

International Security Monthly Briefing – April 2008

A DIFFERENT SURGE

Paul Rogers

The March briefing in this series (*Britain's Security – A New Approach?*) was concerned with a preliminary analysis of the UK National Security Strategy that was published earlier in the year. This followed a briefing in February that questioned whether the United States might be facing a “Suez moment”. As Britain had responded to the Suez war in 1956 by a substantive reappraisal of its defence policy, might some crisis in the US pursuit of the war on terror make for a reconsideration of the viability of the New American Century? Given these two more general analyses, the briefing for April will look back over the past three months at the developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, exploring whether the security situation in both countries has improved.

Iraq

In the autumn of 2007, the Bush administration decided not to follow the recommendations of the Baker/Hamilton Report which involved a phased withdrawal from Iraq in parallel with intensive diplomatic engagement with key countries in the region. Instead, it decided to reinforce the US military presence in Iraq with five additional combat brigades. Although in theory this involved around 20,000 combat troops, the actual increase was closer to 30,000, with support elements, bringing the US total in Iraq to over 160,000 troops, the highest figure since the war began in March 2003.

The additional troops were expected to be able to provide much better security for Baghdad and the most violent of the provinces in central and northern Iraq, but their progress was also aided by three other factors. One was a policy of employing Sunni militias to fight against those elements of the insurgency that were related to the al-Qaida movement and a second was a six month ceasefire called by the leader of one of the two main Shi'ite militia groups, the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The third factor was one which influenced security in Baghdad. This was the movement of refugees away from some of the most troubled districts which had previously been mixed Sunni/Shi'a communities. Because of the tendency of city districts to evolve towards individual confessional groups, there was a decrease in inter-confessional violence.

All of these factors contributed to a decrease in violence across most of Iraq, but any long term progress was always going to be dependent on political change within the country, especially the development of a form of governance that embraced all the major political and religious groups. Whether this was ever going to be possible was open to question, given the enduring US military and political presence. Construction of the world's largest embassy is being completed in Baghdad and the major American bases now have an air of permanence. Both indicate a long-term influence in Iraq of a very high order which makes independent governance problematic.

Even so, the Bush administration's policy is to maintain higher levels of security while encouraging a degree of political development that indicates some Iraqi national control of the country, whatever the underlying influence the United States might maintain. By the end of 2007, this did appear to be achieving some success, not least with the marked decline in US military casualties. As a result supporters of the policy, especially neoconservative political commentators in the US itself, were talking of the prospect of a real political victory in Iraq.

The timing was seen to be particularly valuable, since a sustained decline in violence through the spring and summer of 2008 would allow for withdrawal not just of the five combat brigades, but of many more troops. By the end of the summer the numbers might well have been brought down to 120,000, the lowest for five years, with a prospect of less than 100,000 troops in Iraq by early 2009. This would have

three values. One would be to reduce the pressure on the US Army and Marine Corps, including a reduction in the length of deployments - currently often as long as fifteen months. A second would be to free up troops for other operations, not least in Afghanistan and possibly western Pakistan. Finally, and most significant in political terms, the Iraq issue would play very little part in the final months of the presidential election campaign. This would avoid its being a handicap to the Republican contender, a real asset given the unpopularity of the Iraq War in the United States.

In the event, March and April saw a substantial increase in violence across many parts of Iraq, especially the southern port city of Basra and in Baghdad itself. Indeed April was the worst month for American military deaths in seven months, and this formed part of a more general deterioration in security that contrasted with the optimism being expressed by the Bush administration earlier in the year.

Two factors were involved in this change. One was that there had initially been a substantial impact by the surge, in combination with the encouragement of anti-al-Qaida Sunni groups, on what might be termed the Sunni elements of the insurgency. By February this was starting to dissipate. In particular, there was a significant increase in Sunni insurgent actions against Shi'a communities, including suicide attacks on markets, and there was also some increase in attacks on US troops.

More significant, though, was a serious misreading of the power of those Shi'a militia elements owing allegiance to Moqtada al-Sadr. The six-month ceasefire instituted by al-Sadr last August was largely intended to allow a period of consolidation and centralisation of the militias, known as the Mehdi Army. Some of the elements of these militias had deteriorated into local warlordism and criminality but this hardly amounted to an insoluble problem.

However, the decision to extend the ceasefire in February appears to have been taken by the Malaki government as a sign of weakness, and a military operation was therefore mounted to curb the power of elements of the Mehdi Army in Basra. The subsequent resistance to this operation greatly exceeded expectations and the end result was inconclusive but certainly fell far short of the government's expectations.

One response from some of al-Sadr's supporters was to target the heavily-protected Green Zone in the centre of Baghdad, often with mortars and other weapons fired from the Sadr City densely-populated slum district across the river. This led on to numerous actions by Iraqi Army units and, in particular, from US forces using substantial air power in an effort to counter the impact on the Green Zone. This rapidly became a major political issue, given the large numbers of US civilians working in the Green Zone, many of them living in thin-skinned trailers. If US State Department and US AID personnel were becoming susceptible to attack in what was supposedly the safest part of Baghdad, this could easily call into question the apparent progress in the entire Iraq War.

Over several weeks during April there were hundreds of casualties in Sadr City, many of them civilians, in a period of violent conflict. The extent of the fighting in Sadr City was largely unreported in the western media, but indications from US and UK military sources were that it was at a level of violence not seen since the assault on Fallujah in November 2004.

It may well be that the fighting will ease in the coming months, but past experience suggests that the summer months tend to be the most difficult for the US occupying forces. At the very least it is now highly unlikely that the Pentagon will be able to proceed with a large-scale reduction in forces in Iraq, once the additional combat brigades have returned home. What was initially a US surge has turned, at least for the time being, into a "counter-surge", a situation made more problematic by the security environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Afghanistan

Given the evidence of reorganisation and consolidation by Taliban and al-Qaida militias during the winter, along with political uncertainty in Pakistan, many analysts have anticipated a Taliban offensive in the period from April through to September of this year. Some of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) units have been reinforced with this risk in mind - the United States is committing over 3,000 additional Marines, the UK is putting in more special forces and air power and the French have offered a battalion of combat troops. By the end of April there was little direct evidence of a Taliban offensive but there has usually been a diversion of paramilitary groups away from conflict at this time of year, given the priority to harvest the opium poppy crop.

Furthermore, past experience suggests that Taliban commanders will have recognised the implications of the NATO reinforcement and will largely avoid major conflicts where NATO can bring its air power advantages to bear. So far this year, it does appear that Taliban operations have more commonly involved roadside bombs and suicide bombers, often directed more at Afghan police and army units rather than well-armed NATO forces. There have also been a number of assassination attempts on government officials, including a substantial incident directed against President Karzai in the heart of Kabul.

The overall level of violence in the first four months of 2008 was substantially higher than in the equivalent period in 2007, and this has been reflected in US insistence on the need for other NATO member states to increase their military forces. Apart from the French decision and some other very minor increases, there has been no support for this. Furthermore, there appears to be a profound reluctance on the part of the major Pakistani political parties to allow any increased US military action in the regions bordering Afghanistan, even though some districts are essentially safe havens for al-Qaida and Taliban groups.

The dilemma for the United States is that it now faces a circumstance in which the security situation in Iraq is not improving at the anticipated rate while there are prospects for further conflict in Afghanistan. One US reaction in April was a proposal that the Pentagon take command of NATO forces right across southern Afghanistan. About half of these are currently under NATO command which rotates among member states, whereas the US troops in the south-eastern part of the country are under direct US command. Such a change would be resisted in many NATO circles, but might be made more acceptable if the United States was to add two or three more combat brigades to its forces there. With support troops that could amount to 20,000 more troops, taking the total foreign military forces to around 80,000. Given the security situation in Iraq, that will be very difficult.

There is a further complication in that some strategists within NATO share the view of many senior civil servants in Pakistan that Taliban and al-Qaida elements cannot be defeated by traditional counter-insurgency tactics and that there is no alternative but to try and negotiate agreements, especially with some Taliban commanders, provided this involves them in some political role in Afghanistan. It is by no means clear that negotiations with any al-Qaida elements are currently possible, but the potential for discussions with some Taliban groups is recognised even within the British Army, where local commanders had some limited success with this approach last year.

Conclusion

At the end of last year there was a quiet confidence within the Bush administration that the security situation in Iraq was improving to the extent that some kind of victory might prove possible. While the situation in Afghanistan was less hopeful, and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto was likely to herald a period of political uncertainty in Pakistan, there was also a belief that an easing of the situation in Iraq would allow for an increase in US forces in Afghanistan which might, in turn, encourage other NATO members to provide further troops.

By the beginning of May there was far less prospect of sustained progress in either Iraq or Afghanistan. From a narrow domestic political perspective within the United States, this might not prove a major issue unless there is a massive upsurge in violence in either country in the next six months. What it does mean, though, is that the incoming administration next January will face some extraordinarily difficult decisions right from the start. Otherwise it might see its first term of office dominated by the two wars even more than the Presidency of George W Bush.

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 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.
