sources: U.S.G.S; Afghanistan Geologic Survey; Department of Defense

Potential value
of known and
estimated resources,
in current prices

Iron	\$420.9 bil.
Copper	274.0
Niobium	81.2
Cobalt	50.8
Gold	25.0
Molybdenum	23.9
Rare earth elements	7.4
Asbestos	6.3
Silver	5.3
Potash	5.1
Aluminum	4.4
Graphite	0.7
Lapis lazuli	0.7
Flourite	0.6
Phosphorus	0.6
Lead and zinc	0.5
Mercury	0.5
Strontium	0.4
Sulfur	0.2
Talc	0.2
Magnesite	0.2
Kaolin	0.1

THE NEW YORK TIMES

As it turned out, news that the United States had suddenly discovered US\$ 1 trillion-worth of mineral deposits in Afghanistan, and description of the bounty as a ‘game changer’ by the corporate media, represent nothing more than crude war propaganda designed to invigorate public support for a failing and even more pointless occupation.

The New York Times described huge deposits of minerals in Afghanistan as ‘previously unknown’. In its [story](#) the newspaper pointed to an “internal Pentagon memo” as its source, noting that U.S. officials now believe Afghanistan could become the “Saudi Arabia of lithium”.

The article claimed that “a small team of Pentagon officials and American geologists” has also recently discovered huge veins of iron, copper, cobalt and gold, that could transform Afghanistan into one of the most important mining centres in the world.

The idea that this information is new, however, is manifestly ludicrous.

In an [interview with Politico](#) of 14 June 2010 a retired senior U.S. official remarked that anyone with a memory span longer than a goldfish will realise the supposedly “new discovery” is anything but that: “When I was living in Kabul in the early 1970’s the [U.S. government], the Russians, the World Bank, the UN and others were all highly focused on

the wide range of Afghan mineral deposits. Cheap ways of moving the ore to ocean ports has always been the limiting factor.” the official said.

Furthermore, in the mid 1980s, the chief engineer of the Afghan Geological Survey Department [published a report](#) pointing to vast reserves of mineral riches. The Afghan government was readying to work with the Soviets on extraction, before Russia pulled out of the country altogether as its empire began to crumble in 1989.

A man intrinsically tied to countering the Soviet operation in Afghanistan, by radicalising Muslim resistance in the country, was Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his 1997 book [The Grand Chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives](#), Brzezinski refers directly to the strategic and economic prizes to be gained by controlling what he describes as the Eurasian Balkans: “...the Eurasian Balkans are infinitely more important as a potential economic prize: an enormous concentration of natural gas and oil reserves is located in the region, in addition to important minerals, including gold.” (at page 124) and “America’s global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained...A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world’s three most advanced and economically productive regions...most of the world’s physical wealth is there as well, both in its enterprises and underneath its soil.” (at pages 30-31)

Brzezinski also wrote that in order to control the region, a dominating global power must “prevent collusion and *maintain security dependence among the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together.*” (at page 40) [Emphasis added] He also noted that the American people would have to be stoked and rallied into supporting what essentially amounts to a modern day crusade: “The attitude of the American public toward the external projection of American power has been much more ambivalent. The public supported America’s engagement in World War II largely because of the shock effect of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.” (at pages 24-25)

After 11 September 2001 the world witnessed unfolding exactly what Brzezinski had proposed.

If one still doubts that the American government had no previous knowledge of vast mineral riches in Afghanistan, then one should go to an issue of 13 November 2007 of the United States Geological Survey to read about the *Significant potential for undiscovered resources*

in Afghanistan. The report reveals that the U.S. was aware of “significant amounts of undiscovered non-fuel mineral resources” in Afghanistan, noting that the country “has significant amounts of undiscovered non fuel mineral resources,” including “large quantities of accessible iron and copper [and] abundant deposits of colored stones and gemstones, including emerald, ruby [and] sapphire.”

Other mainstream news sources questioned the *Times*' accuracy. *Afghanistan's treasure trove: a reality check* of 15 June 2010 reported: “The curious thing is this is not the first time Afghanistan's mineral riches have been discovered. Back in January 1984, the chief engineer of the Afghan Geological Survey Department published a report saying the country had reserves of a wide variety of mineral resources, including iron, chrome, copper, silver, gold, barite sulfur, talc, magnesium, mica marble and lapis lazuli. ... The Afghan government in the mid 1980s was preparing to develop a number of the mineral resources on a large scale with Soviet technical assistance, the chamber said. But the Russians left in 1989 and Afghanistan descended into a war which has, more or less, continued since then. The report also mentions abundant reserves of natural gas, so don't be surprised if that too resurfaces as another silver lining in Afghanistan's cloudy sky.”

The only possible reason whereby *The New York Times* was recycling the news is that the American public are sick of seeing their country spiral into a black hole of debt while continuing to pay for a war which has now surpassed the Vietnam conflict as the longest in U.S. military history.

As [The Huffington Post](#) noted on 15 June 2010, “This story is similar to ones that preceded the Iraq War when the Bush administration claimed that Iraq's oil wealth would pay for all the costs of reconstruction.” and the “... news of mineral deposits in Afghanistan [was] neither new nor good.” - a kind of conveniently timed zombie story resurrected yet again for political purposes.

Other factors may be the seemingly dwindling enthusiasm for American involvement [on behalf of President Karzai](#), and his threats to “join the Taliban” in the face of a dysfunctional United States mission.

One conclusion suggests itself powerfully: that Afghanistan's mineral riches were not part of the invasion and occupation agenda, drawn up well before the 11 September 2001 attacks, and have recently been discovered, is clearly false.

The value of the ‘newly discovered’ mineral deposits dwarfs the size of Afghanistan’s existing war-bedraggled economy, which is based largely on opium production and narcotics trafficking as well as aid from the United States and other developed countries. Afghanistan’s gross domestic product is only about US\$ 12 billion.

There was a view that minerals would become the backbone of the Afghan economy.

American and Afghan officials agreed to discuss the mineral discoveries at a difficult moment in the war in Afghanistan. The American-led offensive in Marja in southern Afghanistan has achieved only limited gains. Meanwhile, charges of corruption and favouritism continue to plague the Karzai government, and President Karzai seems increasingly embittered towards the Obama Administration.

The Obama Administration was anxiously awaiting some positive news to come out of Afghanistan. Yet the American officials also recognised that the mineral discoveries will almost certainly have a double-edged impact.

Instead of bringing peace, the newfound mineral wealth could lead the Taliban to battle even more fiercely to regain control of the country.

The corruption which was already rampant in the Karzai government could also be amplified by the new wealth, particularly if a handful of well-connected oligarchs, some with personal ties to the president, gained control of the resources. Just in 2009 the Afghanistan’s minister of mines was accused by American officials of accepting a US\$ 30 million bribe to award China the rights to develop its copper mine. The minister had since been replaced.

Endless fights could erupt between the central government in Kabul and provincial and tribal leaders in mineral-rich districts. Afghanistan has a national mining law, written with the help of advisers from the World Bank, but it has never faced a serious challenge.

“No one has tested that law; no one knows how it will stand up in a fight between the central government and the provinces.” observed Paul A. Brinkley, deputy undersecretary of defence for business and leader of the Pentagon team which discovered the deposits.

At the same time, American officials feared resource-hungry China could try to dominate the development of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth - something which could upset the

United States, given its heavy investment in the region. After winning the bid for its Aynak copper mine in Logar Province, China clearly wanted more, American officials said.

Another complication was that because Afghanistan has never had much heavy industry before, it has little or no history of environmental protection either. “The big question is, can this be developed in a responsible way, in a way which is environmentally and socially responsible ?” Mr. Brinkley wondered. “No one knows how this will work.”

With virtually no mining industry or infrastructure in place today, it will take decades for Afghanistan to exploit its mineral wealth fully. “This is a country which has no mining culture.” said Jack Medlin, a geologist in the United States Geological Survey’s international affairs programme. “They have had some small artisanal mines, but now there could be some very, very large mines which will require more than just a gold pan.”

The mineral deposits are scattered throughout the country, including in the southern and eastern regions along the border with Pakistan which have had some of the most intense battles in the American-led war against the Taliban insurgency.

The Pentagon task force had already started trying to help the Afghans set up a system to deal with mineral development. International accounting firms with expertise in mining contracts had been hired to consult with the Afghan Ministry of Mines, and technical data were being prepared to turn over to multinational mining companies and other potential foreign investors. The Pentagon was helping Afghan officials arrange to start seeking bids on mineral rights by the fall of 2010.

“The Ministry of Mines is not ready to handle this.” Mr. Brinkley said. “We are trying to help them get ready.”

Like much of the recent history of the country, the story of the discovery of Afghanistan’s mineral wealth is one of missed opportunities and the distractions of war.

During the chaos of the 1990s, when Afghanistan was mired in civil war and later ruled by the Taliban, a small group of Afghan geologists protected the charts by taking them home, and returned them to the Geological Survey’s library only after the American invasion and the ouster of the Taliban in 2001.

“There were maps, but the development did not take place, because you had 30 to 35 years of war.” said Ahmad Hujabre, an Afghan engineer who worked for the Ministry of Mines in the 1970s.

Armed with the old Russian charts, the United States Geological Survey began a series of aerial surveys of Afghanistan’s mineral resources in 2006, using advanced gravity and magnetic measuring equipment attached to an old Navy Orion P-3 aircraft which flew over about 70 per cent of the country.

The data from those flights were so promising that in 2007 the geologists returned for an even more sophisticated study, using an old British bomber equipped with instruments which offered a three-dimensional profile of mineral deposits below the earth’s surface. It was the most comprehensive geological survey of Afghanistan ever conducted.

The handful of American geologists who pored over the new data said that the results were astonishing. But the results gathered dust for two more years, ignored by officials in both the American and Afghan governments.

In 2009 a Pentagon task force which had set up business development programmes in Iraq was transferred to Afghanistan, and came upon the geological data. Until then, no one besides the geologists had bothered to look at the information - and no one had sought to translate the technical data to measure the potential economic value of the mineral deposits.

Soon, the Pentagon business development task force brought in teams of American mining experts to validate the survey’s findings, and then briefed the then Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates and President Karzai.

So far, the biggest mineral deposits discovered are of iron and copper, and the quantities are large enough to make Afghanistan a major world producer of both, United States officials said. Other finds include large deposits of niobium, a soft metal used in producing superconducting steel, rare earth elements and large gold deposits in Pashtun areas of southern Afghanistan.

Just in June 2010 American geologists working with the Pentagon team had conducted ground surveys on dry salt lakes in western Afghanistan where they believe there are large deposits of lithium. Pentagon officials said that their initial analysis at one location in

Ghazni Province showed the potential for lithium deposits as large of those of Bolivia, which now has the world's largest known lithium reserves.

For the geologists who had been scouring some of the most remote stretches of Afghanistan to complete the technical studies necessary before the international bidding process had begun, there was a growing sense that they were in the midst of one of the great discoveries of their careers. "On the ground, it is very, very, promising." Mr. Medlin said. "Actually, it's pretty amazing."

The *Scientific American* of 22 September 2011 reported that recent [exploration of rare volcanic rocks](#) in the rugged, dangerous desert of southern Afghanistan has identified world-class concentrations of [rare earth elements](#), the prized group of raw materials which are essential in the manufacture of many modern technologies, from electric cars to solar panels.

In the modern world rare earths go far beyond magnets. Spanning seventeen elements - from lanthanum to lutetium, plus scandium and yttrium - they find use in computers, screens, superconductors, oil refineries, hybrid or electric vehicles, catalytic converters, compact fluorescent light-bulbs, light-emitting diodes, lasers, audio speakers and microphones, cell phones, MRI machines, telecommunications, battery electrodes, advanced weapons systems, polished glass, and even the electric motors which run automobile windows. Importantly, there is no single military system in use by the Pentagon which does not contain rare earths.

So far, geologists say, they have mapped one million metric tons of these critical elements, which include lanthanum, cerium and neodymium.

That is enough to supply the world's rare earth needs for 10 years based on current consumption, pointed out Robert Tucker, the U.S. Geological Survey scientist who is the lead author on a report released on 14 September 2011. And from clues his team gathered during three high-security reconnaissance missions to the site, he suspects the deposit is actually much larger.

"I fully expect that our estimates are conservative." Tucker told *Scientific American*. "With more time, and with more people doing proper exploration, it could become a major, major discovery."

The U.S. Geological Survey's exploration time has been strictly limited due to the deposit's location in the most dangerous part of the country, near the southern border with Pakistan.

The geologists were delivered to the site in Black Hawk helicopters, and armed soldiers watched over them as they scoured the ground for clues.

“It’s one of the most challenging things I’ve ever done.” Tucker said. “Walking around with 30 to 40 pounds of protective gear is very difficult.” But even the rushed, conservative estimate for the tonnage of this single deposit puts [Afghanistan](#) sixth on a list of countries with the largest rare earth reserves. China ranks first with about 50 million metric tons and U.S. reserves are around 12 million metric tons.

Already, then, Afghanistan could provide an alternative source of rare earth elements for industrial countries concerned that China currently controls 97 per cent of the world’s supply, Tucker said. Chemical analyses of rock samples that his team collected in February 2011 show that the concentration of so-called light rare earth [elements](#) in the Afghan deposit is on par with the premier site mined in China, at Bayan Obo in Inner Mongolia.

The new rare earth findings are a crown jewel of the Geological Survey’s new, 2,000-page assessment of Afghanistan’s vast mineral bounty, which was to have been presented on 29 September 2011 at the Afghan embassy in Washington, D.C. This new science, funded by the Pentagon’s ‘Task Force for Business and Stability Operations’, also characterises 24 areas of economic interest, half a dozen of which are world-class mineral deposits in the northern two thirds of the country.

Vast deposits of copper and iron in the northeast near Kabul are together worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The Afghanistan Ministry of Mines has already tendered an exploration lease for a copper prospect called Aynak, in Logar Province, and plans to do the same for several additional sites in the coming months, including a [massive iron ore deposit](#) valued at US\$ 420 billion.

The hope of senior government officials in both countries is that tapping Afghanistan’s underground wealth could transform it from one of the world’s poorest nations into a prosperous major global mining centre. The plan is to get iron and copper mining established in the north, where the risk of violence is lower, with an eye towards eventually opening up the rare earth deposit in the south.

In addition to security, the Afghans still need an expanded electrical grid to power machinery as well as a railroad to ship ore out of the country, said Stephen Peters, the Geological Survey minerals team leader for the Afghanistan project. But he added that the

rare earth deposit, near the village of Khan Neshin in Helmand Province, offers the added incentive of minable quantities of uranium, thorium, phosphate and limestone for cement.

Peters published preliminary estimates about Afghanistan's rare earth elements in 2007. But those guesses were made sight unseen, based on a careful compilation of unpublished Soviet field notes conducted in partnership with the Afghanistan Geological Survey. To move beyond guesswork, Peters and Tucker knew they had to hike the rugged hills. The task force arranged for military transport and protection during three brief excursions to Khan Neshin in 2010 and 2011.

When the team finally crossed the mineralised zone on their second trip, they knew that they had hit pay dirt. The principal ore mineral turned out to be canary-yellow bastnasite, the same mineral which harbours most of the world and United States rare earth reserves.

“The signs were everywhere.” Tucker said. “There were canary yellow minerals, speckled rocks in the ground - it was unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was exhilarating to make this kind of discovery, particularly in such difficult circumstances.”

The US\$ 7.4-billion estimate for the rare earths at Khan Neshin assumes, very conservatively, that the rock is only 150 meters thick. That was all Peters and Tucker could see during their brief visits, but it could easily be thicker. The rare earth-bearing rocks at Khan Neshin are very young in geologic terms, less than 600,000 years old, which gives Tucker strong reason to think that rich portions of the deposit extend deep underground. For comparison, the same type of volcanic rocks once mined for rare earths near Mountain Pass, California are 1.4 billion years old, and so natural forces of erosion have had much more time to whittle away at them.

On 17 July 2012 the Afghan and American governments [announced](#) that Afghanistan had become the first country in the world to have seventy per cent of its territory mapped using “an advanced remote sensing technique known as hyperspectral imaging.” Hyperspectral imaging, like other spectral imaging, collects and processes information from across the electromagnetic spectrum. Much as the human eye sees visible light in three bands - red, green, and blue, spectral imaging divides the spectrum into many more bands. This technique of dividing images into bands can be extended beyond the visible. The purpose of the imaging - overseen by the United States Geological Survey and funded by the Defence Department ‘Task Force on Business and Stability Operations’ - was to [map](#) Afghanistan's multitude of mineral deposits. The potential value of these deposits -

touted to top US\$ 1 trillion - and their importance for Afghanistan's economic growth have been the topic of much public debate, [heralded by some but questioned](#) by others.

Afghanistan undoubtedly contains a wealth of subsurface mineral deposits, as the Geological Survey imaging efforts further confirm. The challenge, however, is how to make their extraction commercially viable given the various [risk factors](#) present in Afghanistan. Converting the country's lithium, copper, rare earth elements, and hydrocarbons into much-needed government revenue is a long-term and complicated effort. Electricity, roads, rail-lines, pipelines, and processing facilities are crucial to the success of Afghanistan's mining efforts, but lacking at present. And building capacity within the Afghan Ministry of Mines to manage multibillion dollar projects is a slow process, too.

The Geological Survey's and the Task Force's efforts generated additional data to show potential investors, and should be commended. But the American government understands that it must do more if it wants Afghanistan's nascent mining industry to become a driver of economic growth. It must use every tool at its disposal to mitigate the risks posed to investors and incentivise investment in Afghanistan's extractive industries.

The Overseas Private Investment Corporation, OPIC - the development finance arm of the United States government - could do much more in Afghanistan, if it were empowered to do so. OPIC is structured and managed like a private corporation and is [self-sustaining](#) - meaning by that that it relies on Congressional appropriations for administrative costs only. OPIC provides financing and insurance to international projects based upon primarily commercial calculations, not foreign policy ones. This means OPIC only rarely takes on projects in Afghanistan.

However, OPIC could help to catalyse investment in mining projects in Afghanistan if the United State government and the American Congress were to give it the flexibility to take risks and make loans which would not normally be justified if based upon purely commercial considerations. Afghanistan is now a major non-N.A.T.O. ally and a long-term U.S. strategic partner, which more than justifies a deviation from normal OPIC policy. [China, Russia, and other countries](#) do this all the time.

The downside would be the United States government or Congress having to cover any unsuccessful, riskier loans OPIC makes, but that is a small price to pay especially when compared to the scale of foreign assistance expenditures in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's mineral deposits hold promise, but no one should underestimate the challenges to their successful monetisation. The United States government should think creatively about how to leverage its resources such as OPIC, to mitigate risks and encourage private investment in this sector. Otherwise, Afghanistan's mineral wealth will remain more of a fantasy than a reality. *The New York Times* returned to the subject of Afghanistan's natural resources in an article of 9 September 2012.

So much wealth - estimated at the US\$ 3 trillion which are underground - has also brought darker dreams as well.

Officials and industry experts worry that the potential resource boom could be increasingly imperilled by corruption and violence and intrigue, and has placed the Afghan government's vulnerabilities on display.

Two forthcoming events make for that uncertainty: one is the impending departure of United States and N.A.T.O. troops in 2014 and the other is the possibility of old regional and ethnic rivalries resurfacing, raising concerns that the mineral wealth could reopen civil conflict.

Both events are more than certain - and concomitant. There are already powerful regional warlords and militant leaders jockeying to widen their turf to include areas with mineral wealth, and the Taliban has begun to make incursions into territory where development is planned.

In Kabul factional manoeuvring is in full swing, including disputes over contracts corruptly awarded to relatives of President Karzai.

Further, a proposed mining law which would be vital to attract and guarantee foreign investment is yet to be finalised; and the delay is threatening several projects. The Afghan Cabinet rejected it the past summer, on the ground that it was too generous to 'western' commercial interests. But some 'western' officials fear that other motives are at work too, including an internal fight for spoils and perhaps an effort by some neighbouring countries to sway officials to keep Indian and Chinese state mining companies out.

Indian and Canadian mining operations are active in the Kalu Valley, in the remote Bamian Province. The locals are hoping that they succeed in turning buried iron ore into new lives for struggling families, thus breaking a cycle of poverty.

That hope, and the prospect of more self-sufficiency as international aid ebbs, encourages Afghan officials; the Ministry of Mines is vigorously trying to facilitate more projects. Economists at the World Bank estimate that if things go very well, mining and agriculture together could raise annual growth rates by 3 to 4 per cent between now and 2025.

It is not a pleasant prospective for Australia which has no idea of how to take advantage of its presence in Afghanistan - now or after 2014.

But for those who care here is the estimated value of the trough, expressed in English pounds in the following table and thereafter converted into Australian dollars.



Translated into Australian dollars, the figures are even more impressive:

MINERAL	AUS \$
Iron	437.9 billion
Copper	283.9 billion
Niobium	84.4 billion
Cobalt	129.9 billion
Gold	26.1 billion
Molybdenum	24.8 billion
Rare earth elements	7.7 billion

Asbestos	6.4 billion
Silver	5.5 billion
Potash	5.2 billion
Aluminium	4.6 billion
Graphite	0.6 billion
Lapus Lazuli	0.6 billion
Flourite	0.6 billion
Phosphorous	0.6 billion
Lead and Zinc	0.46 billion
Mercury	0.46 billion
Strontium	0.3 billion
Sulphur	0.15 billion
Talc	0.15 billion
Magnesium	0.15 billion
Kaolin	1.02 billion

Lithium large deposit found

The prospect that such wealth could in anyway be assigned to the rapacious hands of Karzai and his consorts should disturb President Obama. The Australian Prime Minister would in any event take second place, if any, as it becomes of good camp followers.

* * *

Hamid Karzai is a C.I.A. 'asset', who runs a 'family' of crooks, uncertain about its friends, and mistrusted by its neighbours.

It was known from the very beginning of the Afghanistan 'adventure' that the leader of the new U.S.-controlled *interim* 'government' in Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, was a key collaborator in the conspiracy to construct the major gas and oil pipeline in the region, which was the hidden agenda of the U.S.-led invasion. Karzai was involved with the

American oil company which planned to build the pipeline through Afghanistan, and after the invasion was placed in the highest position in the country.

That he had been for a long time an advisor to Unocal was well known. He had been involved in negotiations of Unocal with Taliban. The story was sufficiently documented in the *Defence journal* (Pakistan) issue of April 2002 [Afghanistan - not so great games](#).

The B.B.C. confirmed on 14 June 2002, if need there be, that Karzai had been installed as the leader of Afghanistan by the American government. He had been clearly “groomed for leadership.”

By early 2012 there were growing, not decreasing, numbers of Afghans angry at the foreign occupation. Corruption and thuggery within the Afghan government installed by the United States and protected by N.A.T.O. remained rampant and the [Taliban](#) remained active across large parts of the country.

Corruption may be the most talked-about subject in Afghanistan, and one that many see as the largest impediment to organising a country which can stand on its own. While corruption has existed in Afghanistan for centuries, it has become a full-scale industry since the arrival of American troops and ‘western’ aid dollars.

No one knows how much of the US\$ 527 billion the United States has spent in Afghanistan has been misused. Statistics would not tell the full picture, anyway, since corruption usually involves manipulating statistics to hide illicit gain. But if one adds up the anecdotes of schools or clinics built with shoddy materials; of politicians who have used their positions to steal public land, siphon off money for personal use, or to protect criminal enterprises; and of civil servants who have taken bribes; one is faced with a troubling view of Afghanistan’s political culture.

For many Afghans, the problem is not corruption itself, but rather the sense that corrupt officials have ruined the country’s best chance at rebuilding by siphoning of vast amounts of money that the United States has spent over the past eleven years. No paper trail exists, but Afghans can see where the funds have - and have not - gone.

Much of the blame for the failings of the Afghan government rests with [President Karzai](#), who owes his current position to fraud-marred elections two and three years ago, but the

large presence of foreign troops and the vast cultural gulf between them and most Afghans, made them convenient targets for public ire.

President Karzai's has been from the very beginning and continues to be a weak and corrupt government, awash in billions of dollars, and continues to alienate Afghans and make the Taliban an attractive alternative.

In May 2010 *The (London) Sunday Times* revealed that the Afghan Financial Intelligence Unit, FinTRACA, reported that since 2006 at least US\$ 1.5 billion from Saudi Arabia was funnelled to the Taliban in Afghanistan, with *al-Qaeda* withholding a cut for their delivery services. Why is there no outcry from the United States ? And from Australia ? - silence.

Karzai's corruption - and not only of a financial kind - has been abundantly documented.

On 2 August 2012 the Afghan Finance Minister Dr. Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal, once championed by international donors for his integrity, came under investigation, after accusations aired on Afghan television that he stashed away more than US\$ 1 million in overseas banks. Afghanistan's anticorruption body, the High Office of Oversight and Anticorruption, has sent a letter to the President urging him to suspend Zakhilwal until an investigation is completed. Afghan lawmakers have thrown in their support, with some calling for no-confidence proceedings to be brought against the embattled finance minister. Nothing else has been heard about that since.

Staggering corruption has consistently undermined the mission of American troops in [Afghanistan](#). A new United States Congress report on Afghanistan released at the end of July 2012 painted a dismal picture of the scale: it found that "a significant proportion" of the US\$ 400 million that the United States has invested in large-scale projects in 2011 has been "wasted, due to weaknesses in planning, coordination, and execution, raising sustainability concerns and risking adverse counterinsurgency effects." These are projects designed to win local support in areas where United States troops are fighting.

Yet the money continues to flow.

On 2 September 2012 President Karzai announced his choice for the new intelligence chief, Asadullah Khalid. Khalid is currently the country's minister of tribal and border affairs who oversees its southern security forces. In 2009 Richard Colvin, Canada's former deputy

ambassador to Afghanistan, testified before Canada's parliament that his team had uncovered "very credible" evidence of torture, which allegedly included Khalid's direct involvement. "He was known to have had a dungeon in Ghazni, his previous province, where he used to detain people for money, and some of them disappeared." Colvin said in his testimony. "He was known to be running a narcotics operation. He had a criminal gang. He had people killed who got in his way." Khalid and Karzai dismissed the allegations as unfounded.

Persistent corruption and organised crime networks within the security forces also risk undermining public esteem for the Army and the Police, and could pose a threat to the transition process.

The Police, in particular, has a reputation for brutality and corruption. In Bagh-e-Pol, a village near the city of Kandahar, the police chief, Abdul Wali, boasted that he and his men often beat people suspected of being members of the Taliban so badly that "sometimes he loses an arm, sometimes he loses a leg."

In Kabul children freeze to death in the winter, and they starve to death all year round. Meanwhile on the edge of Kabul a 'New City' is being built. Hamid Karzai's brother, Qayum Karzai, the sole shareholder in a construction company, benefits as his company 'wins' government contracts without the hassles of competitive bidding. Karzai's relatives are also benefiting from lucrative contracts in the oil and mineral sectors. In 1989 Rateb was convicted for smuggling drugs in the United States and spent more than eight years in prison. The Popal family's company, Watan Risk Management, also worked as a contractor for the U.S. forces. In 2010 they were accused of paying off Taliban insurgents with a cut from N.A.T.O. contracts. In late 2011 Watan Oil and Gas, a company controlled by President Karzai's cousins Rateb and Rashid Popal gained a contract with China's National Petroleum Corporation. According to *The New York Times* another brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, was involved in the heroin trade and was also on the C.I.A.'s payroll for several years before his assassination in 2011. The Karzai family now brings in billions of dollars a year. Forty two per cent of Afghans live on less than a dollar a day. So the United States and the Coalition are bent on ridding Afghanistan of the Taliban while the Karzai government is in the hands of warlords, gangsters, and drug dealers.

Since the United States invaded Afghanistan the heroin trade has exploded, doubling opium production. Afghanistan is now the source of more than 90 per cent of the world's heroin. This dovetails nicely with America's 'War on drugs.'

The growth in the heroin trade coupled with the despair of daily living has contributed to an eruption of drug addiction. Addicts can be found huddled under bridges throughout Kabul. As these men succumb to addiction, their families are left to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, heroin floods the streets of Europe and Russia. Which banks benefit from the enormous cash flows generated by the heroin trade ? Who in the Afghan government benefits ?

The corruption is mind-boggling. A recent report by Afghanistan's central bank said the Afghan political *élite* had been using Kabul Bank as a piggy bank. Founded by major Afghan political players, such as Karzai's brother Mahmoud, Kabul Bank operated a virtual 'Ponzi scheme', Western diplomats say, with loans of hundreds of millions of dollars given out to friends with no paperwork and no accountability. In 2010 word that the bank had lost US\$ 300 million caused a panic, and the number later moved up to US\$ 900 million - and counting.

To win pledges of continued aid at an international donors conference in July 2012, President Karzai promised to crack down on corruption and make political reforms. But he has done little - and no wonder. The aid sustaining his government is at risk if he fails, but one should doubt that he will exercise real leadership. For now, he has proved himself to be not only unreliable, but a force undermining American goals and Afghans' interests.

In 2009 and 2010 Karzai's supporters tried to defraud the national elections. With elections scheduled for 2014, the question is whether Karzai will keep his vow to abide by the Constitution and leave when his term is up. Several respectable observers doubt that he will do so. Amongst other things, in order to do that he needs to make sure that the Parliament and the government provide the country with an electoral system which encourages competent candidates to run and enables a broadly accepted election with international monitors. All sides are lagging. There has been even less progress in restoring local governance, the bedrock of Afghan society, where the Taliban exerts enduring influence.

It is possible that President Obama wants to continue to employ American troops to provide logistical assistance and security at the elections. There were real threats to voters' lives in

the first post-Taliban elections, but the real, persistent threat to democracy is from corruption, not bombs.

Karzai stole the last election, and he got away with it with American forces in place. After giving him eleven years and lots of money, things keep going in the wrong direction. Why would this now change ?

Leaders from around the world gathered in Chicago on 20 and 21 May 2012 for an important N.A.T.O. diplomatic summit hosted by President Obama. At the meeting, attended also by the Australian Prime Minister, President Obama declared: "We still have a lot of work to do and there will be great challenges ahead. The loss of life continues in Afghanistan." The President was using the gathering to extract spending commitments from nation members of the International Security Assistance Force to support the Afghan government once the mission ends in 2014.

On that occasion, Australia added to its existing commitment of AU\$ 300 million by increasing aid by AU\$ 85 million a year to AU\$ 250 million by 2015.

There was tension over France decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Prime Minister Julia Gillard declined to criticise newly elected French President Francois Hollande after a formal meeting with him. "The President of France will speak for himself." she said. "I had a good discussion with him, both on Afghanistan and circumstances in the European economy."

Ms. Gillard noted that there were other ways of supporting Afghanistan rather than simply providing combat troops.

As for Australia, she said that it was in Australia's national interest to stick to the withdrawal timetable already agreed to.

That would see Australian troops beginning to hand over control of Uruzgan Province next year, with a complete handover in 2014, when the N.A.T.O.-led mission in Afghanistan will end.

"We went there because of our national interest, of course, to stand by our ally, the United States, but also because it was in Australia's national interest to go to the country where training had happened for the terrorists who came and took Australian lives in 9/11 and in

Bali. “Given all that we have done and all that we have lost, it is in our national interest to see the job through.” she said.

Earlier, at a meeting with President Karzai, Ms. Gillard confirmed that she would “leave the door open” to having Australian Special Forces continue anti-terrorist operations in the coming years. Australia will also continue its role in artillery training and in supporting a British-led officer training programme.

“It is a very happy day for Afghanistan to consider ourselves partners with Australia, a people that have been so generous and kind to us.” Karzai said. He paid tribute to Australia's soldiers and thanked its taxpayers.

President Karzai and the Australian Prime Minister signed a memorandum of understanding which says in part that Australia “*welcomes the continued efforts of the Afghan people to build a stable, democratic society, based on the rule of law, where human rights, including the equality of all men and women, are guaranteed under the Afghan constitution.* In particular, the governments reaffirm their commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.” [Emphasis added]

The “rights of women and girls” ?

As a possible sop to Taliban conservatives, Karzai welcomed a March 2012 ruling by the country’s Ulema Council - its top religious scholars - that women should not work in the same offices as men or travel alone without a male companion. “This is a green light to the Taliban to return.” said a prominent member of parliament, who has survived two assassination attempts by the Taliban. “We cannot give up now. We have to struggle. If we give up, then we will watch this country fall.”

Ms. Gillard also attended meetings of the N.A.T.O. ‘core partners’ - countries like Australia which are not members of the alliance but are significantly increasing their co-operation with it, as well as leaders of the member states of the I.S.A.F. which joined the Afghanistan ‘mission’.

More aid was pledged at a meeting at a ‘Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan’ on 8 July 2012.

Countries involved in Afghanistan promised another US\$ 16 billion in aid over the next four years. The sum corresponds roughly to what the nation’s leaders and the World Bank think

is needed to bridge the chasm between public revenue and expenditure. The money comes on top of separate promises to finance the Afghan police and army.

Some of the pledges, notably the United States' - made in an election year - were vague. And some of the money may not be new. But many Afghan officials believe that the economic commitments, like the Strategic Partnership Agreement reached with the United States in April, show that they will not be abandoned after the majority of N.A.T.O. troops leave in 2014.

Such donations were not a foregone conclusion, given a backdrop of slow global growth, war weariness, and frustration at the Afghan government's apparent inability to tackle corruption. The motivation, donors said, was to avoid repeating the mistakes of the 1990s, when neglect left the nation prey to civil war, which in turn opened the way for the rise of the Taliban.

Now, after a decade of piecemeal funding, donors say that the Afghan finances have never looked so well co-ordinated. The question is whether foreign money is being wisely used and, in the long term, whether dependence on foreign donations can be reduced.

Afghanistan is hugely dependent on aid. A World Bank analysis in May suggests that only Gaza, the West Bank and Liberia have been so reliant. In the year to 30 September 2011 aid was the equivalent of Afghanistan's entire Gross Domestic Product.

Aid volume, however, is rarely matched by efficiency. The World Bank says that since 2002 some US\$ 55 billion of aid has flowed into the country, and billions of it has flowed out again to pay the salaries of foreign staff and profits to foreign contractors. The World Bank estimates that, in projects which employ foreign contractors, only 10 to 25 per cent of funds given are spent on the ground in Afghanistan. Aid has fed corruption, which has tarnished the administration. Afghan civil groups, meeting on the sidelines in Tokyo, demanded stricter conditions attached to the aid to combat corruption, and to guarantee that social progress in the past decade is not sold away for an easier peace with the Taliban.

Above all, though, government and donors alike know that Afghanistan can only wean itself off aid if it boosts its own economy. The billions pledged in Tokyo will keep the government running, but will do little to foster economic growth. Even with the pledged US\$ 4 billion a year, optimistic projections show G.D.P. growth falling from 9 per cent to below 5 per cent. Investment is badly needed, but investors demand security.

Some economic strategy is needed. However grave their problems, Afghans cannot depend on foreign billions forever.

* * *

Not only is there a family of crooks in charge in Kabul. It is also a band of incompetent people.

The system established at the Bonn Conference, in December 2001, for effective, credible governance, has not served [Afghanistan](#) well. The [Kabul](#) government fails to meet the basic needs of its citizens because most government officials are not responsible to the constituents they serve, but to the system of patronage which keeps them in power.

Most Afghans do not directly elect their provincial governors or local, district-level leaders; these officials are appointed by the presidency and serve at the president's pleasure. As a result, they have an incentive to embrace the endemic corruption which plagues all levels of the Afghan state, enriching themselves and their superiors as they work to advance to, or hang on to, positions of power.

Clearly, if the government does not do its duty, it is corruption. If it appoints incapable people to high positions of power, it is corruption. If *élite* people grab land, it is corruption. If an Afghan is trying to obtain her/his card and s/he has to pay a small bribe, it is corruption. It may be small money, but it makes a lot of unhappy people.

The United States and the Coalition should also help the Afghans establish and strengthen local-level governance. Indeed, America should make this the central focus of all of its efforts - financial, personnel, energy, and experts - over the next 10 years.

Currently, the [Taliban](#) are able to out-govern the inept Afghan government at nearly every turn, gathering 'converts' or passive supporters along the way and further eroding the influence the Afghan government is able to exert over local populations.

The Afghan people will not definitively embrace the current state unless and until they believe that the Afghan government offers better governance and a better future than the Taliban.

Given the resilience of the Taliban, it has become all too clear that a negotiated truce and political settlement must be forged sooner rather than later. An important, somewhat encouraging report put out in September 2012 by the Royal United Services Institute, a London-based think-tank, [suggested](#) that the Taliban are ready for ceasefire talks and compromise as well - though it is a solution that few among the hawks in the American administration could have countenanced eleven years ago.

The [report](#), titled *Taliban perspectives on reconciliation*, was based on a number of interviews with senior, yet not identified, Taliban figures conducted by four American and British South and Central Asia experts. The report makes a number of significant claims: 1) that the Taliban leadership - known as the Quetta *shura* after the Pakistani city where top leaders like Mullah Mohammad Omar are thought to have found safe haven - profoundly regrets its dealings with *al-Qaeda* and is prepared to renounce any ties to international terrorist outfits; 2) that despite certain bullish public utterances, the Taliban are willing to commit to parliamentary democracy, allow for modern education in schools and for girls to attend them; 3) that they are even willing to accept a United States military presence in the country beyond 2014, though insist for an end to drone strikes.

Of course, even if these Taliban assurances are true, there are major stumbling blocks. The most glaring one is the Taliban refusal to cooperate with the corrupt government of President Karzai, a former C.I.A. asset who, despite his growing unpopularity at home and in 'the West', will not disappear quietly from the public stage.

The report cited a person described as a founding member of the Taliban as saying that the group might accept continuing U.S. counter-terrorist operations targeting *al-Qaeda* in Afghanistan as long as the bases were not used to launch attacks on other countries or for interference in Afghan politics.

The report said that, from the Taliban's point of view, any ceasefire would need strong Islamic justification and could not hint at any form of surrender.

However, a spokesman for the Taliban in Afghanistan denied that any interviews had taken place. "The report is a lie and is baseless." Zabihullah Mujahid told *Reuters* from an undisclosed location. "We have never wanted the Americans to stay in Afghanistan and this has always been our position."

The Taliban, who have been fighting against U.S.- and N.A.T.O.-led troops for eleven years, have always maintained that any negotiations with Afghan authorities and the United States could only be carried out once there were no foreign soldiers on Afghan soil.

American officials have said that they see signs that Taliban hostility to peace talks may be splintering.

With violence in Afghanistan at its worst levels since American-supported forces ousted the Taliban in 2001, 'the West' is eager to pursue such negotiations, given that it plans to withdraw most forces by the end of 2014.

In recent years, Australia's commitment in Afghanistan has been reduced to 1) training and mentoring the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade in Uruzgan Province to allow transition of lead security responsibility for the province; 2) building the capacity of the Afghan National Police to assist with civil policing functions in Uruzgan; 3) helping improve the Afghan government's capacity to deliver core services and generate economic opportunities for its people; and 4) operating to disrupt insurgent operations and supply routes utilising the Special Operations Task Group.

The Australian effort is part of a 'mission' to build an Afghan Army and Police Force of nearly 352,000. It is now nominally in the lead for providing security in most of the country. Attrition rates are high and morale is low; the attacks on Coalition forces have eroded trust and slowed the training. Afghan leaders have to work harder with the United States and the Coalition to weed out corrupt troops and Taliban infiltrators, but the nation cannot hang its hopes on that happening.

There is an agreement to finance the army to 2017 with Kabul paying US\$ 500 million, the United States about US\$ 2.5 billion and other donors about US\$ 1.3 billion. If the Afghan government keeps its commitments, the donors should make good on theirs.

The Taliban have not retaken some territory that they lost to Coalition forces, but Kandahar and Helmand Provinces, the Taliban base and the main focus of the 2010 surge, remain heavily contested. A Pentagon report in May 2012 said that Taliban attacks in Kandahar from October 2011 to March 2012 rose by 13 per cent over the same period a year earlier.

In the view of the United States Institute of Peace, 'the most that probably can be hoped' is that the Afghan Army continues to hold the capital and some of the other major cities. But it is not likely ever to become an effective counterinsurgency force.

In particular, it took nine years of fighting in Afghanistan before 1,000 U.S. troops were killed. But the second 1,000 U.S. troop deaths have come in the past two years. In September 2012 the United States reached the grim 2,000-U.S.-troops-killed-in-action in Afghanistan milestone. Australia has lost thirty nine soldiers.

Though the work of American and Coalition troops has become increasingly deadly, many analysts warn that it has not been increasingly effective.

Pentagon officials point to the 300,000-plus Afghan security forces which have been trained as a result of N.A.T.O. efforts. But the attrition rates remain high, and Afghan soldiers and police continue to struggle against the network of an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 insurgents - despite the fact that they outnumber them roughly 10 to 1.

There are also some other deep seated problems. In the Army, and more glaringly in the National Police, problems range from insufficient vetting of recruits to widespread illiteracy, from low morale to ethnic ties overriding national identity.

Many soldiers, like most Afghans, are illiterate when they enter the Afghan National Army. Many new recruits have been attracted to the force by literacy programmes sponsored by the U.S. military. Teaching new recruits how to read "has become a real draw for the security forces as we move forward." Brig. Gen. Thomas Putt, director of Afghan National Security Forces Development in [Kabul](#) said during a Pentagon briefing. "It is also, I think, a secret weapon that the insurgents can't provide, and that's one draw down the road that we think will pay huge dividends as we go forward." In two years ? And the ongoing question will be how to sustain these forces long after American and Coalition troops leave.

Corruption is especially rampant among the National Police, the corps in closest contact with the people.

All these issues, which have shown little improvement as the [United States](#) has poured billions of dollars into Afghanistan, place question marks over the ability of the security forces to hold off a weakened but still active [Taliban](#) post-2014. Perhaps even more grave

is the threat of Afghanistan returning to civil war after international forces leave - a prospect which preoccupies many Afghan leaders.

It may have been mission impossible all along for outside forces to expect to build in a matter of a few years a modern and united national security force in a country as poor, illiterate, and ethnically and geographically divided as Afghanistan. The countries of the international Coalition did not help by persistently failing to provide the number of needed trainers.

But for some experts, the extended foreign occupation and its shifting objectives - counterterrorism here, counterinsurgency there, creating national security forces, then turning to developing militias - will leave Afghanistan shakier than when the N.A.T.O.-commanded, U.S.-led forces arrived.

“I don’t think there’s any way to come out of this that Afghanistan is going to be more stable than when we went in.” said Dr. Christine Fair, a [South Asia](#) security expert at [Georgetown University](#) in [Washington](#). “A lot of people, including me, expect another civil war.”

Some 5,000 Afghans are now enrolled in the national ‘reintegration’ programme which provides job training and cash to former [Taliban](#) fighters who have agreed to put down their arms. The programme is regarded as having ‘potential,’ but it “is not yet a game-changer.” Lt. Gen. Adrian Bradshaw, the No. 2 commander in Afghanistan, acknowledged.

In the meantime, the 68,000 American troops who remain in Afghanistan continue to do much of the heavy lifting, in the form of patrols and even the logistics systems which feed, equip, and maintain the Afghan forces.

In roughly half of the war, the focus has ostensibly been on training these Afghan forces. But with the spate of insider attacks, American and Coalition troops have been forced to implement ‘guardian angel’ programmes.

General Bradshaw emphasised that these programmes are discreet. “You know, whoever’s got the responsibility to keep an eye on their mates while they’re taking exercise or playing sport or relaxing in between operations, whoever has that task just tactfully stays on one side.” he says. “Clearly they have a weapon and they’re ready to use it if necessary, but they’re not constantly in people’s faces. It’s done in a tactful and sensible manner.”

Still, the insider attacks, casualties, and persistent corruption throughout the Afghan government after eleven years of war make some wonder whether the war effort continues to be worth the cost.

“The administration’s strategy at this point is that they are relying on a negotiated settlement, and what the fighting is doing is determining the terms of that settlement.” said [Stephen Biddle](#), professor of political science and international affairs at [George Washington University](#). Some might argue that “the right thing to do is sticking it out and suffering the casualties we will suffer until 2014.” he added. But whether that is indeed the right thing to do, he said, hinges on, “how much can you shift the terms of a prospective settlement in your favor while you continue to fight ?”

Right now, it is increasingly hard to answer that question. “We’re doing a variety of things that even as we continue to fight are moving the settlement terms in the wrong direction.” Professor Biddle said. The ability to sustain any settlement will be another key indicator of the success of the war - and it is dependent on Afghan government reform, he added.

That is because any settlement is likely to legalise the Taliban as a political party. If Afghan leaders continue to allow what Biddle calls “an increasingly predatory government,” then the Taliban’s foothold in the government will grow.

Busy with fighting and training, the United States has “significantly reduced” its government reform efforts. In fact, the insider attacks that U.S. and Coalition forces are enduring could be “the tip of a larger iceberg” related to this corruption, Biddle argued.

While the U.S. military has painted the attacks as largely rooted in cultural conflict and has vowed to redouble cultural training efforts for U.S. troops, a more effective means of addressing the problem is government reform, Biddle said.

Afghan fighters see that their commanders do not have their best interests at heart - he argued - because many of them are political appointees, given their job by higher-ups in government, often with a wink and a nod, to protect large payoff networks which are often making the government officials, as well as the commanders, rich.

Afghan troops see this and lose their will to fight. In turn, American troops are ‘disdainful’ of this lack of will to fight. “All of these American 19-year-olds have been taught that the

one thing that is least praiseworthy and least respectable is lack of courage under fire - and they are training and living with people who they believe lack that.” Biddle explained.

“The result is that there’s a serious danger that what you get is systematic disrespect.” and “There’s reason to believe that lots of Afghans feel they are seriously disrespected, and I think you end up in a situation where mutual disdain builds.”

Disrespect is at best reciprocal: “Everyone knows American power is fake, and they cannot win this war because they are fighting for no reason, no goals.” said a Taliban supporter in Peshawar who refused to give his real name. “Their soldiers are fighting for nothing; and our *mujahideen* are fighting because it is their religious duty, which they were created for.”

Even top United States officials in Kabul, while more optimistic, offer cautious predictions of what Afghanistan’s military and police will be capable of by the time international forces leave in 2014. As the American ambassador to Kabul, [Ryan Crocker](#), said, the A.N.S.F. should by then be able to defend an Afghanistan which is “basically secure, basically stable, basically democratic, [and] that can look after its own interests.”

The assessments of Afghan security forces which run from modest to bleak suggest why [President Obama](#) was focused on securing a Strategic Partnership Agreement, which was signed on 1 May 2012, with President Karzai. With no hope on the horizon of defeating Afghanistan’s insurgency, the administration will settle for an agreement which allows the United States, after its 2014 combat departure, to pursue its terrorist-hunting interests in the area while standing back in a reserve capacity. The United States would help out - for example, with air power - when the Afghans get swamped. N.A.T.O. countries, as well as other countries such as Australia, would maintain some military training. In exchange, President Karzai would receive the funding to prop up a state with meagre revenues.

The Agreement, Dr. Fair said, “is really our ticket out of there.”

Still murky is what will happen between September, when the United States withdrew 23,000 of about 90,000 forces in Afghanistan, and the end of 2014. The [United States military](#) is likely to call for the remaining combat drawdown to be back-ended to give the A.N.S.F. more time, while the American public and many regional experts press for front-loading the withdrawal from what they see as a corrosive engagement.

Gen. [John Allen](#), the U.S. commander of N.A.T.O. forces, recently hinted to Congress that he was unlikely to recommend any further cuts in the 68,000 U.S. forces which remained after September until well into 2013. President Obama has said he wants to set a “gradual pace” of withdrawal.

Yet, whether the withdrawal of international forces is steep or gradual seems almost immaterial to prospects for Afghan security forces to maintain stability, since so many of their problems are internal and resistant to a quick fix.

With nearly a fifth of the international forces killed in Afghanistan this year killed by their Afghan counterparts, much of the attention on Afghanistan in recent weeks has focused on these incidents. Their growing frequency suggests a fraying relationship between the Afghans and the International Security Assistance Force.

The U.S.-led mission said that lapses in Afghan screening of recruits had failed to weed out turncoats, while adding that new countermeasures have been taken. For example, Afghan soldiers are increasingly disarmed when entering Coalition bases, and international and Afghan forces who once lived together are now more often kept in separate quarters.

Yet, as vital as that issue may be, it has also obscured the rising problem of Afghan-on-Afghan violence within the security forces, and what those growing tensions could portend for the post-N.A.T.O. Afghanistan of 2015.

“I would say the international forces can never leave Afghanistan; if they do it will expose a divided country which cannot defend itself.” said Baktash Syawash, the youngest member of the parliament’s lower house. “If the Americans left [Kandahar](#) tomorrow, it’s Talibanization ... [I]t shows you that what we suffer from is a lack of vision for the future of our country.”

Against such downbeat assessments, the leaders of I.S.A.F., civilian and military, generally offer more optimistic views of Afghanistan’s evolution and of the ability of A.N.S.F. to take on the Taliban, deny havens to *al-Qaeda*, and keep a lid on civil war.

Former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker noted that half the Afghan population is already under full Afghan security control, and he expects that share to jump as the ‘transition’ of responsibilities from international forces to the Afghans accelerates. “I suspect that by midsummer, 75 per cent of the country will be looking to Afghan forces for their immediate security.” he said.

On the military side, commanders say that a decrease in insurgent-initiated violence compared with 2011 points to a weakened insurgency.

“I am confident that by the end of 2014 we will be able to hand off security [to Afghans] to deal with a still-active but continuously diminishing insurgency.” said Lt. Gen. Adrian Bradshaw, the British deputy commander of the international force.

Some military officials also insist that the ‘reintegration’ programme designed to bring Taliban fighters back into Afghan society is registering successes after years of difficulty. This is true now, they say, because Afghan forces increasingly play a lead role - thus denying the Taliban the line that they are fighting an occupation.

“They say they were fighting to provide security to their families and to get rid of the foreigners.” said Bradshaw, referring to interviews he said were conducted with some 3,000 ‘reintegrated’ ex-Taliban. “But now we’re seeing that a combination of a security presence that is more and more Afghan, plus the pressure we’ve kept up on the Taliban leadership, is creating a shift.”

However, some former military personnel who were involved in the ‘reintegration’ effort say its successes have been played up, while others are even more dismissive. “It’s a flop.” said [Georgetown](#)’s Dr. Fair. “The most that can be said is that it has brought in some people from the [insurgency’s] very lowest rungs.”

What N.A.T.O. wants to head off is the “rush for the exits” by the international community against which President Obama has warned. To do that, officials with the international forces are not trying to minimise the storm of recent incidents in Afghanistan - the burning of *Qur’an* copies and ensuing riots, the killing of 17 Afghan civilians by a rogue U.S. soldier, the multiplying renegade assaults - but instead to suggest that in a more fragile setting, the reverberations of such incidents would have been worse.

Afghan forces efficiently handled the *Qur’an*-burning unrest, they argue, and the Afghans have taken measures to reduce the opportunity for inside attacks on coalition forces.

“What we’ve witnessed is a very strong indication of their steadiness under pressure.” Bradshaw said.

Perhaps more important, officials say, despite Karzai's outburst that he was "at the end of the rope" with the United States over a March massacre by a U.S. soldier, U.S.-Afghan talks on the Special Partnership Agreement were not ruptured.

Both Afghan and foreign officials say the U.S.-Afghan Agreement would send a strong message in multiple directions.

A key target of that message is [Pakistan](#), where Afghan Taliban fighters continue to find refuge. The United States wants the Agreement to signal that it is not abandoning Afghanistan and that Pakistan's interests do not lie in an unstable neighbour. Some experts counter that Pakistan worries more about archrival [India](#)'s expanding economic and political footprint in Afghanistan.

Karzai is insisting that any accord must confirm Afghanistan's sovereignty, a sticking point.

A point of disagreement is the practice of night raids. U.S. and N.A.T.O. military officials say that continuing the raids would be essential. Officials note that the vast majority of night raids - which have been successful at capturing Taliban leaders and dismantling bomb-making - are already under Afghan leadership. One option under consideration is to require a warrant from an Afghan judge to carry out a raid.

To underscore the country's 'positive trajectory', N.A.T.O. points to upbeat numbers on A.N.S.F. recruiting, training, and retention. By the end of October 2012 both the A.N.S.F. and the Police Force had been expected to reach their full complement.

But what if the Afghan Army were to disintegrate and the police were to continue in its 'trajectory' of violence and corruption? Who would then defend the country from a return of the Taliban?

Of all Afghanistan's challenges - from security, to corruption, to social liberation - probably the most difficult is the task of creating a single Afghan identity. Afghanistan's population of 30 million people is made up of a dozen or more violently feuding ethnic groups. Karzai came to power promising ethnic reconciliation - even his clothes preached integration, from his silky green Northern *chappan* (cloak) to his Pashtun sandals - but his government has been characterised by ethnic rivalry. With Karzai reaching out to the mainly Pashtun Taliban for peace talks, and surrounding himself in the presidency with

Pashtuns, many Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Hazaras are starting to look to their own ethnic groups for leadership.

Ethnic factionalism is one reason, the [International Crisis Group](#) warned in its May 2010 report, that the Afghan National Army is “incapable of fighting the insurgency on its own” the other reasons being drug addiction, illiteracy, and desertion.

In the end, ‘the West’ might have learned nothing from ‘the East’. The [Soviet Union](#), too, tried to build an Afghan national army during its failed occupation of the country, and also dealt with the problem of Afghans killing their Soviet mentors. After the Soviet withdrawal from the country, the ‘army’ quickly splintered into its various Tajik and Pashtun and Uzbek parts, and the vicious civil war which eventually spawned the Taliban was on.

* * *

As for relations with Pakistan, after some bitter disputes, Pakistan resumed cooperation with the United States again in June 2012 by reopening a critical supply route to Afghanistan after closing the border in November 2011, when American forces accidentally killed 24 Pakistani soldiers during an airstrike. There was a price attached, of course.

This was previously the crossing point for the vast majority of [the Pentagon](#)’s supplies for its troops in Afghanistan. Pakistani officials said they were waiting for the United States to apologise for the deaths.

That this apology was long in coming speaks to the resentment that some American officials harbour for what they see as Pakistan’s failure earnestly to crack down on [Taliban](#) insurgents who continue to launch cross-border attacks on American troops.

Pakistani officials have resentments of their own - specifically, U.S. drone strikes ‘targeting’ [al-Qaeda](#) militants hiding out in Pakistan’s tribal regions, which in some cases have also killed Pakistani civilians.

The United States has a huge interest in a peaceful Pakistan, a nuclear-armed country of 170 million which supports *jihād* in Afghanistan, Kashmir and Indian cities. But there is reason to argue that America’s leverage with Pakistan on security matters is limited by its need for Pakistani bases, border crossings and intelligence on the Taliban.

* * *

Why can't the [United States](#) and the Coalition just make a clean break in [Afghanistan](#) and leave ? After all they did that in [Iraq](#). Australia left more than eight years after Australian Special Forces infiltrated the deserts of western Iraq. That occurred on 6 August 2011 with the departure of 17 Australian troops responsible for providing security at the Australian embassy in Baghdad.

Well, it seems to be not that simple.

That question might have occurred to many Americans and Australians months ago upon learning that [N.A.T.O.](#) countries were poised in May 2012 to lay out their post-2014 commitment to Afghanistan.

The answer to the question can be distilled to three parts: [al-Qaeda](#), oil, and [Pakistan](#). What really matters to the United States are two of the parts: oil and Pakistan - *al-Qaeda* is bugaboo. But what of Australia's position ? and 'national interest' ?

The United States, N.A.T.O. and the Coalition have been on the ground in Afghanistan for eleven years, trying to build up Afghan security forces, among other things. But those forces still are not ready to shoulder security duties without outside help.

Thus, the primary goal that the United States set for itself once it routed the [Taliban](#) from power remains to ensure, as [President Obama](#) has repeatedly said, "that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorists." The Australian Prime Minister has parroted that slogan.

With the *al-Qaeda* leadership weakened but alive across the border in Pakistan, the United States wants to maintain a robust counterterrorist capability in Afghanistan.

Another factor is oil - or, rather, in Afghanistan's case, a lack of it, although the project of TAPI is still in very active consideration. In Iraq, the United States could exit abruptly because the central government had the revenues, thanks to plentiful oil deposits, to provide basic services and to field adequate Army and police forces to maintain security, or at least to try. But Afghanistan has no such revenues, although it is working to open up development of mineral deposits which may ultimately provide them - in time, lots of time.

That means the N.A.T.O-trained military and national police - for the Australians the Fourth Brigade of the A.N.S.F. - cannot keep operating unless the United States and other countries contribute for years to come. That was decided in Chicago and Tokyo.

Lastly, there is Pakistan. Essentially, the answer to the 'why not just leave' question is what it has always been: it is the unstable nuclear Pakistan with the possibility of Islamic militants gaining strength right next door.

An American presence in Afghanistan reassures the Pakistani government that the United States is not going to leave behind a void - and one which might be filled by archrival [India](#) ? - about which Pakistan continuously worries. In the opinion of many observers, a powerful American presence reduces the likelihood that Afghanistan collapse into civil war, which could spill across the Pakistan border in the form of heightened instability. That, says Professor Biddle, is "a pretty scary prospect."

To these three reasons, some experts add another: the "paid too much to throw it all away" argument.

A poor excuse for not leaving now is the rise in attacks by snipers against 'western' troops. They are construed as threatening American-Afghan military cooperation and could become another reason to stay until 2014 - beyond, too ? The trend of the attacks undoubtedly affects the United States exit strategy.

So [America](#) 'must stay its course' in the war-torn country, and Australia - of course - unquestioningly follows.

The cost of such 'policy' continues to be paid, in both lives and money.

One American is killed every day in Afghanistan, on average. *Operation Iraqi Freedom* officially lasted for eight years and eight months. By December 2011, 4,486 U.S. and 318 non-U.S. troops had been killed fighting in Iraq, 1,800 more than who died on 11 September. However, according to *The New York Times*, a year after operations ceased United States Special Operations units have quietly begun re-entering Iraq at the behest of the Iraqi government.

In Afghanistan, the war which began on 7 October 2001 still goes on. *Operation Enduring Freedom* is not due to end until 2014. So far Afghanistan has taken the lives of 3,196

soldiers: 2,130 American, 433 British, and 158 Canadian. Forces killed in Afghanistan also amount to more than all the lives lost on 9/11.

Some 8,000 troops have been killed for the 2,977 lost on 11 September 2001.

Once soldiers return from the theatre of operations the numbers keep climbing. In the United States, for every single death in Afghanistan or Iraq, twenty-five soldiers suicide. During the first six months of 2012 there were 187 Army suicides, 55 Air Force, 32 Marine Corps, 39 Navy and 5 Coast Guard. The cumulative effect of multiple deployments and post-traumatic stress disorders *et alia* suggest, however, tens of thousands of additional deaths.

Americans are good at statistics: each year 6,500 veteran suicides are recorded, at a rate of one every 80 minutes. Only the Army releases figures and it is unclear if this includes active duty personnel or veterans of other wars. Although only 1 per cent of Americans have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, they account for a massive 20 per cent of the total annual rate.

No figures are available for the consequences of war in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

No data, of course, are available about the cost of capture, torture and 'rendition'. Housing a single prisoner at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba costs the United States taxpayer US\$ 800,000 per year. More than 100,000 men were detained in Iraq, many at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison; thousands more were held at Bagram Airfield or the infamous, and C.I.A. funded, 'Salt Pit' torture chamber north of Kabul.

The non-fiscal cost of the consequences of tortures and imprisonment-without-trial cannot be calculated. For every single death or incarceration there is a father, mother, brother, son, nephew, friend or neighbour who will never forget what these wars have wrought, and will seek revenge. Revenge lives long - generation-to-generation.

Comparable statistics are hard to come by in Australia. It is enough to say that thirty nine Australians have lost their life to date.

As to the civilian victims of the war, the official number for Iraq has been stuck on 100,000 since 2004, not revised upwards since. But, in 2007 the British *Opinion Research Business* survey calculated that up to 1.5 million Iraqis had been killed in the war. This confirmed an earlier British survey by the *Lancet* which calculated that 655,000 to 1 million Iraqis had died in just three years, from 2003-2006. Although the war continued for a further five years

the studies have not been repeated nor revised to account for additional Iraqi casualties, arguably due to intense American criticism.

There are almost no figures for Afghanistan casualties, but Human Rights Watch recorded 1,000 civilian deaths in 2006 and the United Nations estimates 12,000 deaths since 2007. There are no statistics for the first five years of the war. By 16 February 2007, António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said that the external refugee number reached 2 million and that within Iraq there are an estimated 1.7 million internally displaced people. The refugee traffic out of the country has increased since the intensification of civil war.

According to American sources, at least 181,362 civilians have died and more will die in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan as a result of the fighting at the hands of all parties to the conflict.

Indirect deaths from the wars, including those related to malnutrition, damaged health infrastructure, and environmental degradation, may far outnumber deaths from combat. While these deaths are difficult to count due to factors such as lack of comparable baseline mortality figures, a 2008 survey by The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, an organisation which highlights the role that states and civil society must play in preventing and reducing violence associated with war, crime, and social unrest, estimated that assuming a ratio of four indirect deaths to one direct death in contemporary conflicts would not be unreasonable. This would put the death toll at five times 181,000 - or 905,000.

Millions of people have been displaced indefinitely and are living in grossly inadequate conditions. As of January 2012 the number of war refugees and displaced persons - 7,424,780 - is equivalent to all of the people of two relatively small American states, Connecticut and Oregon for instance, or twice the population of Melbourne, Australia fleeing their homes.

In a time of budget-cutting, the United States spends US\$ 60 billion a year on the war. On an annual basis, that - it was estimated - would be enough to provide groceries for every American family for more than a year and a half.

A 2011 study by Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies estimated the final cost of the wars to be US\$ 4.4 trillion, not including medical costs for injured veterans

or rebuilding aid to Afghanistan. Nobel Prize Economist Joseph Stiglitz estimated the war in Iraq alone would cost \$2.2 trillion. And all of the costs are funded upon borrowed money, as evidenced by the United States debt skyrocketing from US\$ 6.4 trillion in March 2003 to over US\$ 16 trillion as at 1 October 2012.

“At some level, when you make a decision to continue waging a war, losing lives and money, you make a decision that hopefully what you can get in exchange for that is worth it.” said Professor [Biddle](#), a former adviser to retired [Gen. Petraeus](#). “At some point it will reach the point where what we get is no longer worth American lives.”

Retired Army Maj. Gen. Paul Eaton, who conducted the Iraqi security force training program from 2003 to 2004, says that the latest round of ‘green-on-blue’ killings will prompt tough questions among commanders and within the Pentagon. “You have to ask yourself, what has changed ?” says General Eaton, now a senior adviser to the National Security Network think tank.

Eaton and others point out that simply ending the United States involvement in a war is a vast undertaking, and speeding it up comes with its own risks. A condition of ‘inertia’ begins to operate. Things become difficult, appear to be insurmountable. ‘Experts’ then come in to quantify the time necessary for leaving: will it take - as some estimated - “at least 13 months to clear the equipment we’ve got deployed. People forget that there are very real physical limits. We cannot leave the things behind at random - they’re worth too much and are potentially dangerous.” To whom ? Nobody seems to know.

Such sudden problems seem badly to disguise and then propose more important questions: is it ‘strategically desirable’ to leave Afghanistan now ? Should the United States-N.A.T.O.-Coalition stay two more years ? For what: tamp down corruption ? Train the Afghan national security forces ? No government, let alone the Australian, seems to have clear plans for the future.

And would it be because no government would want to face the reality of the situation: defeat is the word. And is the attempt to accept that reality worth one more live lost ?

As General Eaton muses, remembering his experience as a young second lieutenant in Saigon in 1972: “The attitude was, ‘I’d really rather not be the last guy shot as we get out of Vietnam.’ ” he recalls. But “that’s been going on in warfare since we started wars - and since we’ve hoped to end them. That is part of being a soldier.”

Australian retired General Cantwell would agree.

It is perfectly understandable why American administrations - including now the Obama's - never feared its ignorance and the consequent arrogance of the powerful. It is even more so if one considers the magnitude of American power, particularly technological, against the poverty of Afghanistan.

And it is quite conceivable that a 'Great Power' be reluctant to admit defeat. Over Vietnam, it was even to develop a kind of 'syndrome'.

Australia has had no such psychological problem: it never admitted defeat in Vietnam, it went through all kinds of rationalisations, and came out a 'winner-of-sort' in the general amnesia and the congenital ignorance and racism and return to isolation, for a while anyway, until it camouflaged its position and 'discovered' the Asian Century, and new and powerful economic 'friends' in Beijing. It is the fortune and curse of snivelling client-states !

For the present Australian Prime Minister 'denying a base to a resurgent *al-Qaeda*' is the beginning and end of Australian presence in Afghanistan - simplistic stuff. Americans have a heavier burden to bear in order to justify the loss of blood and dollars, and the end has been from the very beginning much clearer: the defence of 'American global interests'. It ranges from the oil of Central Asia to the many bases which now encircle the former other Great Power and, much more feared, an emerging and creditor China.

The present American administration is better equipped to understand what even the sclerotic Soviet regime perceived after nine years of war ending in defeat. The United States has had eleven years to get there. Soviet occupiers left, without many problems, without much fuss and taking with themselves any hope of success in establishing a compliant satellite. The men in the Kremlin knew very well that in Afghanistan there were minerals, were not concerned in the clandestine use of opium, and at the time still controlled the oil of Central Asia. They took whatever time was needed to bring home the precious equivalent of America's tanks, trucks, computers, other very expensive stuff and yes, drones.

Even the Soviets never even attempted 'to Sovietise' the tribes which had defeated even the British and shown them that the sun was setting at the borders of a wild land. That land and its peoples had not been subdued for a few thousand years, but had successfully resisted other empires including Alexander, the Great. He built stone fortresses in Afghanistan, but he did not tame the Afghans. No one ever has. They are a fractious people, as riven by ethnic

and clan rivalries as their land is by its mountains, as renowned for bravery in battle as they are for treachery in their dealings with one another and outsiders. They have never known a genuine central government. The authority of the last Afghan king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, who was overthrown in 1973, did not extend in any meaningful way much beyond the environs of Kabul. Karzai is in a similarly precarious position. And across the border lies an equally treacherous Pakistan, which has received about US\$ 1.5 billion annually in American military aid and reimbursements since 2002 while giving sanctuary to the Taliban and shelter to Osama bin Laden and other *al-Qaeda* leaders.

President Obama must know something that the Australians in Canberra continue to ignore.

It is not that the tribe-peoples of Afghanistan, who refuse to be ‘civilised’ by ‘the West’, may count on a great military machine to defend their land. Quite to the contrary: by the kind of power that Australians most admire, Afghanistan ranks at the bottom of the scale, and if let alone would be at the bottom as a threat to the national security of any nation, including mighty United States of America, half a world away.

Only ignorant vassals or pompous yes-sayers like the camp-followers in Canberra could have a problem with that. Some of them, little men really, might have read something about the nature of popular resistance: the rebels, or terrorists, or outlaws, *Banditen*, were born and can survive in their extremely high mountains with extremely steep passes which rival the Himalayas where a few can hold off an enemy regiment. From their hideouts in the mountains, raids can be made on their enemies after which they scurry back to their hideaways. They have the advantage of history, unlearned maybe but ‘felt’, instinctively, of their fierce independence and of a total reliance on their tribe. Because of that, they can hardly tolerate even an Afghan central government, let alone one imposed by outsiders like the British, the Soviets, and even the Americans.

The mid-September 2012 attack on camp Bastion could show what rebels can do and the damage they may cause: the [most devastating attack](#) on a military base of the war, resulted in more lives lost and, most importantly for money-people, in a damage as large as US\$ 200 million. Old men at the Pentagon may think back and compare with those attacks that raggedy Vietnamese [launched](#) against American bases in the sixties.

This is where ‘the populace’ in ‘the West’, where history is learned from the ‘nowness’ of

television, gets lost.

Their leaders in Australia, the product and beneficiaries of the mighty ‘Westminster System’ - the little minds who never learned but are always ready ‘to give lessons’ - cannot even begin to understand why the Afghan tribe-peoples have a perfect right to live just the way they have done for centuries. Not all Afghans are blood-thirsty Taliban - incidentally an organisation largely assisted by the C.I.A. when it was convenient to do so - nor are all Afghans C.I.A. ‘assets’ like Karzai and his band. Conceivably, they may even want to be those who determine their fate. Perhaps, if the Afghans really cared to emulate ‘the West’, they should really stay away from the ‘blessing of the two-party-system’ as applied in Washington and Canberra, with their farcical democracy and ‘rule of law’ as exemplified by Guantánamo or embodied in the Gillard-Karzai ‘memorandum of understanding’.

The logic of ‘the West’ situation is inescapable. The only way to subdue the Afghans is to eradicate them, exterminate them. The inheritors of the ‘British way’ - with some acknowledgment to the Nazi contribution - might have thought of that. But, sobering up for once, they might have concluded that that ‘solution’ is difficult to achieve nowadays, particularly while talking about democracy and self-determination. Maybe, after eleven years of devastation the only other option is to leave. ‘The liberators’ may be surprised; why, they may even be farewelled with a smile !

Eleven years since it began, the United States occupation of Afghanistan is reeling from crisis to crisis. The U.S. government alone has spent nearly US\$ 600 billion on the war, yet the Taliban insurgency is unbowed. Afghan National Security Forces - that the United States mainly, but Australia also, are training - seem to have no respect for their overlords. In a wave of ‘green-on-blue’ attacks, Afghan soldiers have killed 51 American soldiers in 2012. Seven Australians were killed in 2012, three in ‘green-on-blue’ attacks. And the Afghan people continue to suffer extreme poverty, disproving claims about the successful reconstruction of the country.

This is now clearly President Obama’s war. It was a war that, as a presidential candidate in 2008, he promised to escalate; once president he did - and failed. Chosen as the antiwar choice in 2008, Obama is now responsible for a failing occupation.

Obama has followed in the steps of Bush, essentially hoped to secure bases throughout Central Asia so that the United States, and not Russia or China, could exploit the

development of the Caspian Sea's oil and natural gas reserves and the pipeline routes to carry them. This, and only this, explains the attempts at 'regime change' to secure complete domination of the Middle East. Bloody and partial success followed in Iraq, but not in Iran, and it is too soon to call in Syria.

Rhetoric was easy, and cheap. What Obama called 'the war of necessity' may turn out to be a bigger defeat than the campaign in Iraq, that General William Odom branded 'the greatest strategic disaster in American history.'

When the 'counter-insurgency strategy' proposed by General Petraeus did not work, a new 'counter-terrorist strategy' was adopted: terrorising night raids by Special Forces, terrorising unmanned vehicles 'targeting the enemy' from somewhere in the American Mid-West.

Now Obama is burdened with the quagmire area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where 'the enemy' is everybody 'identified' by American 'intelligence'. Wrong 'targeting' the civilian population exacerbates the situation. Help !

'The enemy' of an occupying power is of course everywhere and no-where: it is the prospective winner of a partisan war of the kind the Nazis faced throughout Europe, and 'the West' - including nostalgically-British Australia - faced in Vietnam. No American president who could read and understand history - and that excludes Bush - learned anything. George Bush Two could only appreciate the power of violence. Australian so-called Labor would cuddle-up as good sycophants should.

Nation-building, the other promise of President Obama, is presided over by a corrupt Karzai, who for all one knows might have stashed away millions in Switzerland, and - if he has any nous - packed a light suitcase for the time the Americans will leave. How will they though ? Only combat troops, not the Special Operation Forces which will remain for, say, ten years ? How long ? Well, how long it will take to lay down and protect the pipelines, and 'American global interests'. Australian Special Forces are likely to remain, too, and their government/s in Canberra - 'Labor' or 'Liberal' - will gratefully accept the crumbs.

Another strategic disaster is looming.

As the distinguished scholar Gilles Dorronsoro, a non-resident collaborator at the Carnegie Endowment, an expert on Afghanistan, Turkey, and South Asia, and formerly a professor of

political science at the Sorbonne, Paris and the Institute of Political Studies of Rennes, put it in a recent study: “The withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan will leave the country worse than it was before 2001 in some respects. There is no clear plan for the future. Washington will progressively lose its influence over Kabul, and drone operations in Pakistan are not a credible way to fight jihadist groups on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The situation will only worsen after 2014, when most U.S. troops are out of the country and aid going to the Afghan government steeply declines.”

His analysis of the situation is cogent and persuasive:

- 1) The Afghan political system’s centre of gravity - the east and the Kabul region - is gravely threatened by a Taliban advance which will take place in the spring of 2013 following the winter lull in fighting.
- 2) The Afghan regime will most probably collapse in a few years.
- 3) Political fragmentation, whether in the form of militias or the establishment of sanctuaries in the north, is laying the groundwork for a long civil war - a dangerous scenario for ‘western’ interests - meaning the United States.
- 4) Negotiations with the Taliban are unlikely before the troop withdrawal, but the United States will not be able to pursue its longer-term interests in and around Afghanistan if it is not willing to deal with the Taliban.
- 5) Poised to take power after the Afghan regime’s likely collapse, only the Taliban can potentially control the Afghan border and expel transnational jihadists from Afghanistan.

Professor Dorronsoro offers some basic recommendations:

- 1) The Coalition must strengthen security in the east and the Kabul region. Even if it means withdrawing troops more rapidly from the south, bolstering forces in the east will slow the Taliban’s progress and encourage them to take negotiations more seriously.
- 2) The United States must end its ‘reintegration’ policy. The attempt to attract fighters away from the Taliban and ‘reintegrate’ them into society enjoys few successes, fuels corruption, fosters insecurity, and ultimately convinces the population that the Taliban presence is justified.

- 3) The United States must not further limit its ability to open negotiations with the Taliban. Listing the Haqqani network, which is part of the Taliban movement, as a terrorist group was counterproductive.
- 4) Coalition operations should focus first and foremost on foreign jihadist groups. The Taliban should not be the primary target of drone attacks and night raids.
- 5) The United States must develop a new approach to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. A long-term regional policy which is not contradictory is needed to stabilise Afghanistan.

While Prime Minister Gillard raved on 31 October 2012 about I.S.A.F.'s "working" against the Taliban, everything being "on track", and the Australians "making a real difference ... on the path to development and peace" in Uruzgan and playing "an important part in the war to stop the terrorists", and how much more money will be given to Karzai and his gang, a recent study by Professor David Cortright, Director of Policy Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and Ms. Kristen Wall, an associate, has documented that the total number of record civilian deaths in 2011 was the highest yet at 3,021, an increase of 8 per cent from 2010 and a 25 per cent increase since 2009. Deaths cause by the Taliban increased by 14 per cent to 2,332. It was the fifth consecutive year of increased civilian deaths.

It is this loss of civilian lives which, more than anything else, is fuelling the ranks of the Taliban - now a formidable fundamentalist anti-occupation force.

Counter-terrorism operations are a source - probably the most important source - of anti-American sentiment in the region. Whatever the real level of civilian losses incurred during the operations, the general perception is clearly one of indiscriminate strikes against the population. This is important because this sentiment facilitates recruitment of jihadist movements, and to a certain extent paralyses the Pakistani government.

In a recent book, titled *Little America : The war within the war for Afghanistan*, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, currently the national editor of *The Washington Post*, pointed out that what the Obama administration is attempting to do in Afghanistan bears a striking resemblance to what the United States attempted in Vietnam. Nguyen Van Thieu, 'our man in Saigon', headed a *coterie* of fellow generals, pimpish politicians and their greedy wives who excelled at thievery and bequeathed concerned American one of the fundamental lessons of the Vietnam war. The moral is simple: one cannot build upon the quicksand of corruption a

sound government and army which will stand up to its opponent. When the moment of truth came in 1975, after the United States had pulled out its combat forces and the North Vietnamese army had launched another offensive, the Saigon regime simply collapsed, its well-equipped troops abandoning their weapons and fleeing so fast that the opposition had difficulty catching up to them.

Pretty soon will be the turn of 'our man in Kabul', Hamid Karzai.

Across the border lies a treacherous Pakistan, which has accepted about US\$ 1.5 billion annually in U.S. military aid and reimbursements since 2002 while giving sanctuary to the Taliban and shelter to the late and unlamented Osama bin Laden and other *al-Qaeda* leaders.

The one senior figure in the Obama Administration who perceived the futility of attempting to prevail with military force in these circumstances was Richard C. Holbrooke, who died in December 2010.

Chandrasekaran shows that Obama's reconstruction programme has been a disaster, leaving Afghanistan little better off today than it was under the Taliban.

Some eleven years after a plethora of powerful, wealthy nations intervened, Afghanistan still has the fifth-lowest life expectancy in the world, reported at 48.6 years, and is one of only five countries in the world where a woman's life expectancy is shorter than a man's. Only 23 per cent of the population has regular access to drinking water. Kabul remains the largest capital city in the world - with a population of 3 million - which does not have a modern sewage system. Only 24 per cent of Afghans above the age of 15 are literate, with much lower rates among women. One in three refugees worldwide is Afghan, totalling over 3 million. In the Australian parliament two gladiators are battling not among themselves but at being the cruellest to asylum seekers and refugees. Inside Afghanistan, there are 1.3 million refugees. Opium production in Afghanistan has steadily increased, now standing at over 92 per cent of world supply.

Eighteen months ago, Afghanistan still ranked as the second poorest nation in the world.

The **United Nations Development Programme**'s human poverty index ranked Afghanistan at the bottom. Nine million Afghans, or 36 per cent of the population, live in absolute poverty, with the next 37 per cent living slightly above poverty line.

* * *

The New York Times has changed its mind about the Afghanistan war. In its 13 October 2012 editorial *Time to pack up*, it argued that the 68,000 U.S. troops should be withdrawn much more quickly than the 2014 deadline to avoid more troop deaths.

Some former cheerleaders for the war now want the troops out before the Afghan presidential elections in 2014 which, they believe, could lead to a full-scale civil war.

More than 66 per cent of Australians want the troops out. They are not convinced by the 'bipartisan' spin that Afghanistan is becoming a safer and more democratic place. But why is there so little scrutiny on the war from members of parliament and the media? Prime Minister Gillard persists in presenting the disaster of the past eleven years as a success.

The New York Times did not mince words: "It is time for United States forces to leave Afghanistan on a schedule dictated only by the security of the troops. It should not take more than a year. The United States will not achieve even President Obama's narrowing goals, and prolonging the war will only do more harm."

Yet, even with the date of end of 2014 for withdrawal, there are some qualifying conditions: "[the United States] and the Coalition partners have committed to remain engaged in Afghanistan after 2014 at reduced levels, which could involve 15,000 or more American troops to carry out specialized training and special operations."

Four years ago, just after his first election, President Obama called Afghanistan a "war we have to win." His strategy relied on: a newly trained Afghan Army and police force which could take over fighting the Taliban; a government competent to deliver basic services; and Pakistan's cooperation. Here is what happened: as for Afghan security forces, the United States and N.A.T.O. built an Afghan Army and police force of nearly 352,000 which is now nominally in the lead for providing security in most of the country. Yet, morale is low; attrition rates are high; attacks on Coalition forces have eroded trust and slowed the training. Afghan leaders could work harder to weed out corrupt troops and Taliban infiltrators, but the country cannot seriously hope on that happening. The Taliban have not retaken territory they lost to Coalition forces, but Kandahar and Helmand Provinces - the Taliban base and the main focus of the 2010 surge - remain heavily contested.

A September 2012 Special Report, *Lessons from Afghanistan's history for the current transition and beyond*, prepared by William Byrd, an Afghan expert at the United States Institute of Peace, asserted that the most that probably can be hoped is that the army continues to hold Kabul and other major cities. It is not likely ever to become an effective counter-insurgency force.

The New York Times concluded its editorial: "America's global interests suffer when it is mired in unwinnable wars in distant regions. ... Post-American Afghanistan is likely to be more presentable than North Korea, less presentable than Iraq and perhaps about the same as Vietnam. But it fits the same pattern of damaging stalemate. We need to exit as soon as we safely can."

Australia may still have a serious purpose in Afghanistan, if and when, it were invited - and truly invited, without any shenanigans to which many Australian governmentd are so apt and so clumsy.

Australia could assist the people of Afghanistan by providing, under strict United Nations supervision, direct no-strings-attached aid to grassroots organisations.

* * *

Beyond 2014 ? No one can make sound predictions. One thing seems to be certain: "If foreign support is taken away after 2014, then things will go back to the days of civil war." said an Afghan Army major and an ethnic Pashtun, who agreed to talk on the condition of anonymity. "If a man is Uzbek, he will run away to General [Rashid] Dostum. If he is Tajik, he will go to the Panshir. If he is Hazara, he will go to [Hazara politician Mohammad] Mohaqiq. And if he is Pashtun, he will go south."

This raises a question for many Afghans. If the Army disintegrates, who will defend the country from a return of the hated Taliban ?

The long-awaited withdrawal of United States troops - as well as N.A.T.O. and Australian forces - from Afghanistan may not be as 'full' as had been expected. It is conceivable that the United States will help 'defend' the country militarily for at least a decade after Afghans take control of their security. The pledge is contained in the new Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in Kabul by President Obama and President Karzai,

on 1 May 2012. The Agreement envisions thousands of American soldiers remaining in Afghanistan for a full decade after 2014. However it stresses that the United States would intervene to Afghanistan's aid only with approval from Kabul. The United States could use "*diplomatic means, political means, economic means and even military means.*" [Emphasis added]

Also, under the Agreement, after 2014 the United States will continue supporting Afghan security forces financially. The United States will fork out up to US\$ 4 billion annually, if the funding is approved by the Congress.

However it remains unclear whether Afghanistan would approve such military assistance from the United States. At mid-2012 the two countries were facing a serious setback in their relations after a number of incidents involving the American troops deployed in Afghanistan.

In the wake of the Kandahar massacre of 11 March 2012, when a [U.S. soldier shot dead seventeen Afghan civilians](#) in a night-time killing spree, President Obama pledged to move his troops out of Afghanistan in a "responsible way", in order to make sure there will be no need to get back in.

The United States has long promised to withdraw its troops by 2014 and hand over control to the Afghan authorities. In February 2012 the U.S. Department of Defense even stated that it was planning to complete withdrawal of the combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2013. The remaining troops were intended to be 'transited' from a "combat role to a training, advise-and-assist role." How they were to be staying is not clear.

Even in Iraq the withdrawal was not total. Between the partial withdrawal in 2010 and the full withdrawal in December 2011, over 50,000 U.S. servicemen, referred to as a "transitional force", were "training, equipping and advising Iraqi Security Forces." President Obama had discussed with Iraqi officials the possibility of extending the stay of "transitional" troops in Iraq, but failed.

In the end, *semble*, the army troops were withdrawn, but [several thousand contractors](#) have reportedly taken over their peacekeeping mission. And in addition the United States is still [operating its controversial fleet of drones](#) over Iraq's territory and, according to the State Department, the military is not planning to cancel its drone surveillance programme for at least another five years.

As at October 2012 the American administration has been holding talks in Kabul to arrange for the continued occupation of Afghanistan by several thousands of U.S. troops after the ostensible deadline for withdrawal at the end of 2014.

The United States special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan confirmed the negotiations on 16 October 2012, speaking at the annual summit of the International Stability Operations Association. I.S.O.A. is a 'trade group for private military contractors', which will no doubt have an important role in Afghanistan as American occupation is reduced from the present 68,000 level.

The talks are clearly designed at cementing an open-ended U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, providing the United States with a base of operations against neighbouring Pakistan, as well as Iran, China and Russia, and a base to exercise American power in the strategically vital and energy-rich Caspian Basin region.

The discussions will implement the provisions of the Strategic Partnership Agreement that President Obama and President Karzai signed in Kabul on 1 May 2012 to prepare for another decade of American military operations in the country.

If an accord is reached, and given the condition of dependence of the Karzai government it is quite certain, the American presence in Afghanistan will be, officially: at least 20 to 30 thousand troops, the 'private military contractors' of I.S.O.A., and un-officially: any C.I.A. personnel the United States will decide to enlist.

Perhaps in a *ratio* of one-to-ten, the troops will be from the Special Operations Command and will continue to carry out the counter-insurgency operations which have terrorised the civilian population. In addition, the United States will have at its disposal the existing bases and airports and the secret bases for the operation of unmanned vehicles.

Arrangements such as those contemplated make nonsense of President Obama's commitment to withdraw American troops by 2014. Never mind what Vice-President Joseph Biden Jr. said on 11 October 2012: "We are leaving Afghanistan in 2014, period. There is no ifs, ands or buts." That was during a nationally televised electoral debate. Needless to say that theatre throws ridicule on the words of the Australian Prime Minister that Australia will leave by 2014 if not sooner.

What did the Prime Minister of Australia say ? “There will be a new NATO-led mission after 2014 - not for combat, but to train, advise and assist the ANSF. Australia will make a contribution to this mission including through the Afghan National Army Officer Academy.

To guard against any possibility of a return of international terrorism in Afghanistan, *I expect the United States and Afghan governments to discuss possible future arrangements for counter-terrorism training and operations. As I have stated previously, the Australian government is prepared to consider a limited Special Forces contribution, in the right circumstances and under the right mandate.*” [Emphasis added]

The Americans at least have a motive: establish a continuing presence near the Caspian oil-wells and ‘contain’ China and a possibly re-emerging Russian power. But what reason do Australians have, other than loyalty to a Great and Powerful Friend, expressed in terms of a blind *obéissance* ? In ‘old style’ family relationships it sounds like this: “*Le mari doit protection à la femme et la femme doit obéissance au mari.*” = “A husband owes protection to his wife, and a wife obedience to her husband.”

On 15 October 2012 N.A.T.O. also informed that it will keep international troops in Afghanistan past 2014 alongside American troops, not for combat but strictly for the mission of training and advising the Afghans.

The troops left behind will act as ‘advisers’ and direct the Afghan units. It is not a simple matter.

As recently as 15 October 2012 *The New York Times* revealed that because of rampant desertions and low rates of re-enlistment, the Afghan National Army is forced to replace fully one third of its troops each year.

“Afghan deserters complain of corruption among their officers, poor food and equipment, indifferent medical care, Taliban intimidation of their families and, probably most troublingly, a lack of belief in the army’s ability to fight the insurgents after the American military withdraws.” the *Times* reported.

According to the article, there is not a single A.N.A. unit judged by N.A.T.O. to be capable of operating on its own.

What did Prime Minister Gillard say on the subject ? All second hand: “I met General John Allen, the ISAF Commander, on 14 October, during my visit to Kabul. He is pleased with what he sees as the ANSF continues to demonstrate this increasing capability and capacity. With two years remaining before the end of transition, he is confident that *ISAF’s mission will conclude with the ANSF well prepared to maintain long-term security in Afghanistan.*” [Emphasis added] And Ms. Gillard promised that “The Minister for Defence will also update the parliament on detailed developments in Afghanistan..” From him, too, nothing new came, but a platitudinous repetition of “staying the course.”

By the end of October 2012 it was clear that the Obama Administration was quietly preparing to keep tens of thousands of troops in Afghanistan. The United States and N.A.T.O. officials were feverishly engaged in working out the fine print of the Strategic Partnership Agreement.

Unnamed American military sources have been quoted in the American media as estimating that some 25,000 U.S. soldiers and Marines would continue occupying Afghanistan at least until 2024. A report issued by German intelligence, cited by *Der Spiegel* in October 2012, predicted that a total of 35,000 troops would stay on, including a smaller contingent from other N.A.T.O. countries. A large portion of this force would be composed of Green Berets and other Special Operations troops, who would continue carrying out counter-insurgency operations - the hunting down and killing of ‘suspected’ leaders and members of armed groups opposed to the foreign occupation and its corrupt Afghan puppets.

Despite the rhetoric emanating from Washington, Canberra and other capitals, about the readiness of the Afghan Army, in fact N.A.T.O. does not consider a single unit within the Afghan National Army capable of operating on its own. The Afghan Army is facing an attrition rate of one-third of its troops every year, and the mounting number of so-called ‘green on blue’ killings has called into serious question the entire U.S.-N.A.T.O. strategy of relying more heavily on Afghan forces.

Navy SEALs, of whom there were said to be some 2,500, and Special Operations Forces, such as the ones who are said to have conducted the raid against Osama bin Laden and have carried out some of the most spectacular and successful operations will not be withdrawn when the United States leaves Afghanistan in 2014. U.S. officials said that eight out of ten [Taliban](#) members captured and detained in the region were caught in special operation raids.

From the rescue of hostages held by pirates to the [SEAL Team 6](#) strike on [Osama bin Laden](#)'s compound, the formerly secretive world of the Special Operation Forces was increasingly destined to operate in and from Afghanistan. The Special Operations Forces have always been important in the protection of American global interests throughout the globe.

Special Operations Forces will take on an increasingly pivotal role in Afghanistan. Reportedly, about 1 in 10 of the 100,000 U.S. troops in the country are part of special operation units. They are not being withdrawn at the same rate as other units, so their percentage of the overall force will rise.

In many ways, the 'transition' will be a familiar one for Special Operations Forces, returning the commands to their roots. Long before their secret raids became so public, Special Operations troops were primarily charged with coordinating with indigenous forces of America's allies. They are now poised to do the same in Afghanistan and in what is obliquely referred to as 'the region', eventually taking over American operations after conventional forces leave. 'The region' could be very well a synonym for what the Australian military calls the Middle East Area of Operations.

"I have no doubt that Special Operations will be the last to leave Afghanistan." said [Adm. William McRaven](#), commander of [U.S. Special Operations](#) Forces Command, during a conference in Washington, on 7 February 2012.

The ranks of Special Operations troops grew from 33,000 before the 11 September 2001 attacks to estimated 66,000 at present. The figure is expected to increase to 70,000 in the next few years.

These forces currently operate in more than seventy countries around the world. Admiral McRaven is reportedly lobbying to gain greater autonomy in determining precisely where to deploy these forces, according to *The [New York Times](#)*. This in turn would allow Special Operation Forces to react quickly and expand into 'new regions'.

In the months to come, the expanded Special Operations Forces role will require some reorganisation of the 'three tribes' of Special Operations, Admiral McRaven said. These tribes include the forces working with [N.A.T.O.](#) in provincial security-response teams, those conducting 'stability operations' in Afghan villages, and those conducting strikes on terrorist cells.

And what are the ‘tools’ of the Special Operations Forces ? So far as it is known, they are ‘night raids’, led by paid informers - always unreliable, and aimed at the killing of ‘suspected’ insurgents.

And what about the ‘aims’ ? Well, ‘provincial security-response’, ‘stability operations’ are often mentioned - and ‘pacification’. Ah, yes, ‘pacification’.

The military, particularly the Americans, have always used a special language which is often full of oblique expressions and allusions. But that cryptic language is not new. It has been used throughout the times. Roman legionnaires, too, were fond of speaking of ‘pacification’. It was left to Tacitus (ca. 56–ca. 117 c.e.) to explain the meaning of that word. Towards the end of chapter 30 of *De vita et moribus Iulii Agricolae*, a book he wrote in praise of his father-in-law, an eminent Roman general, Tacitus introduces a leader of the Caledonian resistance against the Roman invaders, Calgacus. In a speech addressing assembled warriors about Rome's insatiable appetite for conquest and plunder, Calgacus describes the exploitation of Britain by Rome and rousing his troops to fight: “*Auferre, trucidare, rapere, falsis nominibus imperium; atque, ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*” = “They plunder, they slaughter, and they steal: this they falsely name Empire, and where they make a wasteland, they call it peace.” This is what invaders do, from time immemorial.

Only badly-informed deputy-sheriffs are satisfied with the invaders’ propaganda.

Long gone is that [‘Smoke-‘em-out-of-their-caves’ bravado](#). Eleven years after the horrors of 11 September 2001 the war to punish *al-Qaeda* has turned into a global headache. With no decisive ‘military victory’ in sight in Afghanistan, the Americans and their allies are rushing, albeit as discreetly as possible, for the exit. The official date of withdrawal - by the end of 2014 - hangs like an oversized albatross around the neck of policymakers in Washington, Brussels, Kabul, even *semble* Canberra.

On 22 November 2012 the news from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was that Australian troops had handed over Uruzgan bases to the Afghan military - two days before. The move was intended to mark a major turning point for Australia’s military ‘mission’ in Afghanistan, ahead of the wider withdrawal of the majority of Coalition troops in 2014. Henceforth, but no one knows for how long, Australian soldiers will only operate

out of the main base at Tarin Kot. Afghan security forces will now be fully responsible for security in Uruzgan. And that is that !

On 31 October 2012 Prime Minister Gillard said that Australia's withdrawal from Afghanistan was 'on track', and to be completed by the end of next year. By the end of this year Australia's involvement in Uruzgan Province will be more of an advisory role.

Yes, [Osama bin Laden](#) is dead and his *jihadist* enterprise is in retreat. But the legacy of the longest conflict in American history and in Australian history and the future of war-ravaged Afghanistan are both shrouded with dark uncertainties.

And that is the point that, perhaps, Prime Minister Gillard, who two years ago candidly admitted: "Foreign policy is not my passion." still 'cannot get'.

Lack of passion is not the point. It is lack of information which damns. And there is a point where bad advice received by her many collaborators cannot excuse.

Even in Australia there are dissonant and learned voices which could help in understanding what is really happening in Afghanistan. But that would demand a lack of *hubris*, an independence of thought, and a willingness to act consequently which seem in short supply in Canberra. It is much easier to churn out the usual rhetorical, most trite, common *clichés*, well beyond 'transition is on track.' Indeed, it is much safer to curry favour with the leader of the world's last superpower.

Instead, one could begin by consulting with a learned scholar, who happens to be born in Afghanistan, to have visited frequently - as recently as three years ago for six months, and who wrote recently under the unpretentious name of Ehsan Stanizai. In fact he is Dr. Ehsan Azari Stanizai, now an Adjunct Fellow with the Western Sydney University's Writing & Society Research Group. Ethnically speaking he is a Tajik, an elderly gentleman with a chequered academic career, quite keenly interested in Afghan politics. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he joined the resistance. In 1989 he moved to Pakistan, to work as editor of WUFA, a literary and academic journal in Peshawar. Twenty years ago he migrated to Australia. In a very recent article he wrote that the United States' last chance - and that of its client-states - in Afghanistan should be sought in reconciliation with the Pashtuns.

The article opens with a broadside: “The Western exit strategy ... is merely a dysfunctional *façade*.” A presentiment follows: “The recent Afghan history, especially the Soviet experience teaches us that an army created by foreign forces and led by a client regime that has never been able to defend itself is a formula for self-imposed disaster.” On paper, the ethnic breakdown of soldiers within the Army closely matches that of the country, with 44 per cent Pashtuns, 25 per cent Tajiks, 10 per cent Hazaras, 8 per cent Uzbeks, and 13 per cent members of other groups. But loyalties among these soldiers are divided, an International Crisis Group report found, with Pashtun soldiers likely to favour Pashtun commanders and people like Abdul Rahim Wardak, until August 2012 the Afghan Defence Minister, and Tajiks favouring the Tajik commanding general Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, the current Defence Minister.

During a six-month visit to Afghanistan in 2009 Dr. Ehsan Azari Stanizai obtained confidential information from many officers from the Afghan national army and Police. His conclusion? “... the Western plan of training Afghan forces and increasing their number, is a short-term solution or to put it more precisely a useless waste of time and money.” ... “During the last years of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the military situation had reached the same point. Russian troops and local Afghan combatants were fighting under circumstances in which they did not trust their own shadows. The local police and armed forces attacks on the Soviet forces had been systematic and the regime in Kabul was facing a nightmare of mass desertion in all its military garrisons.”

In post 2014 Afghanistan and ‘the West’ will be largely dependent on the infinitesimal weaker warlords of the old Northern Alliance. The United States unequivocal support for the warlords of the Afghan ethnic minorities consistently isolated the Pashtun majority.

Against this policy, that Dr. Ehsan Azari Stanizai regards as fatal and also “responsible for the strength of the Taliban”, and among the gloomiest predictions, the writer advises that “the Pashtuns believe that the Western campaign in Afghanistan meant the dispossession of the Pashtun people to the hilt. This policy is also responsible for the strength of the Taliban, the rage of their insurgency and above all such a narrative amongst the Pashtuns.”

Amidst such gloomy prognoses, there is still one chance left for a lasting peace in Afghanistan if ‘the West’ has the will for a decisive paradigm shift in its Afghan strategy: “A genuine reconciliation with the Pashtuns [which] is possible with a face-to-face talk with the Taliban.” Dr. Ehsan Azari Stanizai recommends re-visiting “[t]he age-old tribal code of

the Afghans, known to the Western anthropologists, as *nanawaty* [which means giving refuge or asylum to a person or group actively sought by someone] and *Pashtunwali* [which is a non-written ethical code and traditional lifestyle which dates back to ancient pre-Islamic times and that the indigenous Pashtun people follow]” and which is said to have “changed blood enemies into friends for centuries.”

Dr. Ehsan Azari Stanizai’s concluding observation is startling: “Afghans have no natural enmity with Western civilization. They are traditionally pro-Western despite this eleven-year conflict. They see Russia as a traditional enemy and it is impossible for the Taliban to get into an alliance with communist China either. Therefore a genuine peace arrangement between the West and the Pashtun could build an iron wall in Afghanistan for Western geopolitical strategy in the region as well as a prosperous future for the tortured Afghan nation.”

Whether Dr. Ehsan Azari Stanizai is correct or not is not the point. What matters, unfortunately, is that in either case he talks to people who are hard of hearing and, more so, of understanding - both the principal in Washington and his stooges in Canberra.

What really matters in Washington is still what Dick Cheney identified in 1998: Central Asian oil, for the defence of ‘American global interests’.

And in Canberra ?

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