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The allure of Afghanistan

By Pepe Escobar

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Asian powers jostle for position amid vast mineral reserves and strategic oil pipelines, while West keeps bombing...

Afghanistan is not often perceived as a mineral Holy Grail.

But, as it turns out, between \$1-3 trillion in mineral wealth lies unexplored across the Hindu Kush. There's enough uranium, lithium, copper and iron ore to potentially turn Afghanistan into a commodities powerhouse.

The Pentagon knows all about it - how could it not? And the Russians have known about it since at least the 1970s, when they mapped out all the uranium riches of northern Afghanistan.

Washington may have complex geopolitical energy reasons to remain in Afghanistan - as explored in a previous Al Jazeera article that generated enormous reader response.

For its part, Islamabad is still obsessed with viewing Afghanistan as a pliable satrap. But the going gets much juicier when one looks at key Eurasian players such as Russia, India and China and their own, non-Pentagonised reasons to come to this mineral Walhalla.

Business suits, not bombs

Early next month a crucial bidding war begins in Kabul. It concerns Hajigak, the world's biggest iron ore deposits, which are located in central Afghanistan (at least 1.8bn tons, according to a Soviet estimate made in the 1960s). To the sound of much predictable Taliban grumbling, all 15 bidding companies are from India - including giants Tata Steel and JSW, the country's third-largest private steel company.

A stable, business-friendly Afghanistan is absolutely essential for India - a gateway to oil and gas from Iran, Central Asia and the Caspian. India is building power stations and strategic roads, such as the one linking Afghanistan with the Iranian port of Chahbahar.

Few may know it, but it's not only Africa that is the object of a fierce India-China business "war". Afghanistan is also a key chessboard. There are five types of minerals on the Afghan horizon - gold, copper, iron ore, and inevitably, oil and gas - and the Indians and the Chinese are all over them.

China Metallurgical Corporation already got a big prize in 2008 - the Aynak copper mine in Logar, southeast of Kabul - for \$3.4bn. Why? Because Western companies were asleep at the wheel (or paranoid with "security"); because the Chinese wasted no time; and, according to the Afghan Ministry of Mines, "because of their package" (in characteristic Chinese style, that includes building a whopping \$6bn railway connecting northern Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan with western China).

Kabul will get up to \$350m a year in royalties. At least 5,000 jobs will be created, with added benefits such as health clinics, roads and schools. Security may indeed be a huge problem; there's a war going on and safe transit routes are a mirage. But as war-weary Afghans are poignantly stressing, that's already a start.

The business track in Afghanistan now runs parallel to the political track.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari visited Tehran twice within only three weeks. He had two face-to-face meetings with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The House of Saud, to put it mildly, freaked out.

After all, this Islamabad-Tehran lovefest totally smashes the myth that the so-called "Shia crescent" is the greatest threat to Sunnis in the Middle East and South Asia.

Washington, predictably, was also hardly fond of it. The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq can be seen as an attempt by the US to encircle Iran from both east and west (that's certainly Tehran's view), and Washington believed Pakistan would play the same role on Iran's southeast border.

In a fascinating exchange that must have choked many a throat across the Potomac, Khamenei told Zardari that Pakistan's "real enemy" was the West, "and the US on top of it", while Zardari told Khamenei that Iran was a "model of resistance and path to progress". What next? Karachi taxis sporting Khomeini magnets?

But the most fascinating part is that Tehran and Islamabad are now discussing not only security matters but also business, such as an upcoming free-trade agreement and a currency swap scheme that would move both countries away from the US dollar.

On the security front, Islamabad has proposed what would be an Integrated Border Management Regime - that is, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan fighting together against drug trafficking. That also happens to be Russia's number-one priority in Central and South Asia. Over twelve tonnes of pure heroin - that's over 3bn single doses - reach Russia every year from Afghanistan.

On the business front, it was all about the crucial Pipelineistan gambit, the Iran-Pakistan (IP), also known as the "peace pipeline". IP may supply as much as 50 per cent of Pakistan's energy needs.

There are delays, of course. By the end of 2012, Iran will have built its whole stretch of pipeline up to the Pakistani border. Yet Pakistan will only start working on its own stretch by early 2012.

But by 2015 IP should be online, forming a strategic umbilical cord between Shia Iran and majority-Sunni Pakistan and rocking the Eurasian geopolitical equation. IP will cross ultra-strategic Balochistan, which is not only dripping with resources but which also, as a transit corridor, provides the shortest access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea.

Iran and Pakistan as allies?

So look for another unintended consequence of Washington's obsession with the war on terror: Iran and Pakistan as increasingly close allies. One can already foresee Tehran sharing on-the-ground intelligence with Islamabad on Washington's myriad covert ops inside Pakistani territory.

Another unintended consequence - unthinkable only two or three years ago - is that now Tehran, which is tremendously influential in northwest Afghanistan, views the Taliban the Mullah Omar way: as an indigenous "national resistance" movement against US/NATO occupation and perpetual military bases. Moreover, Tehran is also in sync with Islamabad in their support for the wily Hamid Karzai, who has increasingly distanced himself from Washington.

There are huge problems, of course. Although Zardari told Khamenei that Islamabad supports Karzai and an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process, hardly any progress can be made without a substantial reversal of Pakistan's official Afghan policy, which considers Afghanistan as little more than "strategic depth" in a confrontation with India, and which does everything to contain India's influence in Afghanistan.

Moreover, regional priorities differ. Moscow worries about its own "war on drugs," wants NATO out of its backyard, and does not want US military bases in Afghanistan. Beijing worries about the Taliban influencing the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Tehran will keep cultivating its privileged relationship with Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks - and not Pashtuns.

What is certain is that any unilateral Made-in-USA road map for Afghanistan, of the "surge, bribe and stay" variety, is doomed to failure without input from these key Eurasian players.

Tragedy aside, the US/NATO war in Afghanistan is now seriously flirting with surrealism - witness the Taliban's accusation that the West hacked their website, their phones, their emails and spread false rumours of Mullah Omar's death. Forget about "medieval towelheads on hash"; these are iPhone-friendly Taliban who tweet and post on Facebook - and command quite a following. Unsurprisingly, gloomy war-machine NATO "declines to comment".

It will be fascinating to watch what schemes the House of Saud will concoct to smash the new business-friendly Tehran-Islamabad axis; after all, Saudi Arabia essentially treats Pakistan as a sort of political/economic annex.

But not as fascinating as watching which Russian, Chinese and Indian companies will make a killing off of Afghanistan's mineral wealth while the Atlanticist West bomb themselves to irrelevancy.