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Central Asia

The Grand Chessboard

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Do Osama Ben Laden's "Al-Quida" network and their Taliban supporters in Afghanistan represent the central target of the US military campaign? Certainly, the proclaimed target is wider: "international terrorism". Inside the vast "coalition" which has been set up, understanding on this theme will not be reached easily and in any case will not last.

Unanimously, US and British spokespersons say that this kind of "anti-terrorist struggle" will be long and complex. That offers the advantage of being able to concretise plans which had been mere scenarios and above all to realize imperialist objectives in a context where Bush enjoys a level of support which would previously have been barely credible. If the priority objective is to "smoke out" Ben Laden and overthrow the Taliban, while perhaps co-opting a faction among them, the military and diplomatic efforts being made by the US seem a little disproportionate. In this hypothesis, which narrows the field of intervention to Afghanistan, the US would carry out a reprisal action and, having attained certain declared goals, would partially withdraw.

Without being contradictory with this immediate option, the US military command's field of manoeuvre could be much wider. The implosion of the USSR has given the central Asian republics (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghiztan) a very much more important position. Zbigniew Brzezinski [1] devoted a whole chapter of a recent book to the importance of ensuring that Russia and China did not enjoy sole control of the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The literature on this theme - with its occasional overtones of political fiction - runs to thousands of pages. Since September 11, in various articles devoted to the support received in the mid 1990s by the Taliban - from the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia - reference is made to the plans of the US oil consortium UNOCAL to build a gas and oil pipeline, starting from Turkmenistan, crossing Afghanistan and running into the Indian Ocean. [2] The project foundered, among other reasons because of the very unstable situation in Afghanistan.

A recognized specialist on Middle East oil affairs, Fareed Mohamedi, in an article for Middle East Report, [3] dealt with the importance in the medium term of the oil and gas resources of this region of central Asia, pointing out that Saudi families held investments in hydrocarbons in some of the new independent republics.

An Israeli specialist on the oil economy, Paul Rivlin, [4] made the following recommendation in October 2000: "All assistance which can be given to the countries in the region [central Asia] so as to develop their economies and develop paths of cooperation where there will be mutual gains will facilitate the establishment of pipelines and the export of gas and oil". An Israeli company - the Merhav Group - possesses significant interests in Turkmenistan. In recent months a reading of the serious weekly Oil & Gas Journal (OGJ) is enough to show the interest - in the various senses of the term - which surrounds the resources in gas (and oil) of this region.

Patrick Cockburn, Moscow correspondent of the British daily The Independent, summed up the situation thus on September 19: "Last week Sergei Ivanov, the Russian Defence Minister, stated categorically that even in the most hypothetical of cases Russia did not want America to use bases in central Asia in its campaign against Afghanistan. He may have been assuming too much. Abdul Kamilov, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, later appeared to say that his country would let America use its territory. A short segment of Uzbekistan shares a common frontier with Afghanistan.

This presents Moscow with a dilemma. It could make air corridors available to the US without reducing its influence. But what if central Asian states started making unilateral agreements with America that in effect cut out Russia? Moscow recalls that the Gulf War against Iraq left America as the dominant power in the Gulf. Russia's agreement

not to stand in Washington's way during the war with Iraq won it no benefits and was seen by the rest of the world simply as a demonstration of weakness.

For the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the views of the states of central Asia have some importance. Moscow is a little unnerved to find such international interest in its own back yard."

Putin has opted for collaboration with the US. Not only can Russia thus pursue the war in Chechnya - with the blessing or silence of all - but through being present on the ground (or by co-participating), its task of surveillance of the situation in central Asia could be facilitated. The ruling cliques in a number of states are already playing the card of a rapprochement with the US. For Uzbekistan, this option is framed by a policy of opening up to foreign investments in oil which has been accentuated since the decrees of April 2000. [5] President Islam Karimov can, moreover, be assured of support for his ferocious repression of "Islamists".

In an article entitled "The New Geography of Conflict" in the May-June 2001 issue of Foreign Affairs, Michael T. Klare wrote; "In October 1999, in a rare alteration of U.S. military geography, the Department of Defense reassigned senior command authority over American forces in Central Asia from the Pacific Command to the Central Command. This decision produced no headlines or other signs of interest in the United States but nevertheless represented a significant shift in American strategic thinking. Central Asia had once been viewed as a peripheral concern, a remote edge of the Pacific Command's main areas of responsibility (China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula). But the region, which stretches from the Ural Mountains to China's western border, has now become a major strategic prize, because of the vast reserves of oil and natural gas thought to lie under and around the Caspian Sea. Since the Central Command already controls the U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf region, its assumption of control over Central Asia means that this area will now receive close attention from the people whose primary task is to protect the flow of oil to the United States and its allies.

The new prominence of Central Asia and its potential oil riches is but one sign of a larger transformation of U.S. strategic thinking. During the Cold War, the areas of greatest concern to military planners were those of confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet blocs: central and south-eastern Europe and the Far East. Since the end of the Cold War, however, these areas have lost much strategic significance for the United States (except, perhaps, for the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea), while other regions - the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea basin, and the South China Sea - are receiving increased attention from the Pentagon.

Behind this shift in strategic geography is a new emphasis on the protection of supplies of vital resources, especially oil and natural gas." Afghanistan is today at the centre of large-scale military manoeuvres. Once more the Afghan people - for a long time victims of conflicts in which the regional states and international powers have used proxy "freedom fighters" - will pay a heavy price. However, in the medium term the "anti-terrorist" armada will serve many other goals.

This article is an extract from a series analysing the international situation after September 11, which appeared in the Swiss revue A l'encontre.

[1] Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives", Basic Books, 1997.

[2] See Institute for Afghan Studies, study by Fahrad Adad, "What Benefits would Pipelines provide for Afghanistan? A Business Case Study", July 28, 2001 (on the internet), and Libération, September 17, 2001.

[3] Middle East Report, July-September, 1997.

[4] Paul Rivlin, "World Oil and Energy Trends : Strategic Implications for the Middle East", Tel-Aviv University, October 2000, p. 85.

[5] See "Uzbekistan proposes attractive conditions for direct foreign investments oil and gas sector of economy" (www.oaric.com/ouzpetrole.htm).