

# The United States and Afghanistan's Critical Moment

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A relentless Taliban insurgency, reluctant allies, political doubts, competing priorities - the pressure to change United States policy in a key region may prove irresistible.

The difficult global inheritance of the United States administration of Barack Obama is exemplified in the possible loss of the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan. This would be a painful event in any circumstance, not least as it may involve the Bishkek government making a deal with Russia that would further signal a changing geopolitical balance in the region. But the troubles the US and its allies are facing in Afghanistan means that this is a particularly bad time to be threatened with a loss of facilities and influence in another part of central Asia.

The latest developments in Afghanistan represent a decisive phase in the ongoing struggle since the Taliban regime was terminated at the end of 2001. The low-level but enduring insurgency in southeast Afghanistan that then ensued left much of the rest of the country relatively stable, until Taliban militia began to make a serious comeback in 2004-05. The response was a build-up of NATO troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and a separate expansion of United States combat-troops under direct US command.

In the 2005-07 period, a pattern emerged of a developing insurgency whose most intensive periods of violence were in the summer but which tended to be relatively quiet in the winter months. A certain increase of violence in the winter of 2007-08 was a departure from the established cycle, without itself being a definitive break. In the past few days, however, four indicators suggest a real winter escalation in Taliban activity.

### The Taliban's Reminder

The first event is the killing of twenty-one police officers and the wounding of eight more in a suicide-attack on 2 February 2009 in Tirin Kot, the capital of Uruzgan province. This province has been less prone to violence than the neighbouring provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, but that relative calm is now ending.



**US bases in the Middle East**



**The Tirin Kot suicide attack**

The second indicator is the increased number of attacks on convoy-routes through Pakistan into Afghanistan, through which at least 75% of NATO supplies travel. Many of these have been directed at individual trucks, though some have targeted major supply-depots. An operation, also on 2 February, took a different form: it demolished a thirty-metre-span iron bridge, twenty-three kilometres west of the Pakistani city of Peshawar. This has severed the supply-lines along the most important route, which cannot be restored until the bridge can be prepared.

The third factor is mounting evidence that combat-trained paramilitaries who have previously been in Iraq are now seeing Afghanistan as the main focus in the war with the "far enemy" of the United States and are moving there in large numbers, possibly in the thousands (see Sayed Salahuddin, "Afghanistan says foreign fighters coming from Iraq", International Herald Tribune, 4 February 2009)

The overall number of Taliban fighters active within Afghanistan is estimated at 15,000; this may be a misleading figure in that far larger numbers may be present or inactive, or else based in Pakistan. The significant point is that, according to Afghan defense minister Abdul Rahim Wardak, in some of the conflicts with groups of Taliban paramilitaries last year, as many as 60% of the fighters were foreign (see

"Iraq militants 'in Afghan switch'", BBC News, 4 February 2009).



**Taliban forces**

This growing internationalisation of the conflict has been underway for some time; it now appears to be accelerating. It is part of and in turn reinforces the view within the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban groups that they are engaged less in a nationalist endeavour to retake control of Afghanistan, but rather militants in a global campaign.

The fourth feature is that the United States army has taken the unusual step of deploying substantial numbers of additional combat-troops to Afghanistan in the middle of winter, rather than wait until a likely upsurge in conflict from May 2009 onwards. Almost 3,000 troops from the 10th Mountain Division have been deployed to Logar and Wardak provinces south of Kabul; they will be followed by the much larger number - possibly as many as 30,000 - who are likely to be sent to Afghanistan during the rest of 2009 (see Fisnik Abrashi, "NATO: 3,000 US Troops Deploy Near To Afghan Capital", Associated Press, 27 January 2009)

The investment of new forces is combined with a shift of thinking at senior levels in the Pentagon towards a greater focus on "counterinsurgency". This is embodied in a new and still secret report from the US joint chiefs-of-staff to President Obama, which recommends "a shift in the military mission in Afghanistan to

concentrate solely on combating the Taliban and al-Qaida".

An account of the background says:

The Pentagon is prepared to announce the deployment of 17,000 additional soldiers and Marines to Afghanistan as early as this week even as President Barack Obama is searching for his own strategy for the war. According to military officials during last week's meeting with Defense Secretary [Robert] Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon's 'tank', the president specifically asked, 'What is the end game?' in the U.S. military's strategy for Afghanistan. When asked what the answer was, one military official told NBC News, 'Frankly, we don't have one.'... (See Jim Miklaszewski & Courtney Kube, "Secret report recommends military shift in Afghanistan", NBC News, 4 February 2009).

### The Moving Target

A key indicator of just how complex the conflict has become for the United States and its allies is the attacks on the coalition's supply-lines. These have been largely secure throughout most years of the current Afghan war, even though much of the territory through which the trucks drove has been controlled by local tribal groups with connections to the Pakistani Taliban. The reason is that the contractors running the trucks have regularly paid "taxes" - in essence, protection-money - to these groups. Some of this money has been passed on to Taliban militia who used it to help finance the insurgency (see Tim Ripley, "Hanging by a thread", Jane's Intelligence Review, February 2009).



**Taliban forces slice US supply line**

This situation - a combination of tacit truce, strategic denial, and convenient subvention of the enemy - has effectively broken down. The contributory reasons include the wider escalation in the conflict over 2008, when much of western Pakistan became a safe haven for Taliban and other militia groups and the widespread use of armed drones to attack presumed Taliban and al-Qaida targets within Pakistan in response inflicted many civilian casualties and infuriated local people. The new vulnerability of supply-lines is a result.

But this is just one aspect of a general decline in security across most of southern and eastern Afghanistan, a matter of intense concern to the young Barack Obama administration. The commitment of the new team in Washington (albeit with some familiar faces still in charge)

to a major "surge" in the number of US forces also builds on plans already made under George W Bush, but with a twist: for the purpose is less to seek outright military victory than to exert sufficient force to bring cooperative elements of a weakened Taliban into negotiations.

The argument is neat but flawed, for the addition of foreign troops may also - as a new report by the analyst Gilles Dorronsoro argues - itself provoke increased Afghan resistance (see *Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2009). This is a view shared by many British soldiers returning from recent deployments in Afghanistan.

### The Critical Moment

It is not clear how Washington's analysis will evolve in a fluid military and diplomatic situation, and in circumstances where the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai is coming under severe domestic pressure in an election year. Much will depend on high-level deliberations around the time of NATO's sixtieth anniversary summit (hosted jointly by France and Germany) on 3-4 April 2009. The annual Munich Conference on Security Policy, to be held on 6-8 February 2009, may be crucial in influencing its outcome; the seriousness of the US's concerns at this stage is reflected in the presence of vice-president Joe Biden, national-security adviser General James Jones, the head of US Central Command, General David Petraeus, and the special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke (see Gerhard Spoerl, "Searching for a New World Order", SpiegelOnline, 30 January 2009).

In both Munich and at the Strasbourg-Kehl summit, a key point of discussion is whether other NATO states will increase their involvement in Afghanistan. Three NATO members are key to this - the Canadians, Dutch and British. These are the only states other than the US that have deployed substantial numbers of troops for combat-roles in southern

Afghanistan. The decision by these states over whether to increase their forces will be crucial to influencing other NATO member-states.

At present the signs are that they will not commit to large new deployments. There is little enthusiasm in the Netherlands; the mood in Canada favours progressive disengagement. The fact that Britain has more combat-troops in Afghanistan than any country apart from the United States makes its choice the most significant of the three; and the government of Gordon Brown (anxious, apart from other motives, to be seen to work closely with the Barack Obama administration), has sent a few hundred more soldiers to Afghanistan.

Inside the British army itself, however, there is widespread unease and disenchantment with the country's role in Afghanistan (though this rarely enters the public domain). It will be very hard for the London government to persuading the military to agree to a serious upgrade of numbers and commitment.

The reluctance of allies, a relentless insurgency, doubts over the Afghan government, pressure from competing priorities - all this adds up to a difficult induction for Barack Obama's Afghan policy. If it remains committed to an Iraq-style "surge" in Afghanistan, it may need to pursue this policy in the absence of the solid NATO support it needs. Yet this would conflict with the president's determination to be much more multilateral than his predecessor.

The tensions are multiplying - perhaps enough to ensure a fundamental rethink of United States policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The period around NATO's sixtieth anniversary may be even more worth watching.

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*This article appeared at Open Democracy on February 6, 2009 and at The Asia-Pacific Journal on February 8, 2008.*

*Recommended citation: Paul Rogers, "The United States and Afghanistan's Critical Moment" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 6-6-09, February 8, 2009.*