

International Security Monthly Briefing – January 2006

IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN AND NOW IRAN ONCE AGAIN

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The evolving US policy in the 'war on terror' was analysed in the December briefing (*Control Without the Consequences*) and is easily summarised. Because of the changed mood in the United States in the past few months, it has become important for the Bush administration to adjust its military posture in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq, it is desirable to be seen to be withdrawing some troops in the coming months, primarily because of the need to avoid the war being a damaging issue in the mid-session elections to Congress in November.

The troop withdrawals are likely to be scheduled for the summer months and may be fairly small scale, perhaps limited to three combat brigades and their supporting elements, certainly less than a fifth of the US troops currently in Iraq. Given the current level of the insurgency and the difficulties of replacing US troops with their Iraqi counterparts, this withdrawal will not be easy to engineer, and may be heavily dependent on the current moves to rely much more on air power in seeking to curb the insurgency. That this is likely to increase civilian casualties through 'collateral damage' may not be seen as an obstacle, even though it will further heighten the anti-American mood in Iraq and across the region.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, where the insurgency is proving more deep-seated than had been anticipated, the US intention is to try and withdraw around 2,500 of the 19,000 troops currently in the country, with some of the burden being taken up by an increase in the size of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), largely through a new deployment of British troops. ISAF's role has primarily been one of ensuring security through a peace-enforcement role, especially in Kabul and some of the larger towns and cities of the north and west of the country. The effect has been variable, but has rarely tipped over into embracing a counter-insurgency role.

That may change as the ISAF forces are deployed to new areas, especially those where they will replace US troops that have been very much involved in counter-insurgency actions. For the British armed forces, such involvement is not new – there have been units of UK Special Forces operating alongside US forces for many months, and there has also been a deployment of six Harrier strike aircraft. Even so, what is now envisaged as part of the ISAF expansion is substantial numbers of British troops directly involved in operations that are far more likely to include open combat with Taliban and other militias. This may have consequences for UK domestic politics as the controversy over UK involvement in Iraq is heightened by a new concern over activities in Afghanistan.

Moreover, this is coming at a time of two significant developments in Afghanistan, both of them indicating that the insurgency is becoming more deep-rooted. The first is that the current winter period has witnessed continued attacks on a range of targets, including US and ISAF forces, Afghan security personnel, government offices and officials and personnel working for aid organisations. All such groups have experienced such problems in the past but there has tended to be something of a pause during the more extreme winter months. This has simply not happened this year, suggesting that the Taliban and other militias are better organised and resourced.

This relates to the second issue, the decrease in Pakistani Army control of the border regions in Pakistan. In the past two years there have been a number of military operations in districts such as North and South Waziristan, with many of them proving costly to the Pakistani Army. In recent months there have been persistent reports that what little hold the Pakistani government had on such districts

has largely melted away, leaving Taliban and other paramilitaries a considerable degree of freedom in which to train and collect supplies.

That such a circumstance has evolved has been a real concern for the US military and specialist agencies such as the CIA, and one response has been to launch raids into the border areas of Pakistan from Afghanistan. In the early weeks of 2006, there were three raids, all of which were reported to have used Predator drones equipped with air-to-surface missiles. The most controversial was an attack on three houses in the village of Damadola, which was reported to be aimed at Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian-born associate of Osama bin Laden who is widely regarded as the key strategist for the al-Qaida movement. It later turned out that he was not present in the village at the time, but it is possible that three other senior al-Qaida members were present and were killed. What is certainly true is that a number of civilians were killed, most of them women and children.

In all probability, the Musharraf government in Islamabad gave informal approval for this and other raids, but the public reaction was substantial, with large demonstrations in a number of towns and cities across the country. This results in a severe dilemma for the Americans. In order to be able to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, they have to be as effective as they can in their own counter-insurgency activities, otherwise there will be a growing number of casualties among NATO's ISAF units, leading to considerable political controversy among NATO's European member states, not least in the UK and the Netherlands. But US operations are seriously limited by the lack of Pakistani governmental control of the border regions, hence the need for US forces to use armed drones to undertake raids.

To be able to do that, though, the American planners have to factor in the likely effects of such actions on Pakistani political stability. President Musharraf has already survived several assassination attempts. He remains privately close to the Americans but the more the US undertakes cross-border actions, the more there will be a strong public reaction in Pakistan. In the final analysis, though, US domestic politics, and the need to withdraw troops, will take precedence over any risks to Pakistani political stability. We should therefore expect to see more cross-border activity, including air strikes on presumed al-Qaida and Taliban units, in the coming months, with the need to do so increasing as the spring and summer approach.

Over much of the period through December 2005 and January 2006, western media attention tended to be focussed on the Iraqi elections and on the developing political and diplomatic confrontation with Iran, with Afghanistan getting far less prominent attention. It may be that the focus will shift away from all of these towards Pakistan, for the first time in several years.

Iran

What is well nigh certain is that the potential conflict over Iran's nuclear ambitions will become much more prominent. This has been a relatively low profile matter for much of the last three years, mainly because of the US preoccupation with issues in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also because of European Union efforts to seek a diplomatic settlement and, more recently, the Bush administration's concentration on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. During the course of January, however, the issue rose rapidly up the political agenda and by the end of the month it was apparent that a full-scale crisis was in prospect.

The consequences of military action against Iran, either by the United States or Israel, are analysed in a forthcoming study from Oxford Research Group (published 13 February) and suggest some very problematic outcomes, including the potential for a protracted war. This makes it all the more strange that the mood has hardened, especially within the United States. In part, this is due to changes within Iran, but it also relates to the underlying reasons why Iran is such a particular concern for the Bush administration.

Within Iran, the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad last year was a surprise for most analysts. His principal opponent, Hashemi Rafsanjani, had the support of most elements of the theocracy that retains much of the power in Iran, but Mr Ahmadinejad was able to go over the heads of the current power base in Tehran, appealing directly to the poorer sectors of the electorate. He succeeded in part because of a widespread view among the electorate that much of the theocracy was distant and even corrupt, and also because of his own simple personal lifestyle contrasting markedly with theocratic opulence.

After coming to power he moved rapidly to consolidate his position, not least through major changes in Iran's diplomatic representation overseas together with replacement of many technocrats in ministerial positions with people that he could consider reliable whatever their own experience. There was a reaction within Iranian political circles and Mr Ahmadinejad had particular problems in getting approval from the Majlis (parliament) for some of the ministerial appointments. Bearing in mind that the theocratic power base had done much to ensure that the Majlis was dominated by conservatives, this might seem surprising. What it does show is that any internal conflict between Mr Ahmadinejad's administration and other elements of the Iranian political system is not a conventional conflict between reformers and conservatives, but more between two different versions of relatively hard-line politics.

This comes in the context of the strongly held view across Iranian society that the country has every right to promote a civil nuclear power programme, not least as a sign of modernity. It has become an indicator of national status embraced not just by Mr Ahmadinejad but by Mr Rafsanjani and many of those within the theocracy. Where there may well be a difference is in the pragmatism of the latter when it comes to international affairs. Leaders such as Mr Rafsanjani would, if in power, be handling the developing crisis in a much more subtle way – keeping the rhetoric down, avoiding diplomatic confrontations and maintaining a semblance of agreement with the IAEA so as to make it difficult for Washington to adopt an aggressive stance.

The Ahmadinejad administration is certainly not doing this, not least through extreme statements directed at Israel. Moreover, these come on top of the changes in personnel described above and may suggest a degree of political naivety stemming from inexperience in foreign affairs. At the same time, it may well be that Mr Ahmadinejad and his advisors positively want a crisis with the United States, believing that this will be a powerful unifying force within Iran. This analysis is certainly supported by the careful recent statements of Mr Rafsanjani, where he has indicated support for the administration in the face of the more hard-line approach being adopted by the United States.

The view from Washington

On the face of it, the possibility of a crisis with Iran that results in a military confrontation would seem to be the last thing wanted by the US military. It is far more concerned with severe overstretch, especially in the Army, and is seeking to cut back its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. To contemplate military action against Iran must surely be an exercise in military stupidity.

There is one immediate counter to this view. Action to destroy Iran's nuclear programme would be very different from the involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan and would be almost entirely a matter of the use of airpower and sea-borne stand-off weapons such as cruise missiles. There is little or no overstretch in these elements of the US armed forces – indeed there are almost certainly elements in the US Navy and Air Force that would welcome a role in order to focus attention on their capabilities, given the current attention being paid to the Army and Marine Corps. One of the effects of the ongoing war in Iraq is that it is these two branches of the armed forces that are getting most of the additional defence spending. Within the politics of the US military there is a constant jockeying for position, influence and resources – the Army and the Marines may be hard-pressed but it does mean that they are doing well out of current defence spending. Getting the spotlight back on the Air Force and Navy could be no bad thing from their perspective.

This does nothing to reduce the risk that a military confrontation with Iran could develop into a sustained conflict, so it does not explain the absolute insistence of the Bush administration that Iran cannot be allowed to proceed on its presumed path towards nuclear weapons. The explanation for that outlook has much more to do with longer-term issues of US strategy in the region. In part, this does still stem from the US experience in the late 1970s, when an apparently secure client regime controlled by the late Shah was overthrown in a manner that was as unexpected as it was violent. The hostage crisis, in particular, still resonates in Washington.

More generally, though, the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan have to be factored into the issue of Iran. Three years ago, the Taliban regime had been ousted in Afghanistan, al-Qaida appeared to have been dispersed and the Bush administration was set to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, replacing it with a client state following free market principles. Iran was still the major obstacle to US control of Gulf security, but with the onset of secure US control of Iraq and Afghanistan, to the west and east of Iran, there was little doubt that any regime in Tehran would be careful in its relations with the United States.

It is all so different now. Not only has the insurgency in Iraq persisted in a manner that has exceeded just about all military expectations, but political developments are ensuring that Mr Ahmadinejad's government could have substantial influence in the future of the country. Meanwhile, Afghanistan is also far from peace, a situation made worse by the uncertainties in Pakistan. There is little sign of the situations in Iraq or Afghanistan easing, and the end result is that the United States could be faced, in two or three years time, with a deeply troubled region in which it cannot maintain control, coupled with a vigorously independent Iran that is getting close to having the ability to produce nuclear weapons.

Iran may not choose to do so, but the development of a substantial civil nuclear power and research programme, especially if it involves a complete nuclear fuel cycle, will give it the potential to do so quite rapidly whenever it decided. The Bush administration is simply not prepared to allow this, even if Iran is within its rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to develop civil nuclear power. The huge geo-strategic significance of Gulf oil reserves is such that the United States under its current leadership will not contemplate an Iran under the current or any similar regime that even has the capability to take the nuclear weapons route.

Moreover, this is not just an issue for the Republicans – recent opinion polling in the United States suggests majority support for military action against Iran in spite of the experiences in Iraq. Perhaps more indicative is the recently changed attitude of one of the leading Democrat contenders for the White House in 2008 – Hilary Clinton. She is now taking a much harder line on maintaining control of Iraq while calling for strong action against Iran.

Perhaps the one issue that is not appreciated sufficiently in Western Europe is the effect of the Shah's fall, and of the hostage crisis, more than a quarter of a century ago. In its own way, that is a much greater explanation for the origins of the current crisis than as commonly realised, and is one of the main reasons why military action, with all its dangerous consequences, may still be difficult to avoid.

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