



## Reflections

## Afghanistan mineral resources and implications on India's future

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## ABSTRACT

With discovery of valuable mineral deposits in Afghanistan, the race for their acquisition has heated up. The paper attempts to evaluate the implications of Afghanistan mineral resources on possible Indian futures. The currently dominant development paradigm is challenged as a purchased future and the need for redefining India's role in the region is put forward. There is a dire need of re-evaluating the development paradigm and euphoria, surrounding India's march towards global leadership. There is also a need to re-evaluate the role of India in Afghanistan, as it transitions from a silent Samaritan to natural resource stakeholder. It is feared that the race to keep up the development paradigm may usher India into a cut-throat competition with other stakeholders in Afghanistan.

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I first came across India as a topic of discussion about two years ago while looking at the pro-poor implications of mineral extraction in Afghanistan [1]. It all started off with the classical futurist tool of scanning the past as an indicator of the future and the genealogy of events, that have led to what Afghanistan has become today. Just in the last 100 years, we have had the Russian empire, the British invasions, the Soviet juggernaut's misadventure and finally the American invasion in the post-911 era. It is hard not to notice the "black hole" effect of Afghanistan on adventurers throughout the course of history the true "graveyard of empires". And this is a trend which goes back to the times of Alexander the Great. And yet, we have two aspiring superpowers-to-be: China and India, thinking of going in, where others have eventually failed. This is my fear of the future.

My fear is not just rooted in the history of a proven giant-killer. After all history is not destiny. I am also looking at the nexus of a phenomenon called the "used future" and the unabashed consumerism (the pre-requisites of modern day success) that is plaguing India as well as China. And the horizon is by no means rosy- Afghanistan or no Afghanistan. In the passages below I will discuss the Afghan mineral extraction scenario, try to de-mystify the used futures corundum and my take on the Chindia consumerism quandary and try to bring it all together.

## 1. Afghanistan mineral resources – a troubled history

Afghanistan's geographic location, between the rich oil and gas fields of Central and Western Asia and the energy-hungry corridor of India, Pakistan and China, make it a vital transit country for energy commerce and in 2010, vast mineral deposits were discovered in Afghanistan, including huge veins of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals like lithium. With reliable estimates of \$1–3 trillion of extractable resources, there is hope and concern surrounding this discovery which is being heralded to "fundamentally alter the Afghan economy" [2]. However, if the past is any indicator of the future, resource extraction has a tortured history in Afghanistan and continues to be a source of concern in terms of physical

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security, environmental and social impacts and their contribution to economic development [3,4]. Afghanistan's one hope was that, eventually, foreign powers would leave it alone and the Afghans would then be forced to make peace among themselves. With the discovery of mineral deposits worth hundreds of billions of dollars that hope has been extinguished and there is a genuine risk of Afghanistan slipping into greater instability. At the present, a future in Afghanistan without a continuation of foreign interference does not look likely and assigning the buffer zone, a three trillion dollar value, has certainly increased the stakes.

### 1.1. A timeline of mineral resource interests in Afghanistan

In the early nineteenth century, the British Empire maintained a comprehensive interest in resources of Afghanistan and first initiated resource assessments in Afghanistan as they searched through pioneering exploration and military escapades for countries to dominate as markets and trading partners [5]. This was done parallel to improving military intelligence on resources and topographic detail that would be needed in their Great Game face-off against the Russian Empire. Afghanistan won its independence from diplomatic domination by the British following the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, and a short while later, a Soviet publication on mineral wealth in Afghanistan was published [6]. The government of Afghanistan tried to entice the Americans to become engaged in resource discovery and extraction in Afghanistan [7]. However, distance from market, economic concerns, and looming worries about World War II caused rejection of the offer, much to the uneasiness of the government of Afghanistan.

With the US attention on resources diverted elsewhere for the next four decades, the Soviets collaborated with the Afghanistan Geological Survey resulting in a detailed mapping of mineral resources in Afghanistan [8]. After the Afghan invasion of the USSR in 1979, the Soviets were in a position to initiate resource extraction in Afghanistan and in the mid 1980s, natural gas was pumped across the northern border of the Amu Darya into the USSR and a smelter scheduled for installation at the Aynak copper deposit, was planned near Kabul [9]. However, the increasing resistance of the Afghan people and the Mujahidin disallowed any significant development of other resources at that time. Instead in 1988–89, the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan and in a twist of fate, the Bush Senior administration closed the US Embassy in Kabul a few years later. In the subsequent years, the Taliban stayed away from exploiting the mineral riches, although they did show interest in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) gas pipeline. The subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the USA and its allies in 2001 began a new phase in the history of mineral resource exploitation in Afghanistan, as many old resource projects were assessed again, and new ones were initiated [10].

### 1.2. India in Afghanistan

Despite having one of the world's largest military forces, India's venture into Afghanistan has been non-military, with emphasis on re-building, humanitarian, and other kinds of aid. This choice of "soft power" over the "hard power" of a military presence in Afghanistan has served India well in terms of her good standing among the Afghan people and current leaders [11]. At stake is what happens after the Western withdrawal after 2014 and herein lies a great paradox. While India has provided many critical foreign aid projects in Afghanistan and has not engaged in counterinsurgency operations, its embassy in Kabul has twice borne the brunt of attacks as well as attacks on Indian civilians that have participated in these projects. India's past links with the Northern Alliance have stood her in good stead for much of the duration of the Karzai government. This however has also meant that sectors of the Pashtun leadership (and not just the Taliban), look at India with suspicion. I will not delve further into the security and foreign affairs issues, but this paradox is at the background of any future of Indian mineral expedition in Afghanistan.

In terms of mineral sources, India's most lucrative foothold was secured in 2012, by being awarded the concession for four of five blocks in the Hajigak deposit (Afghanistan's largest iron-ore deposit) to a consortium of Indian firms led by the state-owned Steel Authority of India Ltd. Those plans would place the Hajigak project alongside the Aynak copper mine, being developed by the state-owned Metallurgical Corporation of China, as one of Afghanistan's two largest mining investments [12]. India has also shifted its focus to the exploration for and development of Afghan coal reserves. A number of pipeline projects for tapping the rich oil and gas reserves of Iran, Turkmenistan and other former Soviet republics (Afghanistan to act as a passage way) to fuel India's high growth rate and increasing energy demands are also on the table.

## 2. Treading on the path of a used future

The supply-side of the equation mentioned above has a demand and that demand is fuelled by what futurist Sohail Inayatullah refers to as "Used Futures". The used future is a secondhand future which is imported unconsciously from another culture/discourse, even though it does not fit into local political/social/cultural practice. The result of this colonization of thought is that the sense of the possible and the preferable can be occupied unthinkingly, inappropriately, and in all likelihood damagingly, by concepts developed in another context (and pursuing other interests) altogether

*"How do we buy other's used futures; how do we disempower ourselves by accepting the futures of others as ours. They are colonized by others' who have thought through the type of world they want, often through the use of instrumental rationality – reason for personal gain. But the problem is not just out there. The future is colonized as well by our own internal images – these are often unconscious –ensuring that the futures we create are not ours." [13]*

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