Defence Policy

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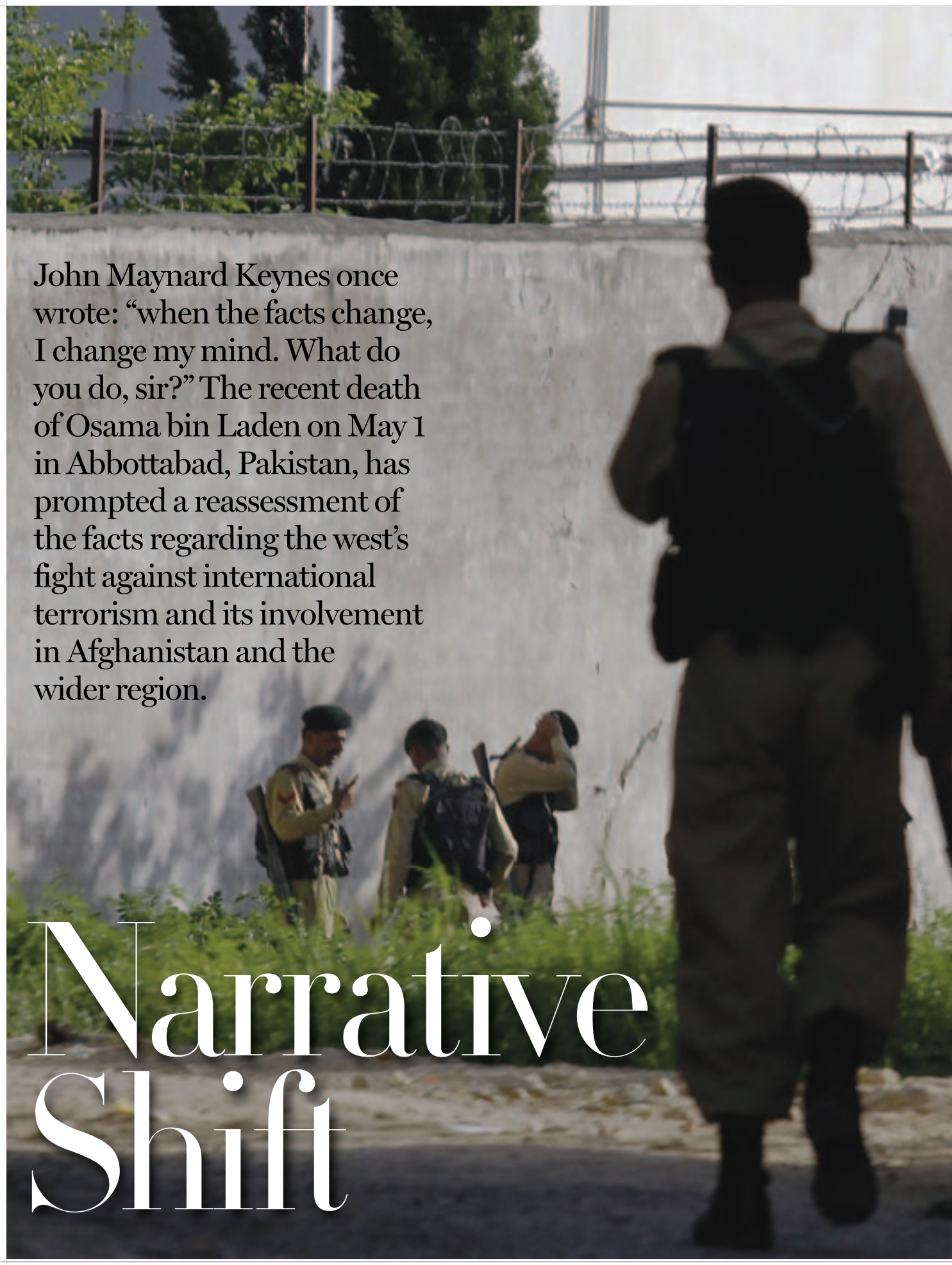

John Maynard Keynes once wrote: "when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" The recent death of Osama bin Laden on May 1 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, has prompted a reassessment of the facts regarding the west's fight against international terrorism and its involvement in Afghanistan and the wider region.

Narrative Shift

Pakistan army troops patrol outside the house of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The achievement of a key mission objective is a fillip for the United States (US) who has sought his capture for over a decade, and it will have an effect on US and British strategy and policy towards both the region and international terrorism.

However, his death does not lessen the threat of al Qaeda, nor does it much alter the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As the west moves into the post-bin Laden era, it is the political and public narrative – the explanation and articulation of policy decisions - which is most likely to change. Political and military leaders in the US and Britain will need to reframe existing objectives in Afghanistan, the continued threat from al Qaeda, and the new opportunities which have been presented in order to provoke and prolong support among increasingly apathetic and uncertain domestic populations.

For over ten years Osama bin Laden has been the figurehead of international Islamic-inspired terrorism. He was the mastermind behind 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in Britain, while behind the scenes he continued to control a vast network of terrorist activity. Despite the diffuse nature of al Qaeda - an umbrella organisation for a wide array of grievances, political agendas and ideologies in the name of Islam rather than a single coherent entity - it was his name and his image which fronted the global brand. He was the clear enemy and target: an objective set up for government leaders, policymakers and military chiefs to meet. His demise means the campaign loses a strategic target. This symbolic achievement may be exactly the political lifeline needed by those seeking to extricate themselves from a seemingly endless and intractable problem.

Both the myth and rhetoric surrounding his persona have been policy and media constructs, part of tendency, evident in the three most prominent military campaigns of the past ten years, to find a 'fall guy'. From Saddam Hussein in Iraq to Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, all have been a key figure against whom to rally support and popular opinion through the creation of a threatening 'other'.

Yet, is this an essential part of the justification for foreign interventions? Is the personification of a campaign necessary for a narrative to encourage support rather than more expansive goals? Would the US, Britain and their allies have gone into Afghanistan with an argument that it was solely for humanitarian objectives? Would the rationale of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies bringing security and democracy to Libya be possible without the prominence given to the repression of Colonel Gaddafi and his forces? And would the intervention in Iraq have occurred in the same way without the presence of Saddam Hussein and his supposed weapons of mass destruction?

Though it is unclear whether this is a fundamental requirement for the narratives of intervention, it will be crucial for the allies to find a new way to effectively and convincingly articulate the challenges that remain and why they are working together in the absence of bin Laden. In particular, is there still a clear objective in Afghanistan or was the hunt for 'America's most wanted' the only clear aim?

Whatever form such a narrative takes, it will have been shaped to some degree from the nature of the American raid. Although much uncertainty remains about the reality of the operation, the opacity of the events inevitably leaves room for interpretation – and invariably exploitation – by both sides. It stands in contrast to operations in Iraq in 2003 where Saddam Hussein was shown 'caught like a rat' in a hole, and then later diminished as a former leader with a hangman's noose around his neck before masked executioners. Images of the former Iraqi leader served as a demonstration of a long awaited victory among the allies, but simultaneously contributed to his martyr-like image among supporters which could be used against the allies' campaign. The absence of any images in the case of bin Laden may mean a clean break, so attention can be focused on the remaining tasks.

However, as initial debate has shown, US leaders in particular will need to acknowledge and attempt to address some reasonable questions. These include the justification of the US's preference for a military raid over a formal trial, as well as the consequences for the sovereignty and security of Pakistan, and in turn others, given its government's apparent lack of knowledge of and involvement in a foreign assault on its territory.

Though the Afghan intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 was built on a narrative of a military campaign against international terrorism, with a key milestone being the capture of bin Laden, this was not the only rationale. In October 2001, following the 9/11 attacks, British parliament was recalled to discuss the intervention. Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that "even when al Qaeda is dealt with, the job will not be over." He further stated that "we will not

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walk away from [the Afghan people] once the conflict ends, as has happened in the past. We will stand by them and help them to a better, more stable future under a broad-based government involving all the different ethnic groupings." Today humanitarian objectives to deliver security, stability and better governance to the region still remain. Despite progress in some areas such as the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and even the police forces, key goals to tackle injustice, corruption, the drugs trade, and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are yet to be met. However, these original motivations are almost ten years old and it remains to be seen whether Blair's expansive and non-personal goals will be adopted and sustained by his Conservative successor.

Indeed, Prime Minister David Cameron has the option to use this development to maintain continuity with the Labour Government on its policy to the region or to define new alternatives. Will Afghanistan remain a priority for the Conservatives and their Liberal Democrat partners in the coming months? Will a desire for short term political expediency alter the approach?

Initial indications suggest no radical departure from prior policy. Already the Prime Minister has spoken of the potential for the region while reinforcing the continued commitment from ISAF forces. Just hours after the events of May 1, he spoke about the new opportunity that this presented for Afghanistan and the region to achieve stability and security. Yet there is a new political opportunity and only a few days after he first addressed Parliament on May 2, national media reported that the prime minister planned to reduce force numbers in Afghanistan in the summer. The demise of the leader of al Qaeda was connected to a potential acceleration of the drawdown of operations in Afghanistan, a move which put the prime minister at odds with military chiefs.

If the US, Britain and ISAF forces decide to remain engaged in Afghanistan, they will need to make clear what the objectives are, and demonstrate that the killing of bin Laden was not their only achievable goal.

Similar connections were being made in the US. Aware of the significance of events, the White House has sought to find the balance between maximising a good news story for domestic support and recognising the longer term implications for its involvement in the region – most notably the continued presence of military personnel. US President Barack Obama has been keen to make clear that, while a 'significant achievement', Bin Laden's death is in no way the end game in operations: the fight against international terrorism and the commitments to the region continue. Nonetheless, there may be a shift from counter-insurgency to counter-terrorism operations on the ground as ISAF forces adjust to changing dynamics in the region – though the insurgency will remain and they need not necessarily operate in exclusivity.

There may be the chance to build bridges with some of bin Laden's more fickle partners. There is talk of new openings to engage with Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar, and to appeal to the less radical insurgents in the region. Though there is proof that al Qaeda is a very well run organisation, politicians and the media in the west have already sought to use the image of an isolated man in a well kept and secure compound in Pakistan to dispel the myth of bin Laden as a strong leader among those who may have supported his cause, orchestrating events from the ground-level and safety of the Afghan caves.

The drawdown of troops seems set to go ahead in July. Rather than a knee-jerk response. this is continuity with a

policy previously set by British and American leaders as a starting point for transition to Afghan forces by 2014, and is part of a timetable agreed at the NATO summit in Lisbon last November by NATO leaders and the Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai.

Whatever comes next, all sides will have to prepare militarily and politically for the fallout. The aftermath of May 1 will be felt as al Qaeda members seek revenge for the loss of their leader. Retribution attacks have already occurred and a bomb attack in Pakistan on May 13, killing at least 69 people, is an early indication of what may be to come. The dismantlement of al Qaeda is unlikely and reports of factionalism over the successor do little to deny its continued potency.

If the US, Britain and ISAF forces decide to remain engaged in Afghanistan, they will need to make clear what the objectives are and demonstrate that bin Laden was not their only achievable goal. Policy and strategy should be responsive to events, yet change should be for the right reasons and at the right time within the bounds of what is reasonable. There is a danger that bin Laden's death may be used for political reasons as an excuse to withdraw. Such a decision is likely to be a pyrrhic victory. Little has changed in the region despite a significant milestone in the wider campaign against terrorism. The threat from al Qaeda is undiminished; already the attacks in Pakistan in the past two weeks have shown what is likely to come, and continued engagement with both Pakistan and Afghanistan will be integral to domestic security concerns in the west. It will be for political and military leaders among the ISAF forces to determine whether they have the appetite and will to meet the remaining challenges. Continuity in the policy of the US and Britain will send a strong signal to allies and adversaries about their commitment and their intent. In the long term, it is likely to prove more productive, even if immediate and pressing issues regarding force numbers, resources and funds remain.

Yet in the short-term can a new narrative be sought around the persisting realities? Or is the loss of one of the most prominent symbols in the campaign sufficient justification for a change of mind and, perhaps more significantly policy, towards the region? More importantly, will increasingly apathetic and uncertain publics in the west sustain the engagement for much longer in light of bin Laden's death?

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President Barack Obama speaks about the mission that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

AP PHOTO/CHARLES DHARAPAK