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A SURGE IN TWO WARS?

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In Iraq a surge in US ground forces is under way, with this accompanied by a substantial increase in the naval presence in the Gulf. In Afghanistan, coalition forces are being increased, although not to the level demanded by some senior officers. In both regions of war there is expected to be an increase in the level of conflict in the coming months, although a new conflict with Iran could develop and even overshadow the existing wars.

Iraq

In the first ten days of the New Year there appeared to be a marked downturn in the level of US casualties in Iraq, with very few deaths. This may have been an aberration or may have resulted from a pause in the level of patrol activity. Whatever the reason, it did not last, with 84 US military personnel killed during the course of the month and over 500 injured. A trend of particular concern was the increased effectiveness of attacks on helicopters in spite of all of the many defensive measures introduced in the past four years. Four helicopters crashed within a fortnight, all of them due to ground fire amid suspicions that insurgents may have acquired supplies of more advanced anti-aircraft weapons, possibly shoulder-launched missiles. The Iraqi civilian casualties remained hugely greater than those of the coalition forces, with numerous suicide bombings, assassination attempts and other attacks.

As the United States begins to increase its troop deployments in Iraq, there are issues relating to the size and duration of the deployments and, more importantly, to the tactics to be used to bring some degree of calm and stability to Baghdad. The reported surge amounts to 21,500 troops but what is not clear is whether these are additional combat troops or total numbers. If the former, then there would be expected to be substantial numbers of support troops as well. In Iraq in recent years, a combat brigade of around 4,000 troops has typically been supported by 5,500 other personnel, in which case the total surge could even be as high as 50,000, a number that would hugely stretch the Army and Marine Corps if it had to be sustained for more than six months.

The administration has apparently indicated that the total is closer to 21,500, with an implication that support personnel already in place in Iraq will also be there for the new troops as well as existing combat brigades. This will put other strains on the system, especially as the main purpose of the surge is to engage in a vigorous and sustained process of “seize, clear and hold” across the greater Baghdad area. The appointment of General David Petraeus as US commander in Iraq is clearly seen within the Bush administration as pivotal, given his previous success with such tactics elsewhere in Baghdad, albeit at the level of large towns rather than a singularly violent and complex metropolis.

By the end of January it was reported that a total of 90,000 troops and police were being assembled for the operation, more than half of which would be Iraq soldiers and police, with most of the former being from Shi’a communities. It is expected that the operation to try and control the insurgency and inter-communal violence in Baghdad will take at least six months, but there are severe doubts that it will work. Recent reports in US newspapers from journalists embedded with US troops in Baghdad speak of a very widespread lack of faith in the plan, primarily at the level of the ordinary soldiers who have been engaged in patrols in recent weeks.

Some senior officers are reasonably optimistic, but soldiers on the ground see it as a near-impossible task with two main obstacles. One is that previous operations of this kind may have had a short-term effect in controlling violence, but mainly because insurgents and other paramilitaries have just melted

away into the urban background, waiting to return until the US troops have left. This time, the intention is to maintain a limited US military presence alongside substantial numbers of Iraqi police and soldiers, but many US troops on the ground simply do not regard these as reliable.

The second obstacle is even more serious in that there are widespread doubts that the ordinary Iraqis caught up in the violence have any trust in the United States forces. This is partly because of the previous heavy use of force by the US military, with consequent civilian casualties, and partly because the violence is so widespread that there is simply no faith that it will get better. This, in particular, makes it highly unlikely that ordinary Iraqis will come forward with intelligence about insurgents – the risk of reprisal is just too high.

The dilemma for the US forces is that this predicament runs directly against most theories of successful counter-insurgency, in that the population concerned has to be “with” the counter-insurgency forces. There may have been some elements of this in individual towns in Iraq on some occasions in the recent past but it is not at all clear that this can apply to Baghdad. Counterinsurgency analysts tend to the view that such operations are 80% political and 20% military. For most of the past four years the approach has been the opposite, and the levels of violence are now such that a concentration on the political process may not even be possible.

One of the most significant publishing events during January was the release of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) from the US National Intelligence Council (NIC), an assessment that draws on all the major US intelligence agencies. The NIC supports the Director of National Intelligence, the head of the intelligence community, and the National Intelligence Estimates are described by the NIC as “the most authoritative written judgements concerning national security issues. They contain the coordinated judgements of the Intelligence Community regarding the likely course of future events.”

The key judgement of the January NIE is worth quoting in full:

Iraqi society's growing polarization, the persistent weakness of the security forces and the state in general, and all sides' recourse to violence are collectively driving an increase in communal and insurgent violence and political extremism. Unless efforts to reverse these conditions show measurable progress during the term of this Estimate, the coming 12 to 18 months, we assess that the overall security situation will continue to deteriorate at rates comparable to the latter part of 2006.

It is possible that the current surge will bring calm and stability to Baghdad and that a more inclusive approach from the Iraqi government will begin the protracted and difficult task of reconciling the major confessional groups, but current circumstances suggest that this is unlikely and that the NIE fear of a further deterioration is more realistic. If that does happen, then a US option would be to withdraw most of its forces from the cities to the major bases, even if this meant that a civil war developed while the more concentrated US presence ensured a continuation of the anti-occupation insurgency. This would also mean that Iraq would retain its status for the wider al-Qaida movement as a jihadist combat training zone – overall an extremely unstable situation with immense human costs. This may be the longer-term consequence of the refusal of the Bush administration to engage with the recommendations of the Baker/Hamilton Commission.

Afghanistan

Although not widely reported in the western media, violence in Afghanistan has continued throughout the winter. While heavy snowfalls have affected the ability of Taliban and other paramilitary groups to move between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the incidence of suicide bombings, roadside bombs and other attacks on NATO forces and Afghan government groups and individuals was unusually high during

January. The British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) in its invaluable monthly reviews, has reported on developments in recent months (see www.baag.org.uk). In its January 2007 edition it quoted the senior US commander in the country, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, in his assessment that from 2005 to 2006, suicide attacks had increased from 27 to 139, roadside bomb attacks from 783 to 1,677 and attacks involving light arms had more than tripled from 1,558 to 4,542.

BAAG also reported six particularly costly suicide bomb attacks in January, including one at ISAF's Camp Salerno base in Khost that killed eight people including two Afghan police officers and another at an army base near Herat airport in north west Afghanistan that killed three Afghan soldiers and two civilians. The Herat attack was of particular concern since it was so far distant from the usual areas of paramilitary action.

Foreign military operations in Afghanistan have two separate components. The majority of the forces, over 30,000 troops, make up NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which is intended to promote stability across most of the country excluding some eastern and south eastern districts close to the Pakistan border. While much of the emphasis has been on reconstruction, significant ISAF elements in Helmand and Kandahar provinces have been involved in violent counter-insurgency operations against re-invigorated militias, mostly Taliban. British, Canadian and Dutch forces have been mainly engaged, alongside US units, but ISAF as a whole has frequently sought to engage with local communities. This has even included Helmand province where British forces have negotiated some partially successful local peace deals in the north of the province.

In addition to ISAF, there is the separate Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan, led and largely resourced by the United States, with elements of the US Army's 10th Mountain Division making up much of the combat force. This command's operation in the Pakistani border areas of Afghanistan has been singularly robust in recent years, with frequent use of air strikes and large numbers of civilian casualties. Relations between the US leadership of CSTC and senior military officers in ISAF have not always been good, with tensions arising as a result of US tactics. It is common knowledge that some senior British officers, for example, regard it as appropriate to negotiate with local community leaders, even if such people have links with Taliban elements. For the United States, on the other hand, the military culture tends to militate against such discussions, primarily on the grounds that this amounts to negotiating with terrorists.

There is a general acceptance that the Taliban and other militias will substantially increase their activities in the coming months, with what amounts to a spring offensive, especially in Kandahar and Helmand provinces but even including Kabul as well. The United States has already announced an increase in its security assistance. Following a visit from the Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, on 16 January, an additional \$8.6 billion was announced for security operations, and 3,200 US troops had their tour of duty extended for a further four months.

Perhaps the most significant development of all in terms of the months ahead was that the command of ISAF was due to change at the beginning of February, with General Dan McNeill of the United States commencing a one-year period of command in place of the outgoing British Commander, General David Richards. General Richards has been credited with overseeing a substantial expansion of ISAF and, with it, an unexpected increase in counter-insurgency operations. He was also credited with allowing some of his commanders to negotiate the local peace deals, and one of the most important questions is whether General McNeill will continue with such policies. While he has said that this will be the case, and he is finally answerable to NATO member states and not just the Pentagon, he previously commanded coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2002-03 when there were numerous uses of air power, and is believed to take a more robust and single-minded view than General Richards.

A further complication concerns the position across the border in Pakistan, where Taliban and other paramilitaries have had a high degree of freedom of operation as a consequence of the Pakistani Army's substantive withdrawal from control operations in border districts, especially North and South Waziristan. The regime leader in Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, has strongly criticised Afghan officials who have blamed Pakistan for allowing Taliban activity in the border districts, saying that the centre of the Taliban revival is in Afghanistan, albeit with some support in Pakistan.

The Pakistan government has announced plans to fence off the Afghan/Pakistan border to help control Taliban movements but this has been criticised in Kabul on the grounds that it would not be effective and would also involve the fencing of areas where there were disputes over the line of the frontier. For now, Pakistan intends a limited fencing operation in the North West Frontier and Baluchistan provinces, but few analysts expect this to have much effect.

In a more general sense, the most important factors in the coming months will be the extent of the Taliban offensive and whether the ISAF forces under General McNeill seek to maintain a policy that can include local negotiations, or whether they will opt for a more robust counter-insurgency approach. If it is the latter, then substantial tensions within NATO could emerge.

Persian Gulf Military Build-up

Finally, the naval build-up in the Persian Gulf continued in the latter part of January, with the carrier battle group centred on the *USS John C Stennis* en route to the region to back up the existing carrier battle group. A third carrier battle group centred on the *USS Ronald Reagan*, left San Diego for the West Pacific on 27 January, with the potential to move on to the Indian Ocean. In a separate development, a powerful Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) centred on the large amphibious warfare ship the *USS Bataan* transited the Suez Canal on 30 January, also heading for the Gulf to join an existing ESG centred on the *USS Boxer*. Even without additional units that might be moved into the region, this already amounts to a very large naval deployment, certainly the largest for nearly four years.

The amphibious warfare ships are particularly relevant because they hardly relate to the situation in Iraq, given that the Iraqi seaboard on the Persian Gulf is under the control of coalition forces. They would, though, be highly relevant to any confrontation with Iran, since they give the United States the capacity to engage in a wide range of actions against Iranian naval and revolutionary guard units on the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea coasts. The US military build-up does not necessarily mean that a war with Iran is imminent. It does mean that the United States is deploying substantial forces to the region and that these forces are highly appropriate should a conflict with Iran develop in the coming months.

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