

Foreign-Backed Taliban Armies Threaten Central Asia

by Ramtanu Maitra

Reports of fresh fighting in mid-August between the Taliban militia and the Opposition Northern Alliance, under the command of Ahmed Shah Massoud, for possession of the city of Taloqan in northern Afghanistan, have spread fear in the Central Asian states.

The internal security of Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan, has already been breached by the drug-traffickers and armed terrorists, who, according to the Central Asian leaders, are trained and armed by the ruling Taliban of Afghanistan.

The battle for Taloqan is important for both groups. The city is under the control of the Northern Alliance, but if it falls to the Taliban, it will provide the “religious militia” a free march to Kunduz in the north, and beyond to the Tajikistan border.

If the Taliban gains easy access to the borders of Tajikistan, drugs and arms will pour into Central Asia, and rebellious activities in the region will get a massive boost. And if that happens, Russians, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazaks, and Uzbeks claim, a number of terrorist groups trying to unseat legitimate governments in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, in particular, will run rampant and destabilize the whole region.

In the Fergana Valley of Central Asia, where Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan meet, anti-government rebels, carrying the flag of Islamic *jihad* and a wallet full of drug money, are involved in guerrilla war against the conventional armed forces of these countries.

There are intelligence reports, mostly provided by Moscow, which say that about 2,000 such terrorists, and a few tons of narcotics, are ready to enter Tajikistan en route to the tri-junction of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan and the lush and prized Fergana Valley.

As with most accusations made against them, the Taliban deny the whole of it. They do not admit that these terrorist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, have

camped inside Afghanistan. However, reports of camps training terrorists for operations in the Indian part of Kashmir, Chechnya in Russia, and Central Asia as well, are published routinely. Some of these come out in the media of such nations as Pakistan, where the Taliban are clearly supported.

At the July Group of Eight summit in Okinawa, Japan, Russian President Vladimir Putin made it a point to tell the other heads of states assembled there that Afghanistan has become a source of terrorism. In July, Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev warned the Taliban that if the government in Kabul continues to support Chechen rebels, Russia would seriously consider air strikes on Afghanistan.

The Bishkek Summit

At a hastily arranged summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on Aug. 20, the Presidents from Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan discussed their ongoing battle with “bandits,” as the guerrillas are called, that have entered the tri-junction area (see **Figure 1**) and have been waging war against government troops. In the joint statement that was issued, the Central Asian Presidents did not name Afghanistan as the source of “bandit formation,” but later, answering a reporter’s question, Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov said: “Afghanistan has become a training ground for terrorists. If the Afghans themselves were allowed to settle their problems, there would have been peace long ago. Geopolitical and strategic centers are continuing to add fuel to the fire of this war and the end is not in sight.”

President Karimov asserted that the Taliban get support not only from “friends next door” (a reference to Pakistan), but also from far away, and that he is not sure that peace will descend upon Afghanistan even if the Taliban take control of the whole country. He added that narco-money has provided the Taliban the flexibility to train Islamic militants from all over whose purpose in life is to spread their form of Islam far



Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's "Arc of Crisis" policy, to set Central and West Asia aflame with "Islamist" insurgencies in order to weaken the Soviet Union, perversely continues on auto-pilot today, threatening the Central Asian Republics. But this is now strengthening the hand of Russia's President Putin with the Central Asian leaders.

and beyond.

The problem President Karimov addressed is true. However, the isolation of the Taliban (only three countries recognize the Taliban regime: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has further worsened the situation. The Taliban regime has allowed opium production to proliferate (see box, "Afghan Drugs: Gold for the Taliban"), drug-traffickers to have bases, and Islamic *jihadis* to train, arm, and launch campaigns from Afghan soil.

The Rise of the Taliban

The rise of the Taliban occurred at a time when anarchy and lawlessness had taken over Afghanistan, with guerrilla "mujahideen" armies which had been equipped by the CIA and British Special Air Services (SAS) with modern armaments to fight the Soviet Red Army. The Soviet Army had retreated in 1989, and everybody forgot Afghanistan and its people. At that time, too, drug trafficking was rampant and the traffickers had begun to build networks through Central Asia to get drugs out. However, few complaints were heard at the international level against those Afghan regimes, although they have done immense damage to the body politic of Afghanistan through internecine warfare and institutionalizing the illicit trafficking of narcotics.

In 1994, when Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Talib from Kandahar, seized that city (see article in this section, "What Are the Taliban?") and hanged two mujahideen commanders for raping women, Afghans came out from their homes and cheered. A large number of mujahideen commanders switched sides immediately and backed the Taliban. They did so, not because they guessed that the Taliban would be the "winners" in the fratricidal war, but because the degeneracy of the seven West-backed Pakistan-based mujahideen groups

had made them angry.

The Taliban of Mullah Mohammad Omar do not represent a totally new phenomenon. During the anti-Soviet *jihad*, they constituted one of the most important sources of recruitment for mujahideen in the tribal areas. They were particularly prominent in two mujahideen groups: the Harakat-e-Inqilabe-Islami of Maulvi Mohammad Nabi Muhammadi, and the breakaway faction of the Hizb-e-Islami under Maulvi Yunus Khalis.

Those resistance commanders who operated from within Afghanistan had only the loosest links to the seven groups; their affiliation to the mujahideen groups was only for cash and weapons, provided by the CIA, Pakistan, and many Islamic nations. How bad did the situation become?

Robert Kaplan, a veteran journalist, wrote this description in the August issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*: "Thus when the Soviet-backed Afghan regime collapsed in Kabul, the capital, in 1992, Afghanistan became a writhing nest of petty warlords who fought and negotiated with one another for small chunks of territory. Girls and young boys were raped and traded between commanders. The situation was especially bad in Kandahar. The road leading to it from Quetta [capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province] was shared by at least 20 factions, each of which put a chain across the road and demanded tolls."

At the beginning, those who supported the Taliban, and who later became justifiably angry and enemies of the Taliban, claim they were "deceived" by the Pakistani intelligence agents who were behind the movement and had begun to send their people into the Taliban meetings.

While Kaplan's observation of the scene on the ground is accurate, there is more to why the Taliban came to power with international backing.

To focus on any single event over the tumultuous decade

FIGURE 1

The Central Asian Cauldron



from 1979-89, as being a turning point in Afghanistan, would be presumptuous. Most Afghan kings did not have control over the whole nation, and historically, Afghan society had fallen into fratricidal warfare from time to time. Although names such as Ahmed Shah Durrani or King Amanullah may rally the Pushtoon — a Pushto-speaking ethnic group which is a large majority in the country — it would not inspire the other ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, or Hazara Shias.

The Soviet Invasion

Still, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is an important inflection point. The resistance against the Soviet invasion, resistance armed and directed by Pakistan as well as Anglo-

American agencies, created the sweep of the Taliban through Afghanistan’s 12 million people.

When the Soviet Army marched into Afghanistan on Dec. 24, 1979, they did not fully realize how difficult the terrain is and how treacherous the roads would be. The other superpower, the United States, with full support from its Western allies, saw in it an opportunity to bleed the Russian bear. Pakistan’s relationship with the West had hit a rough spot when, in April 1979, President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, an Islamic zealot, had the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto hanged. But the Soviet invasion changed all that. Pakistan became a nation of pivotal import to the entire West and the Islamic nations. Overnight, the entire world, barring those

who were allies of the Soviet Union, adopted the mission of protecting “democracy” and “Islam” in Afghanistan. Pakistan became the conduit for all actions targeted to remove the Soviets from Afghanistan.

Quickly, Pakistan became the beneficiary of \$3.2 billion in economic and arms aid from the United States. This little *bakshish* (“thank you money”) was meant not only to forget and forgive President Zia-ul Haq for his obduracy, but also to ensure that Pakistan would play ball in Afghanistan.

As cash, arms, and fuel from the West and Saudi Arabia poured in, and heroin began to move out of the region toward the West, Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province, as it filled up with fleeing Afghan refugees, became the headquarters of the world’s premier non-communist intelligence communities—the CIA, British intelligence, and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) under Gen. Akhtar Abdurrahman. Arms-smuggling and drug networks were set up to augment the arms and money flow into Afghanistan to shore up the battling *jihadis* and also to corrupt and silence those who had qualms about various aspects of these operations. One of the seamier sides was the bringing in of convicted criminals from such Islamic nations as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan, among others, and their training with modern weapons in Pakistan to fight the Soviet troops.

Another important element was the theory, propagated by British Prof. Bernard Lewis and put into active policy form by President Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, to use “militant Islam” to cripple the Soviet Union. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 under Ruhollah Khomeini could not be exported beyond Iran’s geographical boundary, because Iran adheres to Shia Islam, whereas the majority in the nations of Central Asia, then a part of the Soviet Union, were Sunni Muslims. Brzezinski used the defense of Afghanistan to build up Sunni-based militant Islam. This, he argued, would be the cutting edge to dismantle the Soviet Union by creating an “Arc of Crisis” which would span from Iran to Myanmar, threatening the Soviet Union, China, and India.

Seven mujahideen groups were set up by the Pakistani ISI and U.S. intelligence in the Northwest Frontier Province to organize assaults on the Soviet troops. All these mujahideen groups got involved in the drug trade. Fake encounters were staged to “justify” to the taxpayers in the West that more money needed to be pumped into the Afghan cauldron. Propaganda in the Islamic countries and the West worked overtime to portray the “loyalty” and “nationalism” of these mujahideen groups when, in fact, moneymaking and drug-trafficking became increasingly the bottom line of their moral and political outlook.

Later, Vice President George Bush, whose earlier assignment as the head of the CIA provided him the vantage point from where he could exert overall control on the whole show, and Oliver North, took control of the drug money to push independent and unaccounted-for operations in South America without asking the U.S. taxpayers for additional

funds. This episode, which never fully saw the light of day because of the powerful people involved, came to be known as the Iran-Contra affair.

Why Taliban?

With the signing of the Geneva Agreement, which led to the withdrawal of the defeated Soviet troops in February 1989, a new dimension was added to the Afghan imbroglio. Kabul, and most of Afghanistan, were still under the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime. The mujahideen groups, still on their *jihad* to establish an “Islamic state,” began to fight each other for supremacy. The George Bush-Oliver North operations backed Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (see “What Are the Taliban?”), hoping to establish his control when the Najibullah regime collapsed. In August 1988, President Zia ul-Haq and his ISI chief, Gen. Akhtar Abdurrahman, were killed in a mysterious mid-air explosion inside Pakistan, and it seemed for a while that the West’s interest in Afghanistan would prevail. That ended in 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the fall of the Najibullah regime. It became evident at that point, that Afghanistan had lost the strategic position it had previously enjoyed as a buffer state, first between the Russian and British empires, and then between the Soviet and U.S. blocs.

The period 1992-94 was one of untold misery in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Afghanistan no longer a buffer state, its borders were opened up for trade subject to the conflicting interest of regional forces.

This situation gave rise to a new group of international interests. These include international oil companies, Islamic movements based in the Middle East (particularly Saudi Arabia), the United Nations, including both its political department and humanitarian agencies, and non-governmental organizations, both Western and Islamic.

The state with the closest ties and strongest links to Afghanistan is Pakistan, and it is generally supported in its policy by Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries. On the one hand, the Pushtoon chauvinism across the border, and Pushtoon nationalism within Pakistan, posed a threat to Islamabad of a “Greater Pushtoonistan,” which would fight to take almost half of Pakistan’s present territory.

In addition, Pakistan’s extreme insecurity on its eastern border vis-à-vis India, a much larger and more powerful neighbor, made it obvious to Islamabad that in order to provide a secured border in the west, it must embrace Afghanistan. This would provide Pakistan strategic depth and access to the newly independent nations of Central Asia. Pushtoon rule with a religious overtone, the kind that the Taliban represent, became an instrument of Pakistani influence, rather than a security threat.

In the creation of the Pakistani Taliban, who, later, with the help of Pakistani soldiers in Taliban garb, helped Mullah Mohammad Omar to grab power in Kabul, two Pakistani generals contributed immensely. Former ISI chief Lt. Gen.

Hamid Gul, who is close to both the CIA and British intelligence, travelled extensively within Afghanistan to bring field commanders under the Taliban banner. Gen. Nasirullah Babar was a minister in Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto-Zardari's Cabinet when she switched her support to the Taliban. In May 1997, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Foreign Minister, Gohar Ayub Khan, son of Pakistan's military dictator in the 1960s, flew to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif immediately after the Taliban captured that city, recognized the Taliban government, and announced that all other nations should follow suit, as "the civil war is now over."

Also interested in Afghan affairs, is Iran. It was Iran's efforts which combined most of the Shia parties in Herat, Afghanistan to form the "Hizb-e-Wahadat" in 1988, and pressed for Wahadat's participation in international negotiations heretofore dominated by the Sunni parties supported by Pakistan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. Today, Iran supports the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. There are reports of arms supplied by Tehran to Ahmed Shah Massoud's Alliance in northern Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries appear to have continued to fund much of Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan through official and unofficial channels. Until mid-1998, Saudi Arabia supplied heavily subsidized fuel to the Taliban through Pakistan, in addition to providing general funding. It is likely that support for the Taliban also fits into the Saudis' "religious rivalry" with Iran and long-term strategic cooperation with Pakistan. Some Saudi companies and individuals have interests in the various pipeline proposals under consideration.

The Osama bin Laden Factor

Saudi support to the Taliban has waned since 1998, perhaps because of Riyadh's concern about Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden, the man U.S. intelligence considers the most dangerous terrorist in the world, is one of the sons of a wealthy Saudi construction magnate. Saudi sources remember him as an ordinary young man whose intense religiosity emerged when he grew fascinated with the ancient holy mosques of Mecca and Medina.

With the blessing of the CIA and Saudi intelligence, and the active hand of the Ikhwan-al-Muslimeen, an international support network was set up. The hub of this informal network was established in Peshawar, Pakistan in the early 1980s through the "makhtab al-khadamaat" (Office of the Services), headed by a Jordanian, Abdullah Aezam, who was a close associate of bin Laden.

Bin Laden, in turn, founded the Bayt ul-Ansaar (House of Volunteers)—a foundation that recruited and financed Arab volunteers willing to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Though the number of these Arabs (known as "Afghan Arabs") were very few compared to the other nationalities fighting in Afghanistan, these militants not only brought with them their brand of Islam, but also took back home their combat experience in the name of *jihad*. These militants who went back

home to Saudi Arabia are dreaded by Riyadh.

Bin Laden himself bankrolled Afghan mujahideen guerrillas fighting the Soviets through the 1980s. With the help of an Iraqi engineer, Mohammad Saad, bin Laden blasted massive tunnels into the Zazi mountains of Paktia province to establish the resistance's hospitals and arms dumps, and cut a mujahideen trail across the country to within 15 miles of Kabul. It is this Paktia "bunker" that the United States tried to hit on Aug. 20, 1998, when it launched a missile attack from the Arabian Sea. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, bin Laden forged a special relationship with the Pakistani ISI. A U.S.-based newspaper, *Pakistan Today*, reported in its July 23, 1999 issue that bin Laden had contributed 1 billion Pakistani rupees in support of Nawaz Sharif in the 1997 elections.

Bin Laden's organization, Al-Qaeda, is reportedly a loosely bound group, which includes his Arab followers and former "freedom fighters" who fought in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda operatives have been accused of attacking American soldiers in Somalia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Afghan Drugs: Gold to the Taliban

by Ramtanu Maitra

In 1986, when the Soviet Red Army was struggling to gain control of Afghanistan, about 400 tons of opium were produced, accounting for almost 25% of the world's legal and illegal opium output. In 1999, a decade after the Red Army withdrew and seven years after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, Afghanistan, 70% under Taliban control, produced 4,600 tons of opium, accounting for 75% of the world's combined opium production. Furthermore, fully 97% of those 4,600 tons were produced in the areas under control of the Taliban "seekers of knowledge" (see **Table 1**).

There have been poppy fields in Afghanistan as far back as history can recall. Crimson poppies in the eastern part of Afghanistan, overflowing across the Durand Line into what

TABLE 1
Opium Production in Afghanistan
(Metric Tons)

Year	1986	1992	1996	1999
Afghanistan	400	640	1,230	4,600
World	159	3,389	4,100	7,300

Source: United Nations Drug Control Program.
1992 is the year that the Soviet Union ceased to exist.
1996 is the year that the Taliban got control of 70% of Afghanistan.
1999 is the year that opium production by the Taliban more than doubled.