

# The War on Terror and the Afghan Stalemate

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## Abstract

The present campaign of war on terror led by the United States of America in Afghanistan seems to be an intractable involvement. Justification for the invasion of the country has generated lots of debate over time. Afghanistan has a history of being a theater of war for centuries. This paper joins the discussion by reviewing the background to the rise of the Taliban and the al-Qaeda network that the present campaign tries to dislodge. The work also examines submissions made by observers on the real motive behind the onslaught of the two groups. Findings show that interest in securing oil deals by the US and Taliban's lack of cooperation might have resulted in the hostilities. There seems to be a convergence of views that there is a stalemate and it would be difficult for the war in Afghanistan to be won by the US and her allies. This paper concludes that America's involvement in Afghanistan has led to the dispersion of the al-Qaeda network with many sympathizers in other parts of the world who adopt terrorism to assert their views and challenge American interests..

**Key words:** Afghanistan, United States of America, War on Terror, Taliban, al-Qaeda,

## 1. Introduction

In its history, the United States of America (US) has been involved in a handful of intractable wars outside its shores either directly or by proxy. Some examples include Vietnam, Iran-Iraq, Iraq itself, and presently Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan is one of the longest engaged in by the US and its allies. It is a protracted confrontation that has a huge cost on both human and material resources on both the American and Afghan sides as public opinion in the US is already questioning the justification for the war in the first place. Many watchers expected the death of Osama bin Laden to bring to an end the confrontation with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Plans and the timetable for the withdrawal of American and allied troops have not lowered hostilities. Talks being held with the Taliban are expected to help to resolve the deadlock. It seems that there are many things that need to be sorted out to avoid a looming stalemate. What could be the plausible way out of this conundrum? This paper discusses the issue in four sections. The first section explores the history of war in Afghanistan in recent times beginning with the Soviet invasion and the involvement of the Mujahideen, to the rise of al-Qaeda. The second section discusses events that led to the invasion of Afghanistan by the USA and NATO in 2001. The third section examines the motives behind the invasion and they are justified and whether any meaningful results are being achieved. The concluding part highlights the present dilemma in the pursuit of a resolution and its implications for peace in the region.

## 2. The History of Conflict in Afghanistan since the Cold War

Afghanistan is a territory that has been a theater of war for the world powers (Klein, 2008 and Paul, 2010). Before the end of the Cold war and post-Cold War, various interests have been involved in the affairs of the country. The war in Afghanistan, as it is currently going on, is viewed by Osman (2001) to have nothing to do with terrorism, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban or the World Trade Centre, but the need and greed for oil and gas. How does this play out by the principal actors? The following is an overview of the involvement of the Soviet Union and the United States of America and the interests they had or still have in the country.

### 2.1 The Soviets in Afghanistan

The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan was a ten year conflict involving the Soviet Union, supporting the Marxist government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan at their own request against the Islamist Mujahideen Resistance. The Mujahideen on the other hand found support from a variety of sources including the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and other Muslim nations through the context of the Cold War. A British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, 2009) report that gives a timeline of the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan indicates that military occupation began on December 24, 1979 under Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The final troop withdrawal started on May 15, 1988, and ended on February 15, 1989 under the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. After the Soviet withdrawal, the Afghan government continued to deal with attacks from the Mujahideen with support in funding and arms from the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991. For several years, the Afghan government army had actually increased its effectiveness past levels ever achieved during the Soviet military presence, but the government was dealt a major blow when Abdul Rashid Dostum, a leading general, switched allegiances to the Mujahideen resistance in 1992, and together they captured Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan.

## 2.2 Involvement of the United States of America with the Mujahideen

The United States began training the Mujahideen insurgents, and directing propaganda broadcasts into Afghanistan from Pakistan in 1978 before the Soviet occupation (Weiner, 1990). U.S. Foreign Service officers began meeting insurgent leaders of the Mujahideen to determine their needs. By this time, the Soviets were already covertly engaged in Afghanistan. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the then National Security Adviser of the United States, Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) financial aid to the insurgents within Afghanistan was approved in July 1979, some six months before the Soviet invasion. Arms were sent to the resistance movement after the formal invasion by the Soviets (Javert, 1998). In the course of the struggle, the Afghan resistance, assisted by the United States, who alone at a time contributed some \$600 million yearly (Kepel 2002), Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Britain, and others, contributed to the Soviet Union's high military costs and strained international relations. The United States viewed that engagement as an integral Cold War struggle. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) collaborated with the Pakistan intelligence services to undermine the Soviet forces in a program called Operation Cyclone, a program *Green Leaf Weekly* (2001) believes gave rise to Osama bin Laden, group eventually evolved into al-Qaeda (Sageman, 2004). This group alongside others joined in waging a Jihad against Atheist Communists. From this emerged the Taliban who, after fighting as mujahideen against the Soviets, were determined not only to restore order, but to implement their radical Muslim code of behavior on the country. Before the war, Afghanistan was already one of the world's poorest nations (Mallaby, 2004). The prolonged conflict left Afghanistan ranked 170 out of 174 in the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) *Human Development Index*, making Afghanistan one of the least developed countries in the world (Barakat, 2004). Once the Soviets withdrew, US interest in Afghanistan ceased. The US decided not to help with reconstruction of the country and instead they handed over the interests of the country to her allies, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Pakistan quickly took advantage of this opportunity and forged relations with warlords and later the Taliban, to secure trade interests and routes. Panetta (2007) reveals how this has led to the wiping out of the country's trees through logging practices, which destroyed a considerable percentage of their forest cover country-wide. Also, there occurred a substantial uprooting of wild pistachio trees for the exportation of their roots for therapeutic uses, and opium production. All these affected Afghan ecology in a negative manner (Saba, 2001).

## 3. The Oil Equation in the Afghan Crisis

Some revelations have been brought to light that the United States ruling elite has been contemplating war in Central Asia for at least a decade. As long ago as 1991, following the defeat of Iraq in the Persian Gulf War, *Newsweek* magazine published an article headlined "Operation Steppe Shield?" It reported that the US military was preparing an operation in Kazakhstan modeled on the Operation Desert Shield deployment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq.

### 3.1 Plans to Route Oil through Afghanistan

American oil companies have acquired rights to as much as 75 percent of the output of these new fields, and US government officials have hailed the Caspian and Central Asia as a potential alternative to dependence on oil from the unstable Persian Gulf region. American troops have followed in the wake of these contracts. US Special Forces began joint operations with Kazakhstan in 1997 and with Uzbekistan a year later, training for intervention especially in the mountainous southern region that includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan. In trying to tap into the oil deal the US anticipated some difficulties. A major problem that arose in exploiting the energy riches of Central Asia is how to get the oil and gas from the landlocked region to the world market. US officials have opposed using either the Russian pipeline system or the easiest available land route, across Iran to the Persian Gulf. Instead, over the past decade, US oil companies and government officials have explored a series of alternative pipeline routes. One option considered was a route west through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean sea. Another route considered was to go east through Kazakhstan and China to the Pacific. A third option considered and, most relevant to the current crisis, was a route south from Turkmenistan across western Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean.

### 3.2 The Taliban Connection

The option of an Afghanistan pipeline route was most favored by the US-based Unocal oil company in 1998, which engaged in intensive negotiations with the Taliban regime. The US government saw the Taliban as a source of stability in Central Asia that would enable the construction of an oil pipeline across that region because it was "obvious that the Taliban have firm control of their country in much the same way as the Vietcong controlled Vietnam." (Eyre, 2009). According to Rashid (2001) and Coll (2004), the US government had supported the Taliban after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the hope that they will provide a stable government that would guarantee the success of the pipeline project.

Meanwhile, during negotiations, the Taliban appeared to agree to a \$2 billion deal, but only on condition that the US officially recognizes the Taliban regime which at that time was harboring Osama bin Laden (Eyre, 2009). The talks, however, ended in disarray, as US relations with Afghanistan were inflamed by the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, for which Osama bin Laden was held responsible. In August 1998, the Clinton administration launched cruise missile attacks on alleged Osama bin Laden training camps in eastern Afghanistan. The US government demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and imposed economic sanctions. While these developments were going on the oil pipeline talks languished.

In pursuit of the pipeline agreement, the Bush administration made another attempt to get the cooperation of the Taliban at a secret meeting held. The administration was willing to accept the Taliban regime, despite the charges of sponsoring terrorism against it. Further light on the secret contacts is shed by Brisard and Dasquie (2002). Brisard, a former French secret service agent and former director of strategy for the French corporation Vivendi, was author of a previous report on bin Laden's Al Qaeda network, while Dasquie was an investigative journalist. According to them, at a meeting held, representatives of the Bush administration insisted that the Taliban must create a government of "national unity" by sharing power with factions friendly to the United States. The US representatives reportedly made a veiled threat to the Taliban saying: "either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs." The negotiations did not produce any positive results as the Taliban refused the conditions. The stage was set for the only alternative left as the rationale of energy security changed into a military one. Arney (2001), reported that after the meeting, US officials told a former Pakistani foreign secretary that "military action against Afghanistan would go ahead . . . before the snows started falling in Afghanistan, by the middle of October at the latest." Afghanistan was attacked precisely on October 7, 2001.

By way of corroboration, Martin (2001) invites observers of world events to note the curious fact that neither the Clinton nor the Bush administrations ever placed Afghanistan on the official State Department list of states charged with sponsoring terrorism, despite the acknowledged presence of Osama bin Laden as a guest of the Taliban regime. Such a designation would have made it impossible for an American oil or construction company to sign a deal with Kabul for a pipeline to the Central Asian oil and gas fields. As long as the possibility of a pipeline deal remained, the White House stalled any further investigation into the activities of Osama bin Laden. Brisard and Dasquie (2002) revealed that John O'Neill, then deputy director of the FBI, resigned in July in protest over this obstruction. O'Neill told them in an interview that the main obstacles to investigate Islamic terrorism were US oil corporate interests and the role played by Saudi Arabia in it. In a strange coincidence, O'Neill accepted a position as security chief of the World Trade Center after leaving the FBI, and was killed on September 11.

#### **4. The September 11, 2001 Attack as an Entering Wedge**

A careful consideration of the aforementioned developments will show that the September 11 attack on the US was a timely coincidence that made the Bush administration to mobilize support and make the attack on Afghanistan justifiable under the pretext of getting rid of Osama bin-Laden and the al-Qaeda network, the alleged masterminds behind the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Thus, both the American public and allies of the government were stampeded into supporting military action against Afghanistan, in the name of the fight against terrorism. Critics like Martin (2001) accuse the Bush administration of targeting and attacking Afghanistan without presenting any evidence that either bin Laden or the Taliban regime was responsible for the September 11 attacks. It rather took advantage of the event to advance ambitions of asserting American power in Central Asia as it later did in the Gulf region by ousting Saddam Hussein in Iraq. On his own part, while questioning the legality of the invasion of Afghanistan Cohn (2008) argued that it violated three major principles. First, that military action was not authorized by the United Nations Security Council which alone may authorize the use of force against another country according to international law. Second, that a country may respond militarily in self-defense only if that country has been subjected to an armed attack by another country. In the case under consideration, the attack on the U S was not carried out by Afghanistan and neither was the suspects Afghan citizens. The third principle violated was that a nation may attack another one in self-defense only when it has certain knowledge that a potential armed attack is too imminent to bring the matter to the Security Council. However, the threat of a second attack by Afghanistan or al-Qaeda, if there was ever any, and the need to pre-empt it was not urgent. This is substantiated by the fact that the Pentagon did not launch its invasion until almost a month later.

The invasion of Afghanistan was premised on the effort to deal with the Taliban who control Afghanistan and refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the master minder of the September 11 attacks for prosecution. In further justification, Obama (2009), who inherited the war in Afghanistan as president, said:

We did not ask for this fight. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men hijacked four airplanes and used them to murder nearly 3,000 people. They struck at our military and economic nerve centers. They took the lives of innocent men, women and children without regard to their faith or race or station. . . . As we know, these men belonged to al Qaeda – a group of extremists who have distorted and defiled Islam. . . . After the Taliban refused to turn over Osama bin Laden, we sent our troops into Afghanistan.

## 5. The Present Stalemate

Many concerned watchers of international events have doubts if the war in Afghanistan is producing any good. Klein (2008) is of the view that the war in Afghanistan, which began with the supposedly specific goal of capturing Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda members, harbored by the Taliban regime, has become an aimless absurdity. He laments that Afghanistan has now become a “slow bleed against an array of mostly indigenous narco-jihadi-tribal guerilla forces that we continue to call the ‘Taliban’.” According to him, these ragtag bands are funded by opium profits and led by assorted religious extremists and drug lords, many of whom have safe havens in Pakistan.

Presently, the Taliban is not in power and Osama bin Laden has been killed. The war still rages. Previously, Abu Hamza al-Masri, known as the “British bin Laden” was reported to have cautioned on the premise of the campaign in Afghanistan. He said, “Bin Laden is a phenomenon, not a person. People have to understand this. You can kill bin Laden the man, but the phenomenon will never die” (Hari, 2001). This statement was uttered in the year 2001. Eleven years later, bin Laden was killed but the war is far from being won. While giving a similar assessment of the war, Eyre (2009) calls attention to the fact that there is the need:

... to clearly understand that these are local Afghans who fight for a totally different reason. They fight a conventional war without the sophistication of air cover and high technology vehicles and weapons. They fight in defense of their own country like any other freedom fighter would do. They fight using simple technology and by using some techniques taught to them by the US when they were friends! The Taliban know their country extremely well (much better than those that invade it) and more importantly they have the drive and spirit to fight on no matter what the odds.

Observers like Kuhner, Cole, Barry and Thomas (2009), are concerned that this war is appearing un-winnable and may as well turn out to be “Obama’s Vietnam.” Klein (2008) and Paul (2010) conclude that the war will be difficult to win. They referred to history where invading foreign armies have never won a war in Afghanistan. Citing examples of invasions from the Persians to the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and the Mongols under Genghis Khan, the Afghans have always united and slowly humiliated their invaders. In addition, British attempts at subduing Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries also failed. In the case of the Soviets, the rugged mountainous terrain and harsh weather of Afghanistan made it difficult for them to use their conventional forces to defeat the Afghans.

## 6. Conclusion

From the discussion above, the major reason for invading Afghanistan was not as much to root out terrorism as to secure the economic interests of the US. The war is unwinnable and it is obvious that the US is stuck in a long-drawn war that is resulting in a stalemate. Presently efforts at holding talks to find a resolution seem to be the best option remaining. In view of all these, this paper concludes thus:

1. The American government accorded the Taliban quasi-legitimacy by negotiating with them to allow the construction of an oil pipeline across Afghanistan. That gesture emboldened the Taliban who taught a tool or platform for bargain.
2. The US and her allies were too quick to invade Afghanistan under the pretext of punishing the Taliban led government of Afghanistan and arresting of Osama bin Laden the alleged mastermind of the September 11 bombings in the US. The invasion of Afghanistan was an illegal act as it was not backed by a United Nations Security Council Resolution.
3. The very act of invading Afghanistan has a great implication in the sense that the world’s great powers, for economic or other interests, may unilaterally or in collaboration invade any country perceived to be an enemy even if such perceptions may end up being an illusion. Iraq is a great example.
4. Such engagements by the US create more enemies for her as those in solidarity with the countries attacked may see the rise of pockets of sympathizers who may engage in terrorist acts that may harm American interests in their countries.



5. Far from solving the problem, the inability of the US and her allies to defeat the Taliban has only emboldened the Taliban to bid their time and await the departure of the invading forces so they can reclaim whatever territories and power they had lost.
6. As a backlash to the invasion of Afghanistan, the world has seen the evolution of pockets and cells of al-Qaeda in some parts of the world like the middle-east, West Africa, and East Africa. In addition to these cells, there are groups that have emerged in sympathy with al-Qaeda and have clearly demonstrated their willingness to adopt terrorism as a strategy for asserting their demands in their respective countries.

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