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## **The Un-War has Begun**

In a fashion that would have pleased Sun Tsu and even von Clausewitz, using classic tools of disinformation, the US and the UK finally launched the first of its military strikes against Osama bin Laden and the Talib regime. For weeks there had been talk of imminent attack, each time the enemy being misled. Now we are all aware that the campaign has begun in earnest. What is less obvious even to the keenest of observers is what the end result will be, what exactly Washington can realistically achieve.

Perhaps for the first time in military history we are witnessing a very peculiar phenomenon in that at one and the same time an attacking force is not only bombing targets in another country, but also distributing aid to the inhabitants of that nation. With this, Washington is trying to signal as clearly as possible that it's fight is not with the Afghan people, but with what it sees as the perpetrators of the New York and Washington attacks and the regime that harbours them. Nevertheless, if we look to the examples of the Gulf War and the operations against Serbia, both of which introduced the World to the latest weapons in America's hi-tech arsenal, then we can still expect civilian casualties despite claims of hyper-accurate munitions.

The question that should be most important for those observers and interested parties that are not part of the decisionmaking machine within Washington, is what in fact does the American government want to achieve by way of the attack and how realistic are those aims? The possible answers lie on a scale which on the one end sees the location, annihilation or extradition of bin Laden, and on the other sees the installation of a new government in Kabul, one that distances itself from the support of terrorism. If the goal is the latter, then Washington has set a very, very difficult task for itself.

Whilst it is true that by international standards the military might available to the Talib regime is not a impressive one – the “Strategic Balance” yearbook published in London which measures all the armies of the world has difficulty in giving any meaning information at all about the Afghan army given its poor state – that does not mean that the political tasks will be easy to execute. (As was proved in the Balkans, it is one thing to be militarily successful and quite another to create a politically stable environment). It is safe to say that in the late sixties similarly disparaging things could be said about the North Vietnamese Army. Nevertheless, these forces cost the US much in blood and treasure when it set about to politically change the landscape in South East Asia. This is not to say that we are looking at another potential Vietnam, but simply that war is an act whose results can most easily be predicted when it is initiated between nations that are from similar cultures and at comparable levels of political advancement. For example, it is patently clear that the US would be able to defeat hands down any “developed” nation of the world that was Christian or Judeo-Christian. But when faced with nations that a) have a radically different world view than the West (which includes a completely different attitude to kamikaze style attacks) or b) have been steeled in the art of civil war and guerrilla tactics for decades,



then it is very difficult to predict how modern military methods and Western values will prevail.

Even if we disregard for a moment the complicating aspects that such an “asymmetric conflict” necessarily entails, then there are still the political realities of the region. I believe, that for the aforementioned reasons that whilst on its own soil and utilising unconventional tactics the military might of the Talib regime may pose a serious threat, it in no way can be seen as a significant regional actor. The nation that is home to it does not have the economic wherewithal to support classic aggressive territorial actions that would pose a serious threat to any of its neighbours. Likewise any such action would be rapidly responded to in a forceful fashion by the US-British units in the area, should their assistance be requested. No, the real question now is whether or not Israel will be forced to act militarily as a result of attacks against its own interest (whether in the form of heightened terrorist attacks or perhaps as a result of any moves that Iraq may make against Israel so as to exploit the general situation). Given the unprecedented anti-America language used by PM Sharon of late when discussing how to guarantee for Israel’s security and the defence of its interests, we may be heading towards a situation in which no one, not even Washington can have a moderating effect upon Tel Aviv. It is well known to the political and security policy elites of the World that Israel is a nuclear state which sees nuclear weapons as part of its defence posture. The idea of a threatened and self-isolated Israel does not bode well for stability in the Middle East.

Even if the Talib regime can be overthrown there is issue of what then? The Talib traditionally have represented an ethnic and political minority in the country, who just happen to currently be in power. Almost the same can be said of the Northern Alliance. This rag-tag assembly of freedom-fighters is numerically in the minority and is weakened by the fact that as to composition it is made up of many various interest groups that fundamentally only have one thing in common: their enmity towards the Taliban. Such a composition does give one confidence in their ability to rule such a ravaged nation. Even if the Alliance were a homogenous entity this would not solve the problem, given that one of the most important regional players – Pakistan – refuses to countenance an Afghanistan that is ruled by a government solely consisting of members of the Northern Alliance.

For all of the above reasons - and many more – it is blatantly obvious that the men and women of the US and British forces currently fighting this campaign do not have an easy task ahead of them. It took more than two months of continual bombings for the dictator Slobodan Milosevic to surrender. (Even then, people were not sure that it was the bombings that played the decisive role, but instead the threat of the Hague War Crimes Tribunal to prosecute Milosevic). Additionally, Yugoslavia was an instance in which we had white men fighting white men, both countries developmentally speaking standing relatively close to each other – far more so than the US and today’s Afghanistan. On top of this, the NATO allies had a plethora of meaningful targets: power stations, communication sites, bridges, and so on. This is not the case now.

Perhaps the most unfortunate psychological aspect of America’s approach still remains the insistence on using the word “war”. To laymen, wars have beginnings and



ends. They have losers and winners. Realistically the fight against terrorism cannot be won. As long as we decide to live in democracies, we are always open attack by those that wish to use violence to achieve political ends. The conflict is an eternal one. We can annihilate and make an example of individual terrorists and their given groups, but we cannot stop all terrorists everywhere. The best we can do is to be vigilant and to send a clear message that all nations are to be held accountable which knowingly allow terrorists to operate on their soil.