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The Bush Administration, Insurgencies and Iran

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Afghanistan

When the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was terminated towards the end of 2001, there was an expectation of two consequences. One would be a substantial if not terminal weakening of the capabilities of al-Qaida and its associates. Given that al-Qaida had training and logistical functions centred largely on Afghanistan, the assumption was that removal of these functions would have a fundamental impact on its potential for further action. Indeed, this was seen in Washington as the appropriate and relevant response to the 9/11 attacks. In the event, the al-Qaida phenomenon has since undergone a series of transformations. The many associates remain active across the world, the overall level of activity has been higher than before 9/11, and the detention or killing of some leadership elements has had little effect as new cohorts have come forward. In some parts of the world, most notably Southern Thailand, there has even been a recent upsurge in activity.

The second expectation was that Afghanistan would be aided to make major and rapid progress in post-war reconstruction, aided by appropriate security support and very substantial development assistance. Whatever else might happen, this would ensure that Afghanistan would not regain its status as the world's primary source of heroin. Over three years later, the situation remains complex, but it cannot be said that progress has been even remotely as strong as had been hoped.

There are three aspects to the current situation across the country. On a positive note, there is an established government under Mr Karzai, the security situation in Kabul and some other major cities has improved, even if still unstable at times, and a degree of economic revival, along with the enhancement of a range of development projects, has attracted back to the country a large number of exiles. Even so, Afghanistan remains hugely dependent on international aid, and the government of Mr Karzai controls very little of the overall budget. Of the \$4.75 billion budget for the new year, over 90% comes from donors and less than 10% from internal revenue raising.

Furthermore, the government controls less than a quarter of this budget, the great majority being fed through to nongovernmental organisations and projects run directly by foreign governments. There are currently over 2,000 nongovernmental organisations registered in Afghanistan, with many engaged in development projects. As they frequently employ western specialists at high salaries, there remains considerable ill-feeling over the siphoning off of aid into relatively few non-Afghan hands.

The second aspect, that also affects development projects is that the background insurgency in parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan has continued through a fourth winter, with some 17,000 US combat troops involved in counter-guerrilla

warfare and other security functions. Their activities have included large-scale detentions without trial, with these functions apparently conducted without any form of control or oversight by the Karzai administration.

Beyond this is the more substantial national and international issue of Afghanistan's regaining its place as the world's leading source of heroin. This has been directly contrary to the development plans advocated by some coalition governments. In one particular period of Taliban rule, 2000-2001, there were determined and often brutal methods introduced to control opium poppy growing, leading to the almost total collapse of poppy cultivation. The turnaround since then has been remarkable, with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime reporting that Afghanistan now accounts for 87% of world-wide illegal production of heroin.

The Afghan opium export market is now worth \$2.8 billion and production is close to the peak years of the early 1990s, including a 64% increase last year. The basis of production is particularly robust in that the poppies are grown on around 330,000 plots by small farmers, so much so that about one in ten of the entire Afghan population has some kind of involvement. Given the levels of poverty in Afghanistan, recently listed in 173rd place out of 178 in the Human Development Index, the key issue is that opium poppy cultivation, where soil and climatic conditions are favourable, is hugely more profitable than other crops. Typically, an opium poppy crop will yield 12 times the gross income of wheat.

Although the illicit drug industry in Afghanistan has not reached the levels of control of some South American cartels, drawing profits from all four stages in the process (production, processing, trafficking and retailing), there are indications that existing warlords and new drug entrepreneurs are beginning to adopt similar policies. The US government has recently announced an intensive anti-drug programme for implementation in Afghanistan, but it is highly unlikely that this will prove effective unless in the context of much greater support for rural development. That, for the moment, is simply not forthcoming on the scale required.

Iraq

It is now two years since the second post-9/11 regime termination took place, that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In that time over 18,000 civilians have been killed in Iraq, some tens of thousands have been injured and, at any one time, around 10,000 people are detained without trial in Iraq by US and UK forces. The United States has lost over 1,500 troops killed and 11,000 injured, with over 10,000 more evacuated due to physical or mental illness. According to the UN Human Rights Commission, about a quarter of all children in Iraq are not getting enough to eat, and the actual incidence of malnutrition has risen from 4.0 to 7.7%.

Following the elections for the provisional government at the end of January there was a period of chaotic negotiations for the leadership of the government that was largely rationalised by the end of March. During this period there was some evidence of a decrease in the insurgency as far as it was affecting US troops. During the month, 36 US soldiers died, the lowest number for a year, although over 350 were injured, around 150 of them seriously.

Around the end of the month there were some cautiously optimistic statements from US military personnel, suggesting that the insurgency was diminishing and that internal Iraqi security forces would progressively take over many US security roles, with the US forces increasingly being used to provide emergency cover. Against this, other analysts frankly doubted that there was any short-term possibility of the poorly equipped and rapidly trained Iraqi forces taking a major role. Moreover, the insurgency itself continued to take a heavy toll of Iraqi political and security personnel, not least through numerous assassinations of senior security officers and civil servants. There were also indications that the insurgents were developing new tactics, including an ability to mount large scale attacks against heavily protected US facilities, a substantial raid against the Abu Ghraib prison at the end of the month that injured 44 US troops being an example.

The Bush Second Term

Although reporting from Iraq in the US media is now restricted to occasional major events, the slow but steady reporting of deaths and injuries among US soldiers through local newspapers and TV and radio stations across the United States is having a cumulative effect, leading to a decline in support for the war. This has been countered by a heavy emphasis from the administration on the January elections, and the subsequent, if slow, establishment of a provisional Iraqi government. The problems in Iraq and Afghanistan have certainly not had any discernible impact on the determination of the Bush administration to consolidate the neoconservative position in the wider international sphere.

Although not a neoconservative in the strict sense, the decision to appoint John Bolton to be the US Ambassador to the United Nations is one indication, given his strong views on the need for the US to pursue its own interests often regardless of treaty commitments. Another is the appointment of the former US Ambassador to Iraq, John Negroponte, as overall head of security and intelligence.

Perhaps most notable is the appointment of the former Deputy Secretary for Defence, Paul Wolfowitz, as the new head of the World Bank. This is perhaps the clearest indication of the intention of the administration to promote its economic ideology in the wider international community. Although the World Bank is far from being the lead player in global development, there is a strong symbolism in this appointment, establishing a neoconservative vision for an organisation that has considerable influence across the field of international development.

Iran and the Non-Proliferation Treaty

The extension of vigorous unilateralist and neoconservative policies more formally into the international arena is clearly central to the second George W Bush administration and it is probable that an early effect of this will be the issue of Iran in relation to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), especially as the next five-yearly review conference of the NPT will take place in a few weeks time.

The NPT was opened for signing back in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. Thirty-five years later, there are 189 signatories, making it one of the most widely accepted multilateral treaties. Three key states have never been members, Israel, India and

Pakistan, and one state, North Korea, has withdrawn. A second limitation to the treaty is that Article Six requires members that already have nuclear weapons – the US, Russia, China, France and the UK – to progressively give up their nuclear weapons. Although there were substantial cutbacks on nuclear weapons after the end of the Cold War, all five states are involved in nuclear modernisation and none has seriously embraced its commitments under the treaty. Even so, there is a very widespread international consensus that the NPT has helped control nuclear proliferation, limiting it to just nine states when many analysts back in the 1980s would have expected many more candidate states by now.

The problem is that there is a bargain at the heart of the treaty that is now becoming unacceptable to the United States and risks severe damage to the treaty itself. At the time the treaty was originally negotiated in the late 1960s, civil nuclear power was still expanding rapidly. It was recognised, though, that the technologies relevant to civil nuclear power programmes were closely linked to those suitable for nuclear weapons programmes. Indeed it later became clear that the world's first civil nuclear power plant, Calder Hall in the UK, was primarily a system for producing plutonium for Britain's nuclear weapons programme.

At the time, nuclear power programmes were thought to be safe and economical methods of generating electricity that appealed to countries seeking to promote the rapid development of their electric power systems. As a result, a core element of the treaty was a willingness to allow member states to do this, provided there was a degree of inspection from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure that there were no technological diversions into nuclear weapons programmes.

This 'bargain' has largely held for the past thirty years or so, but is no longer acceptable to the United States because of its concern over Iran. The Iranians are developing a small nuclear power programme, including the 1,000 MW Bushehr power plant being built by Russia. This plant will use enriched uranium supplied by Russia, but Iran has its own uranium ore deposits and is developing a capability for uranium enrichment which could be used in a future expansion of its nuclear power programme.

It would be technically possible for Iran to develop this programme to produce highly enriched weapons-grade uranium, and other facilities may be under development that could reprocess reactor waste to produce plutonium. It would therefore be possible for Iran to deploy both the uranium and plutonium routes to nuclear weapons if it so decided. This is unacceptable to the Bush administration to the extent that Washington is not prepared to allow the Iranians to have a civil uranium enrichment programme, even though this is allowed under the terms of the NPT.

In part this is because of the administration's "axis of evil" approach and its belief in the need to pre-empt future threats, but it is supported by evidence that Iran has been tardy in its dealings with the IAEA, with an evident reluctance to be fully forthcoming in the extent of its civil nuclear programmes. Critics of the US position point to two other states that have also been less than open with the IAEA – South Korea and Egypt – but both of these states are closely allied to the United States and face none of the pressures now being put on Tehran.

The view of the Bush administration now appears to be that the Non-Proliferation Treaty is so flawed that it is in conflict with US security interests. It is an issue that may well come to a head during the review conference in New York in May, especially if the US delegation asserts the right to take independent action against Iran at some time in the near future. The timescale is relatively short in that if a major crisis were to develop between the United States and Iran, or indeed one involving Israel, then the worst-case scenario of military action against Iranian nuclear facilities would entail action before the middle of 2006. By that time, the Bushehr nuclear power station will be fully fuelled and will be close to operational. An attack on such facility could have Chernobyl-level consequences with a risk of regional contamination stretching across western Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

It is therefore the case that the forthcoming NPT review conference will be a substantial test for the treaty itself and for the attitude of the Bush administration to multilateral efforts to control nuclear weapons proliferation. Given the fact that John Bolton is well-known for his opposition to most forms of multilateral arms control, it would be wise to expect the United States to seek major modifications or else give a clear indication of its intentions to take future counter-proliferation actions in its own interests, whatever the dangerous consequences for multilateral approaches.

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For further information on the issues raised in this briefing, please see:

Iraq: <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/programmes/globalsecurity/iraqwar.htm>

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