

**International Security Monthly Briefing – November 2006**

## **AFTER THE US ELECTIONS**

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### **Afghanistan**

Although the early part of November saw a particular emphasis on the results of the US mid-sessional elections to Congress, and this will be the main subject of this briefing, the insurgency in Iraq continued with at least a hundred civilian being killed every day, and the violence in Afghanistan persisted into the autumn in a manner which was more intense than the previous four years.

At the end of the month a NATO summit meeting in Riga was dominated by discussions over the NATO leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The key issue was that the boost given to ISAF in the early months of 2006 had not resulted in a major increase in support for reconstruction and development, but rather it developed into a markedly bitter counter-insurgency operation that caused substantial casualties, especially among Canadian and British troops. Furthermore, these and other troop contingents had to rely frequently on the use of air power to suppress opposition, with this often resulting in the destruction of houses and other buildings that were presumed to be insurgent locations. Thus what had intended to be an operation involving construction actually resulted in destruction as troops sought to defend themselves against attack by using their airpower advantage. The Afghan civilian casualties were very much higher than those of the foreign forces.

Political leaders such as George Bush and Tony Blair hoped to persuade NATO partners at the Riga meeting to make two changes. One was the need to increase the military forces available in Afghanistan and the second was to remove restrictions on how some of the existing troop contingents were used. The countries most heavily involved in counter-insurgency operations are Britain, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States, whereas countries including France, Germany and Italy are involved in more stable parts of central and northern Afghanistan under rules of engagement that limited their use in more overtly military operations.

In the event, the Riga summit made little progress on either issue. There was some agreement that there might be more flexibility on deployments in response to specific emergencies but without any systematic change in the rules of engagement of all the major troop contingents. On the issue of increasing the size of the force, the proposal put at the summit was for a modest increase of just 2,500 to add to the 32,000 troops currently under NATO leadership in Afghanistan. While there were claims that this commitment had been accepted, it was not at all clear which countries would make the contributions. Moreover, demands for improved equipment, especially more helicopters and transport planes, were not met.

What the summit did result in was a renewed commitment to ensure security in Afghanistan by continuing to pursue the counter-insurgency operations, with the leaders pledging “to ensure that ISAF has the forces, resources and flexibility to ensure the mission’s continued success”. This was at the end of a summer of intensive fighting against an evident Taliban revival of considerable substance, with the prospect of an even larger spring offensive in 2006.

There is substantial evidence that one effect of the NATO counter-insurgency operations, especially the reliance on air power with all its collateral consequences, has been to boost support for Taliban groups in many parts of southern Afghanistan. It is therefore likely that continued NATO reliance on the use of force will have a similar effect next year, but against a strengthened and more popular Taliban movement. Because of this, there is the suggestion now voiced in many quarters, especially within the

UN and among some Afghan politicians in Kabul, that ways must be sought to bring Taliban elements into the political process, even though this would mean negotiating with people commonly considered to be terrorists.

However uncomfortable such a prospect might be, there is the view that this is an option that has to be considered, given the extent of support that already exists for the Taliban movement and the extremely unlikely prospect that NATO could deploy sufficient forces to defeat the Taliban movement by military means. At this stage, all that can be said is that the Riga summit indicated that the NATO leadership was simply not prepared to consider such a change in policy, even if that could well change if the conflict continues intensively through the coming winter and then escalates considerably next summer.

Meanwhile in the North Waziristan district of Pakistan that borders Afghanistan, the September peace agreement that involved withdrawal of Pakistani Army units has left a territory that is essentially open country for militants, with training camps re-established and fighters coming in from other countries across the Middle East and Central Asia. This reflects the situation two decades earlier when this part of Pakistan served as a crossing point for Islamic radicals intent on evicting Soviet forces from Afghanistan, although such groups were then aided by the United States.

It is highly unlikely that the Musharraf regime has the military ability, let alone political will, to enforce control in this region. As a result, the evolution of such a locus of instability may become unacceptable to the United States, possibly leading to US military intervention next year. This would have serious implications for the stability of Pakistan.

### **The Elections**

In the United States, the mid-session elections to Congress produced results that were deeply unsatisfactory for the Bush administration. There had been a reasonable expectation that the Republicans would lose control of the House, given that all the seats were up for election and polling suggested that the Democrats would gain a narrow majority. In the event the majority was more substantial than expected, but this was overshadowed by the changes in the Senate, where only one third of the seats were up for election. The result was a 49:49 split for the two parties in the 100-seat legislature, but the two independent Senators were effectively Democrat supporters, so the Senate actually moved to Democrat control.

These elections were unusual in US politics in that the most important single issue was foreign policy, especially the war in Iraq. This has become steadily more unpopular over the past 18 months, partly because of the US casualty rates, with nearly 3,000 killed and 21,000 injured, not counting over 10,000 non-combat injuries. The administration has made concerted efforts to avoid paying attention to casualties, not least in the reluctance of senior officials to be seen at funerals or visiting the wounded, and the national media coverage of casualties has been generally low, except for some of the quality broadsheet newspapers. At a local level though, it is quite different, with radio and TV stations and newspapers being much more likely to cover the funerals of young men and women from the locality, or to interview seriously wounded people.

While the effect of this is difficult to judge, it almost certainly contributes to the changing mood about the war. While not on the same scale, it is reminiscent of the impact of casualties during the Vietnam War, although the earlier French Indo China War may be more relevant. Between 1950 and 1954, France was fighting a bitter war against the Viet Minh nationalists under the astute military leadership of General Giap, probably the most successful military commander of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While most of the French forces were from the Foreign Legion, North Africa or Indo China itself, there were many tens of thousands of French regular and conscript troops involved and, over the period, these suffered thousands of deaths. The effect on the French political will to continue the war was slow but pervasive.

In early 1954 the Viet Minh laid siege to the strategically significant garrison town of Dien Bien Phu, finally capturing it with substantial French losses in early May. Although the loss of Dien Bien Phu was not wholly calamitous for the French war effort (French forces still held Hanoi, Haiphong and the heavily populated Hong River delta), the political will to continue finally collapsed and disengagement followed rapidly.

The US willingness to continue in Iraq is not remotely at the same stage, at least at present, but the parallels are worth considering and may become increasingly obvious. If the United States does eventually withdraw entirely from Iraq, it is highly likely that the 2006 mid-session elections will be seen as one of the key turning points. What makes them particularly significant is that they came at the end of a bruising period of campaigning in which the Bush administration tried repeatedly to link the Iraq War to the wider war on terror. The use of the phrase “the Long War against Islamofascism” became almost a standard operating procedure (see last month’s briefing, *Insecurity in Iraq*) but this, in the end, failed to have the anticipated effect.

One further point relating to the war in Iraq is that there is a possibility of a substantial insurgent attack on the heavily protected “Green Zone” in the heart of Baghdad that houses so many US and Iraqi government facilities. While the insurgents would hardly be able to over-run this zone, a major attack would be a signal demonstration of military power and could have an effect much as did the Viet Cong’s failed Tet Offensive towards the end of the Vietnam War.

### **The Democrat Dilemma**

The election results were very bad news for the Bush administration, primarily because the Democrats will now be able to control a range of House and Senate committees, determining a range of studies and inquiries that will be able to examine in some detail many aspects of the administration’s policies over the past six years. There is also likely to be particular attention paid to defence budgets, giving the Democrats some political influence over the course of future military policies. There are, however, three aspects of the changed political scene that provide some relief for the Republicans, even if many commentators are now talking of a decidedly lame duck administration through to November 2008.

The first of these is that the Democrats will have to be careful to avoid criticisms of US soldiers. By and large, the American armed forces remain popular at home, in spite of the Abu Ghraib episode and a number of other courts martial. Also, in spite of growing concern over the war, there is little direct criticism so far of the military commanders. One of the immediate effects of the elections was the removal of the Secretary for Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and this has focussed attention on the failings in the political rather than the military leadership. The end result is that the Democrats may be able to direct criticism at President Bush and Vice-President Cheney but must do this in a manner which avoids them being accused of being disloyal to American men and women actually in Iraq.

The second problem for the Democrats is that if they succeed in affecting the conduct of the war, either by an impact on the defence budgets, by preventing particular appointments or by other means, an immediate tactic that will be employed by the Bush administration, especially in the run-up to the 2008 elections, will be to blame the Democrats for further failings in the war. A political theme that will emerge will be that, at a time when the United States needs strong leadership, it will be the Democrats that will have presented the main obstacle to just that leadership.

The final problem relates specifically to this, and that is the evident lack of unity within the Democrat Party as to the best way forward. Views range from an early and more or less complete withdrawal from Iraq through to staying the course. In this regard, some of the recent speeches of 2008 Presidential hopefuls such as Senator Hilary Clinton are indicative. Such putative candidates, most notably Senator

Clinton, are currently at pains to take a quite hard line position on Iraq, recognising that it remains easy for the Bush administration, even during its current difficulties, to play the patriotism card.

### **Baker and the Neo-conservatives**

In an earlier move to deflect attention away from unpopular policies, the Bush administration facilitated the work of the Baker-Hamilton commission on Iraq. This, it was hoped, would demonstrate to voters that the Bush administration was open to new policy proposals on Iraq, but the results of the elections meant that the Baker Report would get far greater media attention. Towards the end of the month a number of press “leaks” indicated that the report would focus on two particular issues – the need to withdraw combat troops from Iraq while scaling up the training of Iraqi security forces to replace them, and an engagement in dialogue with Iran and Syria in order to work for an orderly transition in Iraq.

Neither of these proposals was remotely acceptable to the neo-conservative wing of the Republican Party, and there was something of a spoiling operation launched in the latter part of November as the publication date for the report drew near, the aim being to denigrate the report as a study based on appeasement. The idea of any kind of dialogue with Iran was anathema, and there was also a strong thread running through neo-conservative analysis of the war that focused on the need to increase troop levels rather than decrease them.

One of the interesting aspects of the post-election period was the manner in which neo-conservative elements in Washington were not especially discouraged in spite of the political setbacks. Indeed the tendency was to take the offensive and concentrate on the essential need for victory in Iraq. Motivations varied but there were two key elements. One was that neo-conservative analysts were all too aware that a majority US military pull-out from Iraq would take on the appearance of a clear-cut defeat. As such, this would cause terminal damage to the desire to re-make the map of the Middle East in favour of the United States. The second was the recognition of the immense value of the Persian Gulf oil reserves, making the continuing presence in Iraq even more crucial than in almost any other part of the world.

Thus the US mid-session elections to Congress may have appeared to have been disastrous for the Bush administration. In fact it may be that the capacity for the White House team to use the new make-up of both Houses to its advantage, and the determination of neo-conservative elements to hold on to their vision for the Middle East, suggested that this might turn out to be the case. What was clear, by the end of the month, was that there was no immediate prospect of a major change of attitude by the Bush administration, whatever the Baker Report might say.

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