

International Security Monthly Briefing – August 2009

Afghanistan and NATO

Paul Rogers

The July briefing in this series sought to analyse the war in Afghanistan from a more general perspective of the original response to the 9/11 attacks and the Bush administration's "war on terror" that followed. It was argued that the predicament in Afghanistan stems from three separate mistakes over the 2001-05 period.

- The response to 9/11, though understandable, was fundamentally wrong. Instead of engaging in war, including early regime termination in Afghanistan, the response should have seen 9/11 as an appalling example of mass trans-national criminality. The response should therefore have been to commence a rigorous process of bringing those behind the attacks to justice. By opting for war, a rump movement was elevated into an oppositional entity which could represent itself as defending a wider religious culture.
- Regime termination in Iraq was a fundamental political error resulting in a 6+ year war, over 100,000 civilian deaths, 120,000 detentions, four million refugees and the sully of the human rights reputation of the United States and others.
- The diversion of attention from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2002-05 enabled paramilitary groups to enhance what was previously a low-level insurgency now entering its ninth year.

It was further argued that US/ISAF no longer anticipates a full military victory, but even seeking to negotiate with paramilitaries from a position of military superiority is counterproductive since an increase in foreign military forces increases the commitment and strength of the paramilitaries. Thus, the experience of the past three years has been that as western military forces in Afghanistan have increased, so has paramilitary activity and influence.

At a more general level it can even be argued that the underlying problem is that the era in which western forces can occupy countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan has long passed, just as the colonial era ended with India independence in 1947, even though colonial powers took a decade or two to realise this. Western states may see their role as one of liberators, but the harsher political reality is that they are all too readily seen as occupiers.

Britain is in a particular predicament having committed itself to the current US approach. Considerable effort should be made to convince the Obama administration that there must be a fundamental rethinking of policy towards Afghanistan. This may well extend to the downsizing and withdrawal of forces and the negotiating of local ceasefires.

The McChrystal Report

During the course of August, there were strong indications that the recently appointed head of foreign military forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, would deliver a report to the White House which would include the following elements:

- The situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating and there will need to be major changes in tactics, including efforts to minimise civilian casualties and increase engagement with local communities.
- An increase in foreign military forces will be required. This might include as many as 45,000 more US troops and increased commitments from other NATO states including Britain.
- It will be essential to greatly expand the size of the Afghan National Army and Afghan Police, with sustained efforts to improve the quality of these forces, especially the police.
- It will be necessary to negotiate with more moderate paramilitary elements.

NATO Involvement

While the great majority of the foreign forces are from the United States, some 30,000 troops are drawn from other NATO states. These include over 8,000 UK troops that form the second largest foreign contingent. UK forces, along with those of Canada and the Netherlands, have been involved in considerable combat operations in southern Afghanistan, but most other NATO troops that are committed to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operate in the north, central and western parts of Afghanistan. For the great majority of them the rules of engagement have related mainly to providing a defensive security presence and aiding civil reconstruction and development, often in the form of Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

There are three other general elements of NATO involvement. One is that since most of the forces have been deployed in what have previously been relatively peaceful parts of the country there has, in practice, been little cause for them to be involved in combat operations. This has applied, in particular, to the substantial contingent of 4,500 German troops operating primarily in Kunduz Province. The second is that there has been substantial public opposition to NATO deployments in Afghanistan in some of the NATO member states. This includes Germany, where opinion polling suggest two-thirds opposition to the German deployments. This level of opposition is particularly significant in relation to the German elections at the end of the month.

Finally, the entire ISAF operation represents a very major development in the evolution of the NATO alliance since the end of the Cold War. The original North Atlantic Treaty and the subsequent establishment of a unified military command (NATO), were very much creatures of the Cold War, particularly the deep crisis over Berlin at the end of the 1940s. As NATO expanded in the 1990s and also had a heavy involvement in the Balkans, questions arose as to whether it might embark on wider roles that were well outside its normal areas of operation. The whole issue of out-of-area engagement has been much debated, with many convinced supporters of the long-term viability of NATO believing that it is an enhancement of its role that has to be embraced. The ISAF operation in Afghanistan is the only substantial out-of-area operation for NATO and it is therefore significant for future of the entire alliance that it is seen to be successful. It is in this context that recent developments in Afghanistan are so significant.

Taliban Operations

Pakistani Army operations against Taliban and other paramilitaries in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province have had some impact in limiting Taliban influence, as have the frequent drone attacks undertaken by US forces. In spite of this, paramilitary influence remains considerable, and parts of the FATA remain safe areas for Afghan Taliban and militias linked to al-Qaida. What is even more significant is that the Taliban paramilitaries in

Afghanistan have substantially increased the areas that they control, in spite of the considerable increase in foreign military forces in the country.

There are three elements to this. One is that Taliban paramilitaries have become progressively more effective in their guerrilla warfare tactics. Partly through sheer combat experience, partly because of tactics brought in from other conflicts such as Iraq, and partly because of the impact of civilian casualties and the effect of a corrupt and ineffective government in Kabul, the Taliban insurgency has become steadily more effective. In particular, the insurgents fully recognise the enormous advantage that the foreign forces have, especially in terms of reconnaissance capabilities and firepower, and they have therefore become far more adept at operating in small groups rather than being involved in frontal assaults.

This has coincided with the recognition in US military circles that it is essential to avoid civilian casualties, even if this means that US and other ISAF units have to operate in a manner that involves deeper engagement at the town and village level. This has to involve foot patrols which are inevitably vulnerable to roadside bombs and other elements of the Taliban insurgency.

The second element is that if the longer-term aim is to replace foreign forces with a greatly expanded Afghan National Army, it simply has to be recognised that this cannot be done quickly. It may be possible to recruit and train many thousands of soldiers over a period of two to four years, but it is a much longer-term process to train junior and senior officers to lead such troops effectively. This reality lies behind the efforts of a number of NATO military leaders to emphasise that Afghanistan will remain a concern for many years.

Finally, and most significant of all, is the manner in which the Taliban paramilitaries have spread their influence and control well into northern provinces of Afghanistan in which they were previously absent or had virtually no effect. These are the provinces in which NATO deployments, including the Germans in Kunduz Province, have had little need for combat operations.

Kunduz and its significance

The spread of Taliban influence into Kunduz Province has involved the raising of taxes, the institution of a parallel justice system and the imposition of harsh Islamist social policies including the closing of girls' schools. It has also involved the movement of foreign fighters into the province together with attempts to hinder supply routes into Northern Afghanistan from neighbouring Central Asian republics. This last development is particularly significant since the attacks on the main supply lines from the Pakistani port of Karachi through the Kyber Pass and other routes to Kabul and Kandahar have meant that NATO has sought to open up the new routes into the north. The fact that Taliban operations have this degree of coordination gives some indication of their capabilities as insurgents. This goes very far beyond the notion of primitive tribal elements operating with crude tactics in uncoordinated and localised operations.

Over the past year, the German forces in Kunduz Province have found themselves steadily more engaged in combat operations, with one single incident a few miles from the town of Kunduz acquiring an international significance. Following the hijacking of two fuel tankers by Taliban guerrillas, German forces requested an air strike against the tankers which were reported to be surrounded by scores of Taliban. A US Air Force F-15 then used a precision-guided bomb to destroy the tankers, causing a huge fireball. The explosion and the resulting conflagration probably killed a number of Taliban but also killed many civilians who were extracting fuel from the tankers that had become stuck in a muddy river.

Because of the level of destruction and the rapid burial of those killed it is not possible to get an accurate picture of the loss of life, but it is estimated to be between 80 and 120 people with a substantial proportion of them being civilians. This is the first time that there have been substantial civilian casualties arising from operations involving German troops and it is a clear sign that the war is extending into regions of Afghanistan that have NATO forces deployed in what have not previously been major combat roles.

The implications of these developments are considerable. The NATO alliance has held together in the face of public unease in a number of member states primarily because only a few countries have sizeable deployments acting in a combat role. If the war extends progressively to those parts of the country that do not have NATO forces undertaking such a role then there are only two responses. One is that such forces will have to engage in combat operations, much as the Bundeswehr is now doing. This is a substantial change of role that may well lead to more incidents such as the recent bombing near Kunduz, with domestic political consequences. The other response is that if participating NATO states are not prepared to take on this new role then other NATO forces will have to be deployed to do so. Given current limitations on the capabilities and political commitment of states such as the UK, Canada and the Netherlands, this will almost certainly mean more US troops.

Conclusion

As the Taliban insurgency spreads into previously stable parts of Afghanistan, either more NATO states become involved in direct combat, with the consequence risk of increased political controversy in the countries concerned, or the United States has to take on a much greater burden of operations, leading to a questioning of the role of NATO in out—of-area operations or even of the viability of the entire alliance in its current form. In this respect, recent developments in Afghanistan are likely to have an impact that stretches well beyond the immediate concerns of the Obama administration.