

## Taliban learning how to win key propaganda battles

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WASHINGTON — The Taliban, once dismissed as too stupid to know they would lose if they dared to fight well-trained Canadian and allied troops, have proved themselves resilient, if still ill-equipped, warriors, learning from their early defeats and adapting to stage sophisticated attacks, inflicting serious casualties and winning key propaganda battles.

"They are showing greater political savvy, too," said a military analyst, who asked not to be further identified. "They understand they don't have to defeat us, they just have to defeat the will of the people back home."

The analyst, who is familiar with the counterinsurgency being fought in Kandahar, added: "We are in a very dangerous time, we have an election coming up and they [the Taliban] know we have a rotation going on and that we are close to the 100 [killed] number which will provoke re-examination" of the mission at home.

Last week's well-executed ambush of an armoured Canadian column is only the latest in a series of Taliban battlefield successes. The Canadian losses - three dead, five injured after a clever, daylight ambush and a fierce gun battle - were only the latest in a high-profile series of setbacks for the U.S.-led coalition that now numbers more than 50,000 troops but has so far failed to defeat the Taliban.

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Canada's new Chief of Defence Staff, General Walter Natynczyk, conceded that the Taliban ambush was "worrisome in the kind of sophistication of the attack."

Better communications, better intelligence and a growing cadre of young, battle-hardened new insurgent commanders all contribute to recent Taliban success.

While senior Canadian military sources insist the casualty counts remain hugely lopsided - as many as 50 or 100 killed Taliban for every Canadian combat casualty - the body-bag ratio does not determine victory in any counterinsurgency.

In August, 10 French soldiers were killed and 21 injured in a similarly well-executed ambush. More than 100 fighters blocked a road, forced the French out of their vehicles and then hammered them with mortar and heavy machine-gun fire from carefully placed positions.

A month earlier, scores of Taliban fighters and several suicide bombers launched waves of attacks on a newly established U.S. base close to the Pakistan border. Nine Americans were killed and 15 injured in what was - until the French losses - the worst single combat defeat for foreign forces since the 2001 invasion that toppled the Taliban.

"They are not only Taliban. They were [Pakistan-based] Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hezb-i-Islami, Taliban and those people who are dissatisfied with [President Hamid Karzai's] government after these recent incidents," said a former Afghan governor, Tamim Nuristani. "They all came together for this one."

August was the deadliest month since 2001 for foreign troops in Afghanistan. Taliban attacks killed 43 coalition soldiers. "The three summer months have been the worst since 2001," admitted NATO spokesman Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette, adding the Taliban remain "well organized [and] still in a position to mount attacks."

Just as foreign armies have adapted - for instance by shifting to ever more heavily armoured vehicles and increasingly turning to helicopters to move troops and supplies in response to the Taliban's mastery of roadside bombs - so too have the Taliban tactics changed

to focus on attacks with more far-reaching impact. In June, in a spectacularly successful attack in the heart of Canada's patch, Taliban fighters blew up a tanker truck outside Sarpoza prison in Kandahar city, freeing hundreds of fellow fighters, many captured by Canadian troops over the previous three years. "These spectacular attacks have psychological impact that far exceeds their tactical significance," said Christine Fair, a senior political scientist at U.S.-based think tank the Rand Corporation and an expert on Afghanistan. "But that is, of course, the point."

Yesterday, a double-suicide attack on the Kandahar police headquarters again demonstrated the Taliban's capacity to strike at the heart of Afghanistan's inadequate and often unreliable security forces, the police and army that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government hopes will be capable of coping once Canada pulls out in 2011.

None of the attacks tipped the strategic balance. NATO and U.S. forces, with the growing Afghan army, remain, by far, the most powerful military force in the country. But all the attacks bore the hallmarks of better training - likely in camps in Pakistan - more effective command and control and a growing awareness by the insurgents that they, too, need to win the battle for "hearts and minds."

Other analysts, like Professor Douglas Bland, chairman of the Defence Management Studies program at Queen's University in Kingston and a former army officer, believes the military prowess of the Taliban is still extremely limited. "They have some low-level commanders who are learning, but their attacks are still hit-and-miss and not a lot of consequence," he said. Prof. Bland said he believes the Taliban have underestimated the will of Western democracies to stay the course in rebuilding Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the Taliban's capacity to plan and stage spectacular attacks - beginning early this year with the assault on the heavily guarded Serena Hotel in the centre of Kabul that had the Norwegian foreign minister cowering in the basement - has dispelled any notions that they are a defeated force.

Rather, both in the Afghan hinterlands and in the minds of Western voters, the Taliban are increasingly regarded as more potent, more powerful, more credible.

The Pentagon is planning to shift to southern Afghanistan 5,000 troops originally destined to go to Iraq next month. Both U.S. presidential candidates have vowed to pour more American soldiers and money into winning the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

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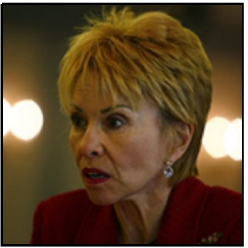
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