

Strategic Insight

Afghanistan Military Campaign Enters New Phase

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As part of the ongoing global war against terrorism, the military campaign in Afghanistan continues, albeit with diminishing results. In the recently concluded Operation Anaconda, the allied forces suffered eight casualties, against many (unconfirmed) losses inflicted upon Al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants. [1] There is growing unease among the European allies about continuing the military campaign. [2] It is time to analyze the war aims in Afghanistan, and the means adopted for meeting the challenge posed by terrorism in the wake of September 11, 2001.

At the start of the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan, the operational aims were: one, removal of the Taliban regime; two, neutralization of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; and three, capture of Osama Bin Laden and dismantling of his terrorist network. [3] Ever since the campaign started on October 7, 2001, the U.S.-led allied forces have achieved spectacular successes. Relentless air and ground operations led to the defeat of Taliban forces without fighting major battles. The Taliban regime in Kabul has since been replaced by an interim Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai. Although many Al-Qaeda operatives are thought to have escaped death or capture by the allied forces, as an organization Al-Qaeda is reported to have been crippled. The bulk of Al-Qaeda members have reportedly taken shelter in the southern and eastern mountainous regions of Afghanistan, and some are known to have escaped into neighboring Pakistan. [4] Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar remain elusive. It is not even known whether Bin Laden is dead or alive, although some recent reports suggest that he has so far survived the search by allied forces. [5] As President Bush has said, even if Bin Laden is alive, he has been marginalized. Also, contrary to concerns expressed in some circles early in the campaign that Afghanistan might become another Vietnam for the United States or might provoke a broad counter-reaction in the Muslim world, the military campaign to date has progressed rather smoothly. Afghanistan's public has been largely supportive of allied military operations, and with few exceptions the reactions in other Muslim countries have manifested in no more than street protests. There was no mass uprising among Muslims, as had been contemplated.

The two main achievements of the anti-terrorist military campaign in Afghanistan are: one, terrorists have been denied safe haven and freedom of action in Afghanistan; and two, it has been demonstrated to terrorists worldwide that the form of violence manifested in September 11, 2001 will not be tolerated by the United States and its allies.

At this stage, the military operations are apparently aimed at weeding out remnants of Al-Qaeda and Taliban resistance. The overall environment and the ground situation that prevailed in October 2000 have changed markedly. The Taliban as an organized military opposition no longer exists; yet their remnants, and almost the entire Taliban leadership, continue to be at large, and they are potentially harmful to the current Afghanistan regime. In some allied countries, domestic opposition to continuing the anti-terrorist military campaign in Afghanistan is increasing. [6] South Asian regional security dynamics have led to the withdrawal of Pakistani military forces that were earlier involved in anti-Taliban and anti-Al Qaeda operations. The campaign is gradually taking on the appearance of a unilateral American fight against Al-Qaeda. The question therefore arises, are the ongoing military operations in Afghanistan absolutely necessary, and if so, how can the best results be achieved at a minimum cost?

During the mid-1990s, the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan as a reaction to the anarchy and factionalism that prevailed in Afghanistan after the departure of Soviet forces. [7] An ultra radical and fanatical Taliban regime helped restore some semblance of order and stability in Afghanistan. The regime had a measure of acceptability and support among the Afghanistan populace that had helped the Taliban gain control of nearly 95 percent of Afghan territory. The regime's repressiveness, particularly against women, their abysmal human rights record, cultural excesses (destruction of Afghanistan's historical assets), coercive imposition of radical Islam, and finally their provision of safe haven for terrorists, global arms dealers, and drug peddlers, made the Taliban an international pariah. Their replacement by the current moderate Afghanistan government has brought a much sought respite to the Afghan population. This change resulted with active support of erstwhile anti-Taliban forces (the Northern Alliance), which represented minority ethnic communities. The Northern Alliance also continues to play a dominant role in the current Afghanistan government, which has caused skepticism among the majority ethnic community (Pushtuns) in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Some regional warlords in these areas are reportedly sheltering Taliban, and the Taliban ideology also continues to have some acceptability among such sections of Afghan society. [8] This factor of regional and societal support to Taliban could manifest in resistance to allied military operations in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda is reportedly based in more than 60 countries around the world. [9] Prior to October 2001, Afghanistan formed the nerve center of their activities and also served as the main base for their ideological and terrorist training. Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan today is a fragmented lot. However, their leadership and core infrastructure have the potential to regroup and reactivate. Recent reports suggest that they are hibernating in small groups. It is very unlikely that they will ever enjoy the same degree of freedom that they did under the Taliban regime. Also, they are unlikely to provide targets warranting large-scale military action. In the earlier stages of anti-Taliban and anti-Al-Qaeda operations, massive use of air and ground assets was necessary and successful. However, in today's circumstances, the fighting is confined to isolated cave complexes, deep mountainous ravines, and urban areas. There are no well-defined battle lines and no easily identifiable targets. Technology and numbers, which provided a decisive edge to the allied forces during the early phases of military operations, are now less relevant. In fact, in the current situation, the remnants of Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces are likely to be fighting on their familiar turf: motivated for revenge, employing guerilla tactics, drawing on local support where they can find it, and operating in familiar physical terrain. These forces have long years of battle experience under similar conditions. Retaliatory allied operations by use of aerial assets and heavy concentration of troops will likely result in losses to allied forces and heavy collateral damage, which will be exploited by the enemy for propaganda. Such operations may also imperil peacekeeping forces, as these forces are likely to be targeted by the enemy to instigate retaliation and gain propaganda material. Also, losses of civilian life and property will draw adverse publicity from human rights organizations, domestic institutions inside the allied countries, and especially the Muslim population around the world. Terrorism thrives by exploitation of fragile human emotions. Unnecessary loss of human lives resulting from large-scale military strikes will form cannon fodder for terrorists' propaganda, which could facilitate recruitment of more Jihadis around the world.

Therefore, the ongoing anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan needs review both in strategy and approach. There is little likelihood of a quick exit by allies from the Afghanistan situation. Analysis of media reports and views expressed by military professionals suggest that a better approach to the current Afghanistan situation would be: one, enabling the Afghan population to develop resistance against exploitation by outside and domestic influences such as the Taliban; and two, preventing the Taliban and Al-Qaeda from influencing the ongoing political transition in Afghanistan. By implication this means providing political, economic, and military support to the current Afghanistan government. It does not necessarily mean nation building, or any form of long-term security or economic commitment in the region.

Military Strategy

The Taliban and Al-Qaeda, which are currently in a state of disarray, will likely try to regroup and work toward undermining the present Afghanistan government. [10] They will try to gain the support of dissenting Afghan warlords, who were earlier sympathetic to the Taliban cause. Their tactics will include

selective coercion to silence the local opposition, hit and run strikes, bombings by use of improvised explosives including suicide missions, and even suicide raids on the allied forces.

Military strategy to meet potential threats in Afghanistan is a matter of professional judgment by the concerned military commanders. However, based on the experience of other militaries under similar circumstances in the sub-continent, the following methodology is suggested: one, swift, surgical operations based upon hard intelligence and supported by sufficient logistical support; two, area domination by mobile patrols (ground as well as aerial); three, covert and overt surveillance of suspected areas of terrorist operations; and four, location and maintenance of troops at a high state of readiness for engaging fleeting targets. Organizing an all-Afghan military and police force for peacekeeping and law enforcement is also necessary. The U.S. government has already offered to help train the Afghan Army. [\[11\]](#)

As a major ally in this ongoing war against terrorism, Pakistan has significant stakes in Afghanistan's stability. However, Pakistan's antipathy toward the Northern Alliance elements in the Afghan transition government has significant bearing on Pakistani motives and intents in participating in the allied military campaign. Certain sections of Pakistan's polity continue to oppose the allied military campaign in Afghanistan. Allied commanders, while finalizing operational plans, should give adequate allowance to such negative factors and remain prepared for surprises.

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- [5] "Osama alive, says half brother," *The Hindu*, 19 March 2002 (quoted CNN interview on 18 March, in which Bin Laden's half-brother Sheikh Ahmed said that Bin Laden is not only alive, he does not suffer from a kidney disease that would require dialysis, as reported earlier in the media).
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- [7] Ahmed Rashid, "Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords," *Pan MacMillan Ltd.* London, 2001, p. 23.
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- [9] Michelle Boorstein, "Talibon and Al-Qaeda fighters may change form of attack, allies say," *Associated Press*, 3 April 2002.
- [10] The remark is based upon analysis by the author of methods adopted by the Soviet Army in Afghanistan (1980-1990), and also the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) operations while fighting LTTE in Sri Lanka (1989-90).

[11] Todd S. Purdum, "Bush offers Afghanistan U.S. help for training of military and police," *New York Times*, 29 January 2002.