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America's New Asian Quagmire Graveyard of Empires

By Tom Burghardt

Global Research, February 7, 2009

With the situation on the ground rapidly deteriorating, U.S. imperialism's South Asian adventure is going off the rails.

The New York Times [reported](#) February 4 that supplies "intended for NATO forces in Afghanistan were suspended Tuesday after Taliban militants blew up a highway bridge in the Khyber Pass region, a lawless northwestern tribal area straddling the border with Afghanistan."

The 30-yard-long iron bridge, located 15 miles northwest of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) provincial capital, Peshawar, a thriving metropolis of several million people, was a major supply route ferrying some 80 percent of NATO supplies into Afghanistan.

Tuesday's attacks were followed-up Wednesday when insurgents torched 10 supply trucks returning from Afghanistan, the *Los Angeles Times* [reported](#). Supplies destined for NATO forces in Afghanistan--primarily food and fuel--are trucked through Pakistan by local contractors. Many are now refusing to drive the circuitous route through the Khyber

Pass because of the dangerous conditions.

As *Asia Times* [reported](#) January 29, Peshawar "is the commercial, economic, political and cultural capital of the Pashtuns in Pakistan." Increasingly, it is morphing into a major power center for jihadists--on both sides of the border.

Peshawar and its surrounds are also now the epicenter for the Taliban and other militants in their struggle not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan but also in their bid to establish a base from which to wage an "end-of-time battle" that would stretch all the way to the Arab heartlands of Damascus and Palestine. (Syed Saleem Shahzad, "On the Militant Trail, Part 1: A battle before a battle," *Asia Times Online*, January 29, 2009)

With kidnappings--whether by militants or criminal gangs--and beheadings on the rise, the city is cloaked in fear. Residents believe "a major showdown" between the state and the jihadists "is imminent."

Daily Times [reported](#) February 4 that the "Talibanization" of Orakzai Agency near Peshawar has accelerated to such an extent that local people have fled the area to "escape Taliban-style rule." *Daily Times* avers,

Orakzai, which borders Kurram in the west and Hangu district in the east, provides a means to the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to expand its influence to Peshawar through Khyber Agency. The organization has already made its presence in the region known by attacking truck terminals for Afghanistan-bound supplies for NATO and US forces. Despite government attempts to block their infiltration, the Taliban recently celebrated their "complete control" over the region by inviting a group of journalists to the area in a show of power. (Abdul Saboor Khan, "Orakzai becomes a new have for Taliban," *Daily Times*, February 4, 2009)

Pakistani officials told the *New York Times* "it was not immediately clear how soon the trucks carrying crucial supplies for NATO forces would be able to travel through the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan."

Meanwhile, in a further setback for U.S. regional plans, *The Guardian* [reported](#) February 3, that the Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet Republic, was threatening to close the U.S. airbase of Manas "a key staging post for coalition forces fighting in nearby Afghanistan."

Both US and Nato commanders have expressed dismay at the possible closure.

It comes at a time when Nato is desperately trying to expand its supply routes to Afghanistan via the northern countries of central Asia following a series of devastating attacks on truck convoys from Pakistan. (Luke Harding, "Closure of US base in Kyrgyzstan could alter Afghanistan strategy," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2009)

In an echo of the 19th century "Great Game" for the control of Central Asia by Czarist

Russia and Imperial Britain, Russia has been pressuring Kurmanbek Bakiyev's authoritarian regime to expel the Americans, viewed as a destabilizing power in the region.

The expulsion of U.S. forces from the Manas airbase would be a blow to U.S. efforts to control vital routes of licit and illicit cargo--including the booming heroin trade--and would follow a similar expulsion from Uzbekistan in 2006 following a deal between Moscow and the Uzbek kleptocracy run by President Islam Karimov.

The Kyrgyz Parliament is expected to vote next week on a measure to expel the Americans from Manas. The "loss of the base would present a significant problem for the Obama administration," *The New York Times* [reported](#) February 5. The *Times* averred, "About 15,000 personnel and 500 tons of cargo pass through Manas each month. The base is also the home of large tanker aircraft that are used for in-air refueling of fighter planes on combat missions over Afghanistan."

But behind the posturing over money and loans to the impoverished Central Asian nation, the Russian government is expecting a *quid pro quo* from the Obama administration if the U.S. is allowed to continue to use Manas as a launching pad into Afghanistan. In a move designed to pressure the U.S., the Russians are playing hardball, seeking concessions from the administration to scrap planned "missile defense" facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic, viewed by Moscow as a first strike weapon.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. imperialism and their NATO partners have encircled Russia with a string of bases in Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus in tandem with the eastward expansion of NATO. Additionally, the CIA, Britain's MI6 as well as Pakistan's ISI have fueled the on-again, off-again "Islamist" insurgency in Chechnya; a move designed to hasten the disintegration of the Russian Federation into docile statelets aligned with the United States--a familiar playbook used in the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia.

With the Obama administration banking on a favorable outcome in Afghanistan as the United States ramps-up military operations, doubling American forces to some 60,000 troops within twelve months, the prospects for resupplying those troops without Russian cooperation are grim.

The Washington Post [reported](#) February 4 that "newly installed officials describe a situation on the ground that is far more precarious than they had anticipated." On Monday, *The Independent* [averred](#) that the situation on the ground in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan is particularly unnerving for NATO operations.

During Operation Kapcha Salaam or "Cobra Salute," a joint British and Afghan army offensive that included heavy armor and warplanes, soldiers were under near continuous attack by insurgents firing rockets, heavy mortars and detonating sophisticated roadside bombs. According to *The Independent*, insurgent ranks were filled with Pakistani and Chechen militants. The fighting has taken a heavy toll on Afghan citizens. *The*

Independent revealed,

Outside Koshtay, Haji Mohammed Amin came up to complain that "Taliban and bandits" were preying on residents. "They come at night and ask us to feed them, sometimes they ask for money; they are not Afghans, they are Pakistanis. We have had 30 years of war and it still continues. Where is our government? Why don't they help us? We hardly have enough to eat." Another, Ahmed Jan, complained: "This is our land, we need this land to live. And you and the Taliban are using it to fight your wars. We want to be left in peace. You are here but then you will go away and the Taliban will come back." (Kim Sengupta, "Under fire in the Afghan badlands," *The Independent*, February 2, 2009)

If the U.S. administration has its way, there won't be peace any time soon. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a Bush holdover, told Congress last week that the war would be a "long slog" with an uncertain outcome. But if history is a predictor of future events, it may not be a pretty finale for imperialism--or the people of South Asia.

While top Obama administration officials and Pentagon bureaucrats are relying on the government of President Asif Ali Zadari to stabilize the situation on Pakistan's side of the border, reports indicate that the ISI continue to fund and advise various proxy armies.

The *Los Angeles Times* [revealed](#) February 3, that Afghan security officials had broken up a suicide bombing cell in the capital, Kabul, and that the 17 men arrested were believed "to be affiliated with a Pakistan-based militant group known as the Haqqani network and that the cell's ringleader was a Pakistani national."

Although relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have "warmed considerably" since Zadari took over the reins from the despised Musharraf regime according to the *L.A. Times*, the ISI's policy of seeking "strategic depth" over geopolitical rival India by controlling a compliant Afghan client state has not changed, despite billions of dollars in U.S. military and "counterterrorism" assistance showered on the Army and ISI.

The spy agency's long-standing ties to the Haqqani network, led by veteran Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, were spotlighted last year when U.S. intelligence backed up Afghan authorities' assertion that the ISI had aided the group in its bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July. That attack killed nearly 60 people. (M. Karim Faiez and Laura King, "Suicide Bombing Ring Is Brought Down in Afghanistan, Officials Say," *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2009)

With a two month deadline tied to an April 3 NATO summit, the Pentagon is scrambling to come come up with a comprehensive strategy. It won't be an easy sell for America's NATO partners, outraged by orders from NATO's commander, U.S. General John Craddock, to kill opium dealers.

Protected Drug Trade and American Hypocrisy

In a bid to import the Iraqi "surge strategy" into Afghanistan, the United States is fielding armed militias to fight the Taliban, the *Associated Press* [reported](#).

Afghanistan's interior minister announced the program had begun with the U.S. "paying for all aspects" including "buying Kalashnikov automatic rifles for members of the Afghan Public Protection Force," modeled after the American-sponsored Awakening Councils in Iraq. A skeptical Afghan official told the *Associated Press*, "only criminals would join because most citizens wouldn't want to face the Taliban in combat."

But perhaps this is precisely the intent of the program; to wrest control of the lucrative heroin trade from unreliable elements beholden to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who allegedly derive \$100 million a year from the global drug trade. What better means to disrupt the "Islamist" insurgency than to grant U.S.-allied criminals and warlords a piece of the action.

In this context, Craddock's orders are all the more ironic when one considers that the forces currently battering NATO in Afghanistan grew rich during the 1980s when Washington turned a blind-eye to drug networks they themselves encouraged as a means to wound their Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union.

According to scholar Alfred W. McCoy, "During the 1980s CIA covert operations in Afghanistan transformed southern Asia from a self-contained opium zone into a major supplier of heroin for the world market." As a cat's paw for imperialism, the ISI doled out funds, weapons and expertise to far-right militants such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Coming to prominence as a thug who attacked communist students and infamously threw acid into the faces of unveiled women at Kabul University during the 1970s, Hekmatyar was a major narco trafficker--and darling of the CIA and their ISI partners in crime. McCoy writes,

As the ISI's mujaheddin clients used their new CIA munitions to capture prime agricultural areas in Afghanistan during the early 1980s, the guerrillas urged their peasant supporters to grow poppies, thereby doubling the country's opium harvest to 575 tons between 1982 and 1983. Once these mujaheddin elements brought the opium across the border, they sold it to Pakistani heroin refiners who operated under the protection of General Fazle Huq, governor of the North-West Frontier province. By 1988, there were an estimated 100 to 200 heroin refineries in the province's Khyber district alone. Trucks from the Pakistan army's National Logistics Cell (NLC) arriving with CIA arms from Karachi often returned loaded with heroin--protected by ISI papers from police search. (*The Politics of Heroin, CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991, pp. 453-454)

The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* [revealed](#) January 28 that "top NATO commander John Craddock wants the alliance to kill opium dealers, without proof of connection to the insurgency. NATO commanders, however, do not want to follow the

order."

In a classified document leaked to *Der Spiegel*, Craddock issued a "guidance" providing NATO troops with the authority "to attack directly drug producers and facilities throughout Afghanistan." In other words, the United States wants to widen the free-fire zone that already exists, one directly responsible for thousands of civilian casualties. *Der Spiegel* reports,

According to the document, deadly force is to be used even in those cases where there is no proof that suspects are actively engaged in the armed resistance against the Afghanistan government or against Western troops. It is "no longer necessary to produce intelligence or other evidence that each particular drug trafficker or narcotics facility in Afghanistan meets the criteria of being a military objective," Craddock writes. (Susanne Koelbl, "NATO High Commander Issues Illegitimate Order to Kill," *Spiegel Online*, January 28, 2009)

German NATO General Egon Ramms and other European commanders are refusing to "deviate from the current rules of engagement for attacks," a move that has outraged Craddock. Considered a loyal Bushist who "fears that he could be replaced by the new US president," Craddock is threatening to remove any commander who doesn't toe the new party line and "follow his instructions to go after the drug mafia."

But here as elsewhere, things aren't always what they seem. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that General Craddock, under pressure from the Obama administration's new anti-Karzai policy, particularly now that Washington is eyeing newer, more compliant "provincial allies" in the Afghan Public Protection Force will target *some* narco traffickers--those in Karzai's orbit--while handing their new "best friends forever," Afghan warlords and Pakistani "businessmen," the lucrative opium concession.

As Peter Dale Scott documented in *Drugs, Oil and War*, "conscious decisions were definitely made, time after time, to ally the United States with local drug proxies." In Central- and South Asia such "drug proxies" and the financial institutions which served powerful political, intelligence and military interests such as the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) and that institution's shadowy "Black Network," helped transform the Afghan mujaheddin into al-Qaeda.

While espousing an overt Islamist discourse, al-Qaeda and their various affiliates continued to serve Western intelligence agencies as disposable assets used in various destabilization operations in Europe, the Middle East and Asia during the 1990s and today. While "the routes shifted with the politics of the times," Scott writes, "the CIA denominator remained constant."

Absurd? Consider this. When the U.S. Army's Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (known as Delta Force) "brought down" Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel in the early 1990s, they relied on *other* narco trafficking cartels, notably the larger and more

profitable Cali Cartel run by the Orejuela brothers, Gilberto Rodríguez and Miguel Rodríguez, to get the job done.

We now know with last year's release of declassified CIA and U.S. Embassy documents by the National Security Archive that this was indeed the case. More importantly, the documents provided confirmation that CIA "anti-narcotics interdiction efforts" did not target the drug trade *per se*, but only those criminal gangs who ran afoul of wider U.S. geostrategic interests in resource rich Colombia.

In other words, U.S. policy in the area amounted to a *protected drug traffic* for allies engaged in anti-left counterinsurgency operations. While U.S. Special Operations Command and the CIA were targeting Escobar's Medellín cartel, they were directly collaborating with a death squad that later morphed into the Colombian Army-allied paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). Founded by major international narcotrafficker Carlos Castaño, the AUC were close political allies of the Orejuela brothers and the man who would later become Colombia's president, Alvaro Uribe.

The parallels between these two resource rich regions couldn't be more striking. Pakistani investigative journalist Ahmed Rashid described a similar pattern when the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan began in 2001.

The Pentagon had a list of twenty-five or more drug labs and warehouses in Afghanistan but refused to bomb them because some belonged to the CIA's new NA [Northern Alliance] allies. The United States told its British allies that the war on terrorism had nothing to do with counter-narcotics. Instead, drug lords were fêted by the CIA and asked if they had any information about Osama bin Laden. Thus, the United States sent the first and clearest message to the drug lords: that they would not be targeted. (*Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, New York: Viking, 2008, pp. 320-321)

Under America's ever so tolerant counterterrorist regional strategy, Afghanistan produced a staggering 8,700 metric tons of opium and now accounts for 92% of global opium production, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) in their 2008 World Drug Report.

Meanwhile, as the Obama administration and the Pentagon prepare a major military escalation in the region and the Taliban expand their writ, "efforts to stem cultivation of opium poppies and the narcotics trade that lines Taliban and government pockets," the *Washington Post* reports, "have made little discernible progress."

Rather, such "efforts" on the part of NATO allies and Islamist adversaries alike presage a strategic battle for control over the multibillion dollar heroin market. Whoever "wins," the people of South Asia will certainly suffer the consequences.

