

The Pygmy who turned into a Giant: The Afghan Taliban in 2009

Until 2006, the Neo-Taliban insurgency had been dismissed as a minor irritant and paid little attention in Kabul and in major international capitals. The Afghan government had denied that they were anything more than a few bands of remnants of the old Taliban, carrying out cross-border raids from Pakistani territory. NATO and Washington were placing the number of insurgents at no more than 2-3,000, although in contrast to Kabul preferred to ignore the issue of the raids from Pakistan. All this changed in 2006, as major fighting erupted in the vicinity of the main southern city of Kandahar and the estimated death toll more than doubled to 4,400. Since then, a tendency to view the progression of the Neo-Taliban as irresistible has replaced the previous complacency, not only in the international press but even in diplomatic and military circles. Are the Taliban really invincible?



The insurgents who operate in Afghanistan at the beginning of 2009 are not, by any standard of comparison, a particularly effective, disciplined or capable lot. Their command and control structure remains relatively primitive and their capacity to mount complex operations less than modest. The Taliban themselves are not fully united and the insurgency is not limited to the Taliban. Another insurgent group which has sufficient strength to have a political impact is Hizb-i Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. From 2006 this group has been recovering strength and is better funded than it has ever been since its collapse in 1996. Particularly in the east and south-east and around Kabul it plays a major role in the insurgency. Although Hizb-i Islami and the Taliban have come to cooperate quite strictly in many provinces, their leadership and chains of command are still separate. As for the Taliban, most of the commanders are loyal to Mullah Omar. Two networks of commanders are however linked to more radical Taliban leaders, who sometimes assume an ambiguous position vis-à-vis Mullah Omar: the Haqqani network in the south-east and the Dadullah network in the south. The latter has been weakened by the death of its founder and the arrest of his brother, who had replaced him at the head. Still, individual commanders of this network often display autonomous behaviour and entertain closer relations with international jihadist groups than Mullah Omar and his closer associates. The Haqqani network remains more influential at the regional level and is trying to expand its operations beyond the south-east, but it does not have a very large base and is now led by the young Sirajuddin, a fact which will likely limit its appeal. At this stage, the fault lines crossing the insurgents' front are of limited importance, because the war is quite localised in character, but in the future this could prove a key weakness.

The training of the average fighters, despite having gradually improved over the years, still leaves much to be desired. Although the leadership is trying hard to impose a degree of moderation and a behaviour acceptable to most villagers, often Taliban commanders are still acting on their own initiative. Radical commanders linked to international jihadist groups are particularly likely to indulge in abusive behaviour, which antagonises the majority of the population. In sum, the Taliban are mainly



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spreading because of the vacuum left by a weak, corrupt and ineffective government, but suffer from significant internal contradictions, beginning from their weak ability to enforce internal discipline. The main strength of the Taliban, therefore, is the weakness of the opposite side. Still, by early 2009 the Taliban had accumulated a very substantial force throughout Afghanistan, either directly or through alliances with groups and individual local commanders. At this point the number of armed men engaged in the insurgency in one way or another might well have overtaken 40,000, including full- and part-timers. The Taliban have begun to infiltrate some northern regions with some success. Indeed, there are only a couple of provinces without any Taliban presence whatsoever in Afghanistan today. Although it is not likely that the Taliban will reach in the north a level of strength comparable to what they have in the south, in two or three northern provinces they are already beginning to mount a serious security threat. Even if Kabul could get its act together and put together a firmer resistance and if international intervention was strengthened, as indeed Washington plans to do, containing the ongoing 'jihad' will not be easy.

Establishing what the Taliban strategy might be is necessarily a matter of guesswork. Some observers even believe that the Taliban do not have a strategy, although this belief seems to be belied by the fact that they tend to concentrate resources in specific regions, as well as move men across provinces to open or consolidate new fronts. Clearly, because of their weak command and control system, their strategy cannot be very sophisticated or complex or in any case it would not work if it was. But a simple strategy is still a strategy. It appears obvious that geographical expansion is part of the Taliban's strategy, as determined efforts to establish a presence around Kabul, in the west and in the north have been going on for years.

Probably the most important issue concerning the Taliban's strategy is its end aim. There is little question that radical networks like Sirajuddin's and Dadullah's want to fight to the end and view the conflict as part of a wider jihadist struggle. But what about Mullah Omar and the mainstream Taliban? They seem to be thinking in terms of an Afghan settlement, of which the withdrawal of foreign troops would be part. Mullah Omar and his followers have maintained an ambiguous position concerning the possibility of negotiations, rejecting them in public, but sending signals of availability in private. In part, this attitude is typical of any negotiation in its early stages; President Karzai's vocal calls for negotiations have not improved his image among the public and have been taken by many as a display of weakness and a desperate attempt to find a niche for himself between Taliban and foreign interventionists. Mullah Omar therefore might just be wise to send out probes, but at the same time avoid the risk of attracting criticism from his jihadist allies. Incidentally, a substantial amount of the funds used by the insurgents comes from international jihadist networks, which would be very displeased if they found out that Mullah Omar is moving towards any kind of negotiations.

The fact that Mullah Omar is testing the ground for negotiations does not of course mean that he is necessarily serious about reaching the kind of all-inclusive political settlement sponsored by the UN. In any case, he has no reason to negotiate with a weak and discredited Karzai. He might therefore just be preparing for negotiations later, once Karzai is out of the way. Or he might be thinking about a seat at the negotiating table not in order to reach a political deal under UNAMA sponsorship, but with other, perhaps more sinister aims. Negotiations, of course, are a weapon of political struggle as much as they can be a tool to reach a political settlement. By taking part in negotiations, Mullah Omar could make some substantial gains, starting from achieving immediately a degree of international legitimization. He would also find himself in a position to cast his political message to the Afghan public and manoeuvre to undermine the existing coalition government in Kabul, which brings together a heterogeneous spectrum of secular groups and old Islamic mujahidin who had

fought against the Soviet Union. The most essential Taliban demands, at least as far as their stated aims are concerned, include an Islamisation (or re-Islamisation) of the state and in particular of the legislative, the judicial and the education systems, as well as of course a withdrawal of foreign troops. Opinion in Afghanistan is divided on all these issues, but there is extensive support for an Islamic judiciary; there is also growing hostility to the presence of foreign troops, which may now even affect a majority of Afghans. By manipulating these issues at the negotiating table, the Taliban could split the existing anti-Taliban front, bringing at least some of the old mujahidin to their side: if not the leaders, at least the base. The fact that the Taliban have established themselves as a credible and durable force on the battlefield is behind their interest in a political strategy to accompany the military one: they are ready to negotiate from a position of strength. The idea of negotiations with the Taliban sends waves of uncertainty and suspicion riding through the ranks of the old anti-Taliban front, which over the last several years has grown increasingly divided and fragmented. Parties, factions and individuals do not trust each other and even plot against each other all the time; the launch of negotiations with the Taliban could be the final straw, which leads to the implosion of the alliance established in Bonn in 2001. That would make continuing international intervention even more difficult and could push towards the acceptance of a not-so-inclusive settlement, bringing together the old mujahidin (or most of them) under Taliban hegemony and at the expense of the secular component of the existing coalition in Kabul.