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The Afghanistan Decision

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During October the Obama administration moved towards a decision on strengthening of US troop deployments in Afghanistan. Most sources in Washington indicated an expansion of around 40,000 troops, but some suggested up to 60,000. Even the former figure would take the US troop totals to well over 100,000 and NATO's overall numbers in the country to around 140,000.

If such an expansion in forces was to be implemented, the US administration would certainly press other NATO member states to increase their commitments. Gordon Brown's government in London agreed during the month to add another 500 troops, this being dependent on such increases, but there was little indication that either Canada or the Netherlands, two key NATO states with troops engaged in direct combat operations, would comply. Germany, with its new government now in power, is the one state likely to allow more combat-orientated rules of engagement for its troops in Northern Afghanistan, but while the government in Berlin is stable, it does not have much popular support for such a change.

The Iraq Attacks

A substantial increase in US troop deployments in Afghanistan is dependent, in part, on maintaining the programme of withdrawals from Iraq. This was thrown into doubt in early October, as the full impact of the bombing of two government ministries in Baghdad was appreciated. Although there has been a very substantial drop in violence across much of Iraq, there have been three significant exceptions during the course of this year. One is the persistent attacking of Shi'a centres, both shrines and markets, often causing severe casualties. Most of these have been in Baghdad or northern cities. The second has been the manner in which some of Iraq's minority groups, including Christians and Yazidis, are caught up in inter-communal competition and conflict, especially in Nineveh Province, with over 150 killed in the three months to the end of September. The third element has been a series of attacks on government installations. In August the Ministries of Finance, Health and Foreign Affairs were bombed, killing 102 people and injuring over 500. Then, on 25 October, truck bombs were used to wreck the Ministry of Justice and the Baghdad Provincial Governorate, killing 155 people and injuring many hundreds more. The series of attacks have been intended both to provoke a response from Shi'a paramilitary groups and to undermine confidence in the Malaki government in the run-up to the January elections. If they continue, the pace of US troop withdrawals may have to be slowed.

In such circumstances a substantial increase in troop deployments in Afghanistan will become problematic. This is mainly because just about every analysis of the evolving conflict comes to the conclusion that the war has some years to run. Sources within the US Department of Defense indicate that it would take three to four years of intensive military operations to ensure the defeat of the insurgency, the implication being that US troop numbers would have to be maintained in excess of 100,000 for that length of time. This is only possible, even allowing for some expansion of the US Army and the Marine Corps, if deployments in Iraq are cut back severely within two years and if there are no other major commitments elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, NATO partner states will have to maintain their involvement in the face of increasing domestic opposition to the war, not least in Britain.

Pakistani Army Operations

During October, the Pakistani Army started a major military deployment deep into Waziristan, one of the least centrally controlled districts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The stated aim is to clear out all opposition to the Islamabad government and it is an operation warmly welcomed in Washington. It is also relatively popular within influential circles in Pakistan, since the repeated bombings by Islamist paramilitaries in towns and cities across the country have resulted in calls for Army action to bring them under control. At the same time, though, opposition to US influence in Pakistan remains high, and there is even a sense that the Army is doing Washington's work for it. This is in the context of a widespread view among opinion formers in Pakistan that the country was wrong to involve itself so intimately in President George Bush's "war on terror" after the 9/11 attacks.

The Army operation in Waziristan is still under way and it is very difficult for independent analysts to get a clear indication of the progress. Journalists have only been allowed into the district under very heavy supervision, and there is a presumption that official Army communiqués are persistently over-optimistic. What is also becoming clear is that the operation is simply not being mounted on the scale necessary to achieve the stated aim of occupying Waziristan and neutralising the paramilitary groups.

There are two issues here. One is that even if the Army was able to so occupy Waziristan, there is little evidence that this would bring to an end the campaign of bombings across Pakistan. Recent attacks show that some of the militant groups are embedded in communities across the country in such a manner that a coherent geographical base is not essential for them. Moreover, they clearly have close connections with elements of the Army and security forces, given their ability to strike at key targets such as the Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi.

The second issue is even more significant. This is that the Waziristan operation simply does not have sufficient troops allocated to it to complete the task of fully occupying the district. The Pakistani Army is primarily a conventional land force that is trained and equipped for combat against the much larger Indian Army. It is not an army that has systematically trained for counter-insurgency warfare. The forces operating in Waziristan number around 30,000, of which barely a third are involved in combat operations. These 10,000 face a similar number of highly motivated irregular forces that have intimate knowledge of the terrain and substantial support from their own communities.

In counter-insurgency operations in such circumstances, it is normally estimated that a 3:1 or even 5:1 advantage in favour of the attacking forces is required to control opposition, coupled with a very high level of police and civil organisation to ensure the maintenance of control after army operations are completed. The current Pakistani government operation in Waziristan does not even come close to matching these requirements and it is therefore well-nigh certain that it will fall far short of its stated aim. What is more likely is that the paramilitary militias will engage Army units when circumstances favour them, but will otherwise melt away into their own communities, allowing the Army apparent success in garrisoning some of the key towns, but then having to face ambushes, roadside bombs and all the other means by which conventional forces can be tied down.

In the short term, therefore, there may be indications of success for the Islamabad regime, but this will be very misleading. Over the next year or so it is much more likely that Pakistani Taliban and other militias will maintain their capabilities, continuing to threaten the state through attacks in the major cities.

Pakistan and Afghanistan

Beyond these immediate circumstance there remains the issue of the attitude of the Pakistani Army's elite, especially the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), to the Taliban and other paramilitaries in Afghanistan. While these key centres of power in Pakistan may support a policy of trying to control Islamist paramilitaries within Pakistan, they have a very different attitude to the insurgents in Afghanistan, an attitude greatly dictated by Pakistan's unequal relationship with India.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban in Afghanistan in the late 1990s was very much a part of maximising influence there so that Afghanistan formed what was effectively a defence in depth against India. It was also geo-strategically important because of its links with Central Asia, not least because Pakistan has no common border with any other Central Asian republic.

In the past couple of years, the Pakistan elite has viewed with the gravest concern the manner in which India has provided copious aid to Afghanistan, including road construction and many other civil projects. It is even more concerned that elements of the Afghan National Army are receiving training from the Indian military, that the Karzai regime has good links with New Delhi and that the Indian Embassy in Kabul is the focus of so much diplomatic engagement.

What therefore has to be born in mind is that Pakistani Army operations to increase control of some of its key border districts simply do not extend to providing consistent support for US/ISAF operations in Afghanistan. From a Pakistani perspective, a future stable Afghan government that, with foreign aid, has defeated the insurgents and has engaged more fully with India, would be little short of a disaster. It is therefore unwise to believe that close cooperation between the US/ISAF and Pakistan in anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan will be forthcoming. The view from Islamabad is that operations on the Pakistani side of the border are quite separate from the war in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan after the Election

Within Afghanistan there is some evidence that paramilitary elements have been forced on to the defensive in parts of Helmand Province, following a near-doubling in the number of foreign troops deployed in the Province. Elsewhere, though, there is abundant evidence that the Taliban and other elements are steadily expanding their areas of control, extending that control to issues such as the raising of taxes and the organisation of courts.

There is also growing evidence that it is misleading to describe the conflict as one between US/ISAF forces and a highly structured Taliban insurgency. While Taliban elements and associated warlord militias are very significant, and are clearly dominant in many areas, a much more generalised opposition to foreign forces is developing. This frequently involves very localised militia groups objecting violently to what is seen as a foreign military occupation. Thus, the conflict now has elements of a more general insurrection rather than a more restricted insurgency, and this is exacerbated by opposition to a distant, corrupt and disorganised regime in Kabul.

Following the deeply flawed presidential election, and the failure to hold a second round, Hamid Karzai has been returned to power, but is under strong pressure from the United States to curb the levels of corruption. There are three problems in making such demands. The first is that President Karzai appears to have been dependent for his re-election on the involvement of key power-brokers in managing the election. Such people now require their rewards for services rendered, not least in terms of positions in the administration. The second problem is that the US has very little in the way of bargaining power, since to threaten a troop withdrawal would be represented as outright capitulation to the Taliban by Obama's political opponents.

Finally, and least recognised, is what amounts to a driving force currently aiding corruption. Put bluntly, there are many people with access to power in Afghanistan who are entirely uncertain as to whether western forces will remain and whether the country will move into a state of decline and a return to the chaos of the early 1990s. In such circumstances it is almost inevitable that people will look to short-term monetary gain in order to secure their own futures, either inside or outside the country.

The Obama Dilemma

In such circumstances the legacy of insecurity in the region bequeathed by the Bush administration is no great help to Obama. It is this complex and difficult legacy which does much to explain the extensive policy discussions within the administration during October. In early November these discussions were complicated by firm advice from the US Ambassador in Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, recommending that the United States send no more troops until there were clear signs of an improved administration under Karzai. This is unlikely to be forthcoming for the reasons already discussed.

It is therefore possible that US policy will move in the direction of by-passing Karzai and working more consistently with local and provincial administrations. If this were to be emulated by other ISAF contingents, and if foreign development assistance was to be substantially increased, along with a greater willingness to engage with some insurgent actors, then the beginnings of a new approach might start to emerge. If not, then a war of many years duration remains likely.