

## **Great Game Reprise?**

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There are fears Russia and American may once again exploit Afghan divisions to exert their influence over the country.

A transitional government for Afghanistan may have been formed this week, but there should be no illusions about the precariously fragmented nature of the country.

The truth is that Afghanistan is still a patchwork of tiny fiefdoms, with warlords seizing pockets of land in a desperate bid to consolidate themselves before any long-term peace deal is reached.

An interim government is in place, but this does not mean it will lead to a unified Afghans state, especially with its history as a loose alliance of tribal leaders.

With the American presence in Afghanistan and Russia's role in the country likely to increase, there are fears that it could once again be divided in an ugly reprise of last century's Great Game.

"Pashtuns welcome any agreement which brings peace and prosperity to Afghanistan," said Latif Afridi, a prominent Pashtun leader. "Afghanistan needs rebuilding, healing and reconciliation but the Pashtun will not tolerate any other foreign game on its soil."

In a country already distinctly partitioned along ethnic lines, we may well see Russia and its allies backing components of the Northern Alliance which it has supported for the past five years.

The US, meanwhile, could step up its wheeling and dealing with Pashtun warlords in the south and east of the country as it seeks to root out al-Qaeda members.

Local leaders have warned that the already divisive nature of the Pashtun tribal network could be splintered with US interference. Likewise, with the Russians, there are concerns that the Northern Alliance could easily fall apart into the separate elements which were at war with each other before the Taleban took power.

Given the strategic and economic importance of Afghanistan, some regional experts believe outside interference is inevitable, and that it will have the same effect it has always had on the country - renewed conflict.

"At this moment in time, there may not be a conflict of interest as everyone is in support of the Bonn agreement," said Dr Sarfraz Khan of the Area Study Centre at the University of Peshawar. "But in the longer term, Russia and US interests could well clash in the country."

And it seems they won't have difficulty exploiting divisions within Afghanistan. Just days after the signing the Bonn agreement, the Uzbek general, Rashid Dostun, and the Peshawar Group leader, Pir Ahmed Shah Gilliani, registered their disapproval of the accord.

In addition, territories have already been marked out by warlords during the Northern Alliance's struggle against the Taleban - particularly since the launch of the US bombardments.

General Dostum is based in Mazar-e-Sharif in the north; Tajik leader Ismail Khan has established himself in the western town of Herat; while Pashtun tribal leaders are vying for influence in the south.

These firebrands are incendiary elements in any case. But additional friction from the outside could send the whole mixture sky-high.

Some, like Mulana Fazal-u-Rehman, a pro-Taleban leader, believes that the US will exploit Afghan divisions if it remains in the country. Many moderate voices have also raised their fears of a prolonged and interfering American role.

The Pastun areas of southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan may be particularly prone to US machinations, as they are controlled by warlords notorious for their lawlessness.

In Kunar province, warlord Hazrat Ali, currently being accused of demanding ransoms for his Taleban prisoners, has US support as he has provided leads on the possible hideouts of Bin Laden in the mountainous Tora Bora area near Jalalabad.

According to local press reports, two prominent Pakistani Pashtun leaders in Quetta accepted millions of dollars from alleged US sources to find "friendly" Pashtun tribes in southern Afghanistan, especially in areas around Kandahar. Meanwhile, hundreds of other warlords and mujahedin are involved in the American-sponsored hunt for Bin Laden.

Shiraz Paracha is South and Central Asia editor for a London-based news service. Between 1987-1998, he reported from Peshawar on Afghanistan, North West Frontier Province and the Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
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