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A HINT OF VICTORY?

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Introduction

In the early part of March, a number of reports from the United States suggested that substantial progress was being made at last in southern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, so much that there were indications that the conflicts with the al-Qaida movement and the Taliban were moving in favour of the United States and its coalition partners. This view was in many ways an extension of a wider analysis that had come to the fore towards the end of 2009 and was discussed in the January 2010 briefing in this series.

That briefing had a cautious conclusion, pointing to developments in Yemen, the Christmas Day attempt to destroy a passenger jet *en route* for Detroit and the attack on a CIA forward-operating base in Khost Province. The attack in Khost, in particular, showed evidence of long-term planning and penetration of the coalition intelligence system, suggesting that al-Qaida was far from in retreat. Since then, however, there have been such positive indications of progress from Washington that it is appropriate to return to this issue and discuss whether this evolving “narrative of possible victory” does indeed represent a clear change.

The current optimism stems from three developments. One is that Operation Moshtarak in central Helmand Province is resulting in the expulsion of Taliban paramilitaries and their replacement by a governmental administration protected by Afghan security forces. A second is that preparations are being made for an operation to take control of the city of Kandahar later this year, this being seen as the key centre of Taliban influence across the whole of Afghanistan. The third is the evidence that the very extensive use of armed drones, especially in western Pakistan, is having a massive, destabilising impact on the viability and perhaps even the survival of al-Qaida as a movement.

The drone attacks, in particular, have been presented by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Leon Panetta, as having had a devastating impact on the ability of the al-Qaida movement to operate. The CIA alone mounted 22 drone attacks in the first ten weeks of 2010, compared with 53 during the whole of 2009. While most of these have been in western Pakistan, armed drones have also been used extensively in Afghanistan, with the US military heavily involved as well as the CIA. The overall effect is reported to be that the command and control capabilities of the al-Qaida movement have been greatly diminished, to the degree that it is now struggling to maintain any sense of cohesion, let alone have the capability for mounting new attacks. The al-Qaida leadership, in short, is concentrating primarily on its own survival.

The Domestic Context

Part of the reason for the presentation of a narrative of possible victory is the political environment in the United States. After initial enthusiasm for an era of change, the Obama administration lost a lot of support during the course of 2009, with the greatest area of controversy being its proposals for healthcare reform. It also suffered from constant criticism of its security posture from two quite different sources.

Conservatives in the US claimed the administration was being soft on terror, especially with its accelerated withdrawal from Iraq, while progressives were critical of the expansion of the war in Afghanistan and western Pakistan. There was also the specific issue that the US intelligence community, especially the CIA, had come in for much criticism, exacerbated by the Khost attack and the failure to detect the Detroit incident despite warnings.

In such circumstances, and with the crucial healthcare vote due before Congress in early March, it is hardly surprising that the administration, and the CIA in particular, would emphasise any areas of potential progress. It is in this context that it makes sense to discuss, whether there really have been major changes, or whether a much longer term perspective remains necessary.

Helmand

The southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar are two of the largest in Afghanistan. Both are mainly Pashtun, and the provincial capital of Kandahar Province, Kandahar city, was the focus for the rise to power of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Helmand Province, to the west of Kandahar, is also important because it has become the most important area for the production of opium anywhere in the world. The export of raw opium paste has become a major revenue earner for Taliban paramilitaries and warlords, and this has been enhanced by an increasing tendency for the raw paste to be refined into heroin and morphine within the country. Although precise data is difficult to gain, it is reported that ten years ago, around a quarter of all raw opium produced in Afghanistan was refined into these much more valuable end products, whereas that proportion is now around three-quarters, providing a much greater revenue source for Taliban and other groups. It follows that one of the main reasons for concentrating on Helmand Province is to limit this crucial revenue source.

Operation Moshtarak is still under way, and it is far too early to assess its long-term impact. Even so, one aspect is already relevant in trying to determine the likelihood of success. As coalition forces have moved into central Helmand Province, so the tactics employed by Taliban paramilitaries have altered, with the main focus being on a considerable increase in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), especially in the form of roadside bombs. Furthermore, the IEDs being used in Afghanistan tend to be much less sophisticated than those developed in Iraq, usually being made from a fertiliser/diesel fuel mix with a minimum of metal parts and circuitry. As the US military experienced a growing IED problem in Iraq from 2004 onwards, it invested in a \$17 billion counter-offensive programme using advanced detection equipment developed specifically for that environment. This was countered by Iraqi paramilitaries so that there ended up being a contest of technologies, in which the US military eventually became highly proficient at detecting quite advanced IEDs.

In Afghanistan, though, the much more simple IEDs, made from readily available components, are proving more difficult to detect – their very simplicity bypasses the advanced detection systems, yet the insurgents' intimate knowledge of localities and the large number of IEDs available for use mean that they are the largest source of casualties. Moreover, not only are IED attacks more common, but much more powerful units are being deployed. US forces reported over 8,100 IED incidents in 2009 compared with just under 3,900 the previous year. In Helmand Province alone, 28 US and allied troops were killed in February. While there is now a major foreign military presence in central Helmand, it appears that Taliban paramilitaries have simply melted into the background, adopting guerrilla tactics focused on IED attacks.

Kandahar and the Taliban

At the beginning of March, US forces announced that they were in the early stages of planning a major operation to take control of the city of Kandahar. This was represented as “taking” a city that is now in Taliban hands, thereby evicting the Taliban and forcing them into retreat. It may well be possible to decrease Taliban influence in Kandahar, but the attitude implicit in this approach suggests a fundamental lack of understanding of the nature of the Taliban that goes right back to the mid-1990s.

When the Taliban regime established itself in Afghanistan fifteen years ago, a strong impression was gained in the West that this was akin to an invading force that had its origins in madrassas and other centres of Islamist learning in western Pakistan. It was often described as a force that came in from

outside Afghanistan to take control of most of the country. This attitude persists to the present day when there is talk of “evicting” Taliban paramilitaries from central Helmand or, in due course, from the city of Kandahar.

What is seldom recognised is that there were major elements of the opposition to Soviet control of Afghanistan in the 1980s that were essentially religiously motivated and came very much from within the Pashtun communities across southern Afghanistan. They were, in essence the people from which the movement known as “the Taliban” originated. There certainly were elements from Pashtun communities across the border in Pakistan, but the key point is that the Taliban takeover of the mid-1990s was not an external invading force but much more of an internal entity.

Similarly, it is wrong to think of the Taliban as an external force that moved in and took control of Helmand Province or now occupies the city of Kandahar. “The Taliban” in essence is simply not an external force that can be defeated and expelled, it is a phenomenon that is deeply embedded within Pashtun society and has direct origins going back a quarter of a century. When the Bush administration terminated the Taliban regime after 9/11, in the closing months of 2001, the Taliban paramilitaries did not flee in vast numbers across the border into Pakistan. Some elements certainly did so, but what was far more common was a melting away into their own communities within Afghanistan.

This is what is also happening today in central Helmand, where the paramilitaries are simply adjusting to the US presence, modifying their modes of opposition and biding their time. This is almost certainly what will happen if and when US forces move into Kandahar city later in the year. There will be an illusion of victory but not a great deal more, since the Taliban phenomenon is actually part of Afghan society.

The Impact of the Drone Attacks

The experience in Helmand brings into some doubt the idea of a turning point in the war, but that still leaves the question of the impact of the drone attacks. Again, it is necessary to put to one side the force of the rhetoric originating from CIA and other sources because such rhetoric is a necessary part of domestic US politics. What is clear, though, is that there has been a greatly increased reliance on armed drones as a means of pursuing the war, and there are some indications that they are having an impact on elements of the al-Qaida leadership.

Even here, though, there are two elements of caution that should be considered. One is that while a number of significant middle-ranking leaders of the movement have been killed in the past two years, there appears to have been a ready cohort of younger paramilitaries to take their place. Moreover, these are people who frequently have recent and direct combat experience, including exposure in the field to the multitude of surveillance, reconnaissance and attack capabilities available to the United States and its coalition partners. They have thus been in an intensive learning environment and may have an unrecognised capability to respond creatively to the adverse environment that the drones create. Experience in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, suggests that paramilitary movements have an evolutionary capability that frequently exceeds expectations.

The second element of caution relates to the much more general phenomenon of the use of armed drones in modern warfare. Such use has been restricted primarily to the United States and coalition partners such as Britain in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to the Israeli defence forces for their operations in southern Lebanon and Gaza. As a result of such use, other armed forces are embracing the technologies which are, in turn, proliferating rapidly.

Bearing in mind the manner in which irregular and asymmetric warfare has evolved in recent years, it would be wise to assume that we are close to the point in which drone technology becomes readily available to paramilitary groups. There is some evidence that this is already happening, not least with

Hezbollah's use of a TV-guided drone flown deep into Israeli airspace more than three years ago. That was largely a symbolic gesture using an unarmed system, but caused some consternation in Israeli security circles.

Given the level of sophistication shown by planners in a number of paramilitary movements in recent years, it would be entirely wise to assume that such movements are no more than a decade behind the drone technologies available to western states in the planning of their actions. In modern asymmetric warfare the potential for drone use, especially in large urban areas, is considerable and may yet represent a highly significant development. For the moment, the advantage may lie largely with western states, not least in western Pakistan and southern Afghanistan, but that may be no more than a short-term advantage. In this, as in other areas, a narrative of possible victory is, at the very least, premature.

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