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‘After Madrid: Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan ’

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At the beginning of March, some international attention was focused on the security situation in Iraq and there was a recognition that substantial military operations were getting under way on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border, but much of the interest was on the forthcoming congressional investigations into the Bush administration's handling of the 9/11 attacks. During the course of the month, though, there were more immediate developments of concern in Pakistan and Iraq, with these initially overshadowed by the Madrid bombings. By the end of the month, Uzbekistan was also a focus of attention.

The attacks on commuter trains in Madrid that killed over 190 people and injured 1,500, demonstrated the ability of al-Qaida-linked paramilitary groups to undertake operations in the heart of Europe and also had an indirect effect on the subsequent general election. As well as the sheer human cost, they also confirmed the view of some analysts that the al-Qaida phenomenon was now substantially dispersed and capable of operating in many countries, including those with highly developed intelligence and security systems.

There have also been apparent interceptions of planned attacks in Manila and London and an increase in the insurgency in Southern Thailand, but developments in Uzbekistan may well be more significant than these. In Tashkent and Bukhara, a series of shooting and suicide bombings caused large numbers of casualties, with most of the attacks directed against the police. Uzbekistan hosts a significant US Base at Khanabad and Washington has consequently been relatively silent in its attitude to the very poor human rights record of President Karimov.

The Karimov regime has consistently repressed oppositional elements and has claimed that the recent attacks have been undertaken by Islamic radicals from overseas. There may be an element of this, possibly with a loose al-Qaida connection, but the sheer level of repression also means that there is deep internal opposition to the regime. What is particularly significant is that it should be Uzbekistan that experiences these attacks, given its tough system of internal security control, when compared with other weaker Central Asian republics hosting US military facilities. Once again, this indicates a paramilitary capability among oppositional elements that exceeds western expectations.

Iraq

Within Iraq, March was one of the worst months for US casualties since the war was supposed to have ended a year ago, second only to last November. One year after the start of the war, the deaths among US personnel are approaching 600, with some

3,000 people evacuated to the United States for treatment for serious injuries. In addition, around 15,000 US personnel have been flown back to the United States for treatment for accidental injuries or mental and physical illness. There was also, during March, a further increase in attacks on expatriate workers and a continuing problem of repeated attacks on Iraqi police, security guards, politicians and government officials.

In recent weeks, coalition officials have suggested that much of the insurgency is now coming from paramilitaries originating from outside Iraq. If this was the case, then it would present an additional problem, although it would also mean that the ongoing conflict in Iraq could be characterised by the Bush administration as part of the “war on terror”, thereby relating it to 9/11 and possibly making it politically more acceptable in the run-up to the presidential election in November. In practice, the evidence supporting the activities of external Islamic paramilitaries seems inconclusive, although there is undoubtedly an element of such involvement.

Indeed, there has been tendency for the coalition authorities to have to recourse to what might be called the “al-Qaida option”, whenever there has been a surge in the insurgency. The reality is more likely that external paramilitary groups represent no more than a small part of the problem, although it is probable that they will become progressively more significant.

Within Iraq there has been an accelerating process of the recruitment and rapid training of police, border guards and a wide range of pipeline and other security personnel. This has been accompanied by a concentration of US forces into fewer garrisons and camps, and a progressive restriction of aircraft movements to a few major bases that are away from urban areas that would otherwise provide cover for insurgents attempting to attacks aircraft with portable surface-to-air missiles. There has also been a restriction in the extent of US army and marine patrols, especially in areas that are particularly subject to insurgency. This trend may explain why there was no attempt to respond to the recent killing of four US security guards in the city of Fallujah, even though there was a US marine garrison of some 4,000 troops nearby.

The overall decline in security for US troops in Iraq, following a rather less violent period of three months after last November, has meant that daily attacks on US troops and facilities have averaged 28 in the later part of March. There is also concern that insurgents may be refraining from some forms of attack on economic targets until the planned hand-over of political power to an appointed Iraqi administration takes place at the end of June.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

During the course of the month, there were further increases in US forces in the region, including a contingent of 2,000 marines deployed on amphibious warfare ships for possible use to reinforce US Army personnel on Afghanistan or even operate in Pakistan. The developing offensive on both sides of the border has apparently taken the form of a “hammer and anvil” tactic aimed at destroying Taliban and al-Qaida capabilities. In this process, US and coalition troops in Eastern Afghanistan form the “hammer”, with Pakistani troops being the “anvil” across the border.

In mid-March the Pakistani Army staged a major offensive into the border area of South Waziristan using several thousand troops and claiming initially to have isolated several hundred militia, including high-ranking members of the al-Qaida leadership. During an operation lasting some two weeks, army sources spoke of considerable success, but it became apparent that the operation ran into substantially greater difficulties than had been expected.

The core of the problem appeared to be substantial resistance not just from the Taliban and al-Qaida militia and their associates, but substantial sectors of the local population. The latter opposition stemmed, in part, from two incidents early in the fighting when at least twenty civilians were killed, with this serving to elicit an angry response. Reaction to the Pakistani Army's operations was apparent in South Waziristan itself, with substantial casualties on both sides, but Pakistani troops also faced problems away from the immediate area of conflict as convoys and bases elsewhere were attacked.

The fighting died down after two weeks, with religious leaders successfully negotiating the release of government officials held hostage by local militia, but the entire operation was very far from the initial success that had been suggested by Pakistani government sources. While this represents the start of what may be sustained military operations stretching over some months, it suggests that the reaction to further Pakistani Army interventions in the border region may be stronger than anticipated. This could call into question the entire nature of the combined operation between the US coalition in Afghanistan and the Pakistani Army on its own side of the border. One consequence of this may be that the United States will seek Pakistani agreement to have its troops operating in substantial combat roles in Pakistan, but this would be subject to powerful opposition within Pakistan itself.

The problem facing the United States in the pursuit of President Bush's "war on terror" is not just that Iraq remains deeply unstable and the operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan are proving problematic. What is of real concern is that this is at a time when Islamic paramilitary groups have been able to undertake a major attack in Western Europe and there has been a sudden escalation of violence in Uzbekistan. Both of these may be short-term developments. If they are not, then two and a half years after 9/11 and one year after the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime, the "war on terror" may be entering a new phase.