The oil fire which devastated the Afghanistan- Iran border crossing at Islam Qala on February 14th was widely reported. Like something out of a Chuck Norris film, hundreds of tankers carrying oil, gas and other items were set ablaze, causing millions of dollars of damage on the spot and millions more in longer term economic affects.

Afghanistan is dealing with an increasingly successful, and internationally tolerated, insurgency. You expect destruction of supplies and trade, particularly when control of official trade routes, and unofficial smuggling routes, is one of the major causes of civil war in a globalised world.

We do not know if the fire was started deliberately or was merely a tragic accident. But essential supplies were destroyed, up to 20 people were injured and looters descended on the site to scavenge for the few goods untouched by the blaze.

Arguments over the numbers involved, which always have a political dimension, are likely to rage far longer than the fire itself did. However various dimensions to this story have the potential to cause an even bigger firestorm.

The loss of all this energy and trade is no more significant than why it was taking place to begin with. A tangle of relations has been revealed which much of the reporting of the fire seems designed to detract attention from. If Afghanistan and Iran have got to this point, every other country has the right to be asking: can’t we?

More Afghan than the Next Foreigner

The endless conflict in Afghanistan is less like Syria and more like Lebanon. It isn’t about who you want to be
running the country. It is about which side is the more genuine representative of the people – regardless of whom they are, what they do, or whether anyone else likes them or not.

However wins will do so because they have become what Western governments continually deride other countries for being - nationalistic, exclusive, referring to their own system of values rather than those the West expects them to have. That’s the only way to win in Afghanistan. That’s why the oil fire gives every disadvantaged group on earth the hope that they can now cause enough trouble of their own to reverse the odds, even if the disadvantage they face is morally justified.

Afghanistan has been ravaged by civil war for over forty years. The present conflict dates back to the overthrow of King Zahir Shah back in 1973, which was achieved with the help of the pro-Soviet Afghan Communist Party as a junior partner. A lot of people wanted the king, seen as lazy and corrupt, out of the way, and creating a republic, led by another member of the royal family, was the sort of change many European democracies had undergone. But few wanted the replacement to be either Communist or foreign.

When it became increasingly so, and the president took action, the Soviet-backed communists murdered him and imposed their own increasingly unpopular regime. The murder of the next president, and disputes with Moscow, led the Soviet Union to intervene in 1979 to stabilise the country. However it did this by murdering the incumbent president and replacing him with their own man – creating the foreign domination nobody wanted.

Everyone has had their share of the on-going waves of conflict since then, cheerfully ignoring one simple fact: that Afghanistan has never been permanently conquered by any foreign power. The British tried three times, at the height of their imperial might, and the first effort is still the worst military defeat the United Kingdom has ever suffered.

Yes, any side is happy to accept foreign sponsorship. But there are limits. Ultimately the foreigners have to go away again, and let Afghans run their own affairs the way they understand they should be run.

Even Amanullah Khan, the native Afghan king revered today, was overthrown because he built factories, and was accused of “turning Christian”. If the Afghans don’t accept it, it’s foreign, and has no hope of succeeding in the longer term. If Hungary’s Viktor Orban turned out to be an Afghan in disguise, nobody would be surprised.

Return of Our Bastards

Nowadays the main conflict in Afghanistan is between the Taliban and the Afghan government. It exists despite the fact that the Taliban were once the government of Afghanistan themselves, and a particularly notorious one.

Where once someone was described as a “Nazi” they are now described as “Taliban” – a brutal ideologue who will do anything to inflict their rules on anyone else, no matter how repressive, unpopular, inhumane or downright loony they are. Who would support such people, or want them back? Anyone who doesn’t want a foreign solution, that’s who.

The Taliban took power in 1996 without having to do much fighting. This was because the Afghan mujahideen groups who had got rid of the Soviets, with Western assistance, Charlie Wilson’s War, were all falling over themselves be “Islamic” (read: native) but their values were not accepted by the people, and weren’t bringing peace and prosperity.

That made them foreign. When the Taliban offered Islam in the context of Pashtunwali, the set of traditional values understood by the traditionally dominant Pashtun community and accepted by all the other ethnic groups, it was a “return to normalcy” in the eyes of many, the end of what the foreigners had inflicted on them for twenty years.

Even the violent “fundamentalist” Islam which followed was long accepted as a necessary evil by many. Only when the connections with the heroin trade became too flagrant did the Taliban have to go - repression was an unacceptable price to pay for feeding a foreign disease, giving the opportunity for the US to move in and re-establish its own control over that trade.

Now a big explosion has occurred. Which foreign stooge is to blame? The Afghan government, supported by the US? Or the Taliban, which the US got rid of but now wants to include in the government so American troops can run away?

If the explosion wasn’t an accident, it was caused by the more foreign group. If the Afghan government is held responsible for the failure to protect the tankers, the Taliban, once Public Enemy Number One, will emerge the
victor, both in practical and political terms.

The US and its allies invested a lot of blood and money in defeating the Taliban. Now the same US is treating it as a political force necessary to stabilise the country – exactly what they said it wasn’t back in the day, and exactly what it said the Afghan government they replaced it with was.

If the Taliban can blow up 500 tankers and be seen as more native than the US-backed Afghan government, it has no need to negotiate. The US is only trying to bring it into government now to moderate it, because it holds all the cards. Maybe the Taliban had nothing to do with the oil fire, but it has the potential to do for it what the Reichstag Fire did for the Nazis.

**You Can’t Unless It Kills You**

The tanker blaze took place at the border crossing between Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan trades with all its neighbours and other countries – one of its untapped resources is licorice, which is grown on commercial scale as a plant but never eaten.

Yet a huge number of tankers were at this one Afghan/Iranian checkpoint, when there isn’t supposed to be any trade between Afghanistan and Iran at all. A US-sponsored government would never be allowed to breach the US sanctions on Iran. So trade with other neighbours should be exponentially greater, and a juicier target for those who want to disrupt it, if this fire was started deliberately.

Yet on an unremarkable day all these tankers were trying to get through the border post, many containing energy supplies. Why? Because Afghanistan is allowed by the same US to trade with Iran when other countries are not, on the grounds that it needs these essential supplies.

China could supply energy. Pakistan would be glad to restore relations with Afghanistan, long damaged by mutual accusations of harbouring terrorists, by trading with Afghanistan some of the goods it trades with India. If Boris Johnson can insist that UK trade levels with the EU can be replaced by trade with elsewhere if damaged, surely the US can find other countries to supply Afghanistan’s needs, even if it won’t let Russia do so?

It seems sanctions only apply until somebody says they need something, and you aren’t willing to supply it yourself. If Afghanistan can benefit from such an arrangement, why can’t many other countries?

**Too Poor To Fail**

The climate change debate has resulted in countries being set carbon emission targets. Countries with abundant alternative sources of energy, and the funds needed to develop them to sustainable levels, can meet those, even if they aren’t interested, or want to blame everything bad on developing countries.

Most countries still rely on fossil fuels for energy because the alternatives aren’t funded, and trade deals still exist. If rich countries cut their carbon emissions, they also have to cut manufacturing, even in the short term, to do it. But the manufacturing has to go on to meet the terms of trade deals, the poorer countries need it, and the energy they supply to fuel manufacturing still has to be there, even if it is out of sight, out of mind.

Increasingly, the burden of making emissions is being shifted onto the developing world. Countries can’t feed themselves anymore because the rich countries are using their crops for biofuel. The have to import food and pay for it with whatever resources they have.

Increasingly these are the fossil fuels the rich countries don’t want in their backyard. Carbon emission targets are not helping the environment, but shifting the blame from the rich polluters to the poor fuel suppliers.

There was a time when nuclear energy was seen as the clean alternative to fossil fuels. Now countries are sanctioned if they use nuclear energy. But to avoid climate sanctions, countries have no choice but to reopen their nuclear plants. This also carries sanctions, but they need the energy somehow. If Afghanistan is allowed to bust sanctions because it needs things, can’t other countries gain the things they need, if the countries who sanction them aren’t going to pay for them?

The Afghan government will have to show it can supply the country, and be seen to be doing it through its own efforts, or the people won’t stand for it and the US will drop it as incompetent. Many other governments, such as Iraq, South Sudan and even Iceland, have the same problem.
So there is a political as well as a practical need for countries to be allowed to bust sanctions. This opens up considerable diplomatic and developmental possibilities. Kim Jong-Un must be laughing his head off, so must Armenia, which still thrives despite sanctions. If the US doesn’t develop another tool of coercion quick, a few more things might blow up to create needs which can be used as blackmail.

From Fire to Volcano

Whatever caused the tanker fire, it has created a new round of looking for someone to blame. Even accidents can’t be written off in times of civil war, because by definition things can and should always be different at such periods.

Blaming both sides gets you nowhere but relying on resources you don’t have, so both local populations and foreign governments eventually have to sit on one side of the fence. Someone will be accused of not playing by the rules, even if no one knew those rules existed the day before.

The Taliban was removed by the US, now the same US is running to it to try and stabilise the country. No one can trade with Iran, but they can if they need the supplies, and if they don’t get those supplies they aren’t worth defending, and might as well ignore sanctions anyway.

The emergency services have put out the Islam Qala fire. Who has the time or energy to put out the other fires it has created? Once again a huge gap has opened up in the international arena, for the first power to get its act together, even though none of them are at present.

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