


Defence Policy Xenia Dormandy



President Barack Obama delivers a policy address in Washington on events in the Middle East.

The Changing Debate

The end of an era? With a surprisingly subdued bang, the ten-year drive to find Osama bin Laden is over. The first night saw Washingtonians, mainly students who grew up in the 'bin Laden era', celebrating outside the White House. A week followed of front page news coverage analysing the Black Op and dissecting the small nuggets of information being released by the White House, alongside the predictable political debate between Republicans and Democrats over what was done right and wrong.

ARGELY CONGRATULATORY MESSAGES were received by the Barack Obama administration from other nations (the exception being Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip, who condemned the assassination of an Arab holy warrior). But a few weeks on and the news has largely moved to the inner pages and to a longer-term assessment of the implications. So, how has bin Laden's capture and death changed the debate, and what does this mean for America, its policy, use of resources, and politics?

For now, at least, we should consider the threat of al Qaeda to be unchanged. Osama bin Laden was an ideological figurehead, no longer the day-to-day operational leader of the group. That role is being performed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who still runs free. While information collected during the operation suggests that bin Laden was still very involved in the strategic decisions of the

organisation, his death is unlikely to impact on operations already in planning except in two respects. Firstly, some actions could be moved forward in retaliation for his killing. And secondly, attacks may be reassessed if information on them was gathered during the operation.

In the longer term however, the effect on al Qaeda is more uncertain. Bin Laden was apparently much loved by the rank and file, unlike his number two, Zawahiri. He was the glue that brought together many previously independent terrorist groups in the Middle East and Asia and held them together to create the franchise that is al Qaeda. It is not clear that Zawahiri, an Egyptian, or the rumoured interim leader, Saif al-Adel, have the charisma to keep them all intact. The result could be a delinking of such groups, bringing more independence to each, which would make them harder to roll-up, but also provide them with less access to resources.

However, while the threat may be ever-present, attitudes within the United States (US) towards the war on terror are changing; this is something that is already being reflected in the debate in Washington and beyond. It is playing out in military and intelligence terms – which resources Americans need to focus on the war on terror, on Afghanistan, on Pakistan – and in budget terms. On both sides of the aisle, Democratic and Republican, questions are being raised as to how bin Laden's departure can free up funds for new tasks.

Soon after being elected, President Obama conducted a long review of the war in Afghanistan, and concluded that it was necessary to significantly ramp up military engagement. There was lengthy debate over whether, particularly given the state of the economy, this was the right policy – whether, as the president put it, the “right war” continued to be a priority for America's security. That debate is very much in evidence again, with polls in late April showing 49 percent of Americans disapproving of the war in Afghanistan, as against 44 percent who approve – a reversal of the January numbers. Osama's death is likely to revitalise those who say that al Qaeda in Afghanistan is no longer a threat (only approximately one hundred al Qaeda members are purported to still be in Afghanistan) and that we should pull out. The administration is going to find it hard to push back.

The impact will also affect US counterterrorism more broadly. The large team in the Central Intelligence Agency and in other intelligence arms of the government who have been focused on bin Laden will be reassigned to broader topics, some still al Qaeda-related, but others in the Middle East and Asia more broadly. There will be a strong push to refocus intelligence attention on the events in the Middle East and North Africa, where the lack of understanding of the constituency of the rebel groups is of increasing concern.

Perhaps most complex is the impact on America's relationship with Pakistan, already a controversial and complicated interaction. The discovery of bin Laden in Abbottabad, a town close to Pakistan's military capital, and one that includes a large military presence and training facility, has strengthened the voices of those who insist that Pakistan is not to be trusted. That President Obama and his team did not inform the Pakistanis before going in suggests that the

One World Trade Center is illuminated in red, white, and blue prior to the visit of President Barack Obama to the 9/11 Memorial, in New York.






administration agrees. The immediate response in Pakistan was embarrassed silence as the government and military leadership tried to find an acceptable argument as to how bin Laden could have been so close to the heart of Pakistan without their knowledge. Perhaps believing that the best defence is offence, days later the head of the military, represented by arguably the most powerful man in Pakistan, General Kayani, went on the attack, threatening the US if it ever again came onto Pakistani soil without permission.

I have long argued that the US needs Pakistan as much as Pakistan needs the US. But with bin Laden's death the equation may have changed, at least in the short-term. As a nuclear power on the doorstep of the Middle East and Asia, and as a Muslim democracy – albeit an unstable one – Pakistan remains of strategic, long-term interest. But in the immediate term, given Pakistan's current hedging strategy between the US and the Taliban, it is unclear whether it wants to be a serious partner; until it does, perhaps the US should be a little more standoffish. Unless Pakistan re-evaluates its interests, a cooling off period might be in order.

Notwithstanding the initial celebrations outside the White House, the response in America was in large part one of relief: relief that 'we had got our man' and could now move on. America's determination, and the message of deterrence that this sends, is an important one that is worth recognising.

As suggested earlier, this is playing out in American politics, as it would at any time but particularly with an election coming up next year. To those who have criticised President Obama for being weak, vacillating, and unwilling to make hard decisions, a strong message has been sent that when necessary, he steps up. This has strengthened his image as Commander-in-Chief and has begun to address concerns about Obama's broader decision-making ability that even many Democrats have held.

There are some in Washington who suggest that 'getting' bin Laden makes President Obama unbeatable in November 2012. The Republicans can no longer attack him on one of the two issues – security – where the Democrats are traditionally accused of being weak. He will now have a potent response: 'Remember who got Osama bin Laden.' But that is to forget one of the absolutes of American politics: 'It's the economy, stupid.' With eighteen months to go before the next election, there is a lot of time for other events to interject themselves. And, in the end, appropriately, bin Laden will have the smallest of voices against the cacophony of unemployment rates, house prices, taxes and inflation. 

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