

IT'S NOT JUST POPPIES - DR

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Back in April, the influential Washington political website, *The Hill*, ran a headline: "Why the US will never leave Afghanistan".

It had nothing to do with military strategy; the reason the writer advanced was that Afghanistan was so rich in minerals that

(a) America needed those minerals, especially the rare earths, and

(b) America needed to deny those minerals to China.

Well, that didn't work, did it?

Australia could suffer collateral damage, in two respects, from the humiliating panic we have seen this week from the US administration and military.

One is a matter beyond *Outcrop's* remit: that is, we rely heavily on the US for our defence support, and there are plenty of people now questioning whether Australia can any longer rely on the Americans. We'll know for sure when China invades Taiwan.

The other collateral damage, however, is right up our alley.

Are you sitting comfortably?

Back in 2010, an internal memo was leaked from the Pentagon which dealt with a study the US had been undertaking on Afghanistan's mineral resources.

The details were published around the world, mostly in relatively brief form, but the *New York Times* gave it massive treatment, quoting the then head of US Central Command, General David Petraeus, saying that the work showed "stunning potential" for mineral development. The paper added that Pentagon officials saw Afghanistan as a future major world producer of iron ore and copper, and that the country could become the "Saudi Arabia of lithium".

In all, the country could become a "major mining centre of the world," the paper said at the time.

The US Geological Survey had estimated known iron ore deposits could hold US\$421 billion worth of iron ore although the preciseness of that sort of estimate should not be taken too seriously — several other media reports talked in terms of the overall mineral endowment as being worth between US\$1 trillion and US\$3 trillion, which is a fairly elastic estimate.

There was plenty of niobium, too, in Afghanistan — along with impressive amounts of cobalt, gold, molybdenum, rare earths (estimate: US\$7.4 billion), silver, potash, bauxite and graphite.

Surveys carried by the US in the western region of Afghanistan had, the report said, located dry salt lakes so rich in lithium that they could be on a par with those of Bolivia.

Well, of course, one has to take such statements with — shall we say — a pinch of salt.

Plus, it would be many years before any mines would be developed, even if (as now seems possible) the Chinese are allowed by the Taliban to bring their can-do attitude to the task.

China has been cosyng up to the Taliban (some of their leaders were on a Beijing visit a few weeks ago) and the Chinese government made it clear this week they had

"maintained contact and communication" in recent days with the bearded ones now in charge in Kabul.

China has also said it wishes to help the "reconstruction and development" of Afghanistan.

Clearly, Beijing wishes to draw Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is a telling detail that the 76km-long border between the two countries includes a pass that was a route on the old Silk Road, the template for the new BRI. Expect to see a highway and rail line this time rather than horses and camels.

China may be able to achieve what others have failed to do: make Afghanistan a vassal state. In that case, they will have under their control Afghanistan's mineral wealth.

The British Raj failed to subdue the Afghans — it's famous retreat from Kabul in 1842 ended with the entire 16,000-man army dying or being killed. Then the Soviet invasion came a cropper in more recent years.

And now the Americans have been humiliated.

Rare earths would be uppermost on Beijing's mind when it comes to mineral resources.

The USGS estimated that rare earths in Helmand province could contain up to 1.4 million tonnes of rare earth elements, which would dwarf what Australia could potentially supply to the world. China's control of those resources, as well as their downstream processing capabilities, would enable Beijing to maintain its stranglehold on those vital critical metals.

And presumably the Chinese would like to get their hands on the iron ore.

Yes, it's possible that the Taliban could turn nasty with them, too.

But China can be pretty nasty when it comes to getting its own way.