

A third phase of war

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At a superficial level, one might expect a degree of satisfaction in the Pentagon at the apparent completion of the war in Afghanistan, with the destruction of the Taliban regime and the dispersal of the al-Qaida network's organisation in that country. Instead, there is an almost palpable sense of frustration at the outcome, a frustration that stems from several factors.

The most obvious is the failure, so far, to capture or kill the leaders of the Taliban regime, including Mullah Omar, and the key figures in al-Qaida, most notably Osama bin Laden, whose recent video appears to confirm reports that he moved directly from Kandahar to Pakistan some weeks ago. Related to this is the growing awareness that the great majority of the Taliban have simply melted away from the major towns and cities, often in collusion with supposedly anti-Taliban militia and local warlords.

Similarly, the number of al-Qaida militia that have been captured is a small fraction of those assumed to have been in Afghanistan four months ago. Hundreds were killed, not least around Tora Bora, but many more have moved into Pakistan, along with some elements of the Taliban leadership. There have even been reports of elements of both groups essentially "buying" their way into Pakistan, paying off anti-Taliban groups to ensure safe passage.

Civilian penalties

Another American frustration have been the difficulties encountered in pursuing the air war against Taliban elements still on the move, the major one being growing opposition from within the new regime in Kabul, not least because of the killing of civilians. Two recent examples caused particular disquiet. One was the destruction of a convoy on its way to the inauguration of the new administration in Kabul, and the other was the attack on the home of a Taliban commander in eastern Afghanistan.

In the first case, the convoy was assumed to be carrying Taliban leaders but this appears incorrect. In any case, the attack extended over several hours, destroying a neighbouring village and killing many people. In the second case, at least 25 villagers were killed, and the Taliban leader was not even present. What made the latter incident more problematic was the response of the Chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, who commented "We think the majority of folks in there would have been Taliban leadership". This appears to have been wrong but, even so, implied that the killing of the "minority" of civilians was not of enduring concern.

Such an attitude tends to produce a perception within the Kabul regime that collateral damage is of little importance to the United States, and that Taliban and al-Qaida elements will continue to be pursued with vigour, whatever the effects on ordinary people. In some ways it is an inevitable consequence of the failure of the war to deliver the leadership of either organisation, a failure compounded by the probable location of many key elements in Pakistan.

Another aspect of the recent bombings that is significant is that it lends credence to the view that civilian casualties were very high during the air war in November and December. At that time, almost all reports of civilian casualties were dismissed as Taliban propaganda. This can no longer be given as an excuse if the new regime is making similar claims. There have also been reports from observers travelling to some of the areas subject to intensive US bombing that the effects were devastating. In short, recent independent estimates of more than 3,000 civilians killed in the bombing look all too plausible.

The position of Pakistan

Although Pakistan has appeared to offer substantial assistance to the United States, Washington has been careful to limit its demands and the Pakistani regime has been lax in the fulfilment of stated commitments. This is hardly surprising, given that the Taliban regime was fully backed by Pakistan and was seen as a way of ensuring a pliant Afghanistan that would not come under the influence of the Northern Alliance with its links to India.

If the United States is to further pursue its campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida then it has either to take military action in Pakistan, or persuade the Musharraf regime to do so. Both options present problems. While there have been some US military units operating from bases in Pakistan, these have been relatively few in number and have conducted their operations largely in secret. There has, in consequence, been relatively little in the way of anti-American action. This would be likely to change if the US was to take direct military action within Pakistan, even if the Musharraf regime agreed.

US action would probably follow a broadly similar pattern to that of the war in Afghanistan, with special forces units working in concert with air attacks. In such circumstances, civilian casualties would be likely, with predictable effects on public opinion and the prospect of real opposition to the Musharraf regime.

The second option would be for the Pakistani authorities to take firm action themselves, but this is made highly unlikely given the current dangerous confrontation with India. While the Pakistani authorities may have been aware of the recent paramilitary attack on the Indian parliament, and are certainly aware of the actions of paramilitaries in Kashmir, there is a reluctance to take steps to control them, not least because Pakistan believes that the war in Afghanistan has created far more problems for it than it has solved.

Pakistan now finds itself with an unfriendly regime to the west, and a US attitude that is increasingly pro-India and determined to continue the containment and destruction of the Taliban and al-Qaida. At the same time, there is a real fear in Islamabad of the current Indian build-up, not least because India is far stronger in terms of conventional military forces, and is led by a notably nationalist government which is particularly aggrieved at the attack on the parliament - widely seen in India as a Pakistani-backed attempt to assassinate key elements of the political leadership.

One strong possibility is that Washington will use the current Indo-Pakistan crisis to put pressure on the Islamabad government, essentially offering to use its considerable influence in New Delhi in return for stronger Pakistani action against the Taliban and al-Qaida. It is, though, a dangerous strategy, not least because one of the immediate effects of the Indian military build-up is to encourage Pakistan to withdraw military forces from the Afghan border. Furthermore, any confrontation between India and Pakistan is inherently dangerous, not least because both states now have nuclear weapons. The prospect for untoward crisis escalation is present, and it would make far more sense for Washington to take direct steps to do what it can to defuse the crisis rather than seek to manipulate it as a means of putting pressure on Islamabad.

The wider picture

In all of this it still makes sense for us to remind ourselves of a few salient points in relation to al-Qaida. The organisation seems to have been part of a loose amalgam of groups, mainly centred on the Middle East and concerned, in their different ways, with Israeli control of Jerusalem and the occupied territories, the US military presence in the Gulf and the existence of illegitimate regimes in the western Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia.

Different paramilitary groups have targeted different aspects of these forces, with al-Qaida mainly concerned with the United States and the Saudi regime. While using Afghanistan as a significant centre, especially for training, it has had monetary support from many rich individuals, mainly in western Gulf states, and has a network of operatives and associates in many countries. Osama bin Laden may be a significant leader, but has taken on, or been assigned, a figurehead role that may well have made him appear far more significant than he actually is.

The US intervention in the Afghan civil war and the fall of the Taliban regime has no doubt done damage to the al-Qaida network, but much of the network appears to have dispersed, and it is by no means certain that the damage is irreparable. It remains likely that much of the US reaction to the atrocities of 11 September was foreseen.

US political figures speak of the reaction of the past few months as being Phase One of a longer "war on terrorism". It should be assumed that, to the perpetrators, the attacks of 11 September may have been Phase Two or Three in their own war against the United States and its allies in the Gulf (e.g. the 1993 World Trade Center attack, The 1998 US embassy bombings, and operations in Saudi Arabia and Yemen). On that basis, the recent reversals in Afghanistan may shortly prompt the instigation of another phase, directed against the United States or its allies in the Gulf or elsewhere.

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