

June 16, 2010

This is the print preview: [Back to normal view »](#)

Malou Innocent

Foreign Policy Analyst at the Cato Institute

Posted: June 15, 2010 12:03 PM

Grasping for Rationales, Feeding Conspiracy Theories

On June 13, the *New York Times* reported that America "just discovered" a trillion dollars worth of mineral resources in Afghanistan (HT to Katie Drummond over at *Danger Room* for offering some enlightened skepticism on the topic).

Of course, the U.S. Geological Survey has known about Afghanistan's "large quantities of iron and copper" since 2007. *The Los Angeles Times* reported that geologist Bonita Chamberlain, who has spent 25 years working in Afghanistan, "identified 91 minerals, metals and gems at 1,407 potential mining sites" as far back as 2001. Chamberlain was even contacted by the Pentagon to write a report on the subject just weeks after 9/11 (possibly to expound upon the findings of her co-authored book, "Gemstones in Afghanistan," published in 1996.)

Given the recent failure of Marjah, which Gen. McChrystal recently called "a bleeding ulcer," this new "discovery" could offer Western leaders a new way to convince their war-weary publics that Afghanistan is worth the fight. Government officials are already touting this new "discovery" as yet another "decisive moment" or "corner turned" in the Afghan campaign.

In the *NYT* article head of Central Command Gen. David Petraeus said, "There is stunning potential here. There are a lot of ifs, of course, but I think potentially it is hugely significant."

Afghanistan epitomizes the fate of countries too dependent on foreign patronage, which over time has weakened its security by undermining their leaders' allegiance to the state. In the long run, \$1 trillion worth of mineral deposits could eventually help Afghanistan stand on its own two feet. However, two problems emerge. First, there is little assurance that revenue from mineral resources (which will take years of capital investment to extract) will actually

reach the Afghan people and not be siphoned off by Karzai and his corrupt cronies--like much of the international community's investment does now.

Second, in the short-term, this discovery may feed conspiracy theories that already exist in the region. Though unwise to generalize personal meetings to an entire population, some conspiracy theories that I heard while I was recently in Afghanistan should give U.S. officials pause before announcing that America can help extract the country's mineral deposits. Some of the wildest conspiracy theories I heard were that the United States wants to occupy Afghanistan in order to take its resources; the Taliban is the United States; the United States is using helicopters to ferry Taliban around northern Afghanistan (courtesy of President Hamid Karzai); America is at war in order to weaken Islam; and the list goes on.

This "discovery" may force more people in the region to ask: what are America's real reasons for building permanent bases in Central Asia?

Follow Malou Innocent on Twitter: www.twitter.com/IndianBrownAle