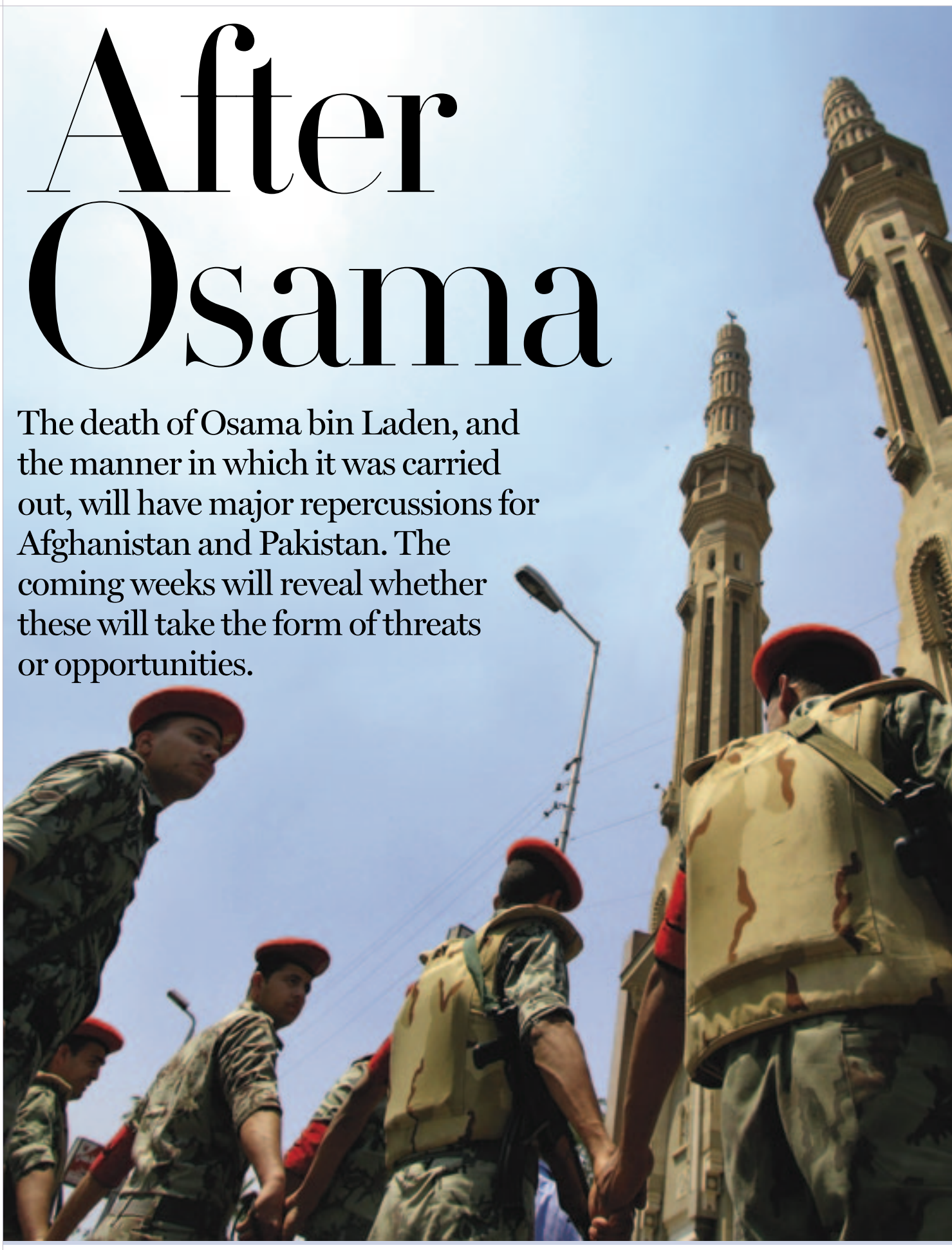
Defence Policy

Gareth Price

After Osama

The death of Osama bin Laden, and the manner in which it was carried out, will have major repercussions for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The coming weeks will reveal whether these will take the form of threats or opportunities.



Egyptian military police stand guard outside the Nour mosque in Cairo, where Islamist groups were protesting against the killing of bin Laden.

For Afghanistan, bin Laden's death may enable the Taliban to formally disown al Qaeda. Given that western intervention in Afghanistan has been increasingly predicated on the need to prevent the country from being used as a base by international terrorists, such a move would expedite moves towards a 'political settlement' in Afghanistan.

Involving the Taliban in a political settlement is clearly unappetising, and would have been almost certainly avoidable had different tactics been adopted in the early years after 9/11. But from here, a thought through political process appears more amenable than the alternative. A couple of years ago, the numbers of Taliban fighters were estimated to be around ten thousand. Now, despite recent western military successes, the number of fighters is thought to be in the region of 35,000. The longer a kinetic approach predominates the western strategy, the greater the Taliban's appeal, not simply as a religious movement but as a movement against western occupation.

At the same time, the realisation that western public opinion is shifting away from continued engagement in Afghanistan implies that the political process should begin sooner rather than later. The death of bin Laden is unlikely to increase western publics' appetite for prolonged intervention.

Whether a political settlement is feasible depends on the mindset within the Taliban as much as in the west. On that, messages are mixed. The west claims that drone attacks have been successful in targeting mid-level fighters and that the Taliban is on the back foot in provinces like Helmand. On the other hand, recruitment to the Taliban would seem to be strong. The recent jail-break from Kandahar returned another one hundred or so mid-level commanders to the field, and the failings of the Afghan government are well documented.

The Afghan High Peace Council had been appointed to forge links with the Taliban. Having made little progress, in early May the Taliban announced that members of the Council were legitimate targets. Until the west – or more likely a Muslim interlocutor, such as Turkey – begins some kind of dialogue process with the Taliban, the plausibility of any eventual political settlement will be unknown.

But while the path towards a political solution may have become clearer, so has the

AP PHOTO/KHALIL HAMRA

threat of a premature western withdrawal. Soon after bin Laden's death, the French foreign minister, Alain Juppe, said that France would take time to reflect over the event, and did not rule out an early withdrawal of troops. The United States' (US) draw-down is scheduled to begin in July 2011. While it had been thought that this would be largely symbolic, bin Laden's death may allow a more rapid withdrawal than previously planned.

There is a widespread recognition that the job in Afghanistan is far from finished, and that the Afghan National Army (ANA) is not ready to take over Afghanistan's security. But while wars are conducted by militaries, they are begun and ended by politicians. With economic difficulties in Europe and North America, political crises in the Middle East and newspapers proclaiming that bin Laden's death means that the job is done, the temptation to speed up the transfer of security responsibility to the ANA will grow. The Taliban would be emboldened, and a return to the civil war of the 1990s, with Iran, Russia and India backing one side, and Pakistan the other, would represent the worst possible outcome for Afghans.

The choice facing Pakistan is equally stark. In the immediate aftermath of bin Laden's death, around ninety Pakistanis were killed in two suicide bomb attacks near Peshawar. A couple of days later, a Saudi diplomat was murdered in Karachi. Bomb attacks and targeted killings are common-place in Pakistan, and the country has learnt to muddle along. But they do little to engender faith in the capacity of the civilian government and the increasingly tarnished military.

The Pakistani establishment is caught in a bind of its own making; it cannot side openly with the US for fear of further enraging public opinion. And it cannot side with the militants because of its need for US support. Rather than "looking both ways", as Prime Minister David Cameron described, Pakistan's establishment could be equally accused of burying its head in the sand. A policy of toleration towards some Islamist groups has failed to prevent the current blow-back from taking place.

The outlook for Pakistan depends on what happens next. A few days after bin Laden's death, Pakistan arrested a 'mid-level' al Qaeda operative in Karachi. Were Pakistan to launch a prolonged campaign against al Qaeda (possibly even uncovering Ayman Al-Zawahiri or the rumoured acting leader of al Qaeda, Saif al-Adel) then the US would be likely to quickly forget past indiscretions. The dismantling of al Qaeda would certainly ease the path for a settlement in Afghanistan: Pakistan's price would be a greater say in Afghanistan's future, to the likely chagrin of India.

While some of the highly-charged language within Pakistan is rhetorical, there is genuine anger at US operations within the country. The threat to cut NATO supply lines has recurred sporadically in recent years, as has the threat to reposition foreign policy around China. If such threats were carried out, the impact on western troops in Afghanistan would be dire. But so too would be the consequent impact on Pakistan.

Such a move would almost certainly scupper assistance from the US, and related aid from the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral institutions. Pakistan's reliance on foreign assistance stems from its oft-criticised inability to tax its own citizens. This in turn creates short-falls in the provision of social goods. With half of the country's tax revenue spent on debt repayments, and half of what's left spent on the military, this leaves precious little to spend on the health and education of its people, paramount for its long-term sustainability. While China and some Gulf states may step up their assistance, there is little evidence that this would compensate for the ending of western support.

> While the path towards a political solution may have become clearer, so has the threat of a premature western withdrawal.

But even if Pakistan does step up its fight against al Qaeda, it will still face severe challenges, not least exacerbating the on-going blow-back. While there is awareness that the existence of Islamist groups within Pakistan threatens the state, at the same time the threat ensures Pakistan's continued strategic relevance. Pakistan has demonstrated the ability to balance violent dissent whilst remaining a functioning state. It seems unlikely that this can continue indefinitely.

Pakistan's other strategic asset is its nuclear capability, the importance of which is strengthened by the fear that it could fall into the hands of militants. The rapid build-up of its nuclear capacity may strengthen Pakistan's hand, but it also increases concern in neighbouring India and points against any accommodation between the two countries.

The fact that bin Laden's death has heightened the risks for the region may be his final legacy, on top of massacring Hazaras in Afghanistan, Shias in Pakistan, attacks on two US embassies in Africa, the US Navy destroyer USS Cole off Yemen and, of course, 9/11. Had he been discovered in a cave in Pakistan's tribal areas, Pakistan's expressions of surprise would have been taken at their word. Bin Laden's decision – forced or otherwise – to live in a garrison town close to Islamabad may have been his final curve ball.

GARETH PRICE is Senior Research Fellow for the Asia Programme at Chatham House.