

**International Security Monthly Briefing – January 2008**

**NATO – A Sense of Crisis**

Paul Rogers

By the end of January, security problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan were leading to a potential crisis for NATO three months ahead of a major meeting of the alliance. At the same time, there were indications of a deterioration in the security situation in Iraq sufficient to suggest that this year's planned withdrawal of the combat brigades added during last year's 'surge', would not proceed as planned.

**Iraq**

In terms of US military casualties, December 2007 was the least bad month for nearly four years, with 23 people killed. Combined with a decrease in attacks on US forces, and in civilian casualties, it provided the Bush administration with an opportunity to argue that the war in Iraq could now be won. This was seen as important in removing a difficulty being experienced by Republican candidates in the 2008 Presidential Election campaign, since the unpopularity of the war had become a major political issue during the course of 2007. In the event, the extent of dissatisfaction with the conduct of the war is such that the changed situation is not playing to the advantage of the Republicans. Instead it is other issues – such as the state of the economy – that are coming to the fore.

In any case, there were indications by the end of January that optimism over the state of the conflict in Iraq was premature. During the course of the month there was a substantial increase in US military casualties, admittedly from the very low level in December. With 40 people killed during the month, this was the worst figure for four months, and there was also a series of major bombing attacks. Furthermore, as noted in the December briefing (*Change – From Iraq Through to Pakistan*), there had been indications of an increase in attacks on those Sunni leaders who had been prepared to work alongside US forces in opposing foreign paramilitaries allied to the al-Qaida movement. This accelerated in January, with around 100 people assassinated across central and northern Iraq, some of them senior Sunni leaders.

During the early part of 2007, the surge in US forces had involved an additional five combat brigades. Together with support troops this came to about 30,000 soldiers added to an existing total of over 140,000. The expectation in Washington had been that all five combat brigades would return to the United States by the middle of 2008. This would follow an easing of the security problems resulting from the effects of the surge and would, importantly, coincide with the most important phase of the Presidential Election campaign.

By late January, there were clear indications from a number of sources close to the Bush administration that the surge might well not be ended on schedule. One of the five combat brigades was withdrawn around the end of 2007, probably because of the decrease in violence in the closing months of the year, but the indications are that all four remaining brigades will stay in Iraq, possibly being replaced by new brigades at the end of their deployment. What is not clear is whether the US Army and Marine Corps can maintain this level of operational deployment, given the pressures to send more troops to Afghanistan (see below). There have been numerous signs of overstretch in the US armed forces over the past year, partly in terms of a lowering of recruitment standards, but also with under-strength units being deployed to Iraq.

Whatever the changes in security in Iraq in the coming months, two things are already clear. One is the determination of the Bush administration to have a high degree of influence, if not outright control, over Iraqi security in the coming years, and the other is an increased use of air power in counterinsurgency, using a number of large air bases being developed within the country.

On the question of control, the Bush administration will be building on the range of agreements made in mid-2004 at the end of the period of the Coalition Provisional Authority led by Paul Bremer. This laid down a series of points of influence over the future political and economic development of the country, this being enhanced by the US control of the "Green Zone", the secure hub in the centre of Baghdad that forms the seat of the Iraqi government and a number of ministries. The zone also includes the site for the new US Embassy to Iraq – the world's largest – which is now nearing completion.

One of the most indicative developments in terms of US influence has been the decision to seek exemption from Iraqi laws for a much wider group than had been anticipated. Such exemption currently applies to US military personnel and private security contractors working for the US government, a group totalling around 175,000 in all. That is planned to be extended to another 154,000 civilians of numerous nationalities also contracted to work in Iraq for the US government.

On the issue of air power, there has in recent months been a substantial increase in air force units assigned by the US military to Iraq. In addition to units located in countries in the region such as Kuwait and Oman, and as well as carrier-based strike aircraft, additional squadrons of ground attack and strike aircraft have been moved to some of the larger air bases within Iraq itself, notably Balad air base north of Baghdad and al-Asad in the south.

The increase in air force units within Iraq is in the context of a substantial increase in the use of air power in counter-insurgency operations during 2007, the rate of air strikes in that year being some five times greater than in 2006. The new in-country deployments suggest that the greater dependence on air power in the war is likely to be an enduring feature. Furthermore, it has become a more common practice to use heavy bombers such as the B-1B in operations in the country. Reports indicate that this has been a relatively recent aspect of the Iraq War whereas B-1Bs have been used frequently in Afghanistan. The planes typically operate out of the US air base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, a territory controlled by Britain but made available to the United States.

The increased use of air power by the US forces may, from their perspective, be a reasonable tactic against deeply entrenched insurgent forces, but the consequences for civilians can be serious, since collateral damage is frequent. At the end of a month an air raid on a presumed insurgent target near Iskandariya, 30 miles from Baghdad, was reported to have killed 20 civilians, including 17 members of a single family. US military sources acknowledged that civilians had been killed, but put the death toll at nine, including a child.

While all the US armed forces – Air Force, Navy, Army and Marines – are engaged in Iraq, neither the Air Force nor the Navy is under great pressure, whereas overstretch is very much a feature of the experience of the Army and Marine Corps. It is in this connection that the concerns over insecurity in Afghanistan come to the fore.

## **Afghanistan**

As reported in the December briefing, coalition forces in Afghanistan had risen to over 50,000 by the end of the year, 40,000 committed to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – 15,000 of these being American – with a separate contingent of around 11,000 US troops under direct US command. The non-ISAF American forces were primarily in the east of the country and most were engaged directly in intensive counter-insurgency operations, whereas many of the ISAF forces were essentially engaged in stabilisation and reconstruction activities in the north and north-west of the country, away from the major areas of insurgency.

These forces, including a substantial contingent from Germany, were not deployed for combat roles, whereas some other contingents such as those from Canada, the Netherlands and Britain were engaged directly in counter-insurgency operations in the south and south-east. Within NATO there were sharp differences of opinion between countries as to the appropriate roles for their troops, with several countries deeply reluctant to see their forces dragged into a counter-insurgency role. It was in this

context that there were significant developments during the course of January, bearing in mind that the mid-winter period is traditionally that time of year with the lowest levels of conflict.

Across the border in western Pakistan, the political upheavals in Islamabad meant that activity against neo-Taliban, al-Qaida and other militia elements by the Pakistani Army was at a low level. As a result, there was considerable freedom of movement for these elements, including support for insurgents across the border in Afghanistan, both in the form of personnel and also supplies. A particular concern for NATO was the occurrence of attacks on supply lines for ISAF units running from Karachi through Pakistan into Afghanistan.

Within Afghanistan itself, fighting continued through the winter, including a major attack on a particularly well-guarded hotel in Kabul. There were warnings from a number of independent military analysts on both sides of the Atlantic that a combination of NATO disunity, inadequate troop numbers and the improving skills of the insurgents could mean that much of Afghanistan would slip under Taliban control. This concern was repeated at senior levels within the Bush administration, and was expressed by the Secretary for Defense, Robert Gates, in strong language to some of his NATO counterparts.

The US predicament was made more intense by a deep Canadian reluctance to maintain its forces in Afghanistan unless other NATO partners would increase their forces. Although the British government had earlier announced that it was committing some of its elite army units to Helmand Province, it was clear that Britain had neither the military nor the political will to make any further increases. Nor was there any sign of other countries increasing their forces or changing the rules of engagement of forces already there. One NATO member state that was singled out for strong pressure from Mr Gates was Germany, but the Merkel government was adamant that Germany's forces in Afghanistan would not change their roles in the direction of counter-insurgency. Even though the Pentagon announced the deployment of an additional contingent of 3,200 Marines to Afghanistan in the spring, this had little or no effect on attitudes within the alliance.

Concern over the NATO stance surfaced in January as part of a wider critique of the alliance from former chiefs of staff of the United States, Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Viewing the divisions over Afghanistan as part of a more general failure of the alliance to ensure the security of the North Atlantic community in an uncertain world, the generals advocated a much closer transatlantic relationship of countries stretching from Finland to Alaska. Much media attention was focused on one aspect of the report that supported NATO retaining the option of nuclear first use, but this diverted attention from the more general conclusion that the North Atlantic community was facing a crisis of identity, of which the problems in Afghanistan were symptoms.

### **An Afghan surge?**

At the time of the publication of the Iraq Study Group Report in the winter of 2006, one of the major interest groups in Washington, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), advocated a policy in Iraq that conflicted directly with the conclusions of the Group. Whereas the Iraq Study Group advocated a slow but progressive military withdrawal combined with intensive regional diplomatic engagement, including countries such as Iran and Syria, the AEI proposed a substantial increase in troop numbers in Iraq. It was this policy – the surge – which was followed by the Bush administration, the Iraq Study Group conclusions being almost entirely ignored.

At the end of January there were indications that the AEI was advocating a very similar policy for Afghanistan, with many of those involved in the analysis being the same people that had contributed to the study that resulted in the surge in Iraq. The AEI proposal has two main components. One is the addition of three combat brigades to the US forces currently in Afghanistan. This would be around 12,000 additional troops, although support elements might take this rather higher. The proposal has come in the wake of the Bush administration's decision to add 3,200 Marines, so that the combination of combat brigades, Marines and support elements could take the proposal to close to 20,000

additional personnel, bringing the total number of foreign forces in Afghanistan to about 70,000, of which 45,000 would be American.

The second proposal is that the United States should pursue a far more forceful policy in western Pakistan, including a willingness to undertake direct military action within the country should the Pakistani Army be unable or unwilling to control Taliban and al-Qaida militias. There have been frequent calls for such action in Washington in recent weeks, but there is also a recognition that the Musharraf government would face considerable opposition within Pakistan in the event of such US action. Moreover, this opposition would extend well beyond the Islamist political parties to include many secular nationalists.

There is an additional issue that the United States may not have the military capability to undertake a surge in Afghanistan unless it withdraws forces from Iraq, yet such a withdrawal seems far less likely than even a month ago. This does much to explain the annoyance that the Bush administration feels for a number of its NATO allies over their perceived failure to play a significantly robust role in Afghanistan. The problem for the administration in Washington is that many of its European allies are very cautious about closer involvement with what is essentially an American war in south west Asia, and are especially cautious about a war that might extend to Pakistan. Indeed, one of the main dangers for the United States if it increases its own forces in Afghanistan so that they are the clear majority of all coalition forces, is that other members of NATO may find it easier to withdraw their troops.

After the 9/11 attacks there was massive support for the United States among western European governments, but the extension of the 'war on terror' beyond al-Qaida and the Taliban to embrace an 'axis of evil', resulted in many doubts about US policy. Those were hugely increased by the consequences of the Iraq War and the rhetoric about Iran. Moreover, with only a year to go before a change in administration in Washington, it is highly unlikely that states such as Germany will change their policies. The end result is a predicament for the Republican Party that may prove politically difficult at the height of the election campaign.

---

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk) and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.

---

**Copyright © Oxford Research Group, 2007**

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.