

**International Security Monthly Briefing – July 2008**

## **A SHIFT OF FOCUS**

Paul Rogers

### **Iraq**

During the course of July, the violence in Iraq continued to ease, with a marked drop in US military casualties and also a decrease in civilian deaths. Even so, there were numerous violent incidents including high-casualty bomb attacks in Baghdad and Kirkuk, with most of these caused by Sunni militia groups, including some linked to al-Qaida in Iraq. One of the reasons for the overall decrease in violence was the decision of the Shi'a Mehdi Army leadership to continue what was effectively a ceasefire against US forces. This was one part of a change of policy towards more engagement with the Shi'a community in the form of an increased involvement in the provision of social and community support.

At the end of the month, Moqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Mehdi Army, was reported as deciding that the militia would actually divide into two groups, one almost exclusively concerned with social welfare and the other available for resistance to what was seen as the continued US occupation of the country. Moreover, this paramilitary element would not resume operations against US forces if the United States was prepared to agree to a timetable for a full withdrawal from Iraq. The Mehdi Army leadership did not set a deadline for such a withdrawal, and it may be that this element of their strategy related to the forthcoming US election, given Barak Obama's stated policy of a fairly rapid withdrawal from Iraq if the security environment allowed.

In practice it actually looks highly unlikely that there will be a complete US withdrawal from Iraq any time in the next few years. The major military bases are developing an air of permanence, the US Embassy in Baghdad is now becoming operational as the world's largest foreign diplomatic centre, and Iraq's strategic importance in a region containing nearly two-thirds of the world's oil, has increased as a result of the recent surge in oil prices. Given the likelihood of a long-term US military presence in Iraq, it is by no means certain that Moqtada al-Sadr's paramilitary forces will maintain their ceasefire indefinitely. Indeed this may explain the degree of caution expressed by US military commanders, especially in relation to the possibly withdrawal of forces and their re-assignment to Afghanistan. This military caution has coincided uneasily with determined efforts by Republican politicians and commentators to present Iraq as a success story in the run up to the November Presidential Election, not least to counter the impact of the increased US military casualties in Afghanistan.

### **Insecurity in Afghanistan**

In the April briefing in this series (*A Different Surge*) a number of developments in Afghanistan were examined. One was the evidence of the reorganisation and consolidation of Taliban and al-Qaida militias during the course of the winter, together with the capacity of the Taliban to expand their urban operations through the winter months, especially in Kabul. There was, in particular, an increased use of suicide bombings, as well as some high-profile assassination attempts, including one against President Hamid Karzai. This resurgence was causing concern within NATO, with the United States urging partner countries to increase their military commitments and allow their troops a wider remit for combat operations.

Over the past two years, western forces in Afghanistan have grown substantially to over 60,000 troops, 36,000 of them American. Most of the troops are in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a NATO operation spread across the country, but a large proportion of the US forces are in a separate operation in the east of the country. This is almost entirely a counterinsurgency operation, whereas the ISAF force is split between a number of contingents operating in central, northern and western Afghanistan involved mainly in stabilisation, and others involved much more in counterinsurgency in the

south and south-east. The latter units include a substantial UK presence in Helmand Province as well as Canadian, Dutch and US troops elsewhere in the region. The US, British and Canadian troops have borne the brunt of the Taliban renaissance and have taken considerable casualties in recent months.

It is worth recalling that when the decision was taken to increase the UK presence in southern Afghanistan more than two years ago, there was an assumption that the great majority of the work would be stabilisation rather than combat, with the then defence minister, John Reid, stating optimistically that there might not even be a shot fired in anger. In the event, 2006 and 2007 saw a marked increase in Taliban activity across much of the country, and there was some anticipation that this year would see a further upsurge during the course of the summer.

At the same time, there was some evidence during last summer's fighting that a stalemate was likely to develop in that numerous small groups of Taliban paramilitaries could control much of the countryside and engage in guerrilla warfare but did not have the ability to confront the foreign forces in open combat, given the airpower and artillery that these forces could bring to bear. Thus, some analysts concluded that an anticipation of a major Taliban upsurge was unlikely. Instead, Taliban militias would avoid open combat while continuing to develop their more dispersed insurgency tactics, not least through roadside bombs and targeted assassinations.

Part of the argument supporting this analysis is that Taliban and al-Qaida paramilitaries now have substantial control over large parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of western Pakistan, and that the political uncertainty within Pakistan makes it unlikely that the Islamabad government has the political will to involve its armed forces in large-scale operations in the FATA, or to allow US forces general access there. As a result, the Taliban/al-Qaida movement can afford to see the Afghanistan conflict as a long-term process in which the aim is to wear down the political resolve of NATO to remain committed to the region rather than win a full-scale war against powerful conventional forces.

During the course of May, June and July, this anticipation of relatively low Taliban activity in Afghanistan was proved wrong. Instead, there was a substantial increase in violence once the opium poppy harvest had been completed and more paramilitary personnel became available. On one occasion a force of several hundred Taliban came close to over-running a newly established US military post close to the Pakistan border, killing nine US soldiers, wounding many more, and resulting in the post being abandoned. This one incident caused considerable concern in Washington and, along with the overall upsurge in violence, has led to calls for four new courses of action. One is a direct and rapid increase in the US military presence within the country, the second is a proposal to bring all the coalition forces throughout Afghanistan under US military leadership and the third will be a substantial further investment in training and expanding the Afghan National Army. The final proposed action is to insist that the United States military can intervene much more forcibly in Taliban/al-Qaida safe havens in western Pakistan.

This is the most significant and potentially most controversial proposal. The US already has specialists involved in training troops in the Pakistan Army and others attached to the paramilitary Frontier Corps, and the Central Intelligence Agency also operates in the country, including the occasional but controversial use of Predator armed drones for raids on suspected al-Qaida locations. What is now sought is a much more substantial involvement, including the use of Special Forces and even regular infantry against militias using the FATA as a safe haven.

### **The Indo-Pakistan Factor**

Many US military planners believe it may be impossible for paramilitary forces in Afghanistan to be defeated or even curbed without neutralising the major military advantage they have of operating bases

and training camps across the border in Pakistan. The problem is the deep reluctance of the Islamabad government to countenance any change, a reluctance greatly increased by the changing relationship between the United States and India, especially in relation to India's increasing role in Afghanistan.

For more than two decades, successive Pakistani governments have seen their influence in Afghanistan as being a strong counter to the regional power of India. In the 1980s Pakistan was virtually on the front line in the closing stages of the Cold War when its powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) agency played a key role in supporting the paramilitary militias fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. At that time, Pakistan had a close relationship with the United States, whereas India remained more neutral, including a moderate if tentative relationship with the Soviet Union. The Indian government in the 1980s was actually concerned at the manner in which the United States supported Islamist mujahidin elements in Afghanistan, seeing this as in opposition to its more secular approach to politics.

With the end of the Cold War, Pakistan lost much of its significance to the United States but the ISI went on to provide support for the Taliban militias as they brought a degree of brutal order to the chaos of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. However extreme the Taliban rule at the end of the 1990s, it still served Pakistan's regional interests – better to have a relationship with a rigid Islamist regime in Kabul than to have no influence at all. Pakistan's position became more difficult after 9/11 and the termination of the Taliban regime, but maintaining influence in Kabul was still of great political value.

The problem was that the Indian Government also recognised the importance of Afghanistan under its new pro-western leadership and has sought, since early 2002, to provide large quantities of aid – estimated at \$1.2 billion so far – towards post-conflict reconstruction. It has also maintained a substantial diplomatic and commercial presence, but it is the recent improvement in relations with the United States that has caused most concern in Islamabad. In particular, the decision of the Bush administration to support India's civil nuclear power programme has caused consternation and is seen as a part of a three-way union involving New Delhi, Kabul and Washington, that is deeply troubling.

From an American perspective there is now a view that the real problem in the region is Pakistan's attitude to the Taliban and al-Qaida and that Islamabad's role as a major stakeholder in the 'war on terror' does not fit in with its current politics. What makes this even more difficult are two elements – the uncertain state of Pakistan's parliamentary coalition and the willingness of many in the higher ranks of the civil service and Army to countenance negotiations with Islamist militias. From Washington's perspective, what actually needs to happen is Pakistan's agreement to the Pentagon expanding its military operations in western Pakistan. However, the recent improvement in relations between the US and India is likely to make this even less acceptable to a wide swathe of Pakistani public opinion than even six months ago.

It is in this context that this summer's Taliban upsurge in Afghanistan has its wider political significance. From the perspective of the Pentagon, the need to confront Islamist militias in western Pakistan is not only urgent, but is becoming increasingly central to its prospects for success in Afghanistan. The problem is that broader regional trends make it less and less likely that any Pakistani government will be able to countenance this. Improving relations with India may look good from Washington's perspective, not least in countering the increasing power of China, but the end result may actually increase its problems in Afghanistan.

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