
Fearful asymmetry

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THE Mujahideen Day parade in Kabul on April 27th was meant to show Afghanistan's new, Western-trained, armed forces coming of age. President Hamid Karzai, the country's political elite and a jumble of Western diplomats packed a podium to review the troops. Then, just as a 21-gun-salute began, three lightly armed Taliban fighters began to take pot-shots from a shabby hotel nearby. The dignitaries scrambled in panic for safety.

Casualties were not as serious as they might have been: the gunmen managed to kill three and wound 11 but missed their main target, Mr Karzai. Afghanistan's intelligence chief said there was evidence that the attackers had ties with militant groups linked to al-Qaeda and based in Pakistan. For the Taliban the attack is a propaganda victory, showing that Afghanistan's capital is within their reach. This was the second big attack in Kabul this year. In January a four-man Taliban suicide-squad blasted its way into a luxury hotel, killing eight staff and guests.

This time, it could have been worse. Called in for a dressing-down by Afghan parliamentarians, the country's intelligence chief, Amrullah Saleh, claimed that security forces had foiled two further attacks that day. Other attacks have reportedly been foiled in Kabul in recent months.

Optimists point out that Afghanistan's government remains relatively stable and, despite the setbacks in Kabul, that there is no evidence of a jump in Taliban capability. Indeed, Western commanders say the younger Taliban leaders now emerging are more radical but less competent than their predecessors. It seems likely that in August, as scheduled, Afghan forces will take on responsibility for security around the capital. That would be a symbolic first step towards an eventual reduction in Western troop numbers. NATO's commander thinks this might be feasible from 2011.

However, recent hints by some Western officials that the Taliban are crumbling look premature. Overall, Taliban violence is in fact rising. Military deaths in the first three months of the year were one-third higher than a year ago, though there were far fewer injuries (99 compared with 187 last year). More casualties among Western forces are caused by tactics such as roadside bombs and suicide-attacks. This time last year such assaults caused 44% of casualties; now it is more like 80%. That suggests the Taliban are eschewing firefights, when body armour often saves soldiers' lives, in favour of lethal terrorist attacks.

A shift to "asymmetric" warfare would be understandable. The attack in Kabul fits in with that evolving strategy. Such "spectaculars" require little in the way of logistical support, but they mould public opinion. In conventional battles the Taliban forces were estimated to be losing 15 fighters, at least, for every NATO soldier killed.

Outside Kabul, too, Taliban leaders may have decided to swap set-piece battles for hit-and-run attacks. This would still allow them to keep the war going long enough to capitalise on disenchantment with the present regime. Grievances about corruption, bad government, worsening local feuds and foreign soldiers could all fuel anger at rule from Kabul. The Taliban's best hope may be to outlast rather than outgun the West.

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