

The Afghanistan War: Origins and Consequences

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During the course of late June and through much of July, US and British troops engaged in major combat operations in southern Afghanistan, principally in Helmand Province. There was substantial fighting, with British troops taking some of the heaviest casualties of the eight-year war. Although there were still frequent instances of violence in Iraq, including major suicide bomb attacks, it was evident that the focus of western military operations had moved from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This did not mean that the US military presence in Iraq was coming to an end – even though a substantial withdrawal of troops is likely over the next eighteen months, it is still probable that at least 30,000 US military personnel will remain in the country and that the Iraq War may continue at a lower level for some years. Even so, the focus for the United States is now on Afghanistan and

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there are indications that a military involvement stretching over decades is in prospect.

If Senator McCain had won the 2008 Presidential Election it was expected that there would have been a major surge of US troops into Afghanistan in pursuit of a clear military victory over the Taliban paramilitaries. Such a surge has also been implemented by the Obama administration, leading to a foreign troop presence of around 100,000 later this year. About two-thirds of these are American, with the British contingent of around 9,000 being the only other major combat force although Dutch and Canadian units are significant both in number and are in engaging directly in combat operations.

On the US side, the former commander in Afghanistan, General David D McKiernan, was suddenly removed from his post earlier this year and replaced by General Stanley A McChrystal, a commander with extensive special operations experience in Iraq. This was part of a change of orientation by US forces towards wider engagement with communities in Afghanistan that would also seek to avoid military operations likely to cause heavy civilian casualties. There is also some moderation in aims for the war in that the Obama administration does appear to recognise that engagement with Taliban elements will be necessary. The difference, when compared with the Bush administration and a possible McCain presidency, is that the latter saw the surge as an aid to a clear victory whereas Obama recognises the need for a degree of compromise but sees this is mostly likely to be forthcoming from a position of military superiority.

Over all this, though, is the increased intensity of the war and the ability of Taliban elements to strike in many parts of the country. There is a deeply problematic but also clear trend over the past three years that as foreign

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military forces have increased in numbers in Afghanistan the levels of violence have risen and the Taliban paramilitaries have increased their influence across the country.

The British Involvement

The UK has had a military commitment in Afghanistan from the start of the war in later 2001 but this increased substantially from 2006. In recent months this has been paralleled by a final UK withdrawal from Iraq, apart from a few hundred personnel engaged in training and support for the Iraqi armed forces. When the British forces finally withdrew from the large base at Basra Airport, they were replaced not by Iraqi Army units as might have been expected but by a broadly equivalent force of US troops. This was almost certainly to ensure that US forces were available in southeast Iraq to secure the supply lines from the coast and Kuwait up to Baghdad, but did give the lie to the suggestion that Britain had successfully completed its mission by handing over to Iraqi forces.

Nevertheless, for Britain the withdrawal did mean the end of an operation that had experienced considerable opposition within the UK, but it also meant that the British involvement in Afghanistan became more prominent. Although UK government sources would not endorse the point, there are indications that an informal agreement was reached between Mr Brown and President Obama that the UK could withdraw from Iraq but would maintain and even increase its commitment to US-led operations in Afghanistan. This commitment currently appears thoroughly embedded in government policy, but the substantial increase in casualties being experienced by British forces in Helmand Province may well mean that opposition to the war will grow, especially as senior British Army officers are now talking in terms of a decades-long presence.

Origins

Given that the United States and the UK are already heading towards the ninth year of a potentially multi-decade conflict, it is appropriate to reflect on the origins of the war in the autumn of 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 atrocities there were two broad options by way of a US response. One was to react to the attacks by treating them as appalling acts of mass trans-national criminality. If so, then the perpetrators and those al-Qaida elements behind them would be seen as criminal elements, albeit motivated by a warped and brutal version of one of the most important of the world's monotheistic belief systems. Such an approach would have involved a long, persistent and wide-ranging operation to bring all those involved to justice. It would have had very widespread support given the international sympathy for the United States, but could have taken years to complete.

The alternative was to see 9/11 as the start of a world-wide war against an organised enemy that was supported by rogue states and required a massive military operation directed at regime termination, initially in Afghanistan but also in Iraq. The first of these approaches, the "international law" route, was advocated by a small number of analysts, including Oxford Research Group, but had little prospect of gaining support in the United States, given that the Bush administration was particularly committed to a specific international security paradigm. This was rooted in the belief that the United States had the unique opportunity, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to lead the world to a New American Century. A very forceful reaction to this new threat was therefore necessary. Moreover, while most of the attention over 9/11 focused on the destruction of the World Trade Center, the attack on the Pentagon by paramilitaries armed only with parcel knives had a profound effect on the US

military leadership. A formidable military response was the least that was required.

The argument for the alternative "international law" response was based partly on an analysis of the al-Qaida motivation for the 9/11 attacks, with these being seen in part as a demonstration of the movement's ability to strike at the commercial and military heart of the "far enemy" and in part as a provocation to bring the military forces of the far enemy into Afghanistan. This second element was predicated on the belief that the mujahidin in Afghanistan, in the war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s, had brought one superpower to its knees. A long-term US military occupation in the region would therefore lead, in turn, to the decline of the United States as the world's surviving military superpower.

A detailed analysis from Oxford Research Group published soon after the 9/11 attacks put it as follows:

"Over the next months, and probably years, military action will seek to destroy the people and supporting network of those presumed responsible for the atrocities of 11 September, and will probably seek also to destroy the Taliban regime in Kabul. In the view of the more hard-line security advisers in the Bush administration, action should also be taken against Iraq and other supporters of anti-American terrorism.

"For the Bin Laden network and its associates, such a strong military counter-reaction will have been anticipated and will almost certainly be welcomed. The groups themselves will have dispersed, probably retaining a capability for further attacks on the United States or its allies. They will anticipate very forceful military action and they will expect it to lead to civilian casualties and

huge movements of refugees, to instability in Pakistan, to an increasing anti-American mood in the Middle East and to more support for their own cause."

In the months that followed, US forces terminated the Taliban regime but avoided an immediate direct occupation of the country by utilising a combination of Special Forces, aerial bombardment and, above all, a re-equipping of the Northern Alliance of warlords. By early 2002, though, attention was diverted to Iraq, leading to regime termination in early 2003 and the start of a six-year war. That war has so far cost over 100,000 civilian lives, probably twice that number of serious injuries, resulted in the detention without trial of around 120,000 people, some of them for many years, and led to the displacement of some four million Iraqis.

In relation to al-Qaida, the Iraq War had three specific advantages. The first was the ability to represent the war as direct aggression by the "far enemy" against a key Arab state in the heart of the Islamic world. Furthermore, as the war evolved, the substantial Israeli involvement in the training and equipping of US forces meant that the war could be represented as a Crusader/Zionist assault on Islam. A second effect of the war was the creation of a corps of experienced paramilitaries from many countries that joined insurgents in Iraq and gained combat experience against well-trained and exceptionally well-armed US soldiers and Marines.

Finally, there was the advantage of a diversion of attention from Afghanistan, allowing a regrouping of the Taliban paramilitaries and their emergence by 2006 as a powerful force that was capable of controlling much of the country. As they developed their tactics against US, British and other forces, they were able to gain from the extensive experience of paramilitaries in Iraq, especially in relation to the development of improvised explosive devices such as roadside

bombs that have presented such persistent problems for the foreign military forces in the country.

To put it bluntly, three fundamental mistakes were made in responding to the 9/11 atrocities. They may be fully understandable in the circumstances of US politics and the sheer shock of the impact of the attacks, but they were still mistakes – responding to 9/11 with a war on terror, invading Iraq and failing to recognise the resurgence of the Taliban.

Consequences

Given that the Taliban and associated paramilitary groups have increased their influence in Afghanistan in recent years, there appears to be a connection between the increased numbers of foreign troops and the incidence of violence. This could be readily explained by those foreign forces “taking the war to the enemy” with this inevitably involving more combat, rather than any increase in strength by the insurgents. The problem with this conclusion is that it does not take into account the increasing influence of the insurgents across the country. If the reinforced foreign troops were diminishing that degree of influence through greater military activity then the argument could be made that more use of force will enhance prospects for a negotiated settlement.

Instead, it seems likely that for significant parts of the Afghan population, especially in the south and south east of the country, the foreign forces are seen as occupiers to be resisted, not liberators to be supported. If this is the case, then the more the foreign troops increase in number, the more the resistance will increase.

This is the core dilemma for the Obama administration and for the Brown government. For the present, the policy is to increase the use of force in the expectation that this will enhance a political settlement. Given the intimate connection between the 9/11 atrocities and the Afghanistan of 2001, that is an argument that it is possible for the Obama administration to make to its domestic constituency. In the United States, by and large, the war in Afghanistan is not yet unpopular, at least not at the level of the Iraq War.

For Britain it is different, and this is the significance of the impact of the casualties on UK public opinion. As these mount, it is distinctly likely that the war will become markedly unpopular in the UK. In the run-up to the 2010 general election this could have a marked political impact. Bearing this in mind, it may well be that the Obama administration will come under private pressure from the UK government that a condition of continued British involvement in the war must be a fundamental rethinking of policies, even envisaging the possibility of a ceasefire and a timetable for withdrawal.

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