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Imperialism's Interest in Afghanistan

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Presentation to the Stalin Society, October 2001

The Stalin Society

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Imperialism's interest in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, like Palestine, has suffered throughout history because of its geographical situation. For centuries misfortunes have arisen from the fact that Afghanistan lay not only on the North-South crossroads for those seeking to reach India - be they the Greeks or the Moguls for instance - but also on the east-west crossroads between China and Persia and access routes to the black Sea. In the modern world, however, the question of trade routes has been completely swamped by the question of gas and oil - substances that are an essential component of modern life - and, in the case of the latter, of modern death too, for oil fuels imperialism's war machines. As E F Schumacher wrote in *Small is Beautiful*, published in the 1950s, *"There is no substitute for energy. The whole edifice of modern society is built upon it ... It is not 'just another commodity' but the precondition of all commodities, a basic factor, equally with air, water, earth"*.

Over more than 100 years the world has become dependent, above all, on one form of energy - oil. The whole infrastructure of society is built on the assumption that oil will be forever available, and therefore, partly because of this, it is the cheapest form of energy available, along with natural gas. Industry demands them, war machines demand them, even domestic users demand them for

transport, temperature control, electricity generation.

However, of all the "basic factors" on which humanity depends, energy derived from oil and gas is the only one which is never freely available. It is the only one of which the world's supplies are both limited and capable, at least in theory, of being monopolised. And the history of the last 100 years has been dominated by the struggle of various players to corner the world's oil supply, both for the purpose of guaranteeing their own supplies and for the purposes of denying supplies to their opponents' war machines. In the 18th and 19th centuries a Great Game was fought out over Afghanistan between Russia and Britain for control of trade routes. Today's Great Game is the struggle for control of oil, and suddenly Afghanistan has once more moved centre stage. There are many who have spotted the analogy. But today's Great Game is multi-dimensional, not just two-sided. While the US imperialist quest for world domination is undoubtedly the major player, along with various other imperialist parties pursuing their own interests, the people of the countries in which gas and oil supplies are situated also have vital interests which they are struggling to defend. No party is strong enough to win on its own, yet none can afford to share the booty, so the whole game involves a seething mass of shifting alliances and betrayals. It is not a game for the faint hearted.

Dwindling supplies

A further twist of urgency is added to the whole process by the fact that the world's gas and oil supplies are fast running out. According to Alexander's *Gas & Oil Connections* Vol 6, issue 15 (4 August 2001):

"World oil reserves are depleting faster than new discoveries are made..."

"Proven recoverable world reserves are now estimated at 1,100 billion barrels of oil, enough for another 41 years at

current rates of consumption..."

However, *"the UK... is pumping out its reserves over 5 times faster than it is finding new ones. OPEC countries are producing oil almost three times faster than it is finding new ones."*

Current consumption is running at 26 billion barrels a year. But in the decade 1991-2001 107 billion barrels were consumed, i.e., 10.7 billion barrels a year on average. In other words, from last decade's average to what we are using today, consumption has more than doubled. Alexander's estimate of 41 years supply, however, assumes that consumption remains at today's levels. Everybody knows that it will not. The figure being bandied around for estimated global demand over the next decade is an increase of 30%. This is obviously excessively conservative an estimate.

Even the most conservative figures cannot hide the fact that oil is fast running out. Of course, besides 'proven reserves' there are also 'estimated reserves' that the oil multinationals spend \$89 billion a year (1998 figure) to try to locate. For instance, imperialism is pinning its faith on the Caspian region. Proven reserves there are currently assessed at anywhere between 16 to 32 billion barrels, but estimated reserves reach at least 60 billion, and some go as high as 200 billion. Nevertheless, if these hopes are fulfilled to the utmost, it will only postpone the day of reckoning - the day the oil finally runs out.

Political effects of shortage

The impending depletion of the world's oil cannot but influence the political views of the people who live in the countries from which the oil is extracted. In Saudi Arabia until 10 years ago the population mostly accepted the monstrous rule of US imperialism's puppet Saudi Royal family, since they lived very well on that fraction of the oil revenue that was allowed them. Since the Gulf War, however, the Saudi people's standard of living has fallen drastically, and the movement for the overthrow of the imperialist

yoke and the royal family that keeps it in place has been developing apace, albeit mostly taking on a religious fundamentalist guise. It is unlikely to have escaped the attention of the Saudi people that in 20 years there is likely to be no oil at all. Where will they all be then? Will they be left in a barren country bereft of any means of livelihood? The Saudi people need to seize control over what is left of the oil in order to use its entire proceeds for the purpose of building a future economy for themselves: they simply cannot afford to allow it all to enure for the megaprofits of foreign multinationals.

Ecological considerations

Even if additional reserves are discovered, it is a fact that these reserves could not be used without threatening the habitability of our planet. The burning of any fossil fuel - oil, gas or coal - adds heat-trapping carbon dioxide and methane to the atmosphere, leading to the global warming that has already caused climatic disasters round the world. *"It could combine with acid rain and loss of ozone to unleash consequences ... second only to nuclear war"* writes Jeremy Leggett in the *New Internationalist* of June 2001.

"Burning even a quarter of KNOWN reserves will ensure climate catastrophe: three quarters of all the oil in the ground needs to stay there in order to protect the planet for future generations" (Wayne Ellwood, also in the *New Internationalist* of June 2001).

Ecologically the burning of fossil fuels is a recipe for disaster, and yet, if the *New Internationalist* is to be believed, each day's sunshine contains more energy than would, if harnessed, be consumed in 27 years (see BP Amoco website !!), and it would take an investment of about \$660 million to make solar electricity competitive, about 0.5% of the \$89 billion spent by oil companies on exploration and production in 1998 alone (*Solar Fact Sheet*,

Greenpeace International, 1999).

Why, then, is solar and wind-powered electricity not immediately introduced? Could it be that to do so would undermine the mega-profitability of the oil giants and invite economic chaos? Or is it that war machines don't run too well on windmills?

Oil shortage and war

Wayne Ellwood continues:

"More than 800 billion barrels of oil have been burned since the oil era was launched in the backwoods of Pennsylvania nearly 150 years ago. But all the big strikes have already been made..

"The respected geologist, Colin Campbell, raised the scarcity issue in ... 1999 ... 'The world's oil companies are now finding only one barrel of oil for every four that we consume'. North Sea oil... is at its peak. Venezuela, the former USSR, Mexico and Norway are all past theirs. Saudi Arabia will peak in less than a decade... global production will begin to feel the pinch around 2005 when reserves begin to dwindle by 3% a year..." (op. cit.).

Though the *New Internationalist* seems to think that the mad scramble for the dwindling oil supplies won't really get going until 2005, Ellwood is prepared to admit that western access to Kuwait's oil was the main reason for the Gulf War. This Ellwood considers to be a mere "hint" of what is to come, and he admits *"Washington's Plan Colombia, a \$1.3 billion aid plan supposedly designed to torpedo the country's cocaine trade has more to do with oil than drugs"* I would go further and say that Plan Colombia has everything to do with oil and nothing whatever to do with the desire to suppress cocaine cultivation.

US energy policy and Afghanistan

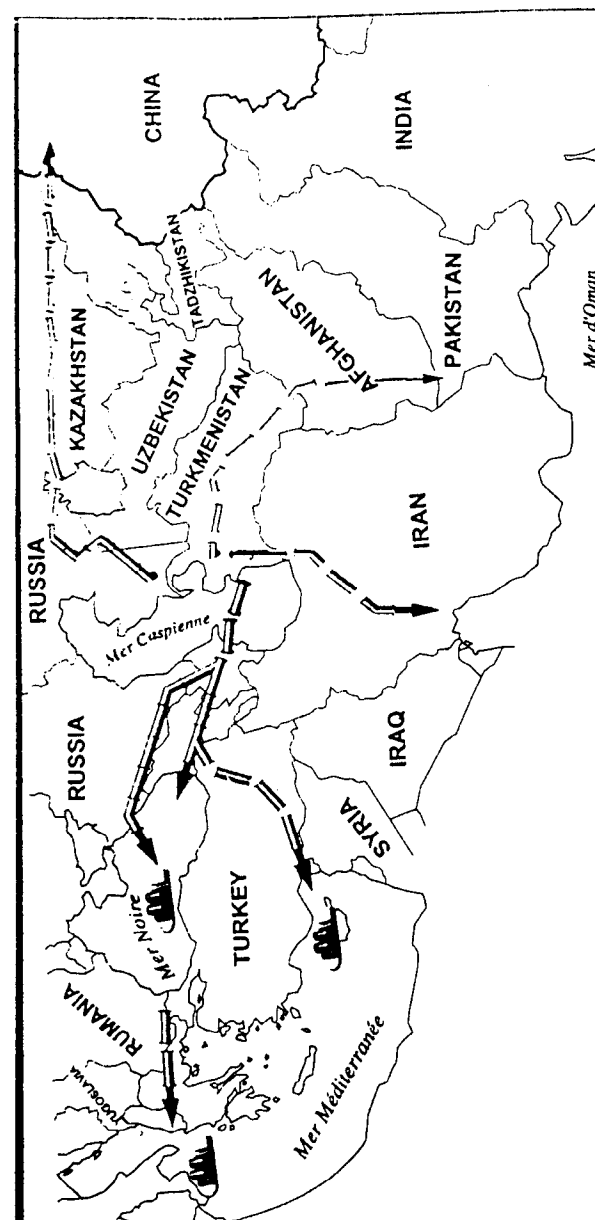
And now we have Afghanistan.

Behind the war in Afghanistan lie the Caspian/Black Sea region reserves mentioned above - those reserves that might reach 200

billion barrels in quantity. Besides the hoped-for 200 billion barrels of oil, there is also 50 trillion cubic metres of gas up for grabs. The bulk of oil production is expected to come from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, which have more than 80% of expected reserves, and are the countries where 85% of foreign investment is concentrating. The oil and gas reserves of these Central Asian Republics (which also include Armenia, Georgia and Turkmenistan) also have the merit, from the point of view of US imperialism, of not being controlled by OPEC. The problem for US imperialism, however, is removing the oil from the Caspian through pipelines it controls to markets where favourable conditions for US imperialism prevail. Since the fall of the USSR, the question of who is to own and control these reserves has become the big issue of our times.

The main problem with these wonderful Caspian/Black Sea reserves is their accessibility. They cannot be transported to other parts of the world without pipelines crossing different countries. Each imperialist player in the Great Game is feverishly seeking to promote its own position and block its rivals' moves.

US imperialism has long been plotting a pipeline under its control through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. The idea for this particular pipeline, incidentally was one which the US multinational Unocal brazenly stole from Argentina's Bidas Corporation after the latter had done all the preparatory work. Bidas made this mistake of inviting Unocal to become part of the consortium that would finance the pipeline, only to find a few months later that Unocal had taken over the whole project and ousted Bidas altogether. Having taken over the project, with the backing of the US government, however, Unocal was very soon disappointed to find that hauling in the profits was not going to be simple, principally because continuing civil war in Afghanistan



ean the pipelines simply could not be built..

As the Sibexlink.com.my website explains:

"In January 1998, the Taliban signed an agreement that would allow a proposed 890-mile, \$2-billion, 2-billion-billion-cubic-feet-per-day natural gas pipelines project led by Unocal to proceed. Unocal subsequently estimated that construction on the line, which would transport gas from Turkmenistan's 45-Tcf Dauletabad gas field to Pakistan, would begin in late 1998. The proposed \$2-billion pipeline tentatively would run from Dauletabad south to the Afghan border and through Herat and Kandahar in Afghanistan, to Quetta, Pakistan. The line would then link with Pakistan's gas grid at Sui. Gas shipments had been projected to start at 700 Mmcfd in 1999 and to rise to 1.4 Bcf/d or higher by 2002. In March 1998, however, Unocal announced a delay in finalising project details due to Afghanistan's continuing civil war ...

"In August 1998, Unocal announced that it was suspending its role in the Afghanistan gas pipeline project in the light of the recent US government military action in Afghanistan, and also due to intensified fighting between the Taliban and opposition groups. Unocal has stressed that the gas pipeline project will not proceed until an internationally recognised government is in place. To date, only three countries - Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates - have recognised the Taliban government."

Even more important, however is that "Besides the gas pipeline, Unocal has also considered building a 1,000 mile, 1-million barrel-per-day capacity oil pipeline that would link Charzou, Turkmenistan to Pakistan's Arabian sea coast via Afghanistan. Since the Charzou refinery is already linked to Russia's Western Siberian oil fields, this line could provide a possible alternative export route for regional oil production from

the Caspian Sea. The \$2.5 billion pipeline is known as the Central Asian Pipeline Project. For a variety of reasons, including high political risk and security concerns, however, financing for this project remains highly questionable."

In order to secure the pipeline the US had created and financed the Taliban through its surrogates in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Their expectation was, to quote a US diplomat that: "The Taliban would probably develop like the Saudis did. There will be pipelines, an emir, no parliament, and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that".

To bring about this result, Saudi Arabia, with full US support, funded *madrassas* in Pakistan to provide education, mainly religious education, for thousands of young Afghani boys whose families had sought refuge in Pakistan at the time of the Mujaheddins' war against the Soviet Union (1979 to 1989). These *madrassas* preached the Saudi version of Islam, Wahabbism, which has a lot more to do with medieval tribal custom than with Islam. These boys were subsequently mobilised by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia into the newly-created Taliban.

Failure of the Taliban to deliver US demands

Why then has US imperialism now turned against the Taliban? There would appear to be a number of reasons for this. The principal one is clearly that the Taliban is unable to deliver pacification of Afghanistan. Wahabbism reflects the traditions of Saudi tribes, not Afghan ones. Afghanistan is a country of many different tribes and languages. Although all the tribes are Muslim, their interpretation of Islam is heavily influenced by their respective tribal customs. To be able to live together at all, Afghans developed a tradition of religious tolerance. Each person observed his or her religion as he or she considered appropriate in the light of their tribal traditions and refrained from interfering in how other people observed theirs. Moreover, Afghanistan was never by

tradition nearly as backward in its treatment of women as Saudi Arabia. Afghanistan is also a country whose educated middle class to such an extent longed for modernisation and enlightenment that it was willing, through an army coup, to dispose of its King and establish a republic. When that proved insufficient to drag the country into the 20th century, they put secular communist forces into government with a remit to sweep away all that was feudal, antiquated, corrupt and obscurantist. For very many Afghans, it was the communists who held the key to freedom with dignity, and to this day Afghanistan has a vibrant underground communist movement. It was therefore a very different thing to foist medievalism on Saudi Arabia - and even there it can no longer be said to be enjoying unqualified success in subjecting the people to imperialist diktat - than it is to foist it on Afghanistan.

Wahabbism is foreign even to the Pashtuns of Afghanistan. The Taliban imbibed it only because they were brought up in Pakistan, away from their own country and its customs. Nevertheless its brand of religious intolerance is identified with the Pashtuns because most of the Taliban are Pashtuns in fact. This means that other tribes - the Hazaras, the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, for example - feel they have to resist the Taliban because it is offensive to their own religious traditions. The inter-tribal antagonism excited by the breakdown of religious tolerance has led to unparalleled brutality and blood letting that virtually guarantees that no tribe will now ever accept a government dominated by another tribe as it would feel such a government could never be trusted.

Not only that, but the Afghan bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie who support the Taliban also have their own agenda. They are traders and the owners of trucking businesses who support the Taliban in order to create conditions favourable to their own interests, which have much more to do with the love of money than the love of God. Ahmed describes the nature of the connection

between these people and the Taliban:

"The fall of Kabul in 1992 coincided with new markets opening up in Central Asia ...

" However, the transporters were frustrated with the civil war and the war lords who taxed their trucks dozens of times along a single route .. The Quetta-based mafia were at a loss with the rapacious Kandahar warlords who had set up dozens of toll chains along the highway from Pakistan ... Taliban leaders were well connected to the Quetta mafia who were the first to provide financial support to the Taliban ... the Taliban collected \$130,000 from transporters in Chaman in a single day and twice that amount the next day ... in Quetta as they prepared to launch their first attack on Heart... the Quetta mafia were urging the Taliban to capture Heart in order to take full control of the road to Turkmenistan ... In 1996, the transporters urged the Taliban to clear the route north by capturing Kabul. After taking the capital, the Taliban levied an average of \$150 for a truck travelling from Peshawar to Kabul, compared to \$750-\$1,250 which truckers had paid before. The transport mafia gave the Taliban leaders a stake in their business by encouraging them to buy trucks or arranging for their relatives to do so. And with the drugs mafia now willing to pay tax to transport heroin, the transit trade became even more crucial to the Taliban exchequer" (p.190-191).

The Taliban government itself is largely made up of people who have their roots in trade: *"Most of the Taliban running the [government] departments of finance, economy and the social sector are mullah traders, businessmen, truck transporters and smugglers for whom the rationale of nation building is seen only in the perspective of expanding the market for smuggling and the trucking business across the region" (ibid).* These ambitions in many cases conflict with US imperialist ambitions for the area.

A major problem for imperialism is that all too often the backward and reactionary national elements it tries to use to further its interests, either against its imperialist rivals or against the national liberation movements that seek to deny it its right to loot, turn out only to be acting in the interests of their own class rather than in blind acceptance of America's right to expropriate the lion's share of the world's wealth. There are signs that this may well be the case also with important sections of the Afghan bourgeoisie and the Taliban itself.

The Taliban were not prepared to be the same kind of tame puppet of imperialism as their Saudi mentors. In providing shelter to Osama Bin Laden, for instance, it is possible that they were showing their support for the growing national liberation movement in the Middle East that fiercely opposes the Saudi royal family and seeks to overthrow it, so that steps can be taken to modernise Saudi Arabia - using what remains of Saudi oil to build for a civilised future rather than allowing nearly everything to accrue for the benefit of foreign imperialist powers. Worse, this national liberation movement seeks to get US imperialism out of the Middle East altogether. The Taliban's rhetoric suggested that the Taliban was also motivated to expel all non-Muslims from the areas under their control. They also put obstacles in the way of the Unocal project and they actively interfered with the activities of the various humanitarian bodies from imperialist countries.

US imperialist policy change

As early as 1997 Madeleine Albright was already publicly expressing her distaste for the Taliban - a sure sign that important sectors of the US imperialist bourgeoisie were becoming convinced that the Taliban were not going to deliver what was required of them. The circles of those in the US who were losing faith in the US administration's Afghan policy continued to widen until earlier this year, prior to the US presidential election, US oil companies

were openly despairing over the chaos in Afghanistan and the apparent impossibility of 'cementing alliances' that would enable the pipelines to be built and run. But with the advent of the Bush regime, they had great hopes that things would change, and, as we can now see, they have.

Government of oil men

The fact that US imperialism is in the lead when it comes to aggressive oil-thirst driven acts of aggression is readily explained by the fact that the US, although having only 5% of the world's population, consumes 25% of world oil production. Its own proven reserves amount to no more than 3% of the world's total. Not only that, but the US is home to the world's powerful oil multinationals, Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco, whose profitability is an important factor in maintaining any buoyancy in the US economy. For instance, last year Exxon Mobil reported profits of \$17.2 billion, the highest ever in US corporate history. The US oil multinationals are extremely rich and powerful, and closely linked with US imperialism's armaments industry. As such they constitute an extremely strong contingent of the American bourgeoisie, able to dictate policy to the US government of the day.

The anxiety of British imperialism to line up with the US in all its misadventures also owes a great deal to the fact that BP Amoco and Royal Dutch Shell, the other two major world oil multinationals, are wholly or partly British.

The present Bush government has been chosen by the oil barons from among their own, and it is now clear that one of the important tasks for which he was selected was to sort out Afghanistan in the interests, of course, of US imperialism. The oil companies contributed \$2.3 million to his presidential campaign (almost not enough!) to secure one of their own became President of the US - albeit one of very little brain. In the 1970s George W Bush started a small oil company - Bush Exploration/Arbusto. He sold it to

Spectrum 7, which was in turn acquired by Harken. Bush, the father, was president of the US at the time Bush, the son, was on the Harken board. And lo and behold Harken was able to secure lucrative contracts for oil exploitation in the Middle East.

This is, of course, the kind of experience, knowledge and understanding of the issues that the US bourgeoisie feels is needed of a President - not the ability to recite the names of capitals of obscure countries.

Vice-President Dick Cheney was head of Halliburton, the world's largest oil-services company (worth \$18.2 billion). He expressed the view at that time (1998):

"I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian."

Don Evans, Commerce Secretary, was Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Colorado-based oil company, Tom Brown Inc., and a director of Sharp Drilling, an oil industry contractor.

Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser, was 10 years on the board of Chevron Petroleum.

Not just these four but others of the Bush government have an impeccable record of fighting for the interests of oil multinationals against such 'dross' as the environmentalists and other such would-be profits spoilers.

September 11

The events of 11 September, when a number of people of Saudi and Egyptian origin, used hijacked airliners to destroy those symbols of US imperialist might - the Pentagon and the World Trade Center - were the excuse used by the Bush administration to launch an attack on Afghanistan that had clearly been planned for some considerable time beforehand. It is quite probable that Bush brought forward the date for commencing the execution of the plans by some considerable time in order to take advantage of the opportunity for mobilising mass hysteria behind his actions. Yet

everybody can see that there is no logical connection between the events of September 11 and the attacks on Afghanistan. Only mass hysteria, cynically manipulated by the likes of Bush and Blair in the interests of the oil companies, can account for the uncritical way in which people are prepared to support, or at least remain passive, in the face of the criminal and genocidal aggression that has been launched against Afghanistan.

George Monbiot draws attention to the parallels between the situation in Afghanistan and that in Yugoslavia - the scene of US imperialism's last genocidal intervention. He writes in www.zmag.org:

"Afghanistan's strategic importance has not changed. In September, a few days before the attack on New York, the US Energy Information Administration reported that 'Afghanistan's significance from an energy standpoint stems from its geographical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. This potential includes the possible construction of oil and natural gas export pipelines through Afghanistan'. Given that the US government is dominated by former oil industry executives, we would be foolish to suppose that a reinvigoration of these plans no longer figures in its strategic thinking. As the researcher Keith Fisher has pointed out, the possible economic outcomes of the war in Afghanistan mirror the possible economic outcomes of the war in the Balkans, where the development of 'Corridor 8', an economic zone built around a pipeline carrying oil and gas from the Caspian to Europe, is a critical allied concern."

US considerations extend not only to the profits that its multinationals have a divine right to extract, but also to maintaining its political and economic hegemony despite its dependence on oil from abroad:

"Consumer countries (notably the US, Europe and Japan) are

already dependent on the Saudi-dominated Mideast OPEC suppliers for 40% of the world demand for crude oil. This dependence is expected to rise to 55% by the year 2010. This prospect is extremely dangerous for a global financial system pegged on two rather than one reserve currencies, the euro and the dollar. OPEC will then be able to pull the plug on either of the two currency zones, unless the only alternative major source of 'boundless' supply in Central Asia has been opened and running in the meantime" (Dimitris Yannopoulos, *Athens News*, 28 September 2001).

George Monbiot continues:

"This is not the only long-term US interest in Afghanistan. American foreign policy is governed by the doctrine of 'full-spectrum dominance', which means that the United States should control military, economic and political development all over the world. China has responded by seeking to expand its interests in central Asia. The defence white paper Beijing published last year argued that 'China's fundamental interests lie in ... the establishment and maintenance of a new regional security order'. In June, China and Russia pulled the Central Asian Republics into a 'Shanghai Co-operation Organisation'. Its purpose, according to Jiang Zemin, is to 'foster world multi-polarisation', by which he means contesting US full-spectrum dominance. If the United States succeeds in overthrowing the Taliban and replacing it with a stable and grateful pro-western government and if it then binds the economies of central Asia to that of its ally Pakistan, it will have crushed not only terrorism, but also the growing ambitions of both Russia and China. Afghanistan, as ever, is the key to the western domination of Asia."

The propaganda

The sordid commercial interests of US imperialism, along with its lust for 'full-spectrum dominance' - the real motivation for the

present war in Afghanistan - have very little potential insofar as mobilising the people behind the US government's acts of aggression. US imperialism has therefore orchestrated a campaign of de-humanising the enemy, presenting them as a bunch of mindless religious bigots determined to force their countries into the dark ages. These are the people who until very recently were America's friends and are now only being dehumanised to suit America's purposes. Moreover, to the extent that the people of Afghanistan are under attack, they too are presented as uncivilised, uncouth, vicious and bigoted - people in short whom US imperialism and its allies are justified in killing in their hundreds and thousands.

John Flynn characterised this aggressor propaganda as far back as 1944 when he wrote:

"The enemy aggressor is always pursuing a course of larceny, murder, rapine and barbarism. We are always moving forward with high mission, a destiny imposed by the Deity to regenerate our victims while incidentally capturing their markets, to civilise savage and senile and paranoid peoples while blundering accidentally into their oil wells".

There can be no better description of the present war hysteria.

Afghanistan may or may not be 'pacified' by the current military actions - the signs, however, are that it will not be. But be that as it may, we should not delude ourselves that an imperialist 'victory', enabling the pipelines to be built on the corpses of the Afghans who have lost their lives in this war and in the civil war that preceded it, would augur well for the future of humanity. All such a 'victory' would do would be to aggravate the contradictions between US imperialism and its rivals, as well as between the world's national liberation movements and US imperialism. The conclusion of one war cannot but inevitably lay the basis for yet another war. Such is the logic of imperialism.

