

Taliban turning to more 'complex' attacks

Analysis shows insurgents are increasingly confronting NATO troops in open warfare, rather than relying on bombings, suicide strikes

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Taliban fighters are increasingly hitting their targets directly instead of relying on bombs, according to a year-end statistical review that contradicts a key NATO message about the war in Afghanistan.

Public statements from Canadian and other foreign troops have repeatedly emphasized the idea that the insurgents are losing momentum because they can only detonate explosives, failing to confront their opponents in combat.

But an analysis of almost 13,000 violent incidents in Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008, prepared by security consultant Sami Kovanen and provided to The Globe and Mail, shows a clear trend toward open warfare.

By far the most common type of incident, in Mr. Kovanen's analysis, is the so-called "complex attack," meaning ambushes or other kinds of battle using more than one type of weapon. The analyst counted 2,555 such attacks in 2008, up 117 per cent from the previous year.



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Taliban militants are seen last week with their weapons. The increase in 'complex' attacks such as ambushes is disturbing because they involve more fighters, rather than relying on bombings and suicide attacks, said Sami Kovanen, a security consultant. (*Reuters*)

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Bombings also increased, but only by 63 per cent year-on-year for a total of 2,384 successful and attempted strikes in 2008.

Mr. Kovanen has spent years tracking the conflict in Afghanistan, first as a NATO officer and most recently at the newly established Kabul-based consultancy Tundra Strategic Security Solutions. The latest trends are disturbing, he says, because the Taliban need more manpower to launch complex ambushes.

"Clearly they are not as weak as the military claims," Mr. Kovanen said.

The numbers for Kandahar province, where Canadian troops have responsibility, do not show the same trend. In that province, the number of bombing incidents has grown more quickly – up 141 per cent – than complex attacks – up 83 per cent. Kandahar remains the most violent province in the country, however, with 1,090 incidents of all types last year, up from 697 in 2007.

The insurgents appear to have refined their strategy last summer, Mr. Kovanen said, as his database started to show the Taliban using more bombs against foreign troops and saving their guerrilla fighters for strikes on easier targets such as the Afghan army and police. That may explain why the pattern of attacks was different in Kandahar, with its concentration of international forces.

At the same time, Mr. Kovanen said the threat against foreign troops is growing because the Taliban's bombs are getting bigger and the insurgents have proved they can briefly – and for now, occasionally – overwhelm the international forces with ambushes such as the attack in Surobi district that killed 10 French troops last summer.

Besides the trends, what stands out in Mr. Kovanen's figures is the sheer number of incidents. At the beginning of 2008, Canadian and NATO officials were confidently predicting a halt to the increases in violence, and even senior UN analysts were forecasting only a slightly worse conflict. Mr. Kovanen's final tally shows a 52-per-cent increase in violent incidents in 2008 – more than predicted, even by his own analysis.

The geographical spread of the violence is also raising concern, he said, as the insurgents appear to be gaining control in new provinces such as Wardak, Ghazni, and Logar. “One big surprise was not the actual numbers of incidents, but more how the Taliban were able to gain strong influence or even complete control in so wide an area during 2008,” Mr. Kovanen said.





One hopeful trend in Mr. Kovanen's statistics is the slight decrease in suicide attacks. While almost every other category of violence worsened sharply last year, the number of insurgents who detonated themselves using car bombs or suicide vests has fallen, from 135 in 2007 to 126 last year. Those figures include a decrease in Kandahar's suicide attacks, too, from 26 to 23.

Among those suicide blasts were some of the worst explosions in Afghanistan's history, such as the bombing that killed more than 100 people on the outskirts of Kandahar city last February.

Still, the insurgents' apparent lack of enthusiasm for suicide blasts may suggest that Arab extremists are not yet an important part of the Taliban ranks.

The coming year may bring global *ihadists* to Afghanistan, however, as the United States shifts the focus of its military effort away from Iraq.

“*Jihadists*' focus is shifting from Iraq into Afghanistan,” Mr. Kovanen said, “and this year we are expecting to see more sophisticated attacks and better tactics.”

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