

**International Security Monthly Briefing – April 2010**

**PROGRESS IN PART**

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**Introduction**

The early part of April saw some valuable progress on nuclear weapons issues but, while this was a welcome change from recent years, developments in Afghanistan threatened to lead to renewed concerns over stability in that country.

**Nuclear Issues**

In the early part of April, and after an agreement with Russia to develop a follow-on to the START Treaty, President Obama hosted a *Nuclear Security Summit* in Washington. The principle aim was to focus on issues of insecure nuclear weapons and fissile material but it was also designed to place some emphasis on preventing further nuclear proliferation, given the imminence of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference scheduled to start on 3 May in New York.

The Washington Summit was attended by leaders and delegations from 47 countries and concluded with an announcement of a further session in due course. There were some drawbacks, including an indication from France that it did not think it appropriate to engage in further nuclear weapons cut-backs, and the avoidance at the Summit of any serious reference to Israel's nuclear capabilities. Against this, Ukraine announced that a small quantity of highly enriched uranium would be made available for disposal. While this was little more than symbolic, it did help focus attention on the question of fissile material, and the security of stocks of enriched uranium or re-processed plutonium.

There was no direct connection between the Summit and the US/Russian bilateral agreement on strategic nuclear weapons, but this new treaty did help focus attention on possibilities for further progress. Both sides will be able to maintain strategic arsenals of around 1,550 warheads, a reduction of close to 40% on current figures. While such arsenals are sufficient to cripple any state fifty times over and still represent a ludicrous level of overkill, they do contrast with total NATO/Warsaw Pact nuclear arsenals of over 60,000 at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s. Furthermore, President Obama has made it clear that he hopes for further progress during his first term in office, and there is a presumption that this will involve attempts to get a mutual draw-down of tactical nuclear weapons. Even if this is not achieved within the next thirty months, the strategic treaty that has been agreed will at least include a number of confidence-building measures relating to verification.

In any case, the important point with all of this is the context. The forthcoming NPT Review Conference follows the bilateral agreement and a successful Summit; it comes at a time of improved US/Russian relations and has a US President who has stated a personal commitment to move towards a nuclear-free world. That latter aim may be little more than a pipe-dream for now, but Obama's attitude is in marked contrast to that of his predecessor. At the time of the 2005 NPT Review, President George W Bush had recently been re-elected, was preoccupied with winning the "war on terror" and was thoroughly disinterested in the NPT Review process. Next month's conference may itself make little progress, but it will form part of a process in a manner unseen for more than a decade.

The nuclear issue has also been a subject in the British General Election campaign. Normally the issue would not form part of campaigning, given that the two main parties, Labour and Conservative, are both committed to replacing the Trident missile system with a broadly similar force, even though cost considerations suggest that this will be difficult. Two weeks into the campaign, however, it looked possible that there would not be an overall winner and that a "hung" or "balanced" parliament was likely. If that should happen, and the third party - the Liberal Democrats - were to join Labour in some

kind of coalition, then the nuclear issue could become relevant. The Liberal Democrats are less inclined to support a like-for-like replacement for Trident and would therefore look to a cheaper and probably smaller system. This would normally be unacceptable to Labour, but the combination of the need for coalition-building and the financial situation might make this a feasible option. It is possible that such changes could be indicated soon after the UK General Election while the Non-Proliferation Conference is still in session in New York – a potentially interesting development. In the event of a Conservative victory or a Conservative-led coalition, however, there would be little or no change in the UK nuclear posture.

## Afghanistan

Last month's briefing (*A Hint of Victory?*, March 2010) analysed the evidence for an improving security situation in Afghanistan. It acknowledged the effectiveness of armed drone attacks, if questioning the long-term consequences. However, it also pointed to the increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in southern Afghanistan and the danger of seeing the Taliban as an outside entity rather than a movement with a high degree of integration into southern Afghan society. In the past month it has become clear that the next major coalition operation will very shortly be directed at the city of Kandahar, with the aim of clearing the powerful Taliban elements from the urban area and its immediate surroundings. This operation is likely to begin in June and will probably coincide with an increase in Taliban activity across the whole province of Kandahar, as well as the province of Helmand to the west.

A pattern of insurgent activity that evolved in the 2002-07 period was that the conflict was most intense each year from June through to October. During the winter months, there was less fighting, mainly for logistical reasons, but there was also a period in the spring, when there was an emphasis on harvesting the financially important opium poppy crop. In the past three years, the winter "lull" in fighting has been less apparent, not least through increased attacks in urban areas, but the poppy harvest period has remained one of paramilitary diversion. For this reason, the timing of the Kandahar operation is likely to result in considerable violence unless the Taliban militias operate in a similar manner to their response to Operation Moshtarak in Helmand. It is for this reason that it is necessary to put some emphasis on analysing the outcome, insofar as it is known, of Moshtarak. Any conclusions must be tentative, but there are three broad themes that can be addressed.

**The Coalition Presence** As a result of the availability of increased numbers of coalition personnel, it has been possible to deploy several thousand troops across central Helmand in a manner which was simply not feasible before. Many of the troops are US Marines but there is also a substantial presence of Afghan National Army forces, most of them drawn from non-Pashtun communities in other parts of Afghanistan. One of the main aims of the US Marines, in particular, has been to reach out to local populations, assuring them of the potential for improved government involvement in that part of the province and of the likely increase in external development aid. A specific part of the process of gaining local support has been the early provision of compensation for the loss of life incurred due to collateral effects of Operation Moshtarak and, to a lesser extent, damage to property. Thus, it has been an operation that was designed from the start to be more than just a military process ending with the defeat and expulsion of opposing forces from a particular district.

**The Taliban Response** As Operation Moshtarak developed, one of the aspects that became clear was that many of the Taliban insurgents and Taliban-linked paramilitaries chose not to fight against the heavily armed and very well-equipped US forces. Indeed, opposition frequently tended to be aimed at elements of the less well equipped Afghan National Army. More significantly, "the Taliban" were not driven out of the district back from whence they came, since so many of them actually come from within the district. This fits in very much with one of the points made in last month's briefing – that the Afghan Taliban movement is internal, not external.

One particular aspect of this, which is hugely relevant, is that people not thoroughly knowledgeable of a local community have virtually no way of being able to identify local people as “Taliban”. Nor are people likely to confide in US Marines, Afghan soldiers or the police, not least as reprisals may be the likely result. One remarkable consequence of this predicament is that Taliban paramilitaries are perfectly able to present themselves as local people demanding compensation for loss of life, injury or damage to property. There have been thoroughly credible reports in the past month of significant amounts of compensation being handed over from US Marines to people who were actually Taliban fighter or sympathisers, the money obtained then being available for the purchase of weapons and explosives to be used against the Marines themselves. We are thus left with a situation in which a much-needed change in US policy which aims to gain support in the countryside is actually leading to consequences that are directly counter-productive.

**IEDs and Night Raids** The final aspect of recent operations has been the impact of an increase in night raids against Afghan households by coalition Special Forces. In terms of the war as a whole, coalition forces have sought over the past year to rely less on airstrikes in their counter-insurgency operations, mainly because the resultant collateral damage, especially civilian casualties, has caused such anger among Afghans. While such a decline in air strikes may not be substantially related to the availability and use of IEDs, what is very clear is that these have become the common weapons of choice, not least in Helmand Province. Because the IEDs used in Afghanistan are currently crude and easy to assemble, they can be prepared and stored in outhouses or even dwellings in villages and towns. One of the few ways of countering this is to mount Special Forces raids on suspected houses and compounds, usually at night. As a general trend, there has thus been an increase in night raids, in parallel with the decrease in air strikes.

The impact of the night raids have been analysed in a four-month study published by the Open Society Institute in conjunction with an Afghan NGO, the Liaison Office, at the end of February. While this study was undertaken between September and December last year, before Operation Moshtarak, its findings are particularly significant given the increased problems being experienced in Helmand. The report states that:

*“...these raids are widely associated with abuse and impunity. Night raids cause tremendous trauma within Afghan communities, often alienating the very people whom international forces are supposedly trying to protect.*

It argues that:

*“Given the international community’s commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan by winning local trust and cooperation, night raids represent a serious stumbling block. Afghans’ negative perceptions of international military actors will not change as long as abuses associated with night raids continue.” (Strangers at the Door, Open Society Institute, February 23, 2010)*

### **On to Kandahar**

Within a few weeks, major military operations will be directed against Taliban control in the city of Kandahar. On the basis of recent experience, there may be some open conflict, but it is highly likely that most Taliban elements will melt away into their communities, being almost entirely indistinguishable from everyone else. Low level but persistent and violent engagement in a densely populated urban environment may then follow, with one of the major options for coalition forces being the use of household raids, commonly at night, to counter such actions. If that is what ensues, then an appearance of early victory in Kandahar may well decay into protracted violence, leading to deep resentment and

opposition to coalition forces. Some of the early indications from the aftermath of Operation Moshtarak in neighbouring Helmand province tend, unfortunately, to support that prognosis.

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