

The wages of war

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The last major centre of Taliban power, Kandahar, finally fell to a heterogeneous grouping of local anti-Taliban Pashtun militia at the end of last week. As suggested in earlier of these weekly briefings, the US military policy of using local militia as ground forces has persisted, in spite of the establishment of a sizeable base some 50 miles from Kandahar occupied by elements of two Marine Expeditionary Units. There was some presumption that this base would serve as a point for an assault on Kandahar, but the US's sustained and heavy aerial bombardment has allowed it to maintain its policy.

In recent weeks, some 80% of all US air strikes have been directed at Taliban front-line positions, especially around Kandahar, and the intensity of this attack was eventually sufficient to ensure the fall of the city. Even so, the manner of its surrender and the extent of casualties raise relevant questions.

With the fall of Kandahar, a pattern was maintained of Taliban surrendering to local militia, changing sides or, more commonly, simply melting away. Some foreign components of Taliban forces, probably in parallel with the more radical Taliban, have moved to more remote parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan, or else into Pakistan. In short, a continual feature of this war has been the near absence of sustained ground fighting, the exception being Kunduz, where Taliban units were surrounded by two elements of the Northern Alliance.

Instead, a fluid situation of multiple militia groups and local warlords exists in much of the country, roadblocks are frequent on the main highways, and there is an almost complete absence of any central authority. Progress at the UN-facilitated talks in Bonn was as good as could be expected, but much will hinge on whether it is possible to have some kind of temporary stabilisation force in the country. One problem is that the United States is not happy with this prospect, being concerned that the presence of disciplined and well-organised foreign troops will limit its capacity to range freely over the country in pursuit of al-Qaida and remaining Taliban leadership elements.

While much of the western media acts as though the war is well-nigh over, this is not the view in the Pentagon. There, the Marine Corps base near Kandahar is seen as the first step in a potentially protracted process involving persistent use of firepower provided by helicopter gunships, strike aircraft and heavy bombers. These forces will be ranged principally at remaining al-Qaida elements in Afghanistan, but also against Taliban groups.

Again, there is an assumption that virtually all Taliban activity has ceased. In practice, though, there has been continued resistance in areas near Kunduz, Kabul and Herat, and a substantial presence in north-west Afghanistan at Balkh near Mazar-e-Sharif, the latter involving over 2,000 Taliban and foreign forces.

Casualties

As the difficult task of identifying the casualties of the 11 September atrocities continues, the final number of people killed will be between 3,000 and 4,000. The casualties from the Afghanistan war are already likely to be well above that level, with many of them civilians. The extent of the casualties will be reasonably well-known to the Pentagon. Bomb damage assessment (BDA) using satellites, drones and on-board cameras will all have given a wide-ranging view of the effects of the bombing, but little or nothing of this evidence will get into the public domain.

At the time of the Gulf War, much was made of precision bombing, but the reality was also the widespread and persistent use of carpet bombing and area impact munitions such as cluster bombs. In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, there were regional estimates of 70-100,000 Iraqis killed, but US government sources downplayed this, suggesting that the numbers were no more than a few thousand. More recently, as some independent assessments have been made, a figure far higher than that, of at least 20,000, seems more probable, with perhaps half of those being killed during the so-called "turkey-shoot" attacks on the retreat from Kuwait.

Somewhat surprisingly, there have been some reasonably reliable indications of heavy civilian casualties already coming out of Afghanistan, with the *New York Times* last week quoting anti-Taliban pro-American commanders saying that hundreds of innocent villagers were being killed in the US bombing raids around Kandahar, Tora Bora and elsewhere. This appears to be an extension of the levels of casualties caused earlier in Northern Afghanistan, when sustained US air attacks on Taliban positions did not distinguish between the Taliban and local villagers.

It is possible that reasonably reliable indications of the death toll may eventually be known, but this is not too likely. What is clear is that the US military posture has continued to be the very heavy use of bombing to support local militias. In such a war, substantial civilian casualties are inevitable but will not be admitted.

The first stage of a long war?

There are two major 'unknowns' at this stage of the war. One is the extent to which Taliban elements will go to ground for several months, seeking opportunities to regain power and influence if local militia continue their internal conflicts into next year. Much will depend on whether the UN and some key member states can make real progress in assisting the rebuilding of central political authority in Afghanistan, as well as the extent of US determination to continue seeking Taliban forces over the winter. The key point here is the manner in which the latter have simply melted away into the rural areas rather than, in most cases, surrendering, giving up their weapons, and being taken prisoner.

Since they will have become inactive as militia, this will be considered part of a more general victory, but there is no way of knowing whether they will re-assert themselves at a later date, especially if it proves difficult to establish a rule of law among rival local militias. This leaves Washington with the question of whether to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan that stretches over many months or possibly years.

The second question is the extent to which al-Qaida (and Taliban) groups have left Afghanistan for north-west Pakistan and elsewhere. The US participation in the Afghan civil war has effectively overturned the Taliban regime and has made it impossible for al-Qaida to maintain training bases there, at least in the short term, but the real problem remains as to whether this had been anticipated. Repeatedly over the last few weeks, attacks on al-Qaida camps, whether by US bombing or by occupation by local militia, have revealed an almost complete absence of al-Qaida members. They had already dispersed.

Again, it is worth taking the Pentagon view at face value - it is not always 'spin'. The word here is that a protracted process, stretching over some months, is still possible, with early indications of possible attacks on presumed bases in Somalia distinctly likely. What is more problematic for the United States is the likelihood of al-Qaida and Taliban elements remaining in north-west Pakistan. Also, and in addition to Somalia, there remains the desire in the Bush administration to extend the war to other areas of presumed paramilitary activity, including locations in Yemen and Lebanon, as well as the major potential adversary of Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Regional considerations

Perhaps of more long term significance than the recent fall of Kandahar were the suicide bombings in Israel, and the intensive and persistent Israeli response. In the light of the loss of life in Jerusalem and Haifa on 1-2 December, the Bush administration effectively gave Sharon a free hand to respond. This, combined with Arafat's weak leadership, is tending to strengthen the position of the more radical groups in the occupied territories, making the possibility of a more general Israeli-Palestinian war more likely, or even the development of an internal Palestinian civil conflict.

The US support for Israel is likely to be seen in much of the region as further evidence of its general anti-Arab and anti-Islamic policy. This is reinforced in the region by the Israeli use of US-built strike aircraft and attack helicopters in their repeated raids on the occupied territories, just as similar planes have been used intensively in Afghanistan over the past 10 weeks.

In other words, US use of heavy air power in Afghanistan may appear in the west to have been a singular success, but it is highly dangerous to analyse matters purely through western eyes. The regional view is entirely different, and the combination of US action and a very hawkish Israeli government is actually more likely to establish a mood from which further radical movements will emerge. It is worth remembering that persistent attempts by the Israelis to maintain control of the occupied territories by an 'iron fist' policy, seem only to further radicalise their opponents, providing yet more potential martyrs for the cause.

US influence extended

Once again, some other indicators, largely missed by the media, are of interest. The first is that, according to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, the United States has established a temporary air base in Bulgaria, the first time that foreign troops have been stationed there since Soviet troops left in 1946. Six tanker aircraft will operate from Burgas Air Force Base in eastern Bulgaria for the duration of operations against Afghanistan, but this could establish an interesting precedent for operations in south-east Europe and south-west Asia, not least as a potential staging post for operations against Iraq.

Coupled with the US presence in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan itself, it is an indication of how far the United States has been able to extend its military presence into the wider region, as a direct consequence of 11 September. Moreover, the extension of activities into Bulgaria has been done by the United States on its own, not as part of any NATO activity.

More cluster bombs

In another sign of the times, the Ministry of Defence in London is extending its arrangement with the defence manufacturer Insys to maintain supplies of the BL755 cluster bomb for RAF service, at least until 2006. The BL755 is one of the most widely deployed cluster weapons world-wide, over 50,000 having been manufactured for Britain and 16 overseas customers. Each cluster unit

contains 147 “bomblets”, each of which detonates to produce around 2,000 high-velocity shrapnel fragments.

Such cluster bombs are deployed principally against what are euphemistically termed “soft targets”. As such they are devastating anti-personnel weapons and also act inadvertently as anti-personnel land mines when bomblets fail to explode. Human rights and anti-war groups have long campaigned to have them banned, but there is little sign of this. Most air forces regard these kinds of area-impact munitions as useful for low and medium intensity operations. More than half of the 1,000+ bombs dropped by the RAF in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999 were BL755 cluster bombs.

Combat proven

A feature of most recent conflicts has been the speed with which arms manufacturers advertise their latest products as ‘combat proven’. Afghanistan is no exception, with Raytheon citing it in sales literature for its Joint Standoff Weapon (JSOW), a glide bomb with a range of over 40 miles, even as the war continues. “Since 1999, JSOW has been combat proven in Operation Southern Watch, NATO Operation Allied Force and Operation Enduring Freedom...” JSOW comes in several variants, including sub-munitions for use against ‘soft area targets’ (eg. people)

Bioweapon convention protocol stalled

Last week saw the end of the review conference on the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, following more than six years of negotiation to strengthen the treaty by bringing in an inspection regime. The protocol has been widely welcomed in Europe, with the UK playing a particularly active role. To widespread dismay, the United States delegation (led by John Bolton, the US under-secretary for arms control and international security) waited until the last day of the discussions to announce that it remained opposed to the protocol, effectively wrecking any chance of getting it agreed in the near future. The whole matter has been put on ice for a year, but the US attitude, which has caused barely disguised frustration if not anger in European diplomatic circles, was a further indication of a distaste for multilateral arms control agreements that is well entrenched within the Bush administration.

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