

US entrenchment across central Asia

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Coverage of the conflict in Afghanistan is now limited to relatively brief reports in the inside pages of more substantial newspapers, though the specialist defence press remains full of it. US military operations have continued at a surprisingly high level of intensity, with marines and special forces encountering resistance in several parts of the country, and air bombardments being, at times, almost as heavy as in November.

While the interim government has established a presence of sorts in Kabul, the predicted problems of lawlessness, warlordism and banditry have developed apace. Without very considerable outside aid – far greater than is planned for the international stabilisation force – there seems little prospect of order being established in much of the country in the coming months.

At the same time, if a view is taken of the region as a whole, it becomes clear that the United States has succeeded in establishing a military presence without precedent. This gives it a remarkably powerful position in the area that could, in turn, lead to an eventual counter-reaction.

The United States in the region

As was mentioned in an earlier piece (article 11), one extension of American activity was the establishment of a US military presence at Burgas Air Force Base in eastern Bulgaria, the first time foreign troops had been based in that country since Soviet troops left in 1946. Burgas is used to support aerial refuelling, and this is likely to continue as its geographical position is very useful in terms of planes in transit to new bases in Central Asia.

There has also been a build-up in the Persian Gulf, with army units deployed to Kuwait and the further build-up of the Al Adid Air Base in Qatar. This latter base, construction of which only started in 2000, has a fifteen thousand-foot runway, one of the longest in the region and, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, is costing around a billion dollars to complete.

These developments in the Gulf are in addition to the substantial US presence in the region for the ten years prior to 11 September. These include major bases and pre-positioned supplies in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain and the huge logistics supply centre and air base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

Even so, what is much more significant is the expanding US presence in Central and South Asia. The build-up in Pakistan has been done with as little publicity as possible, but it is known that the US armed forces are using several bases, including one at Shamsi, the site of last Wednesday's crash of a Marine Corps KC-130 tanker as it was approaching the airfield. The plane had been on what was termed a multi-stop mission, originating at another base at Jacobabad, also in Pakistan.

Another indication of a long-term deployment is the decision to maintain two carrier battle groups together with amphibious warfare ships with several thousand marines on board in the northern Arabian Sea. The current deployment runs through to the end of March but is expected to be extended repeatedly. This is in addition to other warships serving with the Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf.

In Afghanistan itself, the marines who established control of Kandahar Airport are being replaced by one thousand troops of the 101st Airborne Division. This number could be doubled and indicates a long-term presence – marines tend to establish facilities and then move on, whereas the army tends to bed down for a longer time. Elsewhere in Afghanistan, a substantial US presence has been established, again with minimum publicity, at the old Soviet air base at Bagram north of Kabul, scene of a small UK deployment back in November.

The move into Central Asia

Perhaps most interesting of all is the manner in which an extensive and substantial US presence is being established in three countries of Central Asia. Over one thousand soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division are now firmly established at Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan, with substantial repair and renovation work under way. The Uzbekistan Government has a highly questionable human rights record but this does not seem to be an issue.

In neighbouring Tajikistan, three possible sites for new US bases have been examined, at Kulyab, Khojand and Turgan-Tiube. And in Kyrgyzstan, a new base is already under construction at Bishkek. According to the *New York Times* this will be a substantial facility with up to three thousand troops and will serve as a transportation hub for the region.

What this all amounts to is a reversal of the situation at the end of the Cold War, when US forces withdrew from many of their bases encircling the Soviet Union. Now that the oil-bearing regions of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin have become so significant, and with anti-US movements rife in the region, a substantial military presence is deemed necessary to maintain control. In overall terms, perhaps as many as sixty thousand US military personnel are now based in the region at up to twenty bases and on large numbers of warships at sea.

The implications of this for Russia, China and Islamic opinion could be hugely significant in the coming months and years; and it may yet be that the interests of al-Qaida and other paramilitary networks, in seeking an enhanced anti-American attitude, will be realised in due course. Certainly, one effect of the 11 September attacks has been to change the military geography of a substantial part of South West and Central Asia.

Elsewhere...

Away from Afghanistan, the maoist insurgency in Nepal has become so serious that the government is asking the United States to provide military equipment. Although not widely supported outside of South Asia, the six-year insurgency has already cost two thousand lives and the rebels are reported to control some forty per cent of the country. They number around seven to twelve thousand but have succeeded in maintaining their position against government forces of forty-five thousand. A US military mission visited Kathmandu last month and it is probable that the US will extend its traditional support for military training to include a range of counter-insurgency equipment.

Meanwhile, in Washington, it has become clear that President Bush's much-vaunted announcement that he will cut US strategic nuclear arsenals substantially over the next few years is not quite so straightforward as, at first, it looked. It now appears that a substantial

proportion of the withdrawn warheads will be put into store and will be capable of being re-deployed later if considered necessary.

There are also indications that the Department of Energy may consider a new round of nuclear weapons tests. This would cripple any chance of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty surviving, at least in the short term, and would make it much easier for countries such as China and possibly Russia to resume testing. While the reported rationale is to ensure that nuclear weapons stocks are reliable, there are indications that new nuclear warhead designs are now being considered – specifically, a new class of earth-penetrating warheads for destroying deeply-buried targets such as underground bunkers or cave complexes.

Right back at the start of the war, soon after the attacks of 11 September, some analysts argued that one of the aims of the perpetrators was to incite a strong US military response, preferably with a much greater US presence in the region, in the belief that this would result in an eventual violent anti-American reaction.

If this was the case, then they have certainly succeeded in the first aspect. Muslim support for bin Laden's archaic extremism may be much less than he would have wished. A ferocious US response has so far been sufficiently targeted not to have stimulated significant popular or Islamic regime opposition. But if the geo-strategic investment of Central Asia, with a network of bases, also combines with a determined attempt to ignore all treaties that might hinder the further development of America's technological lead, then over the coming decades this could incite Islamic and non-Islamic states alike into an anti-Washington alliance that could include both Russia and China.

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