

MEASURES OF “PROGRESS” IN AFGHANISTAN IN THE SPRING OF 2012

THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC FOCUS, TRANSPARENCY AND CREDIBILITY

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Executive Summary

Military progress is only one of the tests that the US and ISAF must meet to accomplish a successful transition in Afghanistan – even on the basis of minimal security and stability or Afghan “good enough.”

- The Afghan civil government must have enough public support and provide enough services to win popular support once outside military and aid programs largely depart.
- There must be enough outside aid to help Afghanistan through the period in which massive cuts in outside aid and military spending take place.
- The Afghan national security forces must become effective enough to replace US and ISAF forces and be sustainable with the level of self-financing and aid that are actually forthcoming.
- A new post-withdrawal balance of power must be established between the non-Pashtun north, various Pashtun elements, and areas under Taliban/Haqqani/Hekmatyer influence and control to create a reasonable level of stability.
- Pakistan and other neighboring states need to accept the creation of a “new” Afghanistan to the degree they do not actively undermine its stability.

It is not clear at this point in time how many of these other tests can be met. None, however, can be decoupled from the level of progress that the US, ISAF, and ANSF are making in defeating the insurgents. Moreover, the overall success of both the war and every aspect of transition depend on the progress being made in defeating insurgents at the political level relative to the political popularity of the Afghan government and regional power brokers.

Like the war in Iraq, and virtually every major counterinsurgency, victory is defined as the ability of the government to defeat insurgents at the political level, through successful governance, through economic incentives and security, through measurable popular support, and through local and national security. Meaningful progress towards victory is determined by the level of progress in all of these areas, and must be measured in net assessment terms: progress towards victory in a strategic sense is the rate of overall success of the government relative to the insurgent influence and control.

As was the case in Vietnam, the US, ISAF, and ANSF can win every major tactical engagement and still see the Afghan government lose the war if the insurgents take control of the countryside and the Afghan government cannot win the support of the people or establish effective governance in the field.

This is not a lesson that the US, its allies, ISAF, UNAMA or any other source of unclassified reporting on either the Iraq War or the Afghan conflict seems to have fully learned in the last decade. Integrated civil military reporting and net assessment have been no more real than integrated civil-military planning. Worse, unclassified reporting remains stovepiped and often grossly distorted by “spin” and “cheerleading” in claiming exaggerated progress in a given part of the mission.

This lack of unclassified transparency and credibility has been a critical problem throughout both wars, although in fairness unclassified progress reporting has been far worse in the civil areas than the military ones, and particularly in the almost total lack of credibility in reporting on the impact of aid, quality and integrity of governance, and presence of a functioning justice system.

This may not have mattered as long as the war was fully resourced, and there were no rigid time limits for transition. It is particularly critical as the US and its allies move toward withdrawing most of their combat forces and aid efforts to meet a predictable schedule known by the insurgents, the Afghan people, their government and surrounding states.

What has always been an exercise in armed nation building – where every meaningful assessment and metric should have been tailored to measuring success in meeting this overall goal – is now a race to 2014. It is a race between the ability to create a successful and stable Afghan government and political system against insurgent ability to outwait the US, ISAF, and outside aid efforts and score victories in a war of political attrition.

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The Dangers in a US/ISAF ISAF Emphasis on War Fighting and Kinetics

Unfortunately, even if one only looks at the military progress solely in tactical terms, there is no way to tell from recent unclassified reporting and testimony what level of military progress is really being made, or is likely in the future. ISAF and the US are not providing meaningful transparency in reporting on military progress – much less any form of net assessment of the balance and trends in overall insurgent and Afghan government capabilities.

They are using metrics that focus on the areas where ISAF makes the most tactical gains without necessarily achieving any lasting military impact. These same metrics now show up regularly in ISAF monthly reporting, military testimony, and the semi-annual reports that the Department of Defense sends to Congress: the *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan, or “1230 report.”* These military metrics do have some value, and – unlike almost all major progress claims made by US Aid – they seem to be honest and credible.

The problem is that such metrics focus almost exclusively on progress in the tactical or kinetic aspects of military capability. These measures seem to be chosen to provide an exaggerated picture of progress in narrow areas where similar progress has been deeply misleading in past wars like the insurgent struggles in China, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Unclassified metrics do not provide a credible picture of progress in a politico-military struggle. They instead provide a carefully cherry-picked picture of success whose selectivity and “spin,” deprive them of credibility and the ability to win support for an effective transition.

Monthly Security Incidents (October 2009 – March 2012)

One set of metrics does provide a broad picture of the trends in the intensity of the fighting. **Figure One** shows the number of monthly security incidents by broad type, and. ISAF defines these security incidents as,

“...enemy actions and explosive hazard events. Enemy actions include direct fire attacks, indirect fire attacks, surface-to-air fire. By explosive hazards, ISAF means executed IED attacks, namely IED explosions and mine strikes, as well as potential IED attacks. Potential IED attacks include those that were found and cleared, premature IED detonations, and IEDs that were turned in to coalition by local nationals.”

The latest Department of Defense semi-annual report to Congress – the “1230 report” – was issued on April 27, 2012. It stated that these trends were highly favorable: “Security incidents from October 2011 through March 2012 decreased by 15 percent compared to the corresponding period last year. Notably, data reflects nine straight months (since July 2011) of year-over-year (YoY) decreases in security incidents.”

The problem is that – like virtually every other unclassified measure of military progress issued by ISA and used by the US – counting monthly security incidents assumes that the insurgents need to directly attack US, other ISAF, ANSF and other targets rather than infiltrate given areas, expand their political influence, intimidate and threaten Afghan officials and the governments supporters, and wait out the withdrawal of US and ISAF forces and most aid workers.

It does not make sense for insurgents to attack superior ground forces unless they feel that some degree of constant pressure and casualties speeds US and ISAF withdrawal, or they can make media gains in influencing Afghan, regional, US, and allied domestic views of the war. Insurgents know that most outside forces will be gone by the end of 2014, that a number of ISAF countries are already cutting their forces, that the US plans major withdrawals in 2012, and that President Obama pledged further “steady” withdrawals in US forces during his spring 2012 visit to Afghanistan.

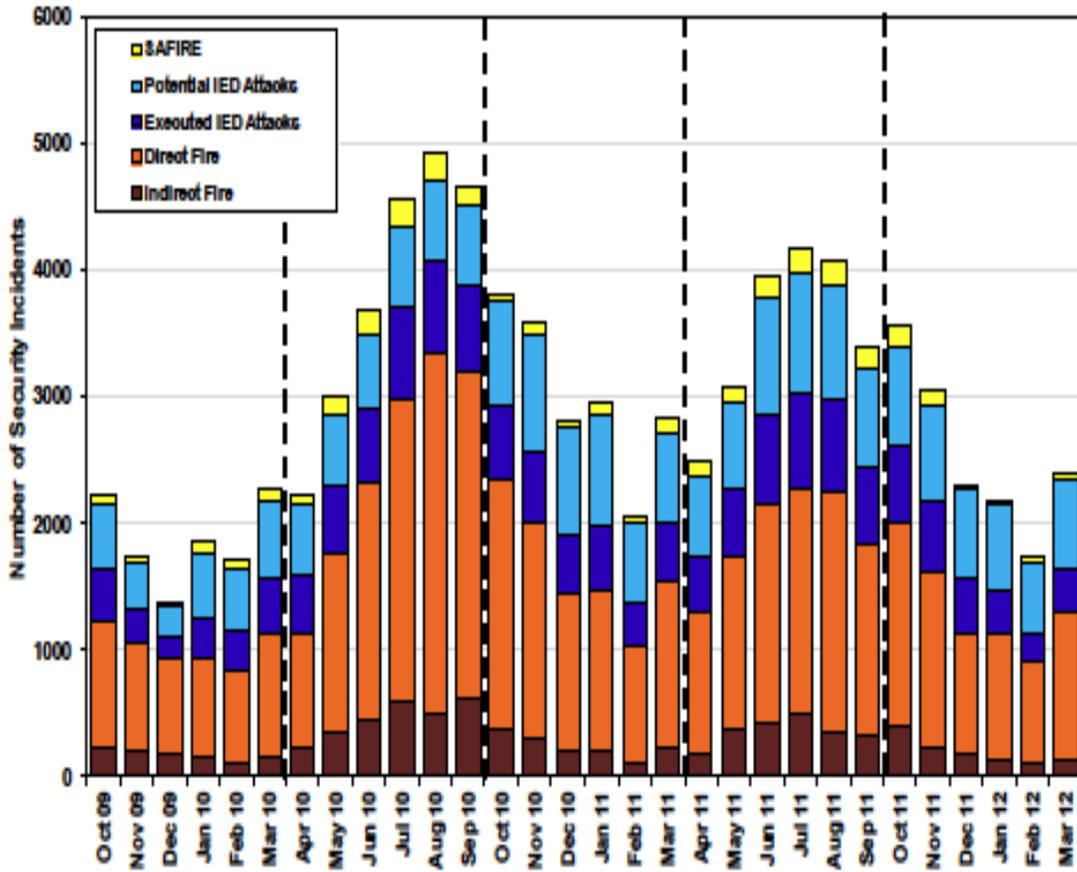
The insurgents do not have to fight the US and ISAF directly. They can fight an indirect war of political attrition – keeping up the rhetoric of war while fighting strategically rather than on a tactical basis. Moreover, a few incidents that have a major strategic communications impact – involving a small number of attackers and suicide bombers – offers the insurgents major political gains at minimum military cost.

It is the quality of the security incident and its strategic effect – not the number of incidents – that is the key factor. If the insurgents do a steadily better job of focusing on the strategic political impact of their attacks, they have less and less reason to seek to actually defeat US, ISAF, and ANSF forces.

Moreover, as US and allied forces withdraw, the insurgents can keep up pressure on a steadily declining force-to-space ratio simply by continuing lower-level attacks that force US, ISAF, and ANSF forces to react, disperse to secure given areas, and keep up a constant strain on the ANA and ANP, as well as create constant uncertainty for Afghan officials and aid workers.

Moreover, like virtually every official metric used in reporting on the Afghan War, no effort is made to fully define what “security incidents” are counted and the level of uncertainty involved. This is critical because it is not clear whether “security incidents” include all incidents in Afghanistan, or those involving US, ISAF, and government targets. It is also unclear whether a sufficient collection capability exists to count insurgent attacks on local Afghan targets or in support of efforts to influence and control the population.

Figure One: Monthly Security Incidents (October 2009 – March 2012)



Source: Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 27, 2012. Report is submitted consistent with both House Resolution 2219 (Report 112-110) and Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended

Enemy Initiated Attacks

The US and ISAF make repeated use of another metric called Enemy Initiated Attacks. This metric has far less credibility as a serious measure of even tactical progress than the previous counts of “security incidents.” It seems designed largely to portray an exaggerated image of success. ISAF defines Enemy Initiated Attacks as,

“...enemy actions (enemy-initiated direct fire, indirect fire, and surface-to-air fire) and explosive hazard events to include executed attacks only (IED explosions/mine strikes). Potential or attempted IED attacks (i.e. IEDs and mines found and cleared, premature IED detonations, and IED turn-ins) are not included.

National Trends

Measuring nationwide trends in Enemy Initiated Attacks does have value in narrow tactical terms, but it is important to note that it again assumes that the insurgents deliberately seek defeat against superior military forces rather than victory at the political and strategic level, and are somehow weak if they pursue other goals and seek to outwait the US and ISAF. Moreover, they exclude IEDs – the form of insurgent attacks presenting the least risk to the insurgents and one where the decline in incidents has been much lower than the types of attack that are include in Enemy Initiated Attacks.

Figure Two shows the most recent such national trends in Enemy Initiated Attacks. The April 2012 “1230” report states that,

EIAs – which, unlike security incidents, do not include potential or attempted IED attacks – were also down 16 percent from October 2011 through March 2012 in comparison to the corresponding period last year. Since May 2011, each month has seen fewer enemy EIAs than the corresponding month from the previous year.

At best, this metric ignores the political and strategic value of the enemy initiated attacks that do occur and their impact on US and allied support for the war; it also does not take into account the Afghan population’s perceptions and willingness to deal with the Taliban – all areas where recent polls show such attacks may be having significant impact.

The value of such a metric also depends heavily on the assumption that because the insurgents declare annual offensives, they really have the objective of launching major attacks on US, ISAF, and ANSF forces regardless of the practical consequences. For all the reasons cited earlier, it is not clear why any intelligent and adaptive set of insurgents should initiate attacks unless they feel the political gains outweigh predictable losses at the military level. Unlike total security incidents, this metric essentially measures the insurgent’s willingness to take military losses by initiating combat they can avoid.

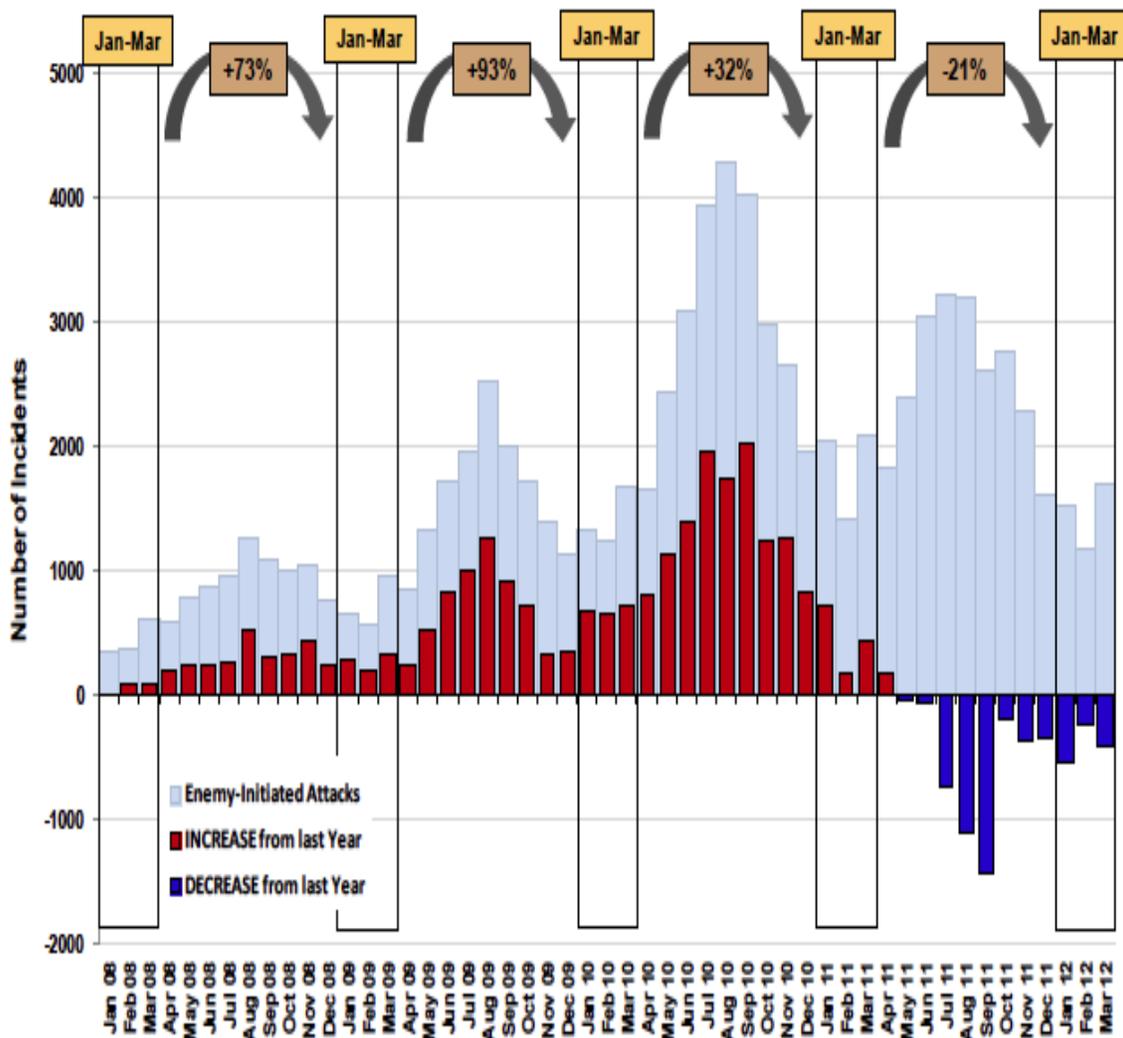
Accordingly, selectively counting the trends in Enemy Initiated Attacks may be one of the worst possible metrics for measuring success in the present war. Some US officials do indicate that they feel there is a direct correlation between this metric and overall insurgent influence. If so, it would be far more relevant. However, it is unclear what evidence exists to support this assertion.

So far, neither the US or ISAF have made any effort to show a clear correlation between the number of Enemy Initiated Attacks and other patterns in the tactical violence. This still, however, would ignore lower level acts of violence like kidnappings, intimidation, and extortion. It also seems to ignore significant numbers of “enemy initiated attacks”

when these affect local forces and officials that are not reported upwards from the local level.

Moreover, if one looks at the trends in the pale blue lines for total attacks in Figure Two versus the brightly colored indicators for changes in percentage of attacks, the shifts in levels of violence become somewhat problematic. It is important that they are not increasing – which implies a high degree of enemy freedom of action and tactical success. The decreases in in RC Southwest, however, only involve a few peak months in the summer of 2011, and the overall pattern of attacks remained high.

Figure Two: Enemy-Initiated Attacks Nationwide Year-Over-Year Change –Part One



Source: Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 27, 2012. Report is submitted consistent with both House Resolution 2219 (Report 112-110) and Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended

Regional Trends

Figure Three provides the same comparisons at the regional level. A number show trends that do little more than reflect the statistical noise level. The data for RC Capital, RC West, RC North and RC South are only important to the extent they do not really show a major trend of either increasing or decreasing attacks.

The only area where the data in the April 2012 “1230” report do show an important enough swing to be clearly statistically relevant is for RC Southwest – where the patterns reflect the US and allied victory in the Helmand River Valley. Again, however, this may only reflect the fact that the insurgents ceased to engage in futile battles, not that they lost all political influence or the ability to fight different wars to win political influence.

It also seems questionable that the decline in Enemy Initiated Attacks in RC Southwest provides a good overall measure of regional insurgent influence since UN data show a major increase in narcotics production in areas outside the main populated areas in the river plain and valleys. The Taliban and drug trade seem to have functioned outside the key population centers and main agricultural areas in the Helmand River Valley 2011 in spite of the trends shown in Figure Three.

It is important to note that the narrative in the Department of Defense “1230” report does provide a supporting summary of the tactical trends by region, and a rough assessment of the overall security in each area. These narrative assessments do not seem to reflect any obvious spin or bias of the kind reflected in the metrics. They do, however, focus on tactical progress and they do not make any evaluation of the level of insurgent influence or control, the level of insurgent activity, or any net assessment of the progress in Afghan forces and Afghan governance relative to the insurgency.

The narrative in the latest 1230 report also does summarize the relative balance of insurgent capabilities by focusing only on the Taliban and by making the following judgments:

The insurgency failed to regain momentum during the fall and winter following the operational failure of their summer 2011 campaign, and the gap between insurgent intent and capability continued to grow. This has been further exacerbated by the increasing success of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) where reconciliation efforts appear to be hurting Taliban cohesiveness. Since March of last year, there has been a more than three-fold increase in the number of formal reintegrees choosing to leave the battlefield through the APRP.

The Taliban-led insurgency, however, remains adaptive and determined with a significant regenerative capacity and retains the capability to emplace substantial numbers of IEDs and conduct isolated high-profile attacks. As insurgent capacity to directly contest ANSF-ISAF gains erodes, insurgents have increasingly resorted to asymmetric efforts in an attempt to regain territory and influence, including assassinations, kidnappings, intimidation tactics, and strategic messaging campaigns. The insurgency will likely expand its asymmetric operations as a result of its diminished operational capability and in order to conserve diminishing resources.

The insurgency also continues to receive critical support – including sanctuary, training infrastructure, and operational and financial support – from within neighboring Pakistan. In fact, key elements of the insurgency remain potent and threatening due to the availability of sanctuary inside of Pakistan including the Afghan Taliban based in Balochistan Province and the Haqqani Network in North Waziristan Agency.

The civil-military COIN strategy continues to expand security for the Afghan population, providing the necessary conditions for the Afghan Government to extend effective governance and

promote economic and social development.

During the reporting period, the Afghan Government made limited progress towards effective and sustainable governance. The executive branch focused primarily on supporting the security Transition process and negotiating a long-term strategic partnership with the United States. The Loya Jirga, Afghanistan's highest consultative body, reaffirmed the country's commitment to such a partnership with the United States. Afghanistan has reached similar agreements with the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Turkmenistan. The Afghan Parliament resumed operations following the resolution of fraud allegations from the September 2010 *Wolesi Jirga* elections and made progress on important legislative initiatives, including approval of the supplementary budget request to recapitalize the Afghan Central Bank for costs related to the Kabul Bank bailout. Importantly, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a three-year, \$133.6M extended-credit facility program, which is intended to support strengthened economic and financial governance. Considerable progress was also made in the health and education sectors, and critical infrastructure continued to develop.

However, the capacity of the Afghan Government and the extension of effective governance and rule of law have been limited by multiple factors, including widespread corruption, limited human capacity, and uneven concentration of power among the judicial, legislative, and executive branches. Setbacks in governance and development continue to slow the reinforcement of security gains and threaten the legitimacy and long-term viability of the Afghan Government. The Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of Interior (MoI) are working closely with ISAF to develop and implement initiatives to combat corruption. Minister of Defense Wardak has personally taken ownership of anti-corruption reforms within the Ministry of Defense and is fighting to make the MoD an example for the rest of Afghanistan. The United States and the international community will continue to work closely with their Afghan partners to address these challenges.

... The progress of the civil-military COIN campaign has severely degraded the Taliban-led insurgency, limiting their operational capacity and undermining their popular support. The decline in insurgent capability, coupled with improvements in the operational effectiveness of the ANSF and a resilient ANSF-ISAF partnership, has enabled the security transition process to expand. The transition of security responsibility to the Afghans by the end of 2014, as agreed at Lisbon, remains on schedule.

The mission in Afghanistan, however, faces long-term challenges. The insurgency draws strength from safe haven and support from within Pakistan and garners popular support by exploiting areas where the Afghan Government has failed to provide sufficient governance, rule of law, and economic opportunities. Afghan Government progress toward key governance and development initiatives remains critical for the sustainability of security gains. Nevertheless, the mission in Afghanistan remains integral to U.S. national security objectives, and the strategy is sound. The United States and its coalition partners are committed to achieving long-term stability and security in Afghanistan to ensure that the country never again becomes a safe haven for al Qaeda or its affiliates.

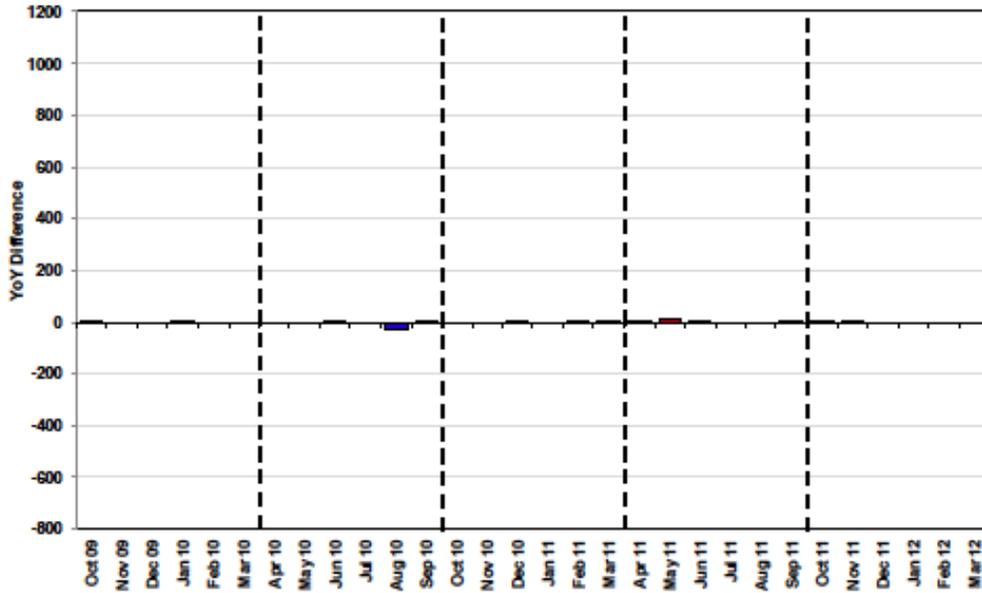
The problem with these judgments is that they again are based on the assumption that the Taliban and other insurgent want to continue fighting a tactical war against the US and ISAF during the period before it leaves and are willing to take major losses to recover direct control of the areas where US and other ISAF forces scored major gains in 2010 and 2011 as a result of the surge that will vanish in 2012 and be followed by the withdrawal of most US and ISAF forces by the end of 2014 – if not before.

There has been Taliban or “Emirate” rhetoric that called for such offensives in 2011 and 2012, but for all these reasons outlined earlier, it is not clear that the Taliban depended on the success of such offensives or really sees them as its primary strategy. The key opponent of the various insurgent groups has ceased to be US or ISAF, and become the mix of Afghan government and ANSF capabilities that will exist after 2014.

The most practical and rational primary objective for insurgents during the period before 2014 has become the ability to undercut the Afghan government and ANSF, and restore and expand political influence in the field, and the means are a combination of selective military and political warfare – not taking pointless losses by directly attacking superior foreign forces.

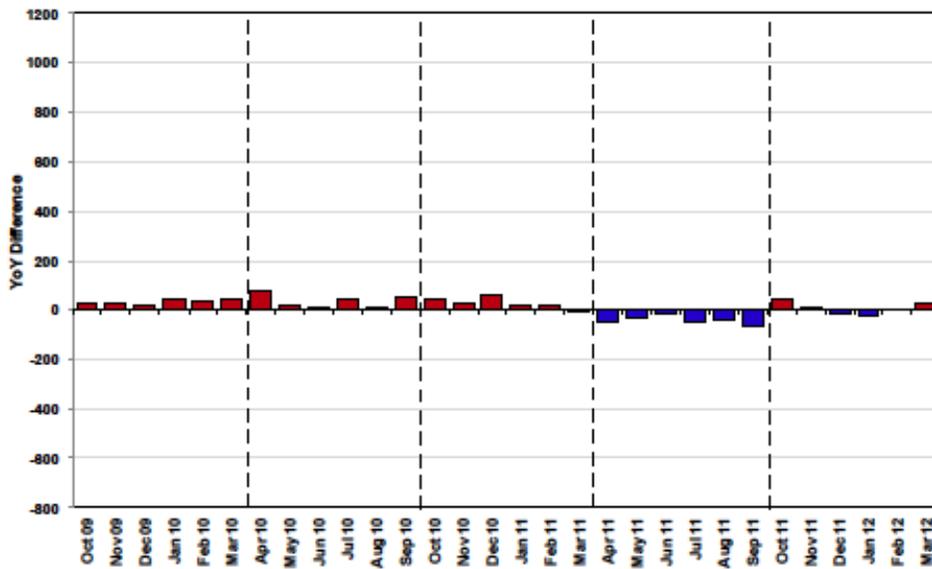
Figure Three: Enemy-Initiated Attacks by Major Regional Command: Year-Over-Year Change

YoY Monthly Enemy-Initiated Attacks for RC-Capital (October 2009 – March 2012)



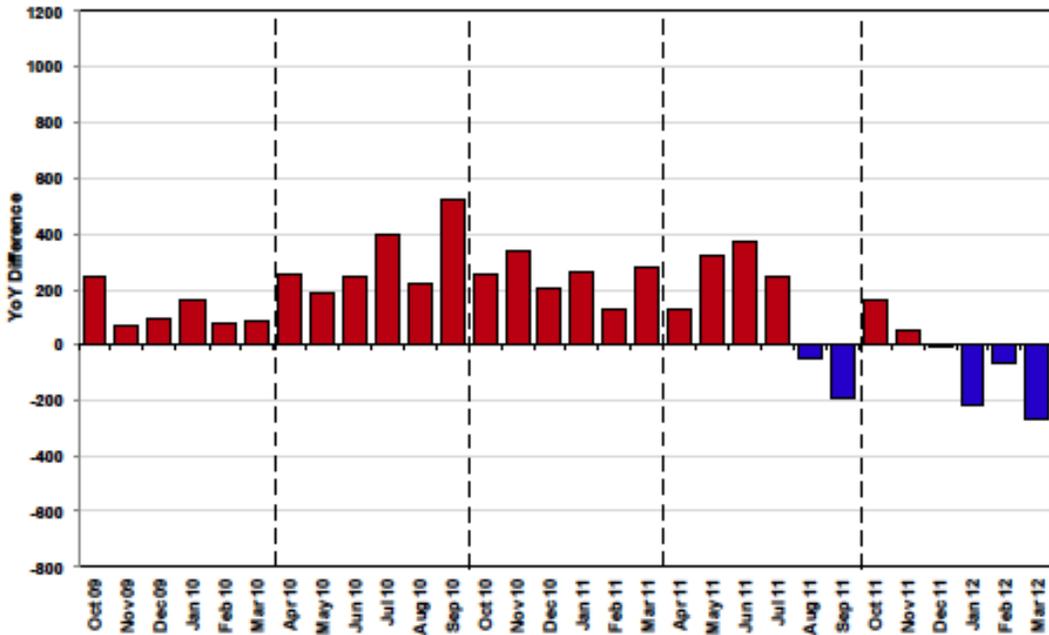
RC-Capital is the smallest RC, by far, and has had low violence levels for several years. As previously noted, security incidents in RC-C were statistically insignificant during the reporting period; the change in EIAs in RC-C over this period was likewise statistically insignificant, with an increase of only two attacks over the corresponding period from last year.

YoY Monthly Enemy-Initiated Attacks for RC-West (October 2009 – March 2012)



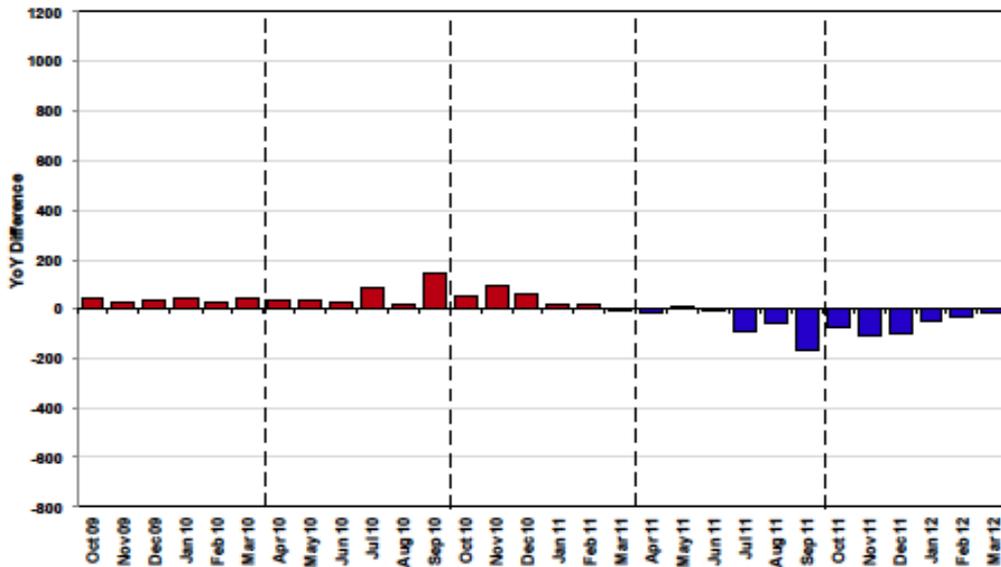
From October 2011 – March 2012, EIAs in RC-W increased 7 percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago. RC-W accounted for 5 percent of all EIAs from October 2011 – March 2012, a statistically insignificant change (increase of 1 percent) compared to the corresponding period last year.

YoY Monthly Enemy-Initiated Attacks for RC-East (October 2009 – March 2012)



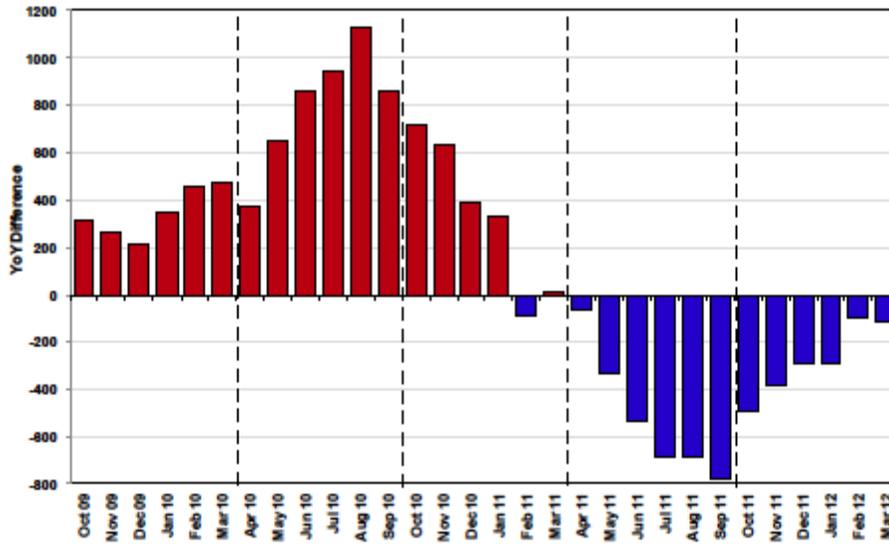
From October 2011 – March 2012, EIAs in RC-E were down eight percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago. RC-E accounted for 34 percent of all EIAs from October 2011 – March 2012, an increase of three percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago.

YoY Monthly Enemy-Initiated Attacks for RC-North (October 2009 – March 2012)



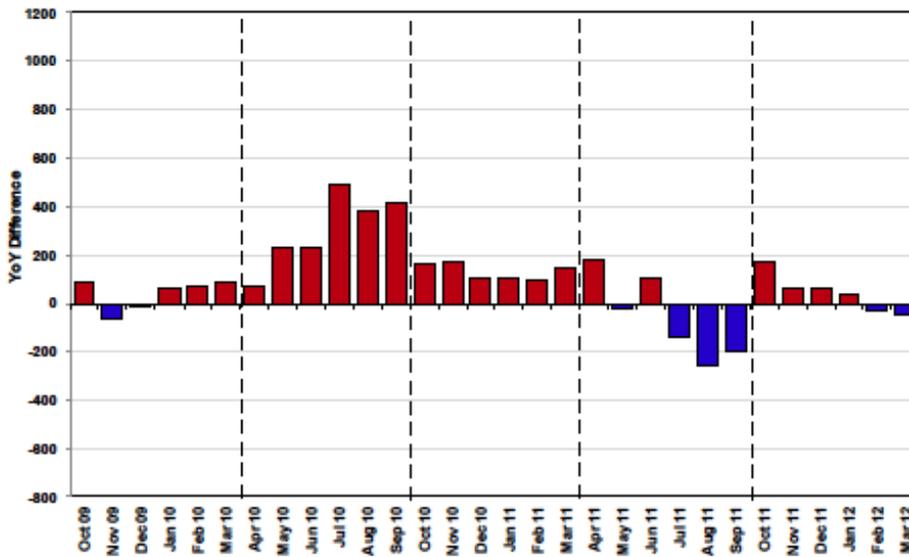
From October 2011 – March 2012, EIAs in RC-N decreased 60 percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago. RC-N accounted for two percent of all EIAs from October 2011 – March 2012, a decrease of two percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago.

YoY Monthly Enemy-Initiated Attacks for RC-Southwest (October 2009 – March 2012)



From October 2011 – March 2012, EIAs in RC-SW decreased by 29 percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago. RC-SW accounted for 37 percent of all EIAs from October 2011 – March 2012, a decrease of seven percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago.

YoY Monthly Enemy-Initiated Attacks for RC-South (October 2009 – March 2012)



From October 2011 – March 2012, EIAs in RC-S increased 13 percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago. RC-S contributed 21 percent of all EIAs from October 2011 - March 2012, an increase of five percent compared to the corresponding period one year ago.

Source: Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 27, 2012. Report is submitted consistent with both House Resolution 2219 (Report 112-110) and Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended

Monthly Complex and Coordinated Attacks

Figure Four shows the data on Monthly Complex and Coordinated Attacks. The latest 1230 report states that,

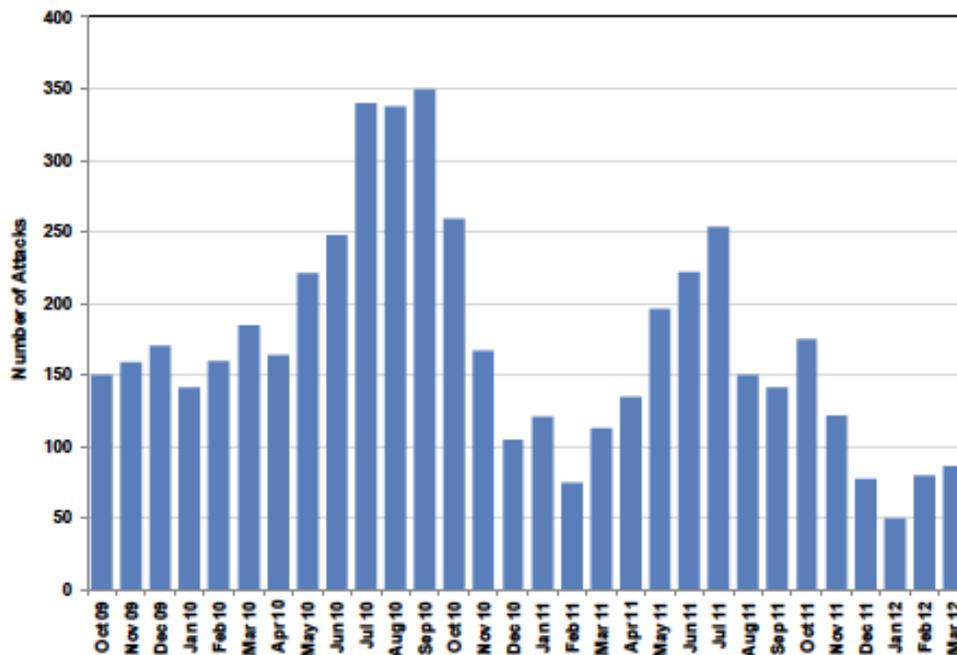
“Complex and coordinated attacks from October 2011 – March 2012 decreased 30 percent from the corresponding period last year. The latter two months in the reporting period evidenced gradual increases in these attacks, consistent with historical patterns associated with the start of the fighting season.

In practice, **Figure Four** present the same serious problems and issues as the previous figures showing the patterns in Enemy Initiated Attacks. The data do have some value, but a rational insurgency would not attempt to maintain the same pattern of attacks in the face of consistent tactical defeats if it had reason to shift to different political tactics and knew it could outlast the presence of its primary enemy.

More generally, a host of media reporting indicates that insurgents like the Taliban and Haqqani Network have had a major impact by focusing on the quality and impact of their attacks rather than the sheer number of attacks. They have found that even largely token attacks and bombings in sensitive areas and against sensitive targets get major media coverage.

This is a key test of success in influencing political support for the war, and the loss of most or all of a small attacking force is expendable. Accordingly, the decline in Complex and Coordinated Attacks does not necessarily reflect any military progress. It can just as easily reflect and adaptive and intelligent enemy.

Figure Four: Monthly Complex and Coordinated Attacks (October 2009 – March 2012)



Source: Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 27, 2012. Report is submitted consistent with both House Resolution 2219 (Report 112-110) and Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended .

Monthly Improvised Explosive Devices and Mine Explosions

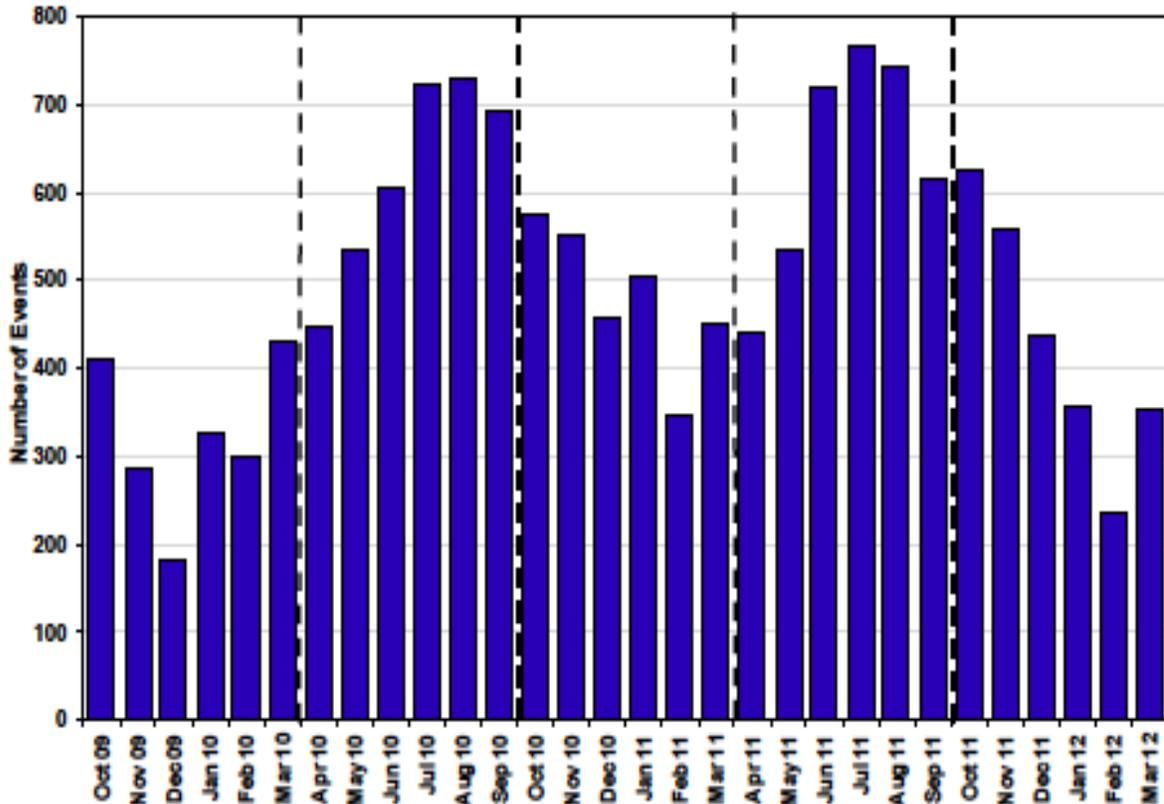
Figure Five shows the patterns in Monthly Improvised Explosive Devices and Mine Explosions. The most recent 1230 report states that,

The reporting period evidenced an 11 percent year-over-year decrease in IED and mine explosions, while IED and mine activity (which includes executed and potential IED attacks) decreased 13 percent. Potential IED attacks include those that were found and cleared, premature IED detonations, and those turned in to the coalition by local nationals. IED turn-ins doubled during this period compared to one year ago.

It should be noted that it is not clear that accurate data can be collected on such trends unless the count is based on IEDs affect US, ISAF, ANSF, and Afghan official targets. As a result, the counts and trends would not necessarily reflect a shift in insurgent operations and use of such devices to areas where they are less likely meet a military threat.

Even so, comparing the trends in Figure Five with the trends in the previous Figures shows far less of a decline in insurgent activity. This is important because IEDs do not expose the insurgents to anything like the same risks and losses as direct combat. As such, the IED trends may be an indicator that the insurgents have adjusted their tactics to limit losses while still maintaining a presence where this serves their political and strategic goals.

Figure Five: Monthly Improvised Explosive Devices and Mine Explosions



Source: Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 27, 2012. Report is submitted consistent with both House Resolution 2219 (Report 112-110) and Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended

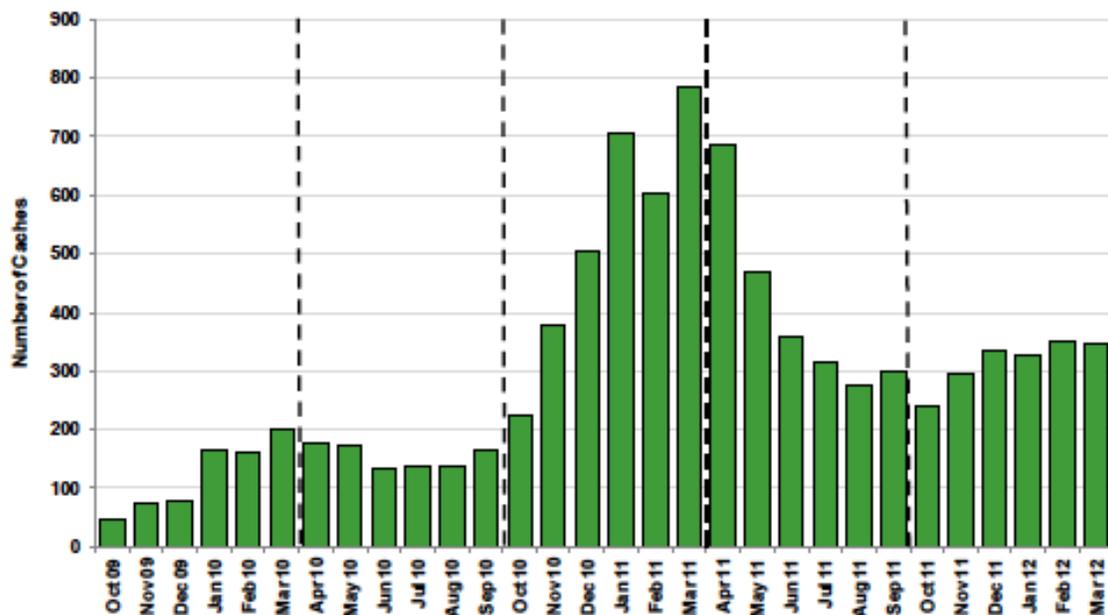
Caches Found

Figure Six shows the latest reporting on the number of insurgent weapons caches found. This measure is not used as often in unclassified analyses as the previous figures, but is a common part of ISAF and US reporting. The latest “1230” report notes that,

This reporting period saw a decrease in total caches found from one year ago and from the previous reporting period’s total. Analysis was unable to discern whether the decrease was attributable to a diminishment of insurgent supplies resulting from persistent ANSF/ISAF operations, but this conclusion is reasonable, given the broad and sustained campaign against the insurgency.

This seems to be a valid conclusion, but it also assumes that the insurgents would stockpile their supplies forward in the same manner as in the past, and the count is by cache number and not by some measure of content. It simply is not clear what this measure really means, although it is more likely to represent tactical progress.

Figure Six: Caches Found (as of 31 March 2012)



Source: Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 27, 2012. Report is submitted consistent with both House Resolution 2219 (Report 112-110) and Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181), as amended

Other Metrics: Trends in Casualties

Figure Seven shows trends in casualties. This is not a measure of military progress per se, but is a potential measure of the fighting’s political and strategic impact on the Afghan population. In this case, the trends may actually be more positive than the bars in the Figure would indicate. The trends shown in Figure Seven do not show a consistent decline in US, ISAF, and ANSF-inflicted civilian casualties, but they also do not show an increase during the period of the surge and most intensive fighting against the Taliban.

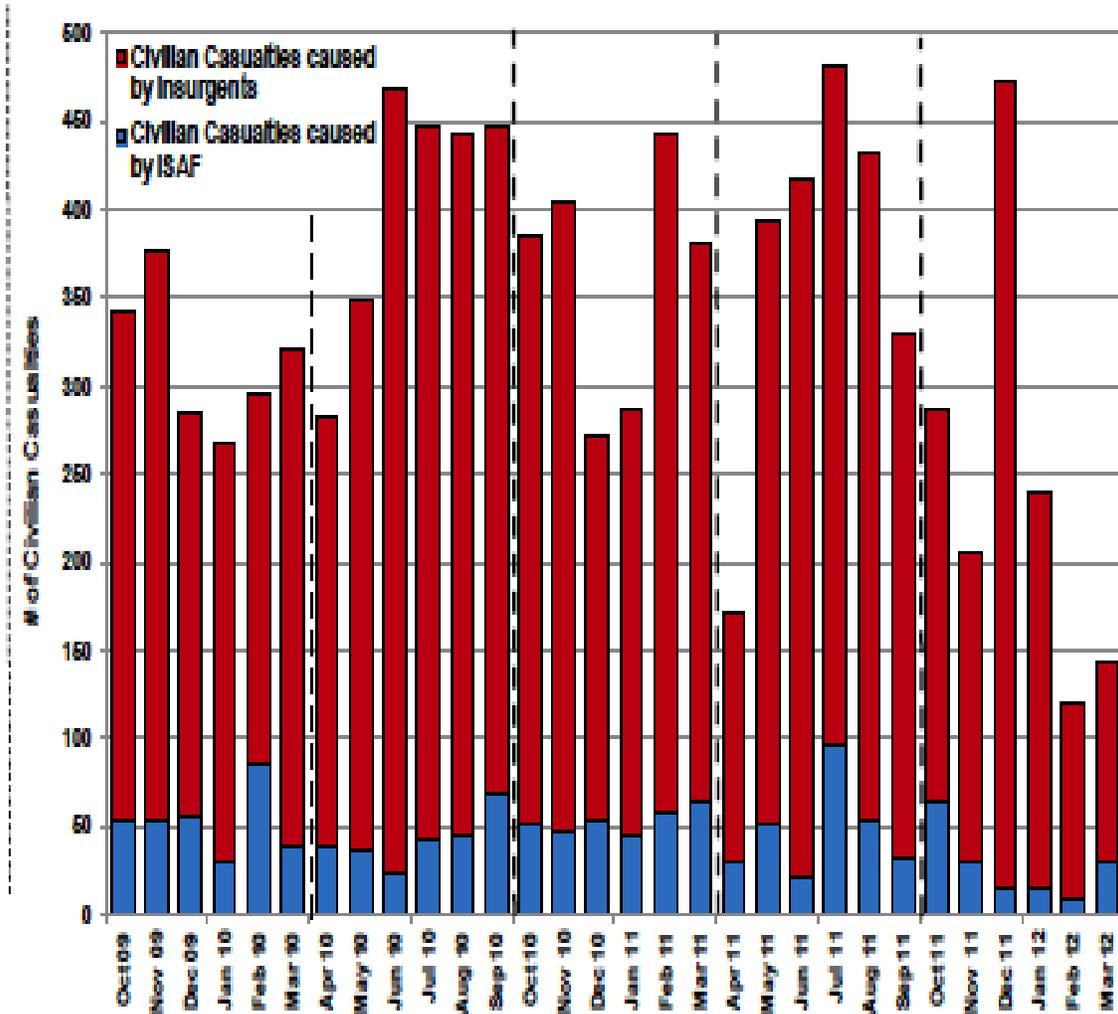
At the same time, the same data show a sharp decline in insurgent inflicted casualties except for one peak month in December 2011. This could indicate both the fact the

insurgents are seeking to reduce the hostility that their attacks on afghan civilians cause and have shifted to a more political strategy.

These casualty data also have important limitations in quality and as measures of the impact of the fighting:

- The broad trends are almost certainly correct, but major uncertainties exist in the count, and the UN produces different data that reflect that same general trends but higher rates of death. Given US experience in Iraq, the ISAF data may well undercount the rates of death. Moreover, it is far from clear that the US and ISAF have reliable counts of civilian casualties related to insurgent assassinations and killings that take place outside areas where US/ISAF/ANSF are fighting.
- It is not clear that civilian casualty death rates per se measure political and strategic impacts. The insurgents have often managed to dominate reporting on the impact of US/ISAF/ANSF inflicted casualties, and avoid reporting on their own casualties. The US/ISAF emphasis on night raids has caused a major hostile reaction among Afghan civilians -- although such raids almost certainly produce fewer actual civilian casualties and better tactical successes against the insurgents than any alternative method of fighting. The same has been true of the use ofUCAV strikes in Pakistan. In short, the fact that the insurgents kill far more civilians seems largely strategically irrelevant since Afghan perceptions seem focused more on US/ISAF/ANSF inflicted casualties.
- Historically, there is a very uncertain correlation between deaths and wounded, and civilian perceptions of violence and who is to blame. Unclassified data are not available for Afghanistan but casualty and polling data on Iraq indicated that surges in wounded can occur at different periods from surges in killed, and that perceptions of violence – and anger at violence – is often a matter of which side civilians encounter most under conditions that they see as violent. In Iraq, this often included displacements and loss of property, and the fact Coalition forces regularly created checkpoints and searches.
- Deaths clearly do not measure lower level acts of insurgent intimidation and violence ranging from night letters to kidnappings to beatings. They do no measure acts of extortion by government forces. Accordingly, an emphasis on casualties by definition largely ignores many of the political and strategic dimensions of what the government and insurgents do to the populations where they fight.

Figure: Seven: Monthly Civilian Wounded or Killed by Insurgents and ISAF (October 2009 – March 2012)



Data indicates that 78 percent of civilian casualties (CIVCAS) occurring during the reporting period were caused by the insurgency. The total CIVCAS for the period of October 2011 – March 2012 decreased 32 percent from the same period last year. CIVCAS caused by ISAF decreased 49 percent over the same period.

Insurgents continue to rely on IEDs as the principal means to execute their campaign. More than 60 percent of CIVCAS caused by insurgents were from indiscriminate IED explosions. More than half of IEDs and mines were found safely cleared by security forces, which have helped to reduce CIVCAS.

Other Metrics: Maps Describing the Course of the Campaign

Figures Eight and Nine provide the only metrics in the latest 1230 report on the future course of the fighting by region. Both, however, have little or no practical value.

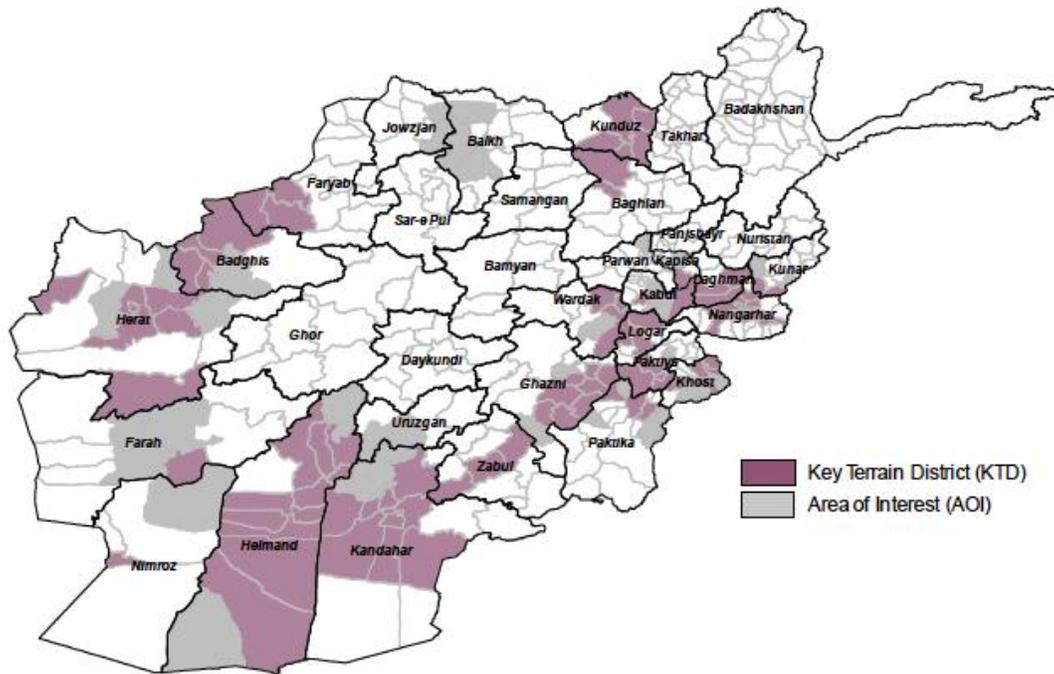
Key Terrain and Area of Interest Districts: The Fine Art of Military Wallpaper

Figure Eight, simply shows the areas of interest without reflecting any picture of actual progress. It also does not define why given areas are “key” or of “interest,” and makes the district boundaries the de facto objective and no given population groups, lines of communication, etc.

Unfortunately, while the colors are nice and the pattern is generally pleasing, the end result is little more than military wallpaper. There is no indication of past progress, current progress, or the project course of the campaign. There is no picture of the areas where there was little risk or threat in the past, of how the threat has changed, and of progress in security, governance, aid and economics, or rule of law. These are all areas where unclassified reporting did occur sporadically before mid-2010, but where virtually all such reporting has since disappeared.

The same is true of insurgent areas of activity and influence. This reporting also was provided in the past, although it was never as detailed and useful as the reporting on insurgent activity in Iraq, when showed the trends in far more geographic detail, and key supply lines. Accordingly, there is no basis for a meaningful net assessment of either Afghan government/ANSF or insurgent progress or losses.

The excuse for not providing such metrics has been that the evaluation systems have changed, or that they were too judgmental. In practice, maps rating performance by district may involve broad judgments, but they are better than no judgments – and all analysis ultimately either ends in summary judgments or no useful conclusions at all. It is also troubling that most such reporting ended after the maps involved failed to show major progress or expected levels of progress.

Figure Eight: Key Terrain and Area of Interest Districts

The ISAF Campaign through 2012 will continue to see ISAF lead the expansion of security, governance, and development across Afghanistan. Military operations continue to focus on the provision of security within key population centers; controlling the approaches to Kabul and Kandahar; and denying al Qaeda safe havens inside Afghanistan. Concurrent to these actions, ISAF will provide support to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) led Transition process to achieve the Lisbon objectives

Transitioning Provinces and Districts: The Military Equivalent of “Elvis is Leaving the Building”

Figure Nine seems to show progress on the part of transfer of responsibility to the Afghan government but does little more than reflect the transfer areas that already were largely secure without defining what transfer really means or the level of Afghan ability to enforce security and provide effective governance.

Similar transfers in Iraq were used largely as an exercise in political symbolism, and had little or no practical meaning. In some cases, they were grossly dishonest. Basra, for example, was transferred when it was anything but secure or under the control of the Iraqi central government, and before the most serious fighting that ever took place in that region – fighting where the Iraqi offensive might well have collapsed without a massive rescue by the US.

Simply reporting on formal transition is the military equivalent of saying that “Elvis has left the building.” It does not indicate anything about the level of Afghan government capability or support in a given province and district. It ignores past levels of security and key ethnic and sectarian issues like the rebirth of the Northern Alliance and creation of insurgent sanctuaries in the Eastern border area. It does not reflect the role of powerbrokers. It does not show whether Afghan forces can secure most of the district or key population centers, the level of Afghan government, whether there is a meaningful civil police and justice system, how many foreign forces and aid workers remain and how dependent the areas remains on foreign funding. It does not attempt to assess remaining insurgent presence and influence.

These are all critical tests of both progress in the war and real world “Transition.” Simply stating that the US and ISAF are no longer responsible is little more than an announcement of an exit and an abdication of responsibility.

Providing the Full Range of Metrics Necessary to Show Progress in the War

There are no metrics or methods of narrative reporting that can provide a certain picture of how a complex insurgency is developing. Wars like Afghanistan are extremely complex, success depends on far more than military victory against the enemy, but many of the metrics and reports that go beyond such reporting are necessarily judgmental and uncertain.

That said, the present metrics provide far less coverage than past reporting, have far too narrow a military focus, and portray the insurgency in far too narrow tactical terms. Moreover, the supporting narratives often have the same biases and limitations.

Fixing the Narrative as Well as the Metrics

It should be obvious that metrics are only part of the problem. Metrics support narrative analysis and both supports judgment. Metrics cannot substitute for a narrative that explains them and puts them in context: numbers, maps, and graphs are ultimately nothing more than different forms of adjectives.

However, metrics are being used without the supporting narratives, and the narratives that are provided often have the same biases and limitations as the metrics. The new “1230 report” is unique in providing unclassified narratives that do address many the key political and strategic trends in the insurgency and the course of the fighting in depth. However, it too generally sees the insurgents’ failure to pursue major tactical offensives against US and ISAF forces as a sign of its weakness without providing the proper range of analysis, and it clearly compartments the military and civil efforts.

Some passages tend to stress the growing weakness of the insurgents:

ANSF-ISAF conventional operations, complemented by Special Operations Forces targeting, continue to steadily degrade the influence and the operational capacity of the insurgency. *The insurgency failed to regain momentum during the fall and winter following the operational failure of their summer 2011 campaign, and the gap between insurgent intent and capability continued to grow.* This has been further exacerbated by the increasing success of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) where reconciliation efforts appear to be hurting Taliban cohesiveness. Since March of last year, there has been a more than three-fold increase in the number of formal reintegrees choosing to leave the battlefield through the APRP.

The Taliban-led insurgency, however, remains adaptive and determined with a significant regenerative capacity and retains the capability to emplace substantial numbers of IEDs and conduct isolated high-profile attacks. *As insurgent capacity to directly contest ANSF-ISAF gains erodes, insurgents have increasingly resorted to asymmetric efforts in an attempt to regain territory and influence, including assassinations, kidnappings, intimidation tactics, and strategic messaging campaigns. The insurgency will likely expand its asymmetric operations as a result of its diminished operational capability and in order to conserve diminishing resources.*

Other passages provide a better balance: (p. 54-56)

As al Qaeda has been degraded, it has become reliant on a shrinking cadre of experienced leaders primarily inside a Haqqani-facilitated safe haven in North Waziristan. Al Qaeda continues to seek safe haven in Afghanistan, and has a small presence in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces. The terrorist group continues to derive some benefits from its engagement in Afghanistan, including exploitation of incidents for propaganda, personnel recruitment, and tribal connections that it

could use to re-establish future safe havens. Al Qaeda views continued involvement in Afghanistan as integral to its global image and relevance.

Although the specific area of operations for each group associated with the insurgency varies, the insurgency generally tends to operate along the border with Pakistan, primarily in the Pashtun-majority areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan, as well as in Pashtun communities in northern Afghanistan. The majority of insurgent commanders and fighters operate in or near their home districts, and low-level fighters are often well integrated into the local population. Out-of-area fighters comprise a relatively small portion of the insurgency.

Taliban senior leaders remain capable of providing strategic guidance to the broader insurgency and channeling resources to support operational priorities. Pakistan-based senior leaders exercise varying degrees of command and control over the generally decentralized and locally-based Afghan insurgency. Within Afghanistan, insurgent leadership structures vary by province. In general, a two-man team composed of a shadow governor and a military commander lead governance efforts and military operations at the provincial level, and also oversee district-level insurgent leadership and lower-level military commanders. Most shadow governors still reside in Pakistan.

To recruit, influence, and intimidate the Afghan populace, the insurgency uses a simple but effective messaging strategy. Capitalizing on the lack of basic services and government assistance at the village level, the insurgency encourages farmers to plant poppies as a means of closing the resource gap experienced by most rural Afghans. The insurgency also cultivates and exploits popular perceptions of the Afghan Government as corrupt, unresponsive, and uninterested in the plight of rural Afghans in order to recruit local Afghans to join the insurgency or to turn to shadow governments and courts to resolve issues.

... The overall declines in enemy-initiated attacks during the reporting period, however, does not signify that the insurgency has adopted a strategy of withdrawing and conserving resources until the coalition withdraws. To the contrary, insurgent leaders have worked throughout the fall and winter to motivate leaders and fighters, particularly in the south and southwest, to leave Pakistani sanctuaries and return to battle.

The inability of Pakistan-based leadership to successfully enlist insurgent commanders and fighters to return to Afghanistan, as cited in previous reports, is a overstated; however, as noted previously, the insurgency is local in nature and Afghanistan-based insurgents operate with a degree of autonomy, allowing them to tailor activities to local conditions.

The insurgency continues to exploit areas where the Afghan Government has failed to provide sufficient governance, rule of law, conflict resolution, and economic opportunities. Furthermore, security gains in RC-S, RC-SW, RC-E and Regional Command – Capital (RC-C) risk being undermined by support the insurgency receives from neighboring Pakistan. In particular, the impact of Pakistani support is manifested in violence levels and high profile attacks in RC-E and RC-C, where the insurgency leverages sanctuaries and support to plan and execute attacks. However, ANSF-ISAF interdiction operations and increasingly effective security in these areas have led to a decrease in enemy-initiated attacks in RC-E, which declined eight percent compared to the same period last year, while enemy-initiated attacks in RC-C remained statistically unchanged in the same time period. Conditions resulting from one of the harshest winters in Afghanistan during the last decade also likely contributed to the year-over-year decrease in security incidents²⁴ in both Kabul and RC-E.

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Despite the undeniable progress of ANSF-ISAF operations, the insurgency is highly adaptable with a significant regenerative capacity, and retains the capability to emplace substantial numbers of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and conduct high-profile attacks. Furthermore, insurgent operations are not limited to direct attacks on ANSF and ISAF personnel, and the security statistics cited above are not sufficient to measure the balance of insurgent versus Afghan Government influence. The insurgency continues to exert its influence in Afghanistan through

alternate methods, including kidnappings, intimidation tactics, and robust assassination efforts, as well as messaging at mosques and leveraging the network of familial, tribal, and ideological sympathizers to exert their influence in areas controlled by the ANSF and ISAF. The insurgency will likely expand its soft power efforts as a result of its reduced operational capability and in order to conserve diminishing resources.

Near-term insurgent operations are expected to focus on regaining control of safe havens and expanding influence over population centers in Helmand and Kandahar. Southern Afghanistan remains vital to the insurgency for its historical significance to the Taliban movement and its importance to the insurgency's narcotics-related revenues. Kabul will remain a persistent target for high-profile attacks and assassinations in the Taliban's effort to undermine public support for the Afghan Government and security forces. Additionally, the insurgency will likely continue to target the ANSF and local defense initiatives, including the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program. In the long term, despite initial overtures toward political cooperation with the Afghan Government and the international community, the Taliban retains its goal of overthrowing the elected Afghan Government following the withdrawal of international forces.

In broad terms, the narratives in the current "1230" reporting are better than the metrics. They still, however, require far more focus on the political and strategic outcome of the war, a more realistic assessment of insurgent objectives and actions, an objective assessment of the risks in transition, and some picture of past and potential trends on a net assessment basis.

Looking Towards Sustained Support for Transition

Solving the problems in both the metrics and narratives do not mean some dramatic, time-consuming effort to find new metrics or patterns of reporting. The past "1230 reports" and unclassified ISAF command briefings have provided plenty of suitable summary metrics for unclassified reporting. So have their counterparts in Coalition reporting on the Iraq War and the current series of quarterly reports by the Special Inspector General for Iraqi reconstruction (SIGIR). The problem in fixing the supporting narrative is largely one of shifting to a focus on the political and strategic character of the war, providing an integrated net assessment of the military and civil aspects of transition, and looking beyond the past towards the future.

As has been stressed throughout this analysis, counterinsurgency is war, but a form of war that is as much – or more – a struggle for popular support and political influence and control than a contest to win clashes at the tactical level. The strategic outcome is determined by which side ends with political power, not who wins the most tactical engagements. Many insurgencies have appeared to be defeated in the field only to win at the political and strategic levels. China, Cuba, and Vietnam are obvious cases in point. So, in different ways, are Cambodia and Nepal – cases where the insurgents ultimately won the peace negotiations without winning the fighting.

There is no reason to give up all of the metrics and narratives that the US and ISAF are now using. They do have some value. There is a need, however, to portray the level of insurgent influence and activity at lower levels of conflict, and to analyze the war fully as a political and strategic conflict and not simply in terms that tacitly assume the key measure of success is enemy ability to win military encounters at the tactical level and take direct control of populations by winning battles.

There is, however, a need for the US and ISAF to stop analyzing insurgent behavior in tactical terms at every level from the narrative to the metrics. Analysis of the war must

examine who is winning at the political and strategic level. Narratives must examine possible and known insurgent motives at the political level, and consider the degree to which insurgents are willing to conduct a war of political attrition, the reasons they might seek to avoid clashes with US and ISAF forces, how their progress at the strategic and political level compare with their progress at the tactical level.

Discussions of peace talks and reintegration must explicitly consider whether and how insurgents might exploit them to win at the political level. The extent to which insurgents are turning away from – or limiting – tactical encounters to relocate or use other means to expand their political influence needs full examination.

Narratives also need to see the insurgent search to retain or win influence and control in net assessment terms. It makes no sense to examine the insurgents and Afghan government in parallel. Both metrics and narratives must show which side is really is dominant where, what the trends in relative influence and control really are, and what are the trends in the popular attitudes towards each side.

Above all, the steady decline in legislative and popular support for the war in the US and most allied states is a warning that proves credible and transparent reports and plans for transition are absolutely vital to winning support for a sustained and well-resourced transition effort. The present report falls short of both transparency and credibility. It is not “spinning” its way to legislative and popular support. It is raising justifiable doubts about current progress and failing to provide a convincing path towards the future.