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## Afghanistan: All About Oil?

By: Alan Bock  
3/23/2009

After my column last week on Afghanistan was published I got an exasperated e-mail from my old friend Dave Redick, who has a fair amount of potentially pro-freedom activity underway, complaining that he had Googled the piece for the words "oil" and "pipeline" and found nary a mention. Because of that lack, he figured I had missed the real reason we *Americanos* want to be involved in Afghanistan and was wasting my time and peoples' attention discussing phony issues like the Taliban, al-Qaeda, supply problems, negotiations, and Afghan governance, the sort of things those really pulling the strings want us rubes to discuss while we ignore the real issues. So I thought the subject deserved more attention.

I must admit that I worry less about oil (and natural gas) than some people as a cause of war, but it would be foolish to deny that it plays a role in a world that runs (for the most part and for a good time to come, even – or perhaps especially – if the government subsidizes various kinds of "green" energy sources) on fossil fuels. And there is certainly a strong oil and natural gas issue that has been connected to Afghanistan for a long time, not because the country has especially notable resources (it doesn't), but because of its geographic location. It's just that I think about the relationship between war and oil a little differently than a lot of people do.

For that very reason, however, further discussion might not be out of line, because thinking sensibly about natural resources, it seems to me, provides yet another solid reason to avoid unnecessary foreign wars, a category that includes most of our most recent wars and those we are contemplating today.

The relationship between fossil fuels and Afghanistan has been written about extensively, just not that much by me. Afghanistan, a landlocked country, has essentially negligible petrochemical resources, but there are vast oil and natural gas fields in Central Asia to the north, notably in

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. Getting those fuels to American, Western European, and even Asian markets requires vast pipelines. The Russians have some infrastructure in place that gets natural gas in particular to Western Europe via pipelines in Ukraine – through which Russia occasionally holds Europe hostage, just to remind us that it can and to keep Ukraine, Georgia, et al. from getting too frisky.

That situation alone is enough for various people to think about alternate pipeline routes from the Caspian basin, but all have potential problems. You could run one through Iran, but Iran hasn't exactly been buddy-buddy with the United States and some European countries lately. A more northerly route to the West, across the Black Sea and possibly terminating in Turkey, is in development, but it involves 12 different countries, not all of which are models of stability. That leaves Afghanistan as a likely possibility. In 1996 the Central Asian Gas Pipeline Inc. was formed as a consortium led by Unocal and Saudi Arabia to build a 900-mile, \$2 billion pipeline to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Pakistan's natural gas grid, connecting in Quetta. Unocal had also considered a 1,000-mile, million-barrel-per-day oil pipeline to transit Afghanistan and end at a Pakistani Arabian Sea port. Unocal and the consortium actually negotiated with the Taliban, which ruled Afghanistan in the late 1990s, over routes, concessionary payments, and the like. But the oil people were concerned about ongoing civil conflict in Afghanistan. Even if 9/11 had not happened, it is doubtful whether the pipeline would ever have been built.

I know I'm simplifying, but I hope I'm not exaggerating or caricaturing too much when I suggest that the usual "it's all about oil" argument goes something like this. To get that pipeline built, it was/is necessary to invade, quash the unfriendly/uncooperative elements, and install a puppet government willing to do the bidding of the international oil consortium and facilitate building the pipeline and protecting it from saboteurs and other unpleasant types.

To which I can only say, both with regard to the Afghan pipeline and the oil industry in general in Iraq, eight years on: "How's that working out?"

David Kilcullen, an Australian counterinsurgency guru who is said to have briefed both Barack Obama and John McCain during the campaign last year and is considered one of the strategists behind the "surge" in Iraq, has recently published a book, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, that explains some of the reasons the U.S. "should avoid such interventions wherever possible, simply because the costs are so high and the benefits so doubtful." Among the many problems is that U.S. intervention provokes a backlash that leads many who would never have considered doing so otherwise to become "accidental guerrillas." The process begins with "infection" as al-Qaeda establishes a presence, followed by "contagion," followed by U.S. intervention, which leads to rejection of the occupiers by local populations that prior to intervention had been neutral or even favorably inclined toward the U.S.

Thus U.S. intervention, far from creating stability in which a puppet government can placidly do Unocal's bidding, is more likely to increase instability and spark more violent insurgent activity. So if the oil companies are rational, the last thing they would want would be aggressive U.S. intervention into oil-sensitive regions. One should never underestimate the capacity of people to undertake irrational projects that reduce rather than increase their chances of success, so there

may be some oil industry people who still think that heavy U.S. military and foreign-aid intervention into and management of resource-rich regions is just the ticket. It may be that Dick Cheney thought he was doing his buddies in the oil industry a favor with the invasion of Iraq, but such thinking is shortsighted and ultimately incorrect.

David Henderson, who teaches economics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey (and of course writes for Antiwar.com) has done the most extensive research and writing that points to the idea that U.S. military intervention into oil-producing regions is not only not necessary, it is counterproductive in terms of acquiring "cheap oil." When you factor in even some of the costs of military deployment, not just in terms of peoples' lives but taxpayer dollars, the oil is not cheap at all. And it's utterly unnecessary. Oil-rich regions may have unpleasant regimes – indeed there are factors in a single-resource economy that make it likely – but at the end of the day they have more reason to sell the oil than customers have to buy it from them (considering that no one country has a monopoly on petroleum, even with OPEC). So the best strategy for acquiring (relatively) cheap oil is commercial negotiation rather than military intervention, which not only raises the effective price but spreads anti-Americanism and makes the world a more dangerous place for Americans traveling or doing business abroad.

Now I wouldn't mind at all if pipelines were built across Afghanistan. I don't think either pipelines or the oil industry itself are inherently evil, and I believe economically viable "green" energy is at least decades away.

Without U.S. intervention and attempted dominance, there might be enough civil unrest and disquiet to make pipelines transiting the country such a risky proposition that they would not get done, though spreading bribes around among the tribes whose territory would be affected might well ease the way. Even if some oil executives might think otherwise, however, using U.S. military force to try to stabilize Afghanistan enough to allow pipelines to be built and protected is a fool's errand. It might be an effective antiwar propaganda trope to argue that no U.S. military personnel should be put in harm's way to benefit arrogant multinational oil companies, which is certainly true. If the oil companies think such intervention will clear the way for them, however, I think they are profoundly mistaken.

The issues I discussed last week and in previous columns also militate against U.S. escalation in Afghanistan. So whether one's concern is facilitating transportation and distribution of oil or natural gas or keeping al-Qaeda isolated and unable to carry out attacks – and even whether either or both of those issues are phony ones the behind-the-scenes war whoopers want us poor rubes to focus on – escalating U.S. military intervention in south Asia is a bad idea, and reducing it would be far more constructive.