

## The New Taliban Tactics Have a Catch

by [James Dunnigan](#)

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The Afghan government believes that key leaders in the Pakistani army and intelligence service (the ISI) are still making deals, some of them secret, with the Taliban and Islamic radical groups, to make it easier for Afghanistan to be attacked, while providing Pakistan some immunity from terrorism. This kind of cynical arrangement is a staple of politics, especially in the Moslem world. Islamic radical groups will grant such immunity from attack in return for favors, then later resume attacks. So while the Afghan accusations may sound bizarre to Western ears, they make a lot of sense along the Afghan-Pakistan border. Behind the scenes, the U.S. is trying to get the Pakistani army and ISI to change their strategy, but that is not easy. The generals leading both organizations (and the current head of the Pakistani military used to head ISI) are more concerned with self-preservation in the long term, than in eliminating Taliban activity inside Afghanistan. To the Pakistani generals, the Taliban are just another in a long line of tribal troublemakers. And it's traditional to deal with these fellows using bluff and bluster, rather than anything more expensive (like bullets and soldiers lives). Ideally, you'd like to get the tribes fighting each other, which is exactly what is happening when the Taliban go to Afghanistan. This year, however, there is an additional complication. Several thousand al Qaeda terrorists (or recruits) have showed up, the aftereffect of the al Qaeda defeat in Iraq. It's not yet clear how many of the al Qaeda men will cross the border, or stay and try to take control of Pakistan. The ISI is negotiating, hoping to get most of these new thugs into Afghanistan. But al Qaeda needs Pakistan as a base, and NATO is leaning on Pakistan hard to not allow that.

The Taliban have developed more effective tactics this year. After a disastrous outing last year, the Taliban were under a lot of pressure to reduce their casualties this year, and they have. The Afghans have always been adaptable, especially when it is a matter of life and death, and there have been many small changes in Taliban tactics to counter the greater lethality of NATO forces (who use UAVs, smart bombs and better trained troops). Taliban forces now operate in smaller groups, keeping weapons (which can be identified from the air by UAV or aircraft cameras) hidden, and concentrate forces just before an attack. Cell phones and walkie-talkies make this easier. Taliban will also break off an attack

quickly, knowing that the smart bombs are on the way. The Taliban will stay near the Pakistani border, because the Americans and NATO rarely pursue, although smart bombs are more frequently dropped on the Pakistani side. But once a group of armed Taliban have made it into Pakistan, they can melt into the civilian population. Which leads to another popular Taliban tactic, using civilians as human shields. It doesn't always work, and when it doesn't the Taliban are quick to claim another NATO atrocity. The Taliban have also been using a growing number of deceptions to try and get NATO smart bombs or artillery to hit friendly targets. A favorite one on the border is to fire mortar shells at NATO troops on one side of the border, and at nearby Pakistani border guards just across the frontier, to try and deceive NATO and Pakistani troops into believing they are firing at each other. NATO counter-fire radars have spotted the shells, and traced them all back to the same location. But such radars are not always available, and sometimes this trick works. Another deception is feed bad intel to the followers, and try and trigger a missile or smart bomb attack on civilians.

This year's Taliban tactics, however, are more disruptive and less concerned with taking permanent control of territory. The Taliban is trying to disrupt the Afghan government control (which was never very great to begin with), and wear down the foreign troops (and cause popular discontent back home that will lead to NATO forces being recalled). The Taliban are playing the long game, which is how things are done up in these hills, when you are dealing with a more powerful opponent. The Taliban have no doubt that their foe (the Afghan government and their foreign allies) are more powerful. The foreign troops in particular, are very deadly. The older Taliban, who fought the Russians in the 1980s, note that the NATO and U.S. troops are all equal to the small number of commandos the Russians used. Back then, the only Russians the Afghans feared were the few thousand paratroopers and Spetsnaz commandos they sometimes encountered. When that happened, the Afghans knew it was time to retreat, quickly. But now, even the Afghan Army troops are more lethal. They have been trained by the Westerners, and that has made a difference. But most of the opponents the Taliban face are anti-Taliban (or pro-government, there is a difference) tribal fighters. The "Taliban War" is basically a tribal conflict, just as it was back in the 1980s, against the Russians, and in the 1990s, when the Taliban captured Kabul, and almost took over the entire country (cut short by the U.S. invasion of late 2001.)

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The Taliban are paying more attention to extortion and taking over business operations, on both sides of the border. The Taliban may be on a Mission From God, but God's children have expenses and must get paid. The more the better. The tribal areas are poor, and the Taliban attracts a better grade of roughneck if they can pay better. The Taliban leaders, in particular, want more reliable gunmen, if only to provide themselves with better personal security. NATO has stepped up efforts to track down and kill the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership. This is happening more often, and is disrupting Taliban operations in areas where key leaders are taken out. The American get more cooperation from Afghans in this, because the Taliban have increased their attacks on reconstruction projects. This year, more efforts are being made to kidnap foreign aid workers, and hold them for ransom. The Taliban could kill these guys, but the ransom routine has the same demoralizing effect on the aid workers, and raises badly needed cash as well. In the last week, two French aid workers were grabbed, and two Turkish ones were released, after ransom was paid, after being held a week.

The U.S. is doubling the number of MRAPs (armored trucks designed to deflect mine and roadside bomb explosions) in Afghanistan (to 1,600). These must be driven in from Pakistani ports. That will come in handy, because the Taliban are trying to take down the road based NATO supply line, that stretches from the Pakistani coast into Afghanistan. These trucks are protected by lucrative security arrangements made with tribes that "own" the roads. These guys don't like seeing this income threatened by a bunch of religious fanatics. Most of this fighting is taking place on the Pakistani side of the border, and NATO has quietly told the Pakistanis that if these supply lines cannot be protected, NATO would have to come in and do it. This, more than anything else, motivates the Pakistanis to tone down Taliban violence, at least on the Pakistani side of the border.