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MULTIPLE CONFLICTS AND OLD THINKING

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In terms of international conflicts, August 2008 was dominated by a sudden outbreak of violence in Georgia and a further deterioration in security in Afghanistan and western Pakistan. While the situation in Iraq appeared to be showing some further signs of stabilisation, there were issues emerging over the status of the US military presence and also over the influence of Iran and China in the economy of the country. Meanwhile, in developments that were little noticed outside the specialist media, there was evidence that the dispersed al-Qaida movement was increasing its influence in Algeria and Somalia.

Iraq

US military casualties remained relatively low during August, even though they were nearly double those of July, but there were still numerous incidents, including a number of major suicide bomb attacks that caused high civilian casualties. Many of the most serious were directed at Shi'a communities and appear to have been aimed at increasing sectarian divisions, but others targeted the police force, especially training centres. Against this background, three issues concerning Iraqi government policy are emerging as major future trends, all with implications for US influence in the country.

The first is the willingness of the Maliki administration to engage in substantial investment discussions with China, leading to a planned Chinese commitment to invest some \$3 billion in oil field developments in the country. This is part of a long-term Chinese commitment to the region that has involved improved relations with Saudi Arabia and with Iran. The Chinese investment in Iranian oil and gas developments has been one of the most notable features of Chinese foreign policy in the last ten years and comes at a time of rapidly increasing oil import dependency. Given that the Maliki government already has close links with Tehran, the three-way connection of China, Iran and Iraq looks likely to grow, suggesting that the influence of the United States in the development of Iraqi oil resources may not be as strong as Washington had hoped.

The Chinese policy of increasing links with oil-rich Gulf states is understandable, given that China's oil import dependency is now close to 50% and is still rising. The United States has an even higher import dependency, now approaching 60%, and since close to two-thirds of the world's oil reserves are located in the Persian Gulf region, the focus of both countries on the region is obvious. China does not have any serious military expeditionary capability and therefore concentrates on economic influence. The United States relies both on military and economic influence and is concerned at any prospect of a decrease in military power, given that this is its main advantage in the region in relation to China.

The second issue relates directly to this – the manner in which the Maliki government has become more insistent on demanding major US troop withdrawals over the next two to three years. The bargaining position appears at first sight to involve a requirement for the withdrawal of all US forces, but the reality is much more likely to be the withdrawal of US combat units, the fifteen brigades numbering around 60,000 troops out of a total force of around 150,000.

The United States requirement, bearing in mind the current heavy investment in constructing bases, is to have a few very large self-contained bases outside of key urban areas, with some smaller bases in strategic locations. The ultimate troop numbers might be in the region of 60-90,000, including US Air Force squadrons, army aviation, Special Forces and many support troops. It is not at all clear that the demands of the Maliki government will extend to all or most of these forces, but it is also the case that it is being more trenchant in its demands than the Pentagon anticipated. For the United States, there would be a deep reluctance to withdraw all of the combat brigade unless it was absolutely clear that the

insurgency was over and, more importantly, had no capacity to return. That is very far from the current situation.

The final issue relates indirectly to the US military presence and directly to this risk of a resurgence of violence. This is the manner in which the Malaki government is taking a much stronger line with those elements of the Sunni community – often termed the Awakening Movement – that have acted to curb the violence of the al-Qaida militias within Iraq. This movement has been substantially responsible for limiting al-Qaida actions in the country over the past 18 months, and Sunni community leaders had been confident that many of those involved in the Awakening Movement would be integrated into the Iraqi national security forces. The Pentagon has been particularly keen to encourage this, having financed much of the actions of the movement.

In practice, the Malaki government has been very reluctant to allow this to happen with any sort of speed, and this has caused some consternation among the US military leadership. In representing the Shi'a majority, the Malaki government remains suspicious of the Sunni minority, but the problem for Washington is that any long-term exclusion of Sunni militias from integration into the Iraqi government security forces could lead to a return to violence on a substantial scale. This, in turn, could diminish the potential for US troop withdrawals just when there is considered to be an urgent need to free up Army and Marine Corps units for deployment to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan

Six months ago there was an expectation that there would be a Taliban surge in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan during the course of the summer months. It was not clear how substantial this would be, and many analysts believed that Taliban commanders would avoid major conventional attacks on NATO and US forces, given the immense firepower that coalition air forces could bring to bear. Instead it was anticipated that roadside bombs, suicide attacks, assassinations and other tactics might be employed, albeit on a larger scale than in 2006 or 2007. A further factor of concern was that the parliamentary election in Pakistan in February had resulted in the installation of a relatively unstable coalition government that would be more concerned with internal machinations and with seeking to force President Musharraf out of office than with controlling the districts bordering Afghanistan that had become veritable safe havens for Taliban and al-Qaida paramilitaries.

In the event, Taliban militias in Afghanistan have certainly increased their guerrilla actions, but have also expanded their operations in three other ways. One has been an emphasis on the targeting of transport links, especially the main highways into Kabul and a second has been a series of spectacular attacks, not least the over-running of a prison complex in Kandahar and an attack on one of Kabul's international hotels. The third, most significantly, has been a willingness to engage in direct attacks on coalition forces. Both US and French units have suffered serious casualties in recent months and one inevitable response has been the use of air power to protect troops. This, in turn, has resulted in several incidents in which there have been substantial civilian casualties.

In parallel with the increased violence in Afghanistan has been the manifest reluctance of the Pakistani government to sanction major military operations in the border districts. Towards the end of August President Musharraf finally agreed to step down, and this lost the United States an ally, even if his power has been much diminished of late. The departure of Musharraf makes it even less likely that the Pakistani government will agree to US requests for strong military action in the border districts, yet most US analysts do not see how a military victory against the Taliban in Afghanistan can be achieved if extensive safe havens exist across the border.

One of the fundamental problems is that most elements of the Pakistani political class see it as necessary to be prepared to negotiate with Taliban and other Islamist elements, yet this remains

anathema to the Bush administration, where the dominant approach is to seek to increase military force in Afghanistan, persuade NATO allies to follow suit, and even to extend US military operations into western Pakistan. Moreover, both the McCain and Obama presidential campaigns appear currently to take a similar view, so major changes in policy seem unlikely after the November election.

Algeria and Somalia

In mid-August, one of the worst bombings in Algeria in several years killed 43 police recruits, and there were numerous further attacks in the closing days of the month. The incidents represented a further escalation in actions by a small but growing insurgency commonly termed al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), originating in one of Algeria's long-term paramilitary groups but now claiming to be loosely allied to the wider al-Qaida movement. The level of violence is very low compared with the devastating conflict that engulfed Algeria in the 1990s, and AQIM's strength may be only in the hundreds, but it appears to be well-armed, adequately financed and, of most concern, highly motivated. Furthermore, its targets have included UN and Canadian interests as well as government buildings and the police.

The involvement of the United States in Algeria is relatively low, but its counter-terrorism operations in Somalia have been at a much higher level, with numerous air strikes and other operations against insurgents. Although these have resulted in the deaths of many insurgents, including some leaders, there have also been civilian casualties, and recent months have seen a growth in anti-Americanism, while antagonism to the Ethiopian forces currently occupying Mogadishu also continues.

The insurgent groups operating in Somalia have been disparate rather than united, and most of them have not been intensely Islamist to the extent of the Taliban or al-Qaida. However, there are indications that both elements are undergoing change. The most radical insurgent group, Shabab, is seeking both to increase its links with the al-Qaida movement while working to cooperate with other militias. Although it does not have the power of two years ago when it supported a short-lived Islamist government in Mogadishu, it has the potential to form another element in the loose al-Qaida network. Furthermore, there are credible reports of a movement of foreign paramilitaries into Somalia from Sudan, Chechnya, Algeria and even Iraq and Afghanistan. If this does develop into a much larger centre of rebellion, then the indications are that the United States will respond with an increased use of force.

Georgia

The short but intense conflict in Georgia started with a Georgian government attempt to take control of the break-away district of South Ossetia, followed immediately by a Russian counter-attack, occupation of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia and buffer zones inside Georgia, and systematic action to destroy much of Georgia's military infrastructure. The conflict is notable for a remarkable difference of views between Russia and the United States. In Russia, the military action has been very popular, being seen as an entirely justified operation in response to a violent Georgian assault on a small district in which the majority of its inhabitants want close links with Russia. Moreover, it comes at a time of intense Russian opposition to the potential expansion of NATO to its borders, as well as deep suspicion over US plans for forward-based missile defence facilities in Eastern Europe.

All of this is in the context of a deeply held view that Russia was humiliated by western attitudes to the economic collapse of the 1990s and a determination to demonstrate that Russia remains a great power. It is an outlook favoured by former president Putin, and responsible for much of his popularity, and it is also aided by Russia's substantial oil and gas reserves. The willingness to intervene in Georgia in support of the separatist aspirations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is in marked contrast to Russia's brutal suppression of its own Chechen separatists, but both policies have domestic support. They form a part of a pervasive determination to maintain the integrity of the state while resisting what is seen as western encroachment.

Some western European countries have been cautious in their condemnation of the Russian actions, not least because of the view that the original Georgian military assault in South Ossetia was rash and provocative, but the prevailing reaction in the United States and the UK has been of bitter criticism of the Russian actions. This has extended to talk of a renewed Cold War, it has increased US determination to move ahead with the forward-basing of missile defences, and may even involve a substantial programme to re-arm the Georgian military.

At the time of writing, it is probable that the sense of crisis will die down, since there is recognition in some circles in Washington and London that any escalation could lead to a singularly dangerous crisis involving neighbouring Ukraine, with its NATO aspirations but a very large Russian-speaking minority. Russian attitudes are unlikely to change, given the domestic popularity of recent actions, and there are strong arguments for scaling down the levels of rhetoric.

Old Thinking

Perhaps what is most striking about many of the developments of the past month is the manner in which forceful responses to threats and crises seem to be the only approaches that can be considered. In Iraq, the Bush administration is troubled by Iraqi demands for a military withdrawal and in Afghanistan the likely policy will be increased military force and a possible extension into western Pakistan rather than any prospect of negotiations with some of the relatively more moderate Islamist groups. In Somalia there is the prospect of the current use of force being counterproductive, leading to a paramilitary resurgence, and in Georgia neither Moscow nor Washington appears to have any capacity to recognise the perspectives of each other. It is markedly reminiscent of what was termed "old thinking" of the later years of the Cold War, and is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the many developments of the past month.

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