

**Monthly Global Security Briefing – January 2012**

## **AFGHANISTAN AND THE NEW AMERICAN WAY OF WAR**

Paul Rogers

### **Summary**

The Obama/Karzai meeting in early January was accompanied by reports that the United States may decide to pull out all its combat troops from Afghanistan. While that may have been a negotiating ploy to ensure that remaining troops have immunity from prosecution under the proposed Bilateral Security Agreement, the very fact that it could be suggested indicates how far the Obama administration has moved away from its first term. In this respect Obama's re-election has considerable implications for the US approach to international security. It is reflected in the caution over direct involvement in Syria, and indeed Mali, but its most important significance lies in the approach to Afghanistan. The consequences of new thinking are important not just for Afghanistan but for other states that seek to promote a peaceful and viable future for that country.

### **“War Lite” and the War on Terror**

When George W Bush was elected in November 2000, he established an administration with a strong leaning towards neo-conservatism and assertive realism, especially in relation to international security. This was part of the vision of a *New American Century*, in which US leadership would be fundamental for international peace and stability. At the same time, the new Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, saw the way to maintain a secure world as best achieved by what was termed “war lite”. This would avoid deploying large numbers of ground troops overseas in theatres of insecurity. It might well rely to an extent on expeditionary warfare, primarily by the US Marine Corps, but the essence of the policy was to utilise the new generation of highly accurate stand-off weapons which, along with the selective use of Special Forces and surrogates, would be the primary means of control.

Afghanistan was the first test of this, and for the first two months in October/November 2001, it was spectacularly successful – the Taliban regime was terminated and the al-Qaida movement was dispersed by the intensive use of air power, deployment of Special Forces and CIA personnel, and the re-arming of the Northern Alliance warlords as surrogate ground forces. The same appeared to apply in Iraq in March/April 2003, where the Saddam Hussein regime was terminated with US troops occupying Baghdad in barely three weeks. While the Iraq war did use substantial Marine and army units, the expectation was that these deployments would be short term, with most of the occupation based on airpower operating from newly established bases in the country.

In the following years, both wars – in Afghanistan and Iraq – turned out very differently and each involved very large long-term troop deployments of close to 200,000 (including coalition partners) in Iraq and 140,000 in Afghanistan. The wider consequences were appalling, with some 200,000 civilians killed, more than twice that number seriously injured, 7.8 million refugees and a cost heading towards \$4 trillion. There were also human costs for the United States, with over 5,000 troops killed and well over 20,000 seriously injured – improvements in battlefield medicine ensuring that many would survive but with life-changing injuries.

## The Obama Change

Obama fought the 2008 election on the basis that Iraq was a “bad war” and the US should withdraw. There was majority domestic support for this and the administration did, indeed, do so by the end of 2011, but had to accept that it could not even keep a small combat force in Iraq as the Maliki government refused to concede immunity from prosecution. Afghanistan, on the other hand, was seen as the “good war”, mainly because of the al-Qaida-9/11 connection, and Obama eventually accepted the need to surge troops in December 2009. Significantly, this was not to defeat the Taliban but to negotiate withdrawal from a position of strength, ensuring that a post-occupation Afghanistan would not have a strong element of Taliban governance.

By the time of the 2012 election, security thinking within the administration had already moved on to embrace the concept of “light footprint”, otherwise termed “remote control”, in which a combination of reconnaissance and armed drones, Special Forces, privatised military companies and use of long-range strike would combine to maintain security while avoiding large-scale troop deployments. This approach has been used in Afghanistan, north-west Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, and elements of it are likely to be employed in the developing war in Mali. The key development in all of this is that Obama’s re-election consolidates this approach – it would not have developed to anything like the same extent if Romney had won.

## Obama II and Afghanistan

Well before the 2012 election, it was clear that the Obama security team had concluded that the Taliban could not be defeated and that a more rapid withdrawal of most ground troops was advisable. Since the election, this approach has been made far clearer, and the overall approach is also reflected in a number of key appointments that Obama is making to his foreign and defence teams and his close White House advisers. Moreover, the US is currently spending around \$120 billion a year on Afghanistan, an amount that is not sustainable.

What this means in terms of what will be offered to the Afghans is not yet clear, but there are now good indications of what is likely. Assuming that talk of complete withdrawal is a political bargaining tool to ensure immunity for US troops, press reports now suggest that the Obama administration is thinking in terms of less than 10,000 military personnel remaining in the country. This is about one-tenth of the maximum deployment, which peaked last year. A minority of these would be in training and advisory roles, but there is little belief that the Afghan National Army (ANA) can maintain security for the Kabul government right across the country. While the US may be leaving behind surveillance drones, helicopters and transport planes for the Afghan forces, there is little indication that this will be anything other than window dressing for a military facing enormous challenges on the ground.

Recent assessments suggest that just one of the ANA brigades out of thirty is capable of acting without at least some coalition support. While ANA units may be quite effective in the north and east of the country, the swathes of south and south-east Afghanistan that are primarily Pashtun are regions where the ANA has little impact. As US and coalition troops withdraw during the next 12 to 18 months, Taliban and other armed opposition groups (AOGs) are merely waiting for that process to be completed. Indeed, it may well be that this year’s summer “fighting season” will be quiet, a deceptive situation because the Taliban are merely conserving resources for 2014 and beyond.

## US Military Aims

Given the large-scale withdrawal of US troops and assuming that the remaining numbers will be less than 10,000, what are likely to be their locations and functions? They will clearly have neither capability nor intention of securing particular areas but will be primarily organised for two purposes. One will be to ensure that radical paramilitary Islamists within Afghanistan that may seek to plan attacks on the “far enemy” of the United States and its overseas interests will not be able to operate. They will be controlled and eliminated by Special Forces, armed drones and other means, operating from a small number of bases, the most significant being Bagram and Kandahar.

The second purpose will be to provide a base for forces that may undertake similar functions across the border in North-West Pakistan and Baluchistan. However deeply unpopular this may be with the Pakistani government and with public opinion, this will almost certainly remain an aim for the US forces for as long as a threat is perceived from within Pakistan.

## Implications for Afghanistan

A recent report by Jonathan Steele for the Norwegian think tank, NOREF, ([7 January 2013](#)) points to confusion and uncertainty among Afghan politicians, civil servants and civil society combined with disappointment at the outcome of the last eleven years of war. There is concern at the risk of breakdown of central government, major gains likely to be made by the Taliban/AOG forces and the risk of renewed violence. Other evidence supports this analysis and one of the main consequences is likely to be that many of the more powerful politicians will look to their personal futures and will therefore seek, with renewed enthusiasm, to divert resources overseas so that they can leave the country for safe and lucrative lives in Dubai or elsewhere as the situation deteriorates. This renewed pressure for corrupt practices and maladministration should not be underestimated. It may well reach its peak should the 2014 elections proceed as planned.

Perhaps the core point here is that the United States and its main coalition partners may talk of a long-term security commitment to the country but the reality is different – their involvement is essentially short-term, apart from a US determination to use remote control to protect its wider security interests. Beyond that, Afghanistan is increasingly peripheral to US and coalition interests. It can therefore be argued that other states, not least European allies, should engage in Afghanistan in a way that appreciates, but is not simply a response to, the US troop withdrawal.

## Policy Implications

For such states and for NGOs that remain committed to the country the starting point in examining options is to accept that the analysis given above should form the basis for any future policy. It is an uncomfortable prognosis but is, regrettably, the most appropriate starting point. Beyond that, five points should be made, while accepting that they are necessarily tentative.

- Wherever possible, Government and international NGOs should seek to work with elements of Afghan society that show the most long-term commitment to the security of the country. All others should be avoided wherever possible.
- Efforts to minimise corrupt practices should be intensified, however difficult that may be.

- The central lesson of both the 'war on terror' and the Arab uprisings is that while a large segment of the population remains marginalised from mainstream society, unrest and insecurity is assured. The existence of an entrenched and corrupt elite is an almost guaranteed driver of disenfranchisement and resentment.
- Projects to be supported should, wherever possible, be those that are likely to be as sustainable and survivable as possible under severe conditions of insecurity, and must be attuned to the political situation after 2014, in which the rural-urban divide is likely to become increasingly important with the Afghan government's control often not extending beyond the cities.
- Emphasis should be placed on funding to aid survivable community-orientated agriculture and horticulture, shelter and basic health.

Above all, any assistance must recognise that any openly announced programme of development assistance for the country should be stated to be for a minimum of ten years. Even that modest commitment will give a small degree of hope at a time of profound uncertainty. It is the least the country deserves after eleven years of foreign intervention.

---

*Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG) and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk), where visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.*

---

**Copyright © Oxford Research Group 2013.**

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.