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Strategic Insights: The Mysterious Case of the Vanishing Taliban

August 1, 2016 | Dr. M. Chris Mason

2015 was a bad year for the Afghan National Security Forces. They ended the Western calendar year badly battered, like a punch-drunk prize fighter on the ropes. At least 5,500 of them died in 2015, the worst annual casualty toll since American involvement in Afghanistan's civil war began in 2001. By the end of Western calendar year 2015, the 215 Corps based in Helmand had virtually disintegrated, with perhaps only 35 percent of its table of organization and equipment strength still present and able to fight.¹ For comparison, U.S. Army doctrine considers an infantry unit to be "combat ineffective" if it suffers 30 percent casualties. Continuing the steady 12-year long pattern, about 35 percent of the Afghan Army and the Afghan Police deserted in 2015. "Ghost policemen" and "ghost soldiers" were reported by Afghan officials with credible accounts suggesting as many as 3 policemen out of every 10 now receiving pay (from U.S. taxpayers) do not actually exist, or are no longer alive. The ANA's 10,000 commandos, who are good solid troops, were literally exhausted from being shuttled from one firefight to another all over Afghanistan, often pausing between battles just long enough to throw some more ammunition onto the helicopters.

The Taliban captured four districts in Helmand province in 2015, two districts in Badakshan and, spectacularly, the city of Kunduz, one of Afghanistan's largest urban centers. In the first phase of the Battle of Kunduz, which apparently started as a prison break, fewer than 500 Taliban troops routed some 4,000 Afghan security forces, who mostly fled the city without firing a shot. They kept running until they reached a hilltop fort outside Kunduz where a small detachment of a dozen or so U.S. Special Forces Soldiers were calmly preparing for a repeat of the Alamo. Eventually, after more than two weeks and the U.S. bombing of the Doctors without Borders hospital in Kunduz which resulted in the killing of 42 staff members and patients, the visible Taliban presence was driven back out of the city. By early 2016, the situation appeared so bleak that Nicholas

Haysom, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the normally upbeat UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), predicted that “For 2016, survival [of the Afghan government] will be an achievement.”²

For Western analysts, the outlook for 2016 was indeed grim. The intelligence community expected the Taliban to come out of its corner for this round of the fighting after January and February swinging from the heels. Predictions outlined by the Director of National Intelligence in his annual testimony to Congress called for a repeat of 2015 only worse; an acceleration of the Taliban’s momentum from 2015 which would not give Afghan security forces breathing space to rest, reequip, and replace losses with troops transferred from less hard-hit areas. In short, analysts feared the worst. They expected exactly what well-led American troops would do in this situation — that the Taliban would keep up the pressure, be aggressive, continue attacking, and keep the opposing fighter back on his heels and on the ropes until he inevitably went down for the count.

It didn’t happen. For the first four peak fighting months of 2016, the Taliban mysteriously more or less went to ground. In June, Afghanistan’s TOLO News reported that insurgent attacks dropped 17 percent lower than in May.³ This may have been partly due to the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan occurring during most of June, but no drop of comparable size in insurgent attacks occurred during Ramadan in 2015.

We know Taliban military leaders are familiar with Mao Tse Tung’s famous treatise on guerilla warfare. Translated copies of it have been found in cave complexes and abandoned camps in Afghanistan for many years, as well as a lot of other Western literature on warfare and American military history. Indeed, the Taliban study American military history and American military thinking carefully. They occasionally make pronouncements on their website which reflect this historical knowledge. We don’t know, of course, whether they follow Mao’s advice on insurgency and guerilla warfare to any degree, because we lack that kind of insight into their thinking and planning processes. However, Taliban activity so far this Western calendar year looks like a page taken straight from Mao’s treatise. In Maoist guerilla doctrine, guerilla forces in the initial stages of their military operations do what they can to harass their enemies — kidnappings, executions, bombings, and attacks on remote security outposts only when success is certain. When the Maoist guerilla movement transitions to the third stage, which is marked by the permanent formation of larger bodies of troops, the creation of permanent supply and training bases in secure territory, and the steady flow of new men and materiel into action, then Mao Tse Tung said guerillas will operate more like regular forces. That was what 2015 looked like in Afghanistan. However, Mao noted, if guerilla forces at this stage suffer a setback, they should revert back to the lower level of guerilla activity (the second stage) until conditions are favorable to progress again to the highest, or third, stage of guerilla operations.

That is certainly what 2016 in Afghanistan looks like so far. The predicted mass attacks and major guerilla operations in Helmand, Kunduz and elsewhere — 2015 The Sequel — simply have not materialized. Instead, we have seen the sorts of things guerillas do when they are in stage one or stage two of an insurgency — stopping busses, kidnapping citizens, murdering men suspected of cooperating with the government, suicide bombings, and pinprick attacks on the most remote police outposts, many of which that were in rural Afghanistan were wisely withdrawn earlier this year. The Western year 2015 witnessed Taliban guerillas massing in units of a thousand men or more on numerous occasions. This year, they're gone. The beleaguered Afghan security forces have had time to rest and regroup. The 215 Corps is being completely rebuilt during this lull in operations. The commandos, President Ghani's firemen, have had time to rest, retrain, and assimilate new commando course graduates into their ranks. The miniscule Afghan National Air Force (the term the Afghans use to refer to it) has had breathing space to conduct overdue maintenance, obtain spare parts, repair aircraft, and train with the first of the new Super Tucanos (propeller driven flight trainers built by Embraer and adapted to a light ground support role). The underlying question in the Mystery of the Vanishing Taliban so far this year is: Why?

There are at least five possible explanations, some combination of which may or may not be true. The first possible explanation is the "Kunduz was the Taliban Tet" theory. During the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam, similar to the Taliban takeover of Kunduz, Vietcong guerillas succeeded in surprising government security forces by briefly and spectacularly seizing a number of towns and parts of cities; Vietcong sappers got into the U.S. Embassy grounds in Saigon. Having been told for many years by endless Pentagon briefings that the Vietcong were a spent force, the civilian population of the United States was shocked by the Tet Offensive. The Vietcong won a major propaganda victory, largely convincing the American public that the Vietnam War could not be won. This propaganda success, however, came at a devastating cost for the Vietcong movement, which was almost wiped out by casualties and counterattacks as the U.S. and the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) recovered their balance and struck back. Efforts to explain this to the public ran into the "Boy Crying Wolf" effect. Having been consistently misled by ecstatically optimistic U.S. Department of Defense press releases for years, anything the Pentagon now said was deeply suspect — another lesson unlearned from the Vietnam War. Producing a steady jet of wildly optimistic progress reports erodes your credibility and makes it less likely the public will believe you and trust you when you really need them to.

In the case of the Vietcong, the reports of its devastation were true. After the 1968 Tet Offensive and even by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 1972, the Vietcong were a pale shadow of their former organization, their ranks depleted by as much as 80 percent and their leadership decimated. Tet was a complete military disaster for the Vietcong, and a less corrupt, incompetent, illegitimate, and universally-reviled South Vietnamese

government might have pulled victory from the jaws of defeat. Using this analogy, the “Kunduz was the Taliban Tet” theory of diminished Taliban activity in 2016 posits that Taliban military efforts in Kunduz and Helmand in 2015, while successful as propaganda, were terribly costly in casualties to the Taliban rank and file and seriously depleted the cadre of experienced mid-level Taliban military commanders, the Taliban equivalent of field grade officers.

The Taliban are exceptionally good about policing up the battlefield before leaving it, so it is difficult to assess how many casualties they suffered in 2015. They almost always remove their dead and wounded, scrub signs of casualties as much as possible (e.g., covering up blood stains, bandages, and body parts) and even pickup their spent shell casings before pulling back. So this theory is hard to substantiate, but it does fit the facts and the apparently Maoist doctrinal approach seen so far this year. Arguing against this theory is the fact that the Taliban has an almost infinite number of replacements in Pakistan steeped in jihad and eager to join the fight in Afghanistan. The Taliban recruiting pool is indoctrinated and trained in hundreds of radical madrassas in the Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) funded by the Pakistani Government. All Taliban field commanders are Mullahs (or the slightly higher title, often self-promoted, of Maulvis) and there is no shortage of religious leaders in Afghanistan, either. The *pirimuridi* system of training young men to be Mullahs essentially clones religious beliefs and codifies doctrinal behavior. It is therefore doubtful that in 2015 the Taliban incurred the same level of debilitating, irreplaceable casualties that the Vietcong suffered from Tet.

The second possible explanation is the “Internal Political Problems” theory. The brilliant extermination of Taliban leader Mullah Mansour in Baluchistan via drone strike earlier this year threw the Taliban into its second leadership succession crisis in less than a year. Within two weeks, a religious pseudo-scholar (in academic terms, none of the Taliban leadership is anything more than a cloned ideologue with a very weak scholarly understanding of Islam) named Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada emerged as an acceptable middle ground figurehead between the rival tribal factions of the jihadist organization. For the last 15 years a profound ignorance about the Taliban and a persistent anthropomorphic interpretation of it along Western cultural lines has knee-capped the fight against them. Even in 2016, organizations like the Office of the Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) persist in conceptualizing the Taliban as some sort of European political movement with a Western military hierarchy. The problem with the “Internal Political Problems” theory is that this might be what would be happening if the Taliban were a Western organization and thought like Americans. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Taliban is a classic Islamic millenarian movement, the direct ideological descendant of the Hindustani Fanatics movement of the mid-1800’s in the Punjab and Hazara regions of what today is Pakistan. No matter how badly the State Department wants to shoehorn every actor on the world stage into the rational actor theory of human activity, the Taliban are decidedly **Other**. Taliban

thinking, hierarchies, and lines of authority are utterly different from Western concepts of organizational theory. Mullah Omar and his successors were and are not, as most Western leaders continue to believe, some sort of World War II four-star General Eisenhower-style supreme military commander of the Taliban. This completely misunderstands militant millennial Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan and the culture of the Pashtun frontier, as I have written many times before over the past decade.⁴ The failure of Western analysts to discover that Mullah Omar was dead for two years, or to even guess the outcome of Mullah Mansour's succession, illustrates clearly the extent to which the Taliban mindset remains opaque to Western understanding. So the "Internal Political Problems" theory might make sense if the Taliban were General Motors or the British Labour Party, but they are not. Using Western words and ideas to describe something so completely **Other** does not work well. But the Taliban are like a primordial grove of interconnected ancient trees which are at the root core the same organism and which have the same ideological DNA, but which grow independently and struggle for water and light with the other trees as well as with the other organisms in the ecosystem. You can chop down the central tree, the Mullah Omar or the Mullah Mansour tree, and this hurts the grove, but the organism soon regenerates a central tree and the root network remains deep and strong. The other trees continue to grow and do what they do because they are part of the entity, but they also continue their struggle for resources and even compete with one another. Overall Taliban military control remains largely in the hands of Haqqani Network scion Sirajjudin Haqqani. Furthermore, we have seen even less external evidence of discontent with Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada's selection as Emir than was evident with Mullah Mansour's earlier accession to power to replace Mullah Omar. This is in large part because Pakistan's ISI was eager this time to avoid the unseemly strongman tactics that accompanied Mansour's power grab and to make the selection of his successor more transparent to the Taliban *Ulema* via a process that seemed more inclusive and consensual.

A third explanation is the "Orientalist Theory," which holds that the Taliban was indeed part of the 200-year long, classic, cyclical repeating Northwest Frontier charismatic "Mad Mullah" phenomenon. This theory holds that the death of Mullah Omar will lead, as it always has in the past 200 years, to the gradual but steady decline of the movement, as the followers of the latest Mad Mullah drift away, are killed, or splinter into small, largely impotent sects. One could argue that the appearance of a so-called ISIL cell in eastern Afghanistan fits this pattern — its arrival and rise coincide with the death of Omar as the charismatic leader of the most recent iteration of the classic, repeating Mad Mullah movement. Certainly, the so-called ISIL or ISIS cell in Afghanistan has little or nothing to do with the terrorist quasi-state actor by that name in Iraq and Syria. None of its members speak anything but Pashto, few are from ethnic groups unknown in Nangarhar province, and most are disaffected former Taliban competing for smuggling routes and the concomitant monetary rewards which they bring in. The more money you have, the more fighters you can pay. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's (i.e., HiG's) most recent

break with the central Afghan Taliban organization and his predictably dead-end “negotiations” with the Ghani government may also fit this pattern. Time will tell if the historical pattern of jihad on the Northwest Frontier will hold true again this time — such an overall decline in the Taliban would take years to detect. More importantly, the kind of Islamic radicalism which the Taliban represents today is no longer the isolated disease organism that its predecessors represented a century or two ago. Global Islamic radicalism is an experiment which escaped the CIA laboratory in Afghanistan during its proxy war against the Soviet Union in the 1980’s, and it has metastasized into a sprawling, interconnected cancer with strong cells in almost every country across the Islamic world. The information age and social media have changed the battlefield, and this genie is not going back in the bottle any time soon. So the “Orientalist Theory” for explaining the Mystery of the Vanishing Taliban in 2016 is as unsatisfying as the “Internal Political Problems” theory, because it fails to take into account the evolved 21st century context of Islamic radicalism.

A fourth possible explanation is the “Taliban as a Learning Organization” theory. If the Taliban senior leadership had attended the U.S. Army War College and learned the theory and practice of strategy, Kunduz would not have been captured in 2015, and Helmand would not have been a major battlefield. The United States and the rest of NATO were on a glide slope to a near-zero presence in the country, air assets were being withdrawn, and the Taliban were getting exactly what they wanted: The removal of foreign troops from Afghan soil. All they had to do was lay low for a year or two, play possum, make it appear that they were a spent force, and let the U.S. and the other small NATO-country contingents complete their withdrawals. After that, without U.S. advisors and airpower as an impediment, the Taliban could have resumed its offensive operations and taken over much of Afghanistan with relatively little opposition.

Viewed from a Sun Tzu strategic standpoint, 2015 was a major strategic blunder. Its outcome was to effectively reverse President Obama’s timeline for troop withdrawal combined with the broad reauthorization of U.S. air strikes against Taliban targets in support of Afghan security forces. Some analysts believe that any amount of U.S. presence is not a significant factor in Taliban thinking. After all, they fought against U.S. forces all through the period of President Obama’s escalation of the war, when there were as many as 130,000 American troops and 260,000 American civilian logistics contractors in the country — almost 400,000 U.S. personnel in country by old Korean War standards of counting. The Taliban has been fighting for 14 years against the United States and the American-backed Kabul government, this analytical perspective points out, so it follows that the Taliban simply does not care if some American assets remain in support of the “puppet infidel regime” in Kabul. Jihad is jihad.

Yet, the Taliban is without doubt a learning organization, at least at the tactical level of war, as anyone who was involved in the struggle to get ahead of the improvised explosive device (IED) threat in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2012 will attest.⁵ Reducing the IED threat was a fast-paced game of measures and countermeasures in which the Taliban figured out what American forces were doing to stop IED attacks and developed tragically effective responses at an astonishing rate. The ability of illiterate, sandal-wearing peasants to intuit intricate technological capabilities and defeat them with duct tape and car parts created a grudging respect among most Americans I knew in Afghanistan for the ingenuity and resourcefulness of men who could not write the numbers 1-10 on a piece of paper or tie shoelaces. After the earliest phase of the deadly IED chess game involving WWII-era pressure plate technology, the Taliban progressed to remote detonators.

American analysts quickly realized the Taliban were using cell phones as detonators for homemade roadside bombs. When a U.S. vehicle convoy was in the blast radius of their bomb, Taliban observers would call the cellphone detonator attached to the roadside bomb. So American forces fielded simple vehicle-mounted cell phone jammers which blocked cell phone calls in the immediate vicinity of the convoy. That worked for a short time. Then, the Taliban deduced what was happening remarkably quickly and implemented a simple countermeasure — running 10 cents worth of monofilament wire from the bomb itself to a detached cellphone antenna 100 meters or so from the bomb and outside the jamming radius of the American jamming devices. Astute observers drew parallels to the underestimation of the Vietcong in Vietnam, where a network of listening posts and bicycle runners totally defeated the entire Arclight grid square-based strategic bombing effort.

Thus, at least at the tactical level of war, the Taliban are clearly a learning organization and a fast-learning one at that. The explanation for the Mystery of the Vanishing Taliban could be that they learned from 2015 that it is better to wait the Americans out and encourage us to leave their country by their quiescence. I think however that this is unlikely. The evidence from the last 14 years indicates the “they just don’t care” argument has a lot of validity, and it is a year too late to be applying the lesson of 2015 in any case. Those horses are out of the barn and the decision to keep important American assets in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future has already been taken.

A fifth hypothesis for explaining the Mystery of the Vanishing Taliban is the “One Damn Thing After Another Theory.” This suggests that in 2016 Taliban operations have thus far been hamstrung by, of all things, the calendar, combined with the execution of Mullah Mansour by drone in Baluchistan. According to this theory, the reduced level of major Taliban attacks in 2016 is a result, in sequence, first of the poppy harvest, which consumed March and part of April. This was followed by Mullah Mansour’s timely demise — not because of internal political problems, but for the more prosaic and somewhat comical reason that all senior Taliban men, one suspects, immediately put a great deal of distance between themselves and their previous cell phones and SIM cards

(especially after an article in the *Wall Street Journal* unhelpfully explained to the Taliban in detail how Mansour was tracked and killed), and for several weeks, no Taliban commander in the field in Afghanistan knew any Pakistan-based Taliban leader's new cell phone number(s). This simple lack of a phone book, the "One Damn Thing After Another Theory" posits, severely interrupted battlefield operations by disrupting operational communications. This temporary disruption was then followed by Ramadan, which as discussed earlier did not have a major effect on Taliban operations in 2015. For a variety of reasons involving Taliban command and control methodologies, this theory is not particularly strong either.

That brings the mystery back to square one. Whatever the answer is to the puzzle of why the Taliban have been so relatively scarce and relatively quiet on the battlefield so far in 2016 compared to 2015, however, three things are certain: First, while the Taliban rarely make tactical mistakes, because they are hardened fighters with a lot of tactical experience, Taliban leadership does make strategic mistakes, and fairly often. They do not have a Command and Staff College or a War College. This could be capitalized on far more effectively than has been the case over the last 14 years.

Second, whatever the reason is, it is **not** a reason or combination of reasons that Western military minds would develop if faced with an identical problem set. The Taliban simply do not think like we do. Any American who has ever had a conversation with an Afghan and thought they were going from Point A to Point B in the discussion and found themselves at Point Q instead understands this. Human information processing is not a universal, organic, mental sequence hardwired into the brain at birth. It is learned, and it is learned in a unique cultural environment. "Rational actor" (or "rational choice") macroeconomic theory is wrong because everyone in the world does not think the same way and arrive at the same conclusions. Flying airliners into skyscrapers on September 11, 2001, should have been the expiration date of rational choice theory and the day this line of Western thinking was discarded into the dustbin of intellectual history. "Rational" is simply an academically-biased, orientalist meta-descriptor for the Enlightenment-based Western educational process and Western cultural values in decision-making.

Third, and finally, wherever the Taliban are, whatever they are doing, they will be back, perhaps this week, perhaps next month, but if not this year then next year or the year after that. Because in their minds, God wills it, and you do not negotiate with the will of God.

ENDNOTES

1. Tom Bowman, "Afghanistan: A Tragic Return to A War With No End," *National Public Radio*, July 6, 2016, available from www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/07/06/483839687/afghanistan-a-tragic-return-to-a-war-with-no-end.

2. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53448#.V4AP_dTD_IU.

3. "Security Incidents Drop By 14 Percent in June: TOLO News Survey," *TOLO News*, July 08, 2016.

4. See for example, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," Chris Mason and Thomas Johnson, *Orbis*, Vol. 51, Iss. 1, Winter 2007, pp 71–89.

5. See Thomas Johnson, "Taliban Adaptations and Innovations," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, January 2013, pp. 3-27.

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