

By Zainab Cheema

Games are a traditional metaphor for global politics. Chess, safari, and their aristocratic variants — these are suggestive of power, competition, and fabulous stakes where treasuries and lives are nonchalantly betted away for capturing the upper hand. Behind the smoke and mirrors diffused by issues like terrorism, helpful for distracting citizens, modern-day hegemony are pursuing a Great Game that rivals the old colonial scrambles. Western nations, Russia, India, and China are now quarrying a priceless booty embalmed in Eurasia — pulsating reservoirs of oil and natural gas required to secure an energy rich future.

While reams of print have been written about the tragic link between the US war on Afghanistan and the energy infrastructure it is building to access Eurasian oil and gas, China's entry in the Game must also be considered. China recently announced its full economic recovery, signaled by a growth rate of 9.5% at the close of 2009, to the envy and astonishment of US analysts. This is, of course, directly linked to China's acquisition of prime energy contracts across the globe, with profound consequences for Muslims living around the axis of energy deposits and their transportation routes.



Pipelineistan: the name given to the oil and gas-rich area of Central Asia. The map above shows existing and proposed oil and gas pipelines which originate from this area. The majority population in all of these countries is Muslim, most of whom are overwhelmingly poor and without essential services.

To perceive the tactics of the game, we first must understand the terrain. Eurasia, of course, consists of the five former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Iran. It also includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Xinjiang, which are not part of the Caspian Basin and Eurasian reservoirs but are vital geostrategic corridors for pumping wealth out of the post-Soviet countries' oil and gas fields. Let's take a quick look at numbers. According to the US Energy Information Administration, Eurasia (excluding Iran) is estimated to contain 30.7 billion barrels of crude oil, and a staggering 1219.39 trillion cubic feet in natural gas.

The itinerary of massive, transcontinental pipelines siphoning out liquefied energy has given the geography a new name: Pipelineistan. While Samuel Huntington's classic thesis of Islam and the West in a clash of civilizations mostly reveal the paranoia of self-important US foreign policy technocrats, it does reflect the fact that Pipelineistan's energy infrastructure is mapping conflicts onto Muslim lands as perhaps no past Game has done. The five post-Soviet states have Muslim majorities, as are the energy corridors respectively claimed by the US and China — the Afghanistan-Pakistan route to warm water Indian Ocean ports, and land locked Xinjiang corridor to the thirsty markets of Shanghai and Beijing.

Not only are Eurasian resources desperately needed by capitalist machines that must work faster to sustain the West's living standards, it guarantees control over other energy-rich regions of the world. Eurasia is called an axial super-continent that enables the power controlling it to have significant leverage over Africa and the Middle East. It is understandable then why Muslims living at this global node of power and access are witnessing what has become a twice told tale: the installment of puppet regimes in Eurasian countries to ensure compliance to energy vampirism, punctuated by the systematic breakdown of societies like Afghanistan and Pakistan to erase any difficulties posed by public will to the use of their terrain for transportation routes. The Persian Gulf Wars and the mid-20th-century struggle over Iranian politics and oil aren't old enough to make this into a challenging game of "whodunit".

Pipelineistan not only maps energy and geostrategic interest, but desperation as well. The new polycentric world is characterized by a resurgent Russia, which has consolidated control over some of its Eurasian breakaways, including Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Iran's determined economic growth, backed up by the lure of its Caspian reserves, is making it impossible to isolate it from other countries. India's growing economic chops is requiring the US and Israel to spoon-feed its ally for fear that it will breakaway from their sphere of influence and contract relations with Iran. In fact, the 2008 US-India nuclear deal exchanging nuclear technologies and materials between the two countries was seen as a way to pressurize India to abandon the Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline (IPI) through which Iran would export oil to India and provide Pakistan a significant economic windfall in the form of billions of dollars in transit fees.

We can also see Pipelineistan as a romance, with characters competing for Eurasia's virgin wealth. For the US to maintain its dominance over world markets, global energy flows, and its network of alliances, it has placed all its bets on the pipeline linking Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI). TAPI is widely believed to be the *raison d'être* of the Afghanistan and Pakistan conflicts. Piping oil from gas rich Turkmenistan, where Chevron has won a lucrative contract, to the hungry markets of Pakistan and India ensures that Pakistan remains a subservient American satellite and India remains within the US sphere of influence. TAPI will deliver American controlled gas to the world via Karachi and Surat, Pakistan and India's warm water ports on the Indian Ocean.

IPI and TAPI are then dueling pipelines mapping two global geographies: one drawn by US visions for maintaining its vertical influence over key geostrategic regions, while the other represents Anglo-Israeli nightmare of bilateral relationships growing between and integrating Iran, Central and South Asia into a power-house unit. TAPI's price tag announces as much. The project is valued at \$3.5 billion, a number covering development and construction but not the auxiliary costs of politically destabilizing Afghanistan and Pakistan. Regional self-sufficiency appears to contradict every tenet of the US foreign policy bible.

US desperation in securing its pipeline in the shifting terrain of the Eurasian Game can be seen in the change of its war strategies in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Paralleling its strategy of paying off shaikhs in Iraq's Anbar province, the economically distressed nation is following the same formula in Afghanistan's rocky, resistant region. Hamid Karzai announced last month that the US will begin to pay the Taliban to lay down their arms. The severance package includes pensions for older fighters, allotment of land, and asylum in London.

The Eurasian Game is becoming even more unsettled with China's entries on the global energy market, which has vital consequences for Pipelineistan's Muslim residents. On the one hand, China is developing relationships with Iran that challenges US and Israeli policies of containment. In 2009, China and Iran entered into a \$3.2 billion deal for developing Iran's South Pars gas field, which taps into the world's largest natural gas reservoir ensconced beneath the Persian Gulf seabed. Recently, China announced that it will be investing \$120 billion in Iran's energy infrastructure.



The proposed TAPI, favored by the United States, and IPI, favored by China, pipelines out of South Asia. Either way, India stands to benefit tremendously as most of the fossil fuel would be refined there, leading credibility to the thesis of India's involvement into the potential dismembering of Pakistan.

Even more disastrously for the US, Iran announced the completion of its Dauletabad-Sarakhs-Khangiran pipeline in January 2010, which links Turkmenistan's natural gas resources to Khangiran in Iran, where it joins with the Iran Gas Trunkline. The energy alliance between Eurasia's two most prolific energy producers has boosted Iran's profile in the Game, increasing its attractiveness to India, China and other robust economies. In fact, India's competition with China is drawing it back to the negotiating table with Iran. The chairman of India's Oil & Natural Gas Corp recently met with Iranian executives from the National Iranian Oil Co. to further the two countries' energy relationship. A wealthier and politically influential Iran, of course, challenges Israeli programs for dominations in the Middle East.

In effect, China and the diversification of the Eurasian Game are producing significant cracks in US and Israeli foreign policy objectives. Benjamin Netanyahu recently commented that the three main threats facing Israel include "The Iranian threat, the missile threat and a threat I call the Goldstone threat," referring to the UN sponsored report on Israel's war on Gaza and the worldwide outcry it sparked.

China's Muslim majority Xinjiang province is also a critical node in the intersection between the Eurasian and Persian Gulf games. Xinjiang is a cultural and geostrategic corridor to the Middle East, with which China is also developing closer relations. Currently, China is buying billions of barrels of oil from Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Even as the US has temporarily consolidated power in the Middle East Game through the Iraq War, Middle Eastern elites may look towards China in the future to guarantee their wealth and security if the US economy is unable to recover.

China has also become central to the emerging green technologies industry being developed worldwide in an effort to diversify energy sources. Green technology, such as manufacture of electric cars, efficient light bulbs and large wind turbines, depends on natural elements called rare earth minerals. As worldwide industrial dependence on these minerals grows, the US certainly finds no comfort in the fact that most of these elements are found in China. Currently, China accounts for 93% of production of these rare substances and is locking down foreign export as it develops its own alternate energy infrastructure.

While Muslims may welcome the diversification of the global political stage, a multipolar world

does not necessarily mean increased justice and security for themselves and fellow Muslims. Even as China's political interests in Iran and the Middle East may act as a lever breaking down US attempts to maintain hegemony over these regions, its brutal treatment of the local Uighur Muslims of Xinjiang hardly marks it as a friend to Islam. The Chinese government pursues a policy of disenfranchisement and ghettoization of the Uighurs, creating a class of foreign elites composed of Han Chinese imported from China's other provinces to reap the windfall of Xinjiang's economic development. Uighur activists such as businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer, have been imprisoned or threatened for speaking out against state oppression. In fact, China has proved that it can be as utilitarian as the US, Israel, or India in using the global discourse on terrorism to mask a program of state-sponsored oppression. China has used Uighur street protests as an excuse to politically tarnish the local population and take away more land.

Xinjiang is critical to China's energy interests. Not only is it an essential geographic corridor for piping down Central Asian gas reserves to the mainland, but Xinjiang itself has rich energy deposits desired by the Communist regime. This is illustrated by the West-East Pipeline, constructed by China to channel natural gas from Xinjiang to major Chinese metropolises. If economic interest fuels China's imperialism towards the Uighurs, the latter are not likely to face better conditions anytime soon. Xinjiang is the central axis of China's global energy profile.

China's energy policies also have a crucial impact on the local Muslim populations of Eurasia's post-Soviet countries. In increasing its political presence in the energy-rich Central Asian republics, China is handing out billions of dollars in loans to corrupt regimes and diversifying its portfolio of assets in the region. While this draws Central Asia out from Russia's orbit and challenges US and European energy politics in the region, China's policies favor the same pattern of transforming its energy partners into economic and political subordinates that has been so strongly criticized in the US and Europe. This keeps the local Muslim populations of Eurasia in a subservient position — equitable distribution of resources is never found on a program driven by lust for fantastic profits.

While China's presence in the Great Game gives Iran an important opening to break out of US-Israeli strangleholds, it translates into poverty and dispossession for Central Asian Muslims. Even as the players shift, Muslims must realize that what ultimately needs to be changed are the rules of the game.