

# New movement in Afghanistan changes the balance in Central Asia

by Adam K. East and Ramtanu Maitra

Long forgotten by the western world, Afghanistan has once again captured the headlines in the western press. News reports center on the emergence of a new group in Afghanistan, the Taliban (meaning religious students), who have captured nearly one-third of the country since their sudden appearance in September of last year. Evidence is accumulating, although it is not conclusive, pointing to the view that the well-equipped Taliban are being backed by Pakistani Intelligence Services (ISI), with Saudi Arabia, and the implicit support of the United States.

Following the defeat of the Soviet Red Army and its subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan Mujahideen continued to fight the communist government for three years, and after its fall in 1992, they have been busy fighting among each other. Provided by weapons and funds from Afghanistan's immediate neighbors and other countries abroad, the rival Mujahideen groups have been ruthlessly tearing at the relics of this once-proud nation.

With the Koran in one hand and an AK-47 in another, the Taliban have drastically changed the political balance in the country. However, all are not religious students as suggested by most news accounts. The main body of this force is comprised by the former Mujahideen, who are from the Pushtun-dominated provinces of the south. There are also a number of religious students recruited from the Madrassas or religious schools and refugee camps from across the border in Pakistan. The Taliban, reportedly starting off with but a few hundred men, have seen their ranks swell to well over 25,000 men under arms.

The Taliban's initial conquest began about six months ago, when they seized an armory near the Pakistani border. Later on they entered Kandahar, the old royal capital in the south, Afghanistan's second biggest city. After fierce battles, they captured the city and turned their attention toward the south, the primary poppy-growing region of the country. There they torched the poppy fields and executed the drug traffickers. From Kandahar, the Taliban marched toward Kabul in the northwest, about 300 miles away. With astonishing success, they made swift progress toward the capital, capturing city after city.

Their biggest victory came against Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizbe-Islami, who had allied himself with northern warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam, a former communist general,

against the forces of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military strong-man Ahmad Shah Masood.

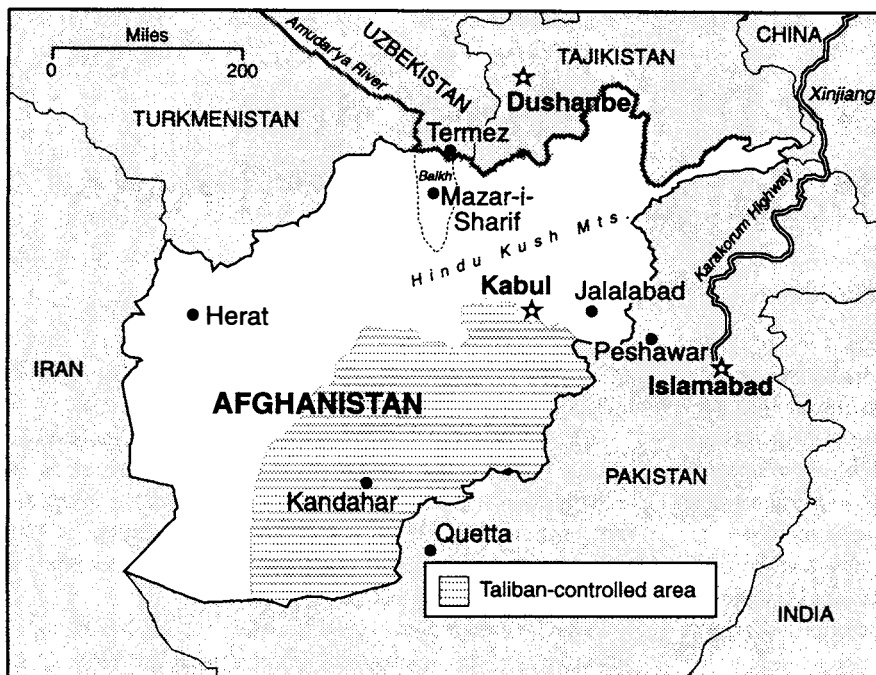
The Taliban say they are not seeking power, but favor an Islamic government, and are demanding the disarmament of all Mujahideen groups in the country. "We want a weapons-free Afghanistan, and we will try to collect weapons, which have caused destruction in our country," a spokesman for the group was recently quoted as saying.

The Taliban arrived at a time when United Nations special envoy to Afghanistan Mahmoud Mestiri was busy working out the final details of the latest peace plan for the country. The process was delayed by the nominal government's insistence that the Taliban should also participate in the peace process. President Rabbani, whose term expired on Dec. 28 of last year, has demanded the unconditional participation of the Taliban in the interim administration. Since all previous peace plans, such as the charters reached in Peshawar, Islamabad, and Mecca, have bit the dust, there is little hope for the current plan. Moreover, the Taliban have refused Rabbani's demand saying that they will not work with "criminals."

According to *The Hindu*, the Madras-based English news daily which is believed to have close contacts within the Indian Foreign Office, the interim council was to be headed by Sultan Mahmood Ghazi, a cousin of the former King Zahir Shah, with the former prime minister, Mohammad Yousuf, assigned this post again. Half of the 30-strong body was to be comprised of representatives of the Mujahideen and the chiefs in control of various regions, and the other half by independent persons. The Taliban will represent the Pushtun majority, and their military control so far has remained confined within the Pushtun-dominated areas.

## Murky origins

There is much speculation about the Taliban's murky origins; their list of probable sponsors includes Pakistan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. Over the past few years, Pakistani officials have on more than one occasion voiced their desire to establish a land route for trade with Central Asia—a land route which would have to pass through Afghanistan. The Pakistani port of Karachi is the nearest port city for the Central Asian states, and by air Islamabad is closer to Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, than it is to Karachi. Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, is only an hour's flight from Is-



**Area of Taliban control in Afghanistan**

Islamabad, and by road through Afghanistan the distance from Dushanbe to Karachi is 2,720 kilometers. In contrast, the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas is 3,400 km, Vladivostok is 9,500 km, and Rostov on the Don is 4,200 km away.

Although Pakistan does not have the money to invest in Central Asia, it hoped to market its short route to the sea and provide services such as transport, banking, insurance, and business training programs. It also offers expertise and international contacts to help develop the textile industry in Central Asia. There was only one precondition to this—peace in Afghanistan—because Kabul controlled Pakistan's land access to Central Asia. For Turkmenistan and southern Uzbekistan, the shortest route to the sea lies through Iran, but for all other states it is through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

By reopening the ancient Silk Road, Pakistan would indeed become the gateway to Central Asia, greatly boosting its political and economic affairs. But the stakes in the game for influence in Central Asia are very high. Pakistan faces such strong contenders as Russia, which is out to reclaim the old Soviet empire; Turkey; and Iran. In order to avoid the chaotic city of Kabul, which the Taliban are now trying to control, there exists a proposal to rebuild the road from Termez to Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, and then to take Balkh province. Northern Afghanistan remains under the control of the Uzbek militia under Rashid Dostum, who is on good terms with almost all Central Asian leaders who have past Bolshevik connections.

The plan is to get the goods from Quetta to Karachi—an easy haul. Pakistanis are also in the process of building a deepwater seaport in Gwadar on the Makran coast. Pakistan proposed to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan a new route from

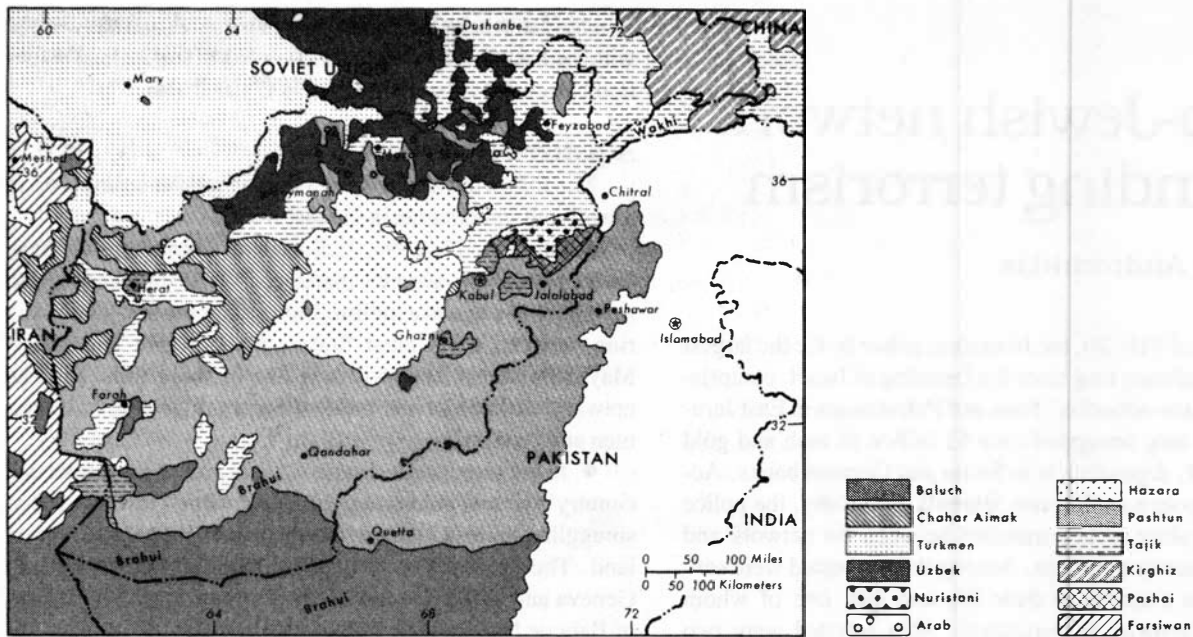
Alma Ata to Xinjiang to link up with the Karakoram Highway, which runs from the Chinese border to Islamabad. This route will only be passable during the summer months, but it would link Central Asia with China and Pakistan, thus opening up the old Turkestan to the sea for the first time in history.

### **De facto partition**

The major outcome of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and subsequent civil war, is that the border between Central Asia, or between the Turkic-speaking people and the Pushtuns, the largest group in Afghanistan, which previously ran along the northern slopes of Mazar-e-Sharif and the Amudarya River, was de facto changed and shifted southward to Kabul and the Hindu Kush mountains. Eight of Afghanistan's nine provinces are now inhabited by Central Asian people, mostly those who had fled Soviet rule over the years. Some 4 million Tajiks, 1.5 million Uzbeks, half a million Turkomen, and several thousand nomad Kyrgyz and Pamiri-Ismaelis (Aga Khanis) are now reportedly living in Afghanistan.

During the Afghanistan war, the Soviets went after the eastern Pushtun belt of Afghanistan, and dealt with Afghanistan's northern provinces lightly. The discrimination during the war was to fuel ethnic tensions between those of Turkic origin and the Pushtuns inside Afghanistan. The United States and Pakistan, meanwhile, boosted the image of Hekmatyar, the fully corrupted Pushtun, while the Soviet propaganda machine boosted Ahmed Shah Masood.

The 1992 revolt of Gen. Rashid Dostum against his mentor Najibullah sealed the fate of the Kabul regime and established the north as a separate Turkic political entity controlled by Uzbeks. The Uzbeks have now less in common with their



Pushtun brothers than ever before. Hence, in effect, the Soviet invasion of 1979 has led to the de facto partition of Afghanistan.

The advance of the Taliban, who are predominantly ethnic Pushtuns, has also made prominent the geographic division between the Pushtun-dominated provinces from the rest of the ethnic groups. The Tajiks, the second biggest ethnic group which Masood and Rabbani belong to, are mainly in the north and northwestern provinces of the country. Dostum's Uzbek group gets active support from the President of neighboring Uzbekistan, former communist Islam Karimov.

Should the Taliban stay in their present areas, or if there is a provocation of ethnic hostilities, it could very well mean the effective division of the country according to the old British plan of intelligence operative Bernard Lewis. This could also have undesirable consequences for Pakistan, since its North West Frontier Province, which is predominantly Pushtun, borders Afghanistan in the south.

Meanwhile, reports filtering into India indicate that the Taliban are advancing exclusively in areas controlled by the Pushtuns. The Taliban are also making other distinctions: Those Mujahideen groups close to Saudi Arabia have not been touched, which has raised further suspicions that the Saudis and the Pakistani intelligence, with tacit support from the United States, are running the Taliban circus. The Taliban have not ventured into regions controlled by Dostum. If the Taliban do not attack Dostum's area, *The Hindu* claims, then Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are de facto accepting the original Soviet plan to shrink Afghanistan's borders and make Kabul the northern limit, while northern Afghanistan becomes the buffer zone or the cockpit. That would prevent the "Islamic fundamentalism" of the Pushtuns travelling north and thus keep the CIS somewhat immune from the fundamentalists' "at-

tacks." Meanwhile, Iran has again expressed fear that the new forces emerging in Afghanistan will go after the Shias there.

General Dostum has reportedly threatened that any move by the Taliban to capture Kabul and other territory in the northern reaches might lead to a pronounced ethnic confrontation and division of Afghanistan along Pushtun/non-Pushtun lines.

### Unexpected Chinese reaction

No developments in this part of the world go unnoticed by Beijing. China has already showed its hostility to all Islamic provocations in Xinjiang, otherwise known as "Chinese Turkestan." China would not hesitate long to seal the Karakorum Highway (which links Pakistan to China in the north) if it detects any questionable activity which is guided from Islamabad. An uprising two years ago in Xinjiang underlines the nervousness of the Chinese over the emergence of any Islamic movements in the area. There are reports of an uprising in April 1992 which was led by Abdul Kasim, an Islamic leader of the Free East Turkestan Movement. According to Chinese authorities, the group, made up of Uighurs and Kyrgyz, had been armed and trained by the Afghan Mujahideen. A ruthless crackdown was carried out, and the Islamic leaders were arrested. China, taking the matter very seriously, closed the Khunjerab Pass and the Karakorum Highway, and informed Pakistan that China would question its relations with that country if Islamabad failed to check the activities of Islamic militants based on Pakistani soil.

The Pakistani example should be a warning to the United States not to walk into a trap which British geopoliticians, who have had ample experience in this region, might be setting up. China will not look favorably on any operations by the United States ostensibly to "solve" regional problems.