

Obama's turn in the "great game"

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Lee Sustar examines the military, economic and political agendas driving Barack Obama's war drive in Afghanistan.

WHEN BARACK Obama says he wants to "finish the job" in Afghanistan, he's talking about a lot more than smashing al-Qaeda or crushing the Taliban. What he's after is a permanent outpost of U.S. imperialism in Central Asia, one of the most strategically important places on the planet.

Some knowledgeable observers, however, discount the idea that Afghanistan is part of a U.S. grand strategy. "The real goals of the Afghanistan escalation are domestic and electoral," journalist Christian Parenti wrote recently. "Like Lyndon Johnson who escalated in Vietnam, Obama lives in mortal fear of being called a wimp by Republicans."

According to Parenti, one of the leading independent journalists who's reported on the ground in the Afghan war, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was a "trampoline" for George W. Bush's administration to get into Iraq. And it's certainly true that Bush's neocons were eager to get to Iraq. We know now that former Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued for an attack on Iraq immediately after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

But in fact, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had—from the perspective of U.S. imperial strategists—its own powerful logic. One key reason, of course, is access to oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia. Journalist Pepe Escobar calls the region "Pipelineistan," [\[1\]](#) and sure enough, the U.S. is angling for pipelines to move natural gas out of the Caspian along a corridor that bypasses Russia and Iran:

"Yep, it all comes down to black gold and 'blue gold' (natural gas), hydrocarbon wealth beyond compare, and so it's time to trek back to that ever-flowing wonderland—Pipelineistan. It's time to dust off the acronyms, especially the SCO or Shanghai Cooperative Organization, the Asian response to NATO, and learn a few new ones like IPI [the Iran-Pakistan India pipeline] and TAPI [the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline]."

"Above all, it's time to check out the most recent moves on the giant chessboard of Eurasia, where Washington wants to be a crucial, if not dominant, player."

According to Escobar, the U.S. and China are competing to develop the Pakistan port town of Gwadar as the termination point for both proposed pipelines as part of the 21st century revival of the 19th-century "Great Game" in which rival imperial powers competed for influence in Central Asia.

Escobar's analysis is compelling—as far as it goes. He rightly focuses on the maneuvering for the

most crucial commodity for modern industrial powers—oil. But even this understates the importance of Central Asia to U.S. imperialism. To understand why, it's helpful to recall U.S. strategic aims following the end of the Second World War in 1945 when the U.S. emerged as the world's dominant imperialist power.

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THERE WAS only one clear strategic competitor to the U.S. after 1945—the USSR, which had turned East Germany and the Eastern European states under its military control into satellites. The USSR would go on to eventually roughly match the U.S. in nuclear firepower, establishing mutually assured destruction if one side launched a war against the other.

The U.S. national security doctrine of the late 1940s centered on the USSR's supposedly expansionist "communism." In reality, the U.S. was the driving force in the division of the world, creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to compel Western European powers to irrevocably join Washington's camp. As NATO's first secretary general, Lord Ismay of Britain, put it, NATO's purpose was to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down."

During the long Cold War, Washington and Moscow contended for influence the world over, starting with a proxy war on the Korean peninsula, and extending to many corners of the Third World. During most of that time, Central Asia was the most remote from Washington's influence. But Russia's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan to prop up an embattled pro-Moscow government changed all that.

Earlier that year, Washington had been shaken when the Iranian Revolution swept away the regime of the Shah of Iran, a U.S.-backed dictator who helped Washington put pressure on the USSR's southern flank. Fearful of Moscow's possible influence in post-revolutionary Iran, Democratic President Jimmy Carter declared that any attempt by the USSR to move into the Persian Gulf region would be treated as a hostile act directed at the U.S.—a policy soon known as the Carter Doctrine.

But while Washington was sounding the alarm about Moscow's supposed designs on the Gulf, the U.S. was stepping up its aggression in the USSR's sphere of influence by arming the Afghan resistance. As then-National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski recalled in an interview: "I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war."

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 created a vacuum in Afghanistan that was eventually filled by the Taliban, a movement that originated among the Islamist fighters financed, armed and trained by the U.S. At the same time, however, the unraveling of the USSR suddenly opened entire new regions for U.S. economic, political and military penetration.

By 1996, the U.S. Committee to Expand NATO, funded by arms manufacturers and staffed by neoconservative policy specialists, was engineering what would become the absorption of the most important former Eastern European satellites of Moscow as well as the three Baltic republics of the USSR.

NATO claimed a new reason for being in its supposed "humanitarian" war on Yugoslavia in 1999, allegedly waged to protect the Albanian minority in Serbia, but in reality to consolidate the alliance for the post-Cold War era. When the U.S. military took control Afghanistan in 2001, NATO troops came in their wake. The justification for this was the attacks of September 11, 2001. The alliance had invoked the article of its charter holding that an attack on any of its members was an attack on all. So if the U.S. deemed Afghanistan responsible for the attacks, NATO had the justification to go all in.

Since then, of course, most NATO allies have proven reluctant to risk much commitment in Afghanistan, forcing the U.S. to continually press them for more money and troops. But the U.S. has succeeded—so far—in compelling its allies to join it on a drive deep into Asia, very far from the Atlantic region that NATO was supposed to protect.

In fact, the U.S. had begun to set the stage for this move years ago. Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, head of Central Command during the 1990s, compared himself to a Roman proconsul as he used his command of U.S. forces in the Middle East and the Gulf to carry out U.S. political aims in that region and beyond. Andrew Bacevich, a retired U.S. colonel turned academic, called this period the “unprecedented militarization of U.S. foreign policy.”

In fact, top U.S. military commanders met at NATO headquarters in 1995 to plan ways of “extending Persian Gulf security guarantees” to Central Asia. The effort bore fruit, symbolized in a 1997 high-profile publicity stunt by U.S. Marine Corps Gen. John Sheehan, then head of the U.S. Atlantic Command. Sheehan flew 19 hours from North Carolina with the Army’s 82nd Airborne and joined a parachute drop into Kazakhstan, the heart of Central Asia. “The message is there is no nation on the face of the Earth that we cannot get to,” he declared.

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THIS GROUNDWORK paid off for the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11. The U.S. immediately set up military “facilities” in the five Central Asian states formerly part of the USSR that would play an important role in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Suddenly, the strongest military on earth had secured a position that greatly furthered its aims—militarily pressuring Iran to the west, and giving the U.S. military a key airbase within short flying times of key cities in both Russia and China.

Certainly, control of proposed oil and gas pipelines is a key part of the equation. But what the U.S. is after is even bigger—limiting Russia’s economic, political and military revival, and raising the stakes for China as it attempts to turn its growing economic power into greater political clout.

Achieving these gains for U.S imperialism hasn’t been easy. In addition to facing a much more powerful insurgency in Afghanistan than anticipated, the U.S. has had to compete with Russia for influence in the Central Asian states, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. But even the Russians have been forced to accommodate Washington’s agenda in the region, as they view a U.S. occupation of Afghanistan as a lesser evil to a restored Taliban regime—at least for now.

It’s for all these reasons that Obama and his military strategists considered Afghanistan a more important war than the “dumb” one in Iraq. In their view, Iraq under Saddam Hussein was weak and contained by sanctions, and the U.S. military’s grip on the Persian Gulf was unassailable. By contrast, the new “great game” in Central Asia after 9/11 provided unprecedented opportunities for U.S. imperialism.

Now, Obama is trying to salvage the Afghanistan gambit that Bush bungled. Obama’s war plans are packaged differently—so much so that they can be tucked into a Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. But the aims remain the same: create a client state with a large and permanent U.S. military presence.

It’s the job of the antiwar movement to oppose Obama’s war drive for the imperialist venture that it is.

P.S.

* From Socialist Worker, December 14, 2009:

<http://socialistworker.org/2009/12/14/obama-and-the-great-game>

Footnotes

[1] <http://antemedius.com/content/tomgram-pepe-escobar-pipelineistan-goes-af-pak>