

News Columnists

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These wars are about oil, not democracy

PARIS -- The ugly truth behind the Iraq and Afghanistan wars finally has emerged.

Four major western oil companies, Exxon Mobil, Shell, BP and Total are about to sign U.S.-brokered no-bid contracts to begin exploiting Iraq's oil fields. Saddam Hussein had kicked these firms out three decades ago when he nationalized Iraq's oil industry. The U.S.-installed Baghdad regime is welcoming them back.

Iraq is getting back the same oil companies that used to exploit it when it was a British colony.

As former fed chairman Alan Greenspan recently admitted, the Iraq war was all about oil. The invasion was about SUV's, not democracy.

Afghanistan just signed a major deal to launch a long-planned, 1,680-km pipeline project expected to cost \$8 billion. If completed, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) will export gas and later oil from the Caspian basin to Pakistan's coast where tankers will transport it to the West.

The Caspian basin located under the Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakkstan, holds an estimated 300 trillion cubic feet of gas and 100-200 billion barrels of oil. Securing the world's last remaining known energy El Dorado is a strategic priority for the western powers.

But there are only two practical ways to get gas and oil out of land-locked Central Asia to the sea: Through Iran, or through Afghanistan to Pakistan. Iran is taboo for Washington. That leaves Pakistan, but to get there, the planned pipeline must cross western Afghanistan, including the cities of Herat and Kandahar.

PIPELINE DEAL

In 1998, the Afghan anti-Communist movement Taliban and a western oil consortium led by the U.S. firm Unocal signed a major pipeline deal. Unocal lavished money and attention on the Taliban, flew a senior delegation to Texas, and hired a minor Afghan official, Hamid Karzai.

Enter Osama bin Laden. He advised the unworldly Taliban leaders to reject the U.S. deal and got them to accept a better offer from an Argentine consortium. Washington was furious and, according to some accounts, threatened the Taliban with war.

In early 2001, six or seven months before 9/11, Washington made the decision to invade Afghanistan, overthrow the Taliban, and install a client regime that would build the energy pipelines. But Washington still kept sending money to the Taliban until four months before 9/11 in an effort to keep it "on side" for possible use in a war against China.

The 9/11 attacks, about which the Taliban knew nothing, supplied the pretext to invade Afghanistan. The initial U.S. operation had the legitimate objective of wiping out Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida. But after its 300 members fled to Pakistan, the U.S. stayed on, built bases -- which just happened to be adjacent to the planned pipeline route -- and installed former Unocal "consultant" Hamid Karzai as leader.

Washington disguised its energy geopolitics by claiming the Afghan occupation was to fight "Islamic terrorism," liberate women, build schools and promote democracy. Ironically, the Soviets made exactly the same claims when they occupied Afghanistan from 1979-1989. The Iraq cover story was weapons of mass destruction and democracy.

Work will begin on the TAPI once Taliban forces are cleared from the pipeline route by U.S., Canadian and NATO forces. As American analyst Kevin Phillips writes, the U.S. military and its allies have become an "energy protection force."

ADDED BENEFIT

From Washington's viewpoint, the TAPI deal has the added benefit of scuttling another proposed pipeline project that would have delivered Iranian gas and oil to Pakistan and India.

India's energy needs are expected to triple over the next decade. Delhi, which has its own designs on Afghanistan, is cock-a-hoop over the new pipeline plan.

Russia, by contrast, is grumpy, having hoped to monopolize Central Asian energy exports.

Energy is more important than blood in our modern world. The U.S. is a great power with massive energy needs. Domination of oil is a pillar of America's world power. Let's be realistic. Afghanistan and Iraq are about oil, nothing else.