

The Forgotten War

Shows No Sign of Abating

By Mark Sedra | April 2003

Less than an hour before the initial bombs and cruise missiles rained down on Baghdad in the first volleys of the Iraq war, the U.S. military launched a major attack in its other war in Afghanistan. Pentagon spokespersons insisted that the timing of the attack was “a coincidence” and that planning for the operation had been going on for months. However, it seems clear that this escalation of U.S. military activity serves a dual purpose: to assuage the fears of those concerned that the U.S. would lose interest in Afghanistan after the onset of the war in Iraq and to send a clear signal to anti-American forces in Afghanistan and the wider region that the war on terror would not lose momentum. More than anything, though, the operation illustrates that the ongoing war in Afghanistan—involving 11,000 coalition troops, 8,000 of which are American—is far from over.

“Sporadic acts of terror continue to occur all too frequently,” according to a report by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan released on March 18, 2003. The report went on to state that events “in the first months of 2003 point to increased activity by elements hostile to the government and to the international community in Afghanistan.”

Recent statistics bear out this picture. In the past eight weeks, there has been more than one rocket attack per day targeting coalition forces and 50 civilians and government soldiers have been killed or wounded in insurgent violence in the South of the country, where sympathy for spoiler groups—including the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-I-Islami party—remains robust. Under such conditions it hardly seems accurate to refer to Afghanistan as a post-conflict society.

The deterioration of security in Afghanistan, coupled with the emerging reality that the war in Iraq may last months rather than weeks, casts a shadow of uncertainty on Washington’s commitment to Afghanistan. With U.S. forces increasingly bogged down and overstretched, the added strain of a continuing low-intensity war in Afghanistan may become prohibitive in the months ahead. Although U.S. political and military figures have vigorously reaffirmed a long-term commitment to Afghanistan, the specter of disengagement haunts Afghan policymakers, who recall similar assurances made during their struggle against the Soviet Union. Those promises proved hollow after the Soviet withdrawal, when the U.S. and the world turned their backs on Afghanistan. To avoid a recurrence of this tragic episode in history, it is essential that the threat posed by spoiler groups be confronted now, before it develops into

a movement capable of undermining the post-war order. Contrary to the underlying premise driving U.S. planning and operations, a strategic shift in Washington’s approach rather than an intensification of military operations is the most effective means to achieve this goal.

U.S. Military Operations

On March 20, 2003, the Pentagon launched a major operation with more than 1,000 coalition troops in the villages and caves of southern Kandahar province, where troops loyal to the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Hekmatyar’s Hizb-I-Islami party were thought to be operating. Coalition forces were acting on intelligence reports that fighters in the area had communications equipment, possessed considerable firepower, and were highly organized. Lieutenant General Dan K. McNeil, the commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, affirmed that one of the primary purposes of the operation, dubbed Valiant Strike, was to disrupt the plans and capability of spoiler groups to regroup and launch a spring offensive.

What coalition forces found when scouring the caves of this mountainous area was sufficient to raise concern that antigovernment guerrilla activity may intensify significantly in coming months. A large cache of weapons was seized, including hundreds of mortars, rockets, land mines, and “too much ammunition of all caliber to count,” according to Lieutenant Michael Shields, a senior operations officer of the coalition task force. “In recent history, the size of this find is significant,” Shields added. Five days after the beginning of Operation Valiant Strike, coalition forces



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launched a parallel operation, dubbed Desert Lion, in the Kohe Safi Mountains of northeastern Afghanistan. During the early stages of the offensive, coalition forces uncovered two large arms caches, including rockets and ammunition for mortars, recoilless rifles, and machine guns. What the initial results of the two operations show is that Afghan spoiler groups are better equipped and organized than most analysts and observers believed.

Afghan spoiler groups have responded to the coalition offensive with a wave of rocket attacks, the heaviest in over a year. Although the rockets have not caused any significant damage or injuries, they have demonstrated the resiliency of these groups and their capability to retaliate against coalition attacks. The resistance groups have also intensified offensive guerrilla activity against coalition forces, launching several attacks in late March. On March 29, two U.S. soldiers were killed and one was wounded when their convoy was ambushed in southwestern Afghanistan by Taliban forces. This attack is typical of the hit-and-run guerrilla tactics now being utilized by the spoiler groups, an approach coalition forces have had difficulty combating in a decisive fashion. “It’s a challenge to pick out enemy forces that are made up of local Afghans,” U.S. spokesperson Roger King admitted. In their attempts to do so, U.S. forces have alienated a large portion of Afghanistan’s Pashtuns, who constitute a majority of the population.

Pashtun Discontent

The Taliban as an ideological movement is clearly on the wane in Afghanistan. It has survived as a political and military entity, because it is perceived—in Pashtun areas—as a symbol and vehicle for Pashtun nationalism. The Taliban has grown adept at feeding off the growing anger and resentment of the Pashtun populace, providing an outlet for their frustration. It is believed that the Taliban has formed a consortium of spoiler groups, including Al Qaeda and Hekmatyar’s Hizb-I-Islami faction, that is collectively endeavoring to channel Pashtun disillusionment into an organized campaign of resistance. In a recent interview with the Pashto-language service of the BBC, Mullah Dadullah, a notorious Taliban commander, stated that the Taliban had regrouped and that those opposed to

it in the past, most notably Hekmatyar, supported its campaign against the “foreign occupation troops.” He went on to declare a jihad against American forces and vowed to drive all “Jews and infidels” out of the country. “The ground became hot for the Russians here, and so maybe the ground will also become hot for the Americans,” he added. Recent press reports quote Taliban loyalists as saying that training camps have been established in the mountains of Afghanistan and that anti-American forces are united.

Pashtun discontent has been fueled by several factors. Politically, Pashtuns feel underrepresented, even disenfranchised. Although the president of the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), Hamid Karzai, is a Pashtun, it is widely believed that the Panjshiri Tajik faction, led by Defense Minister Fahim, controls the government. Two of the three power ministries, defense and foreign affairs, remain in the hands of the Panjshiris, and the bulk of the military and intelligence service is loyal to Fahim. Fahim’s decision in February 2003 to

replace 16 ethnic Tajik generals with individuals from other ethnic groups—a move due in large part to concerted American pressure—was heralded as a political breakthrough, yet the Pashtun populace remains skeptical. The inability of the ATA to protect Pashtuns from a wave of human rights abuses perpetrated against them since the fall of the Taliban has only heightened Pashtun suspicions and mistrust of the government. In northern Afghanistan, where Pashtuns represent a minority of the population, they have been attacked and driven out of their homes with impunity, in apparent retribution for the crimes of the Pashtun-based Taliban regime.

Another source of discontent concerns U.S. military operations. By their heavy-handed tactics in Pashtun areas of the country, U.S. troops have alienated much of the populace. In particular, their indiscriminate use of air power, which has killed scores of civilians, and their lack of sensitivity to indigenous laws and customs have been viewed with seething resentment. According to recent reports in the Afghan press, U.S. Special Forces, during routine sweeps of Afghan villages searching for weapons and members of resistance groups, have physically abused villagers, damaged personal property, and subjected women to body searches, a major affront on a family’s honor.

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Threats to Reconstruction

Growth of both Pashtun disaffection and armed spoiler groups has severely hindered the Afghan reconstruction process. The upsurge of violence that has accompanied the beginning of Operation Valiant Strike and the simultaneous onset of hostilities in Iraq has created an inhospitable and volatile environment for humanitarian and development activities. An illustration of the dangers that face UN and nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers in Afghanistan came on March 28, when Taliban loyalists executed an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worker in southern Afghanistan. Ricardo Munguia, a Salvadoran water engineer working for the ICRC, was gunned down after being singled out of a two-car ICRC convoy that had been halted by 25 Taliban militiamen. The act was clearly intended to send a message to internationals working in Afghanistan. This message was reinforced two days later, on March 30, when two rockets were fired at the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the UN-mandated peacekeeping force based in Kabul. In the attack, one 122-mm rocket fell inside ISAF's compound, causing damage to a building, and another rocket landed harmlessly outside the capital. Although no injuries were reported, ISAF spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Lobbering admitted that the attack was "far more sophisticated" than anything previously seen by the peacekeepers. These incidents have sent shock waves through the aid community, prompting the ICRC and many other organizations to curtail or halt operations across the country, particularly in the turbulent South. Taken together with the decisions of numerous UN agencies and NGOs to suspend operations in the North of the country due to continuing factional clashes between the militias of Gen. Rashid Dostum and Gen. Atta Mohammed, the reconstruction and development process has become increasingly paralyzed in large parts of the country.

What Can the U.S. Do?

In spite of the steady deterioration of security conditions since the beginning of 2003, the ATA has remained remarkably stable. At present, spoiler groups are not in a

position to overthrow the post-Taliban order, only to destabilize it. It is thus imperative that the threat these groups pose be confronted now, before the resistance expands into something unmanageable. To confront this dilemma, Washington should take steps to ameliorate Pashtun disaffection and bolster the influence of the central government in southern and eastern Afghanistan, where the bulk of U.S. forces are concentrated. First, U.S. troops should exercise more caution and restraint in their use of air power in civilian areas and should be more respectful of tribal laws and customs in their interactions with the Afghan people. Such measures are essential to reestablishing a modicum of trust between the Pashtun community and coalition military forces.

Second, the U.S. should cease providing political and material support for Afghan warlords under the auspices of the war on terror. With the demise of the Taliban regime, the Pentagon formed various strategic alliances

with military strongmen across the country. In exchange for money, equipment, and training, warlord militias were placed at the disposal of U.S. commanders for use in anti-Al Qaeda operations. Although the U.S. has scaled down its reliance on, and support of, warlords openly opposed to the Karzai regime, its ties with less troublesome and disruptive figures remain intact, emboldening them to defy the

ATA. The two objectives pursued by the U.S. in Afghanistan, the eradication of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and the establishment of a robust central government, have often worked at cross-purposes. It is essential that Washington reconcile these two objectives. To do so, it should pressure regional warlords to submit to the writ of the central government and should direct U.S. forces to expand their current level of consultation and coordination with the ATA regarding military planning and operations.

Third, the U.S. should expend more resources to provide a secure environment for civilian agencies and the ATA to deliver relief and implement reconstruction projects. The Pentagon's current policy of contributing directly to the reconstruction process through the establishment of Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which consist primarily of Special Operations soldiers and Army Civil Affairs officers, has enjoyed only mixed success. Such a policy blurs the distinction between civilian and military personnel, endangering civilian workers, and it diverts the

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military from its *raison d'être*—to provide security. Instead of delivering relief, PRTs should facilitate security sector reform—a role already being considered—most notably, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants. Security sector reform, comprising elements such as military reform, police reform, and DDR, is the key to establishing security and stability in a sustainable fashion. It has progressed at an alarmingly slow rate and should receive more attention and resources.

Lastly, Washington must exert more pressure to convince regional states—most notably Pakistan—both to refrain from interfering in Afghan internal affairs and to crack down on spoiler groups that have sought refuge in their territories. It can hardly be viewed as a coincidence that the majority of Al Qaeda's leadership figures currently in custody have been apprehended in Pakistan. U.S. military officials contend that 90% of attacks on U.S. forces originate in Pakistan. Although Pakistani authorities have vigorously denied such claims, it is believed that Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence is aiding the remnants of the Taliban in an effort to fuel Pashtun radicalism and retain some influence in southern Afghanistan. The ATA has pleaded with the U.S. to take a harder line with the Pakistani government, which appears to be playing both sides of the ongoing conflict, to the overall detriment of Afghanistan.

A U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is crucial for the country's long-term security and stability. That presence has reassured the Afghan civilian population that the world will not forget about Afghanistan, and it has deterred spoiler groups and other would-be aggressors from mounting a major challenge to the new regime. So,

it is not the presence of U.S. forces but rather their strategy and tactics that should be questioned. Growing military fatigue in Afghanistan, spurred by rising violence and insecurity combined with the burden of a costly war and prolonged occupation in Iraq, could conceivably force Washington to reevaluate its military commitments to Afghanistan. Any softening of the American commitment, however, would have disastrous implications for the stability of the country. As one official in the ATA remarked in January 2003, if the U.S. withdraws, there will be a "bloodbath." With the consequences of failure so dire and ubiquitous, it is important that the U.S. reevaluate and reassess its strategic approach. Victory in the war on terror hinges on the establishment of a stable and secure Afghanistan; the two goals cannot be pursued in isolation. Accordingly, U.S. military strategy should be remolded to embrace the interconnected nature of these twin objectives. The current upsurge of violence in Afghanistan and the onset of the Iraq war only highlight the urgent need for this shift in strategy. Though force may be the only language that Afghanistan's spoiler groups understand, they can only survive as long as they have a fountain of discontent to draw support from. Remove this support base, and these groups will succumb to pressure and fade away.

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Recommended citation:

Mark Sedra, "The Forgotten War Shows No Sign of Abating," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, April 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/afghan2003.html>

Production Information:

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Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC