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INTELLIGENCE DIGEST

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THIS WEEK'S BRIEFINGS

EDITOR'S notes

■ King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia suggests his country gave the UK intelligence that could have prevented the 2005 suicide attacks. As the British intelligence community in a 2006 report rejected having received such data, it is baffling that the king would repeat the claim and just before his high-profile visit to the UK. Was the 83-year-old monarch badly briefed or just purposefully provocative? Or are the British holding back information? Neither side will divulge the intelligence that was exchanged prior to the attacks and hence it is impossible to assess the usefulness of the Saudi data. The king might have opted to provoke but that is not the Saudi style of conducting foreign policy. Still, Abdullah seems to relish breaking with past ways and there is no reason why his pursuit of policy transformation should not manifest itself in the realm of foreign policy.

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Afghanistan's warlord alliance

On 23 February, an event that few could have anticipated took place in Kabul's Ghazi Stadium. A crowd of approximately 25,000 people gathered for a rally to express their support for a cause that would have seemed to be about as popular as the Taliban, the opium mafia or suicide bombing. Waving placards featuring a cast of characters ranging from Abdul Rashid Dostum to Ismail Khan, the crowds rallied around the cause of men some describe as warlords.

Calls for the trial of warlords by Malalai Joya, an outspoken female member of parliament, appear to have raised concerns among many of the leaders accused of having 'blood on their hands'. These calls, when combined with the execution of former Iraq president Saddam Hussein in December 2006 by the Iraqi counterpart to Hamed Karzai's administration, seemed to have galvanised the protest. While some Western observers said the participants had been bribed, many of the warlords seem to have genuine support among certain regional, political or ethnic constituencies.

To fight for these constituencies (and also for a general amnesty for war crimes), several of the warlords subsequently united to create a powerful political alliance known as the United National Front (UNF) in March. The formation of the UNF includes such key Northern Alliance leaders as Sayad Mansur Naderi, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Yunus Qanuni, Fahim Khan, Ismail Khan and Zia Massoud; ex-communists such as Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoi, Nur ul Haq Uloomi; and Mustafa Zahir, a grandson of the former king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah. While this union went largely unnoticed by Western media who were focused on the war with the Taliban, Afghans are aware of its portent and the UNF has been called the most significant political group to emerge since the Taliban regime was toppled in 2001.

There is little to unite the factions within the UNF apart from their desire to prevent themselves being politically sidelined by President Karzai and to weaken the Afghan presidency. To promote their agenda, the UNF leaders have called for the creation of a parliamentary system that would devolve power to the provinces. Many UNF members resent Karzai's efforts to place outside governors to rule provinces that have long sought autonomy and only recently acquired it during the years of civil conflict and national fragmentation that began in 1978. Much to the chagrin of Western human rights activists, many of their followers support the UNF leader's objectives.

To understand this support, a key commodity in Afghanistan called qawums (ethnic, clan or regional blocs) needs to be understood. While the Afghan government has painted the formation of Afghanistan in the 19th century as a unification process, the country was actually created by a series of bloody Pashtun conquests and ethnic cleansings. This conquest is still bitterly resented by the victimised groups.

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Myanmar's military, its factions and the future

The dispersal and arrest of mobs of red-robed monks in Myanmar over the past two months marks the well-publicised end of the Saffron Revolution, or at least the end of its first phases. Now the question on the lips of international observers is: what next? Can there be any hope of democratic transition in Myanmar?

Answering this question requires an evaluation of the most important, most opaque actor performing on the stage of Myanmar politics: the Tatmadaw, or military. Understanding the psyche of the Tatmadaw and regime chief Than Shwe is crucial to affecting change in Myanmar. Pro-democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi has been house-arrested into obscurity. As for external players, their power has always been limited. The junta tends to dismiss outside forces as imperialist interlopers, including China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Contrary to popular belief, China is not a regime puppet master; many members of the current junta cut their military teeth combating PRC-backed communists and Kuomintang militias during low-level Cold War border disputes.

Yet it cannot be denied as China is now at least allowed to speak at the Myanmar table. So why does Myanmar's military deign to engage, and yet still be paranoid of, China and ASEAN? Essentially, it is because those polities understand Than Shwe, and know that diplomatically influencing Myanmar rests on their ability to see the Tatmadaw as it sees itself: the sole guardian of Myanmar nationhood. Anyone who accepts this account is a potential, if warily regarded, ally.

Anyone who rejects it is an enemy to be disdained, and the EU, the US and UN are all currently in this camp. It may be time for these bodies to acknowledge that, short of direct military intervention, it is the Tatmadaw that holds the reigns of power in Myanmar, and the Tatmadaw that will have any say over when those reigns are handed over, if at all.

While Myanmar's top generals are well known for being unknowable, in some ways their motivations are fairly transparent. One only has to see the statues of three historical Burmese monarchs that have become part of everyday public iconography – they dominate the central plaza of the hideaway capital of Naypidaw and crop up in museums and state media – to understand how Than Shwe perceives himself: absolute ruler and protector of his people.

Shwe meets the criteria for emulating Burmese kings in many ways: he is paranoid, ruthless and willing to engage in violence. These are all qualities long espoused by Burmese royalty, who were constantly engaged in bloody warfare to maintain both the country's internal cohesion and international borders. Today, Shwe has folded the above history into a post-colonial narrative of opposing "external elements", as claimed by state propaganda, with the military, of course, taking on the role of defender of the nation.

In doing so, Shwe and his junta are both carrying on and re-inventing the Tatmadaw mythos. In the immediate post-independence period, a decade of chaotic civil war, the army proved the only stable institution in the country. Eventually, military officers assumed control of the country, and while there have been power shifts within the ranks, most soldiers have not relinquished the idea of themselves as stewards of the nation. That myth is now augmented by the crude regalia that links the junta to royalty.

One of the aforementioned internal Tatmadaw power shifts was the ouster of the former dictator Ne Win by his own officers after the 1988 'democracy summer', when Ne Win and his appointees promised to hold national elections. The current junta rejected the outcome of those votes – the election of the National League for Democracy (NLD) – and swept itself into power. As Than Shwe was one of the officers behind that putsch, it seems doubtful he would be sympathetic to the idea of a power transition following this latest round of civil unrest.

And yet the junta has released high-profile prisoners and announced it will draft a new constitution as part of its 'Road Map to Democracy'. In the past, such talk has been a military ruse; today, international pressure must be applied until such reconciliatory moves become realities. It is too much to hope for a handover of power to the NLD, but perhaps a power-sharing agreement can be hammered out, especially if the current generals are made to believe they can retire in peace.

With the following in mind, there are two non-mutually exclusive ways of engaging Myanmar. One, a distasteful necessity, is recognising Than Shwe and his hardliners as the legitimate rulers of the country and approaching them with tempting offers. Isolation via sanctions has only served to further entrench the junta, feeding into its self-image as a righteous pariah that has successfully managed to defy the world's great powers. Engagement combined with intense public scrutiny (which seemed to throw the junta off balance in September, proving press coverage will also be crucial to Myanmar's future) already seems to be bearing some fruit.

The other strategy is strengthening pro-dialogue blocs within the military. Such a faction may include the regime's number two, Maung Aye, who was apparently less willing to order a violent crackdown on the latest round of demonstrators. Unfortunately, the recent dismissal of Hla Htay Win, the head of Yangon command, for not giving the order to fire on monks, would indicate this group was recently outmanoeuvered by Than Shwe. Developing any sort of pro-dialogue wing may require stepping up covert intelligence and even officer exchange programmes, although the Tatmadaw may reject such proposals, as it is aware part of its power rests in the psychological isolation of its officer corps. Breaking this psychological isolation and splitting the military could be an important component in weakening the Tatmadaw in the future. ■

Is Russia bluffing on nuclear treaty?

President Vladimir Putin, while meeting with US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on 11 October, demanded the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty become global in its scope, otherwise Russia would withdraw from it. Putin also demanded a freeze on US efforts to build missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic. By doing this he clearly sought to link the treaty to the freeze on missile defences. Since globalising the INF treaty would take years of negotiation, even if successful, this demand is clearly something of a bluff. The abrogation of the INF treaty, which banned intermediate range nuclear forces in both Europe and Asia, could open the door to arms races throughout Eurasia.

But there is more to it than bluffing. Building on remarks by former defence minister and now Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, Putin explicitly cited Russia's southern and eastern neighbours' (Iran and China) missile programmes as threats. However, Moscow has no defences against those threats and its military and government will not openly admit these countries are, or soon will be, the main military threat to Russia. Although Russian officials, beginning with Putin, regularly claim there is no threat from Iran or China, some generals have publicly observed that Iran has an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) and space programme (thanks to Russian help) and could therefore pose a future threat to Russia. China's missile programme is even more developed, and well known, and has all Russian territories within its reach.

Because Russia evidently cannot build comprehensive missile defences against these threats, Moscow's only counter is to deter these states by building intermediate range nuclear weapons, unless it can compel Washington to include Russia in a pan-European missile defence project. Proposals brought by Gates and Rice to Moscow move in that direction, but Washington refuses to freeze plans for anti-missile facilities in Eastern Europe. Gates and Rice offered to link development of missile defences to development of the threat, in other words, Iran's ongoing uranium enrichments. They proposed Moscow could send liaison officers to the installations in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the Russian radar at Qabala in Azerbaijan could be linked to the NATO network, fostering Russia-NATO defence integration.

A vast new missile programme and added defence spending would gladden the hearts of Russia's military leaders, who have publicly agitated for a break with the INF treaty since 2005. Therefore, Putin's threatened withdrawal is not a complete bluff. Russia will probably leave the INF treaty unless Washington accepts Russia as a co-guarantor of European security against what Russia simultaneously and paradoxically claims to be a non-existent Iranian threat.

But withdrawing from the treaty merely reignites a nuclear and conventional arms race in Europe that Russia cannot win, but which would have catastrophic consequences for international security. Withdrawing from this treaty and, as can also be expected, from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty would represent giant steps towards remilitarising Russian foreign and security policy along Soviet lines. Nonetheless, Moscow evidently prefers to do this than admit its 'friends' and neighbours pose a growing military threat to its security.

Russia's diplomacy to compel a freeze on US missile defences and participate on an equal basis with Washington (if not NATO) in a continental defence system also betrays some of the fundamental problems and contradictions afflicting Russia's overall policy. First, the inveterate anti-Western threat assessment that refuses to see the origin of the true threats to Moscow comes from the military's corporate independence and unreformed character.

The Russian military leadership view Russia as an equal to the US and use the threat of the US to secure massive funding from the government. Certainly they have convinced Putin that 10 radar stations and interceptors in the Czech Republic and Poland threaten vital Russian interests. Therefore, the consequences of the absence of any democratic reform of the armed forces or of democratic civilian control over the means of force in Russia (including the FSB, MVD forces and so on) have fostered a foreign and defence policy based on the presupposition of inherent East-West rivalry and enemy relations.

This obsessive passion for anti-US policy and the perceived undermining of Russia's 'great power' status by Washington have become major instruments of Russian domestic propaganda used to stir up an 'external enemy' in ways that evoke Soviet era campaigns. This organisation of mass hatred admirably serves Putin and the military and security service strongmen in their desire to remain in control of all of Russia's power and wealth: even as they turn on each other in that competition for wealth and power. Putin's rude treatment of Rice and Gates during their visit was clearly staged domestic theatre to show Russia's imperial hauteur and independence, even though subsequent private negotiations were much more constructive.

This anti-US stance leads to insoluble contradictions. In pursuit of great power status and engagement with Washington, Putin feels impelled to intimidate Washington into agreements, even though Washington is, and will remain, Moscow's only bulwark against what its military knows to be the growing Iranian and Chinese threats that could imperil Russia.

The recurrence of Soviet-style diplomacy and the obsession with great power status unwarranted by Russia's real military capability indicates the Putin regime is regressing towards traditional policies and behaviours. In addition to this, rather the absence of control over inflated threat assessments, defence spending, and an unaccountable military and police establishment engenders military adventurism like that displayed in the Chechen wars and which could erupt again. Russian information attacks on Estonian computer networks in April-May exemplified this possibility. The point is, Russia knows it paid no price for that attack nor its current intimidation tactics. Consequently, Russia not only remains a risk factor in world politics, but the nature and scope of that risk is growing. ■

INTELLIGENCE POINTERS

■ **NATO MULLS REDUCTION TO RESPONSE FORCE CORE**

NATO defence ministers have tasked their Military Committee to determine how to reduce the core of the NATO Response Force (NRF) amid pressures from continuing operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo. NATO spokesman James Appathurai said ministers had agreed at a meeting in Noordwijk, the Netherlands, on 24-25 October there should be a "graduated approach" to the NRF in which the concept, range of missions and ultimate size of the force would remain unchanged. He explained that the committee would determine the size of a core that would be able to ramp up to 25,000 troops, the current size of the force. *Jane's* understands that this would mean a core made up of support troops and enablers on standby ready to rapidly mobilise and deploy a larger force. NATO also wants to bring "added value" to energy security and multinational cyber defence efforts and identified a need to improve maritime capabilities.

■ **ROUTE CHANGE FOR BALTIC PIPELINE POSSIBLE**

The planned gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea may get a new routing as the pipeline could lead to political tensions over a potential military build up in the region. From 8-9 October, representatives from countries around the Baltic Sea met to discuss the planned gas pipeline from Vyborg, Russia, to Greifswald, Germany, via the Baltic Sea. The pipeline may become a political problem for nearby countries. One of the reasons is the statement by President Vladimir Putin that the pipeline in the Baltic Sea will fall under military protection. A consequence of the Russian posture is that the pipeline might be an excuse for an increased Russian presence around its eventual location. Russian naval planning calls for 31 new ships between now and 2015. The Russian-German gas pipe is part of the EU commission's Trans-European Energy Network and is, therefore, an EU priority project.

Continued from the front cover

When the Pashtun-Afghan state collapsed in 1992, these ethnic grievances manifested themselves in the form of Hazara, Uzbek and Tajik militias that fought to defend autonomous ethno-provinces. When the Pashtun Taliban sought to reconquer these areas, the northern ethnic groups created the United Front or the Northern Alliance to resist them.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban, the US-led coalition has recognised the dominant role the Pashtuns play in Afghanistan and has backed Pashtun moderate President Karzai. The coalition has also tacitly supported Karzai's efforts to increase his power at the expense of the various non-Pashtun regional commanders from the north. This tightrope act between the weak Karzai government and powerful ethnic and political chiefs was endangered by recent calls in parliament for the trial of some of these leaders for war crimes.

While most Western observers are unaware of the largely unseen power struggles in Afghanistan, all of the UNF men have been undermined by the Karzai government. While the removal of Ismail Khan from his 'Amirate' of Herat is the most notable example, the central government has moved to weaken the power bases of other leaders in more subtle ways. For example, former minister of education Nur Muhammad Qarqin is a Turkmen from Jowzjan province that also happens to be General Dostum's home province/base (the Uzbeks and Turkmen are close ethnically). As such, he was seen as a Dostum loyalist, but 'defected' to Karzai and began to officially side with the president in power struggles with Dostum. The haemorrhaging of Dostum supporters is encouraged by the Karzai government, which also named Dostum's Tajik rival, Ustad Atta, governor of his old capital of Mazar i Sharif. Fahim Khan, Sayed Mansour Naderi, and Yunus Qanuni have similarly been weakened by the central government.

The UNF was formed with the aim of creating a unified power block to stymie the Karzai government's efforts at centralisation that strip these men and their provincial followers of their autonomy and power. Acting while Karzai was travelling abroad, these leaders (several of whom have positions in Karzai's government) moved to create a 'loyal opposition' party.

Far from being loyal, critics say the party is an attempt to dismantle the Afghan constitution. Actually, it seems to be focused on bringing collective pressure to bear on the Karzai government should it move against one of the individual members. Should the Karzai government seek to remove one of the members from their provincial power-bases or try them for war crimes, then they will mobilise their resources to prevent this. There are also longer term implications and the UNF members will represent a powerful political bloc should the Karzai administration fall or the Taliban insurgency spread.

As one Afghan source tells *Jane's*: "These men are preparing to defend themselves against Karzai, the Taliban or anyone else. If the centre weakens, they are aligning themselves for another civil war." ■

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