

## An arc of conflict

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Two weeks ago, an article in this series attempted to analyse the military situation in Afghanistan, an exercise made more difficult by the paucity of reliable information available. Even so, there was enough evidence to indicate that the guerrilla forces, whether Taliban, al Qaida or others, were largely operating in very small groups and were able to hide out in Afghan villages and towns. They were also able to disperse over the border in Pakistan, and were showing a surprising adaptability to US military tactics.

Other points were highlighted. They included the increase in numbers of western forces engaged in Afghanistan and the reluctance of the Pakistani government to allow a heavy US presence in the region bordering Afghanistan. There was also the prospect of the spring thaw opening up mountain passes for guerrilla movements, as well as the longer-term effects of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation as a radicalising factor in the wider region.

It was also pointed out that while there had been no recent deaths among western forces, there was evidence of quite frequent attacks on units of these forces. The key point here was that the guerrillas were still capable of military initiative, a further indication that to talk of “mopping up” operations was, at the very least, premature.

Over the past two weeks there have been a number of developments. Even when put together they do not give us a completely reliable indication of likely trends, but they do help to illuminate what is happening.

### A phantom enemy

At the level of military operations, western forces have still found it repeatedly difficult to target active guerrilla groups. Time and again, troops have failed to make contact, and even the much-vaunted destruction of a large arms dump was questioned when there were indications that it was not part of a Taliban or al-Qaida supply system.

The British marines have been involved in three operations, *Ptarmigan*, *Snipe* and *Condor*, the last-named being last week’s move to support an Australian special forces unit that had apparently come under guerrilla attack. In the event, none of the three operations involved direct contact with guerrilla forces.

Even so, attacks on coalition forces have continued, including the death of a member of the US special forces. There has also been a steady increase in the western military presence in Afghanistan. The International Security Assistance Force, centred almost entirely on Kabul, remains at about five thousand troops, and this is engaged essentially in local security.

There are quite separate forces engaged in offensive operations elsewhere in the country, and these now number around eleven thousand. While the largest group is from the United States (five thousand), there are sizeable contingents from Canada (two thousand, two hundred), and

Britain (one thousand, seven hundred). Several other western countries are also involved, notably France and Germany.

Sources in Pakistan suggest that there are currently only a few hundred guerrilla fighters active, with the great majority having dispersed into villages and towns, and especially into some of the larger cities in Pakistan. Even so, these active fighters are able to ensure that a substantial western military presence remains in Afghanistan, with this directed much more at counter-guerrilla actions than in aiding Afghanistan in nation-building and reconstruction.

UN sources have repeatedly called for a much larger security assistance force, perhaps around thirty thousand instead of the current five thousand, in order to ensure reasonable levels of security across the country. At present, though, coalition states are reluctant to accept this and, under US leadership, persist with an offensive military strategy.

### **The reluctance of Pakistan**

Within Pakistan, militant anti-western groups remain active, as evidenced by the attack on the French naval workers two weeks ago. But the Pakistan government is increasingly resistant to allowing US special forces freedom of operations within its territory. There are two reasons for this. One is the obvious risk of a further rise in the current anti-American mood, with the probability that this becomes more directed towards the government itself.

The other is the huge pre-occupation of the Pakistani military with the current dangerous confrontation with India. Pakistan simply does not have the military forces to confront India while, at the same time, co-operating with the United States in counter-guerrilla operations in the border region. But without those forces, it is unwilling to let the United States operate on its own, at least not in terms of engaging in serious open conflict on its territory.

A further problem for Pakistan is that its own armed forces are relatively poorly equipped, not least because of the effect of sanctions. As a result, Pakistan is pressing the United States for upgrades to its F-16 fleet, and the release of spare parts embargoed since the nuclear tests in 1998. The US may accede to these requests in return for greater freedom of action in Pakistan itself, but Pakistan's view is that it has already done more than enough to support the US.

All this means that the ability of the US and its coalition partners to engage in operations in Pakistan remains very limited. Meanwhile, al-Qaida and Taliban guerrillas can simply bide their time while undertaking sufficient attacks on coalition forces to keep them heavily engaged in Afghanistan for a long time to come.

### **The US homeland under threat?**

The remarkable sequence of events in the United States in the past two weeks leads us to ask one key question – is there really a possibility of a further major al-Qaida attack? There is no doubt that President Bush has come under some pressure because of revelations about warnings given prior to 11 September. But it is not a serious blow to his credibility and domestic opinion remains supportive of his “war on terror”. Why, then, be so up-front about new threats unless there really is a risk?

Two explanations can be offered for such talk. One is simply that there is some small possibility of another attack and the administration wants to be absolutely sure that it cannot be accused of not disseminating a warning in advance. In a sense, this is all about routine politics, but it may also disguise the issue of the actual status of al-Qaida.

In that context, there are several points to make. One is that, as has been mentioned, guerrilla forces remain active in the region, and are tying down over ten thousand coalition troops. The second is that the disruption of the al-Qaida leadership has been very limited – few have been killed or captured.

Then there is the pretty obvious fact that the Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners at Camp X-Ray and in Afghanistan have failed to yield much serious intelligence about either organisation. Finally, anti-American feeling in the middle East and south-west Asia remains high, making it easier for al-Qaida and other groups to operate, gain finance and move around.

There are two other elements to consider. One is that the very dispersal of al-Qaida from Afghanistan may be to its advantage. A concentration in one country, even under the sympathetic control of the Taliban, may have offered protection, but it is actually more difficult for western intelligence and security agencies to track operatives across numerous countries, especially when there is so much support for their activities.

The other element, always to be remembered, is that the al-Qaida network is part of a regional phenomenon with very clear political aims (US military out of the Gulf and the fall of the House of Saud), and that these aims form part of a long-term strategy.

Within that strategy, the New York and Washington massacres were specifically designed, in part, to increase US engagement across the region, with the anticipated effect that this would engender a stronger regional reaction. We can assume that this strategy is still in place and, as such, a further major attack would form an integral part of it.

### **Iran in the line of fire**

The other significant development of the past week is the manner in which forceful warnings have been issued from the Bush administration about terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction. There is certainly some possibility that a paramilitary group could acquire and use such weapons, but the warnings seem more directed at serving a political purpose – that of preparing the ground for an attack on Iraq.

In this context, the connection is being made repeatedly between terrorism and “rogue” states that seek weapons of mass destruction, with Iran labelled as the main problem. This has been to the evident surprise of many European politicians who have been steadfastly cultivating good relations with the current government in Tehran, widely seen in Western Europe as relatively moderate in outlook.

Part of the reason for the US focus on Iran must be the historic problem of memories of the hostage crisis going right back to the late 1970s. It is worth remembering, though, that the one country that has consistently regarded Iran as the major regional threat has been Israel, and current US attitudes to Iran are almost certainly hardened by the currently strong pro-Israel sentiment in Washington.

The Israeli view is that Iran, in concert with Syria, is deeply involved in anti-Israeli action, not just through arms shipments to the Palestinians, but in its support for Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. This view now has substantial credence in Washington, yet European governments are far more concerned to seek co-operation rather than confrontation with Tehran. At the very least, this will be a source of friction in Euro-American relations.

### **Iraq: a moving target**

The status of Iran, as the newly confirmed “lead rogue state”, does not diminish the concern with Iraq, not least because of a near-unanimous belief in Washington that Iraq is much closer to having weapons of mass destruction, especially biological weapons, and that this is simply unacceptable.

One problem, though, is that the Saddam Hussein regime itself appears resilient and stable, and is experiencing more favourable economic circumstances than for many years. The last two or three years have seen a significant improvement, per capita GDP growing by fifteen per cent last year. Moreover, this is not just affecting the elite of around a million people who have done well throughout the past decade, but even the poorer sectors of Iraqi society are experiencing some benefit, in contrast to extreme difficulties over many years.

Smuggling of oil exports persists at a high level, but Iraq has also exercised more open pragmatism in seeking much closer diplomatic and economic relations with neighbouring states. According to the *Washington Post*, Iraq is importing thirteen billion dollars-worth of goods from neighbours such as Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and even Saudi Arabia, and a sustained diplomatic process has eased relations with many Middle Eastern countries.

The Saddam Hussein regime remains firmly in power, and brutal and repressive measures continue to be used. But some neighbouring states now see a degree of pragmatism and caution that makes them less fearful of the regime. This combines with the regional attitudes to Israel and the United States to create a mood that is resistant to any further western intervention in Iraq.

It is in marked contrast to the mood in Washington, where the Iraqi regime remains the focus of attention, with every sign of military action later this year or early next year. At the very least, and from a regional perspective, Iraq’s recent economic advance makes that much more problematic.

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