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Afghanistan: From “War on Terror” to “War for Resources”

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Is the discourse of “war on terror” now being supplemented by “war for Profits?” Obviously, we would not find any US or Western official describing the war scene in Afghanistan as something now exclusively geared towards ensuring greater control over the country’s economic resources; yet, we often find officials mentioning the “crucial” importance of economic factors in bringing peace to the war-torn country. That ‘economic development’ is essential for blocking off the Taliban’s re-entry in Afghanistan’s politics is the argument is being used to somehow prolong the Western stay in the country. The objectives of the war seem to have changed from achieving military occupation to financial occupation of Afghanistan.

The debate on Afghanistan’s political future in the post 2014 scenario has, in the last year or so, been overshadowed by too much emphasis on the question of negotiating or not-negotiating with the Taliban, or on the possible strength of the residual force the US intends to leave behind. In other words, economic dimension of Afghanistan’s future, apparently, seems to be out of the picture. However, a closer look at the ground realities show that much of the war effort has now turned, at least in official circles, towards “forward deployment” of industries to exploit Afghanistan’s untapped natural resources—the raw material—and use them to produce things of strategic importance. This issue is as much crucial for the US and its allies as for the Taliban.

Now, the central problem, as such, is not merely who would rule Afghanistan (Taliban/Pashtun, non-Pashtun groups, or a coalition?), but also how the government, howsoever formed, would

sustain the Western installed system to maintain hegemonic control over resources, especially once the forces withdraw. It is obvious that no economy can sustain itself by relying on aid alone; and, in case of Afghanistan, time is approaching fast for a virtual replacement of mere aid assistance by large scale investments. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the US government has already started ‘advising’ the Afghan government on how to properly craft contracts for exploration/exploitation of mineral resources. Needless to say, it is of utmost importance that this natural wealth is translated into monetary wealth to be utilized for national development. But, how this happens and who does it are also important questions to be considered.

That the common people of Afghanistan would hardly benefit from such ‘intended’ development is evident from the fact that a significantly large segment of Afghanistan is actually doing well economically. This, however, is very ironical; for, it is the US invasion and its deliberately designed policy of encouraging opium cultivation that has made many people “prosperous”—hence the question: why would people leave a profession that has given them and will continue to give them huge profits? The extent of the success of opium business can be assessed from the following facts. According to a UNODC report of 2013, opium production contributes almost 7 to 8% of total GDP of Afghanistan; however, this figure does not tell the whole story. The actual contribution seems to be much higher because the foreign exchange earned from opium exports is not included in the balance of payments in Afghanistan, which diminishes the Central Bank’s monetary control. In addition to it, UNODC report has also predicted an increase in the production of opium, and by default, its increased and unreported contribution to Afghan economy as well. The question of drug trafficking assumes even more importance when we take into account another factor, that is, the role this war has played in generating cash earnings through drug trade in Western markets. The actual amount of money earned is well in excess of \$200 billion a year. How is then the opium trade going to be replaced by resource trade is yet not clear, nor is the question of broadening the base of Afghanistan’s economy across other sectors.

The success and the expected spread of the opium business, as such, is a reflection of what is happening in Afghanistan. While the international investors from various countries continue to invest huge sums of money in mineral sector under the US’ security umbrella, the rural Afghanistan largely remains engaged in the opium cultivation. In other words, this section of the Afghan society has no reason to bother about what the US and its allies are doing with the mineral and mining sectors, or what they are exploiting to sustain their own industries at home.

On the other hand, as a prelude to a longer stay in Afghanistan, the US media houses such as the New York Times have been heaping up reports declaring Afghanistan as “Saudi Arabia of Lithium.” This, in reality, is not only a sign of the extent of wealth the country possesses, but also an indication of its vulnerability to the exploitations of the West, which now aims to compensate its losses in the war through cheap exploitation of the resource wealth of Afghanistan. Not only this; if Afghanistan remains too much dependent upon its natural wealth alone, it might very well have to rely heavily upon imports from the West for meeting other needs and necessities. This would have the effect of drying up its natural wealth in exchange for costly imports. It is for this reason that we have to tread cautiously, given the fact that countries largely depending upon natural resources as the major source of wealth do not happen to be so democratic and developed as other countries do. In other words, economic future of Afghanistan is, unlike the Western projections, going to be not so much different in terms of the actual benefit

that the Afghans themselves could have from this wealth.

It is obvious that the Afghans do not have enough resources at hand to extract these resources and utilize these for economic purposes by converting them into finished goods. Under such conditions, it is the “foreign” companies that are going to completely manipulate and control this business for years to come. And, as a matter of fact, it is again those very countries’ companies which had previously occupied Afghanistan, and are now ‘advising’ the Afghan government on drawing up mining contracts in order to ‘ensure protection of local communities and the environment.’ Even the necessary legislation for regulating mining industry is being enacted under the shadow of ‘foreign powers.’

The United Kingdom government has expressed its full support for the law which has been stranded in the Afghan Parliament for months now. This law is, again, very controversial. According to a published report of Global Witness, A Shaky Foundation, this law does not include safeguards against corruption and imposes no ban on the usage of the mineral wealth either by independent militias or the Afghan National Army. The report also mentions that some militias have already been benefiting from chromite and other resources. Besides it, the law also provides no procedure of publishing details of small contracts, thereby allowing the government to manipulate mining sector through small contracts and thus divert its potential benefits away from public sector development. This law also seems to allow, the report mentions, the mining firms unlimited use of water, which again is likely to sow seeds of conflict in an arid country where even small streams of water are zealously guarded. It is perhaps because of these flaws within the Afghan legislative and administrative framework that even before the start of mining work, reports of conflict and corruption have already started to come. It has been reported (a recent report from Integrity Watch Afghanistan) that Local police commanders in eastern Kunar have been extracting chromite without licenses, but with foreign help.

Besides these crucial external factors, there are other political aspects, essentially internal to Afghanistan, which have to be considered as well. Given the extremely fragile politico-economic conditions, it would not be wrong to reason that the tussle between the Taliban and anti-Taliban groups can, at any stage in future, possibly turn into ‘resource tussle’—an altogether new reason for civil war—as a means of capturing central power. There can be no doubt in that the exploitation of minerals is essential for triggering forces of economic activity; and, perhaps it is for this very reason that the Afghan Taliban, realizing the importance of this factor, did ‘inform’ the UK Government, through some undeclared sources, of their willingness to support the development of mining sector as a means of wrangling Afghans from “tentacles of poverty.” As such, the possibilities of the Taliban taking control of resource rich areas after the withdrawal of NATO forces, and the possibility of the consequent internal conflict cannot be ruled out.

It is increasingly becoming clear that the geo-politics of the Afghan war is gradually turning into geo-economics. Not only have countries started making heavy investments in the mining sector, but also have started influencing the making of laws for regulating this sector, thereby paving the way for influencing politics of Afghanistan. One can only wonder what the Afghans would reap out of this ‘new’ form of tentacles of influences being deliberately installed both at the central/national and sub-national/regional level either through the central government or through militias. Realizing the complexities of the Afghan conflict, it would thus be an oversimplification

to state that the conflict is coming to a halt; rather, it is assuming a new form in the Afghan context.