



Afghan National Army soldiers are briefed before live-fire exercise partnered with coalition special operations forces

# Green-on-Blue Attacks Why “Insider” Violence Has Risen in Afghanistan

By ERIC JARDINE

**W**hy has there been a rapid increase in so-called green-on-blue attacks in Afghanistan since 2011?

Put otherwise, why are members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) increasingly targeting coalition forces? I argue that, while personally held individual-level motiva-

tions for attacks play a role, the underlying and systematic root cause of the relative increase in these attacks is a lack of counterinsurgent control over the territory and population of Afghanistan.

## An Overview

First, the problem currently confronting coalition forces in Afghanistan is a

growing *absolute* and *relative* number of so-called green-on-blue attacks in recent years. Second, the growth of the indigenous security apparatus and lack of counterinsurgent control of the population and territory of Afghanistan are the most relevant variables in determining the increase in the relative rate of insider attacks. Third, a framework that systematizes the relationship between Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) growth, counterinsurgent control over the population and territory of Afghanistan, and the occurrence of green-on-blue or insider attacks is offered. Finally, by using the proposed framework, it is possible to diagnose the source of the current problem and provide a prognosis for what will likely occur as Western forces begin to withdraw from the Afghan theater in 2014. In particular, I maintain that the source of this problem is one of sequencing. The United States and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) expanded the indigenous security capacity before the span of counterinsurgent

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**Table. Escalating Trend in Green-on-Blue (“Insider”) Attacks**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Green-on-blue fatalities per year (% of all fatalities in parentheses)	2 (< 1)	12 (2)	16 (2)	35 (6)	61 (15)
Green-on-blue injuries per year	3	11	1	34	81
Total insider attacks per year	2	5	5	16	44
Total estimated ANSF near year's end	147,910	195,089	266,389	323,410	344,108
Ratio of green-on-blue attacks to average ANSF size	1 : 73,955	1 : 39,018	1 : 53,278	1 : 20,213	1 : 7,821

Sources: Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, “Green-on-Blue Attacks in Afghanistan: The Data,” *The Long War Journal*, August 23, 2012. Figures on the size of the Afghan National Security Forces were taken from Ian S. Livingston and Michael O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 16, 2012), 6.

control over the territory and population was broad enough to limit the ability of the insurgency to coerce individuals into undertaking insider attacks.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as Western forces withdraw approaching 2014, the problem of insider attacks is likely to grow even more pronounced.

### Examining the Problem

Current U.S. and ISAF policy in Afghanistan places a large emphasis on building up the indigenous security apparatus of the Afghan state, including both the ANA and the ANP. For example, Seth Jones, a RAND Corporation expert on Afghanistan, posits, “The United States should focus its resources on developing capabilities that help improve the capacity of the *indigenous government* and its security forces to wage counterinsurgency warfare.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the preeminent counterinsurgency theorist David Kilcullen notes, “The essential strategic problem for Western intervention in Afghanistan is . . . less about directly defeating the Taliban and more about building an Afghan state that can handle the Taliban.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, General Stanley McChrystal’s “Commander’s Initial Assessment” of the war in Afghanistan insists that to achieve success in Afghanistan, both the quantity and the quality of the ANA and ANP need to rise.<sup>4</sup>

Both the United States and ISAF have signaled that they will withdraw their troops in 2014. To compensate for the diminished international presence, the United States and ISAF have invested considerable time, money, and resources into building up the ANSF. Indeed, since the end of 2003 when the total ANSF consisted of approximately 6,000 personnel, both the ANA and the ANP have grown significantly. By March 2012,

the total number of ANSF personnel, including forces from the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior, had grown to some 344,000.<sup>5</sup> Despite problems of personnel retention and overall troop quality, the ANSF has grown quite rapidly.

Yet concomitant with the rise in security forces is a rise in green-on-blue attacks—attacks where Afghan security forces (also known as “insiders”) target coalition personnel. By September 2012, for example, Afghan security forces killed 18 British soldiers, while a roughly equal number were wounded in similar attacks.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, according to some fairly comprehensive statistics compiled by *Long War Journal*, 72 green-on-blue attacks occurred from 2008 to the end of 2012. Of all the casualties suffered by coalition forces in 2012, an estimated 15 percent were caused by Afghan forces attacking U.S. and ISAF personnel.<sup>7</sup> As outlined in the accompanying table, the *absolute* number of green-on-blue attacks has been escalating since 2008, with more insider attacks and more coalition fatalities each year.

Given the expansion of the ANSF, an absolute increase in the number of insider attacks would be expected, as more soldiers lead to more chances for insider attacks, just as larger cities tend to have more murders and violent crimes. In this sense, at least part of the increase in green-on-blue attacks is, as British Brigadier General Doug Chalmers points out, “statistical.”<sup>8</sup> What matters more in some ways is the *relative* rate of green-on-blue attacks, or the number of insider attacks that occur relative to the number of Afghan security personnel. As illustrated in row 5 of the table, the relative number of attacks has been growing as well, with the ratio of

attacks to ANSF personnel growing steadily worse. For example, the ratio of green-on-blue attacks to soldiers fell from 1 attack for 73,955 ANSF personnel in 2008 to a startling 1 green-on-blue attack for 7,821 ANSF personnel in 2012. This means that in addition to an increase in the *absolute* number of attacks in recent months, the *relative* rate of attacks against coalition forces is rising as well. This trend begs the question of why.

### Causes

In general, the rise in the *total* number of insider attacks against coalition forces is, I argue, a function of two variables: the number of indigenous troops and the extent of counterinsurgency control in Afghanistan. These variables interact to produce higher levels of insider attacks in both absolute and relative terms. The expansion of the indigenous security capacity of the Afghan state contributes primarily to the absolute increase in attacks. A low and potentially waning span of counterinsurgent control over the territory and population of Afghanistan contributes to the relative rise in attacks that have occurred since 2008.

At its core, the growing number of indigenous security personnel contributes to a higher *absolute* level of green-on-blue violence through personally held individual-level motivations, which are highly variable but can range from comparatively simple grievances over U.S. and ISAF actions to full-blown allegiance to the Taliban insurgency. As highlighted in row three of the table, the *absolute* number of green-on-blue attacks is rising. Moreover, for any given baseline level of discontent with U.S. and ISAF forces among the Afghan population, the growth of the ANSF should result in more people within the security apparatus who want to attack coalition forces.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Maconochie writes, “The catalyst for the majority of insider attacks appears to be a mix of personal grievances, cultural disparities and psychological distress. The largely unreported number of attacks by Afghan soldiers on their own forces bears this out.”<sup>10</sup> Individually held grievances provide the motive, but the expansion of the ANSF must happen before an aggrieved individual has an opportunity to enter the Afghan security apparatus to then undertake an attack.

An expanding number of indigenous security personnel also means more poten-



tial for insurgent infiltration. For example, Mullah Mohammad Omar, the leader of the Taliban, reportedly claimed on August 16, 2012, that the perpetrators of many of the green-on-blue attacks were “cleverly infiltrated in the ranks of the enemy according to the plan given to them last year.”<sup>11</sup> Invariably, a larger security apparatus spreads thin the counterinsurgency’s finite resources for screening, monitoring, and controlling new recruits, which makes increased insurgent infiltration more likely.

In these myriad ways, rapidly building up the ANSF contributes to an increased number of insider acts. Yet the evidence over the 2008 to 2011 period suggests that the baseline level of grievances within the Afghan population is declining. Moreover, according to annual surveys conducted by the Asia Pacific Foundation, from 2008 through 2011 at the national level, an increasing number of Afghans indicated that Afghanistan is heading in the “right” direction.<sup>12</sup> In 2008, only 38 percent of respondents indicated that the country was heading in the right direction. This number grew to 42 percent in 2009, 47 percent in 2010, and 46 percent in 2011. Admittedly, the number of people expressing the view that the country was moving in the wrong direction rose to 35 percent in 2011, but only after declining from 32 percent in 2008 to 27 percent in 2010. Basically, at one level at least, the national statistics imply that the baseline level of grievance is likely improving over time, which means that it cannot really account for the *relative* increase in green-on-blue attacks in recent years. If anything, as grievances decline, the *relative* rate of insider attacks against U.S. and ISAF soldiers should decline, which is the opposite of what is happening.

Overall, more indigenous security forces will likely lead to more green-on-blue attacks because more aggrieved people will enter the security apparatus and there will be more chances for direct insurgent infiltration. However, normalized around the number of security forces on active duty, the *relative* rate of attacks likely would not change unless the baseline level of grievances in the local population changed for the worse or U.S. and ISAF screening measures were overwhelmed by an influx of new recruits. As the data presented at least tentatively illustrate, grievances are diminishing over time at the national level even as the *relative* number of green-on-blue attacks is rising.



U.S. Navy (Jacob Dillon)

**During Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program, insurgent commander turns in weapon and urges others to follow and renounce their affiliation with insurgency**

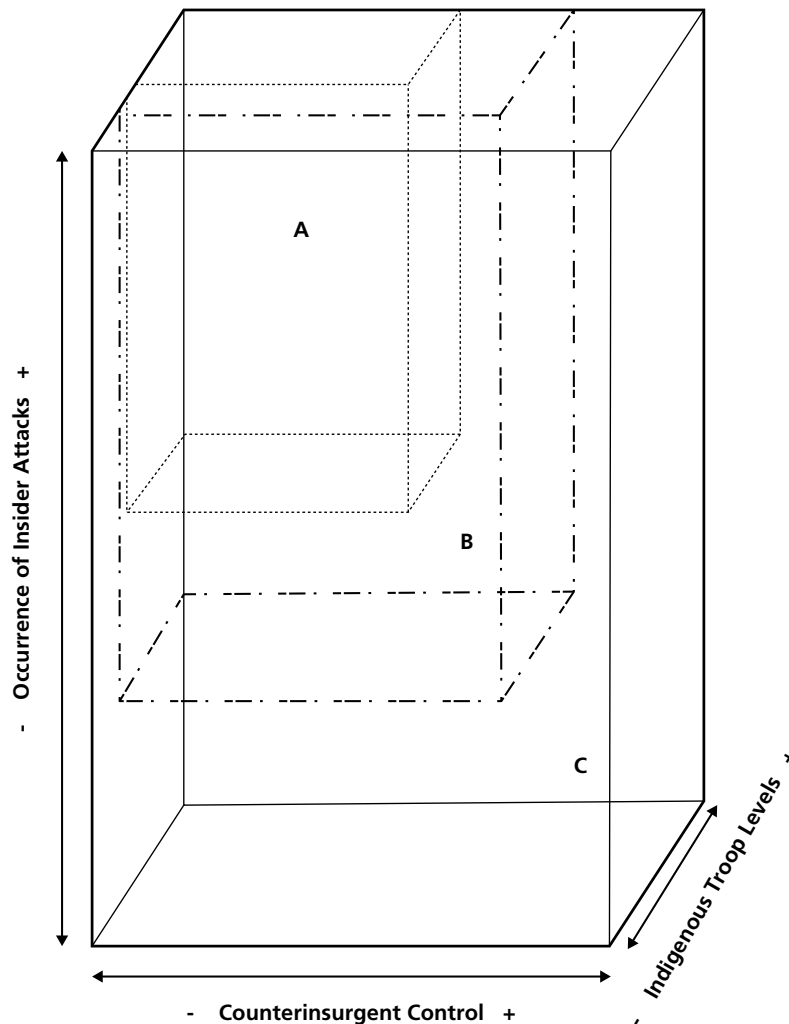
The most likely driver of the *relative* increase in green-on-blue attacks is the changing span of counterinsurgent control over the population and territory of Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The level of control that a counterinsurgency can exercise in a territorial area affects the actions of both the population and the insurgency.<sup>14</sup> People generally collaborate with the counterinsurgency in areas of high counterinsurgent control and refuse to do so in contested or insurgent-controlled areas because the population fears it will be punished by insurgents. If the occurrence of security incidents is taken as a proxy for the extent of counterinsurgent control, the scope of control exercised by ISAF, the United States, and the Afghan government is fairly minimal and perhaps even growing worse over time, as security incidents are rising yearly in many parts of the country.<sup>15</sup> Waning counterinsurgent control over the territory and population is problematic because it places a systematic constraint on the allegiance of both incoming and current ANSF personnel.

Generally, as the counterinsurgent’s span of control over the territory and population in Afghanistan declines over time, the ability of the insurgency to credibly threaten and punish the population increases. As the vulnerability of ANSF recruits’ families and dependents rises, so does the degree to which ANA and ANP personnel are susceptible to being coerced into launching an attack against coalition forces.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, General John Allen of the U.S. Marine Corps recently conceded that roughly 15 percent of insider attacks are attributable to Taliban coercion of the security personnel or their families.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the limited span of counterinsurgent control in Afghanistan coupled with the expanding size of the indigenous security capacity result in higher levels of insider attacks in both *absolute* and *relative* terms.

### Framework for Diagnosis and Prognosis

Higher levels of green-on-blue attacks are caused by two factors: growing indigenous troop levels and limited counterinsurgent

**Figure. Indigenous Security Capacity, Counterinsurgent Control, and Occurrence of Insider Attacks on Coalition Personnel**



control. The mechanism that transforms expanding indigenous troop levels into increased insider attacks is the individual-level motivations of recruits and current personnel. More indigenous troops mean more opportunities for disaffected individuals to join the ANSF and target coalition forces. Likewise, a larger ANSF recruitment process results in a greater chance that insurgents will be able to infiltrate the process. An increase in indigenous troop levels is therefore definitely related to higher levels of green-on-blue attacks in an absolute sense. All else being equal, as the size of Afghanistan's indigenous security apparatus increases, so will the total number of insider attacks.

The span of counterinsurgency control over the territory and population of Afghanistan involves the extent to which factors external to the individual—primarily

the insurgency's ability to coerce individuals through their families and dependents—can motivate a member of the Afghan security apparatus to launch a green-on-blue attack. When counterinsurgent control is low, the dependents and families of ANSF members are vulnerable to coercion and can be credibly threatened by the insurgency. In that sense, counterinsurgent control is negatively related to more insider attacks. All else being equal, as the forces of the counterinsurgency expand their span of control over more of the territory and population of Afghanistan, the *relative* number of green-on-blue attacks should fall.

The accompanying figure outlines the relationship between expanding indigenous force size (z-axis), counterinsurgent control (x-axis), and insider or green-on-blue attacks (y-axis or dependent variable).<sup>18</sup>

Given that a large number of indigenous troops is necessary for Western forces to leave Afghanistan, counterinsurgency control represents the most important axis. In zone A of the figure, the lowest value on the counterinsurgent control axis is represented—meaning that the counterinsurgency controls the lowest amount of the territory and population of Afghanistan. Assuming that indigenous troops are at a medium to high level, low counterinsurgent control results in a higher level of insider attacks—a high value on the y-axis. If counterinsurgent control expands—a movement to the right on the x-axis—then for any given level of indigenous security capacity, the number of insider attacks should fall. Indeed, if counterinsurgent control of Afghanistan approached a maximum value, then even the highest level of indigenous troop levels would not necessarily lead to higher levels of green-on-blue attacks.

In some ways, counterinsurgent control can be furthered by increasing indigenous troop levels, so the x- and z-axes are not completely independent. However, a counterinsurgency's span of control over territory and population is the product of more than just security force levels, so a movement along the z-axis (growing indigenous troop levels) will not necessarily produce a similar movement along the x-axis (growing counterinsurgent control).<sup>19</sup> This means that an expansion of the counterinsurgency's span of control will usually lag indigenous troop development. In the context of the framework in the figure, there will be a movement along the z-axis (increased indigenous troops) that is greater than the movement along the x-axis (increased counterinsurgent control). The implication is that there will also be an increase upward along the y-axis, resulting in more green-on-blue attacks.

In sum, for any given level of indigenous troops, the smaller the span of counterinsurgent control of the territory and population, the higher the *relative* number of insider attacks. Conversely, the higher the level of counterinsurgent control, the lower the level of insider attacks.

### Policy Conclusions

The proposed framework for understanding the drivers of green-on-blue attacks has both diagnostic and prognostic implica-

tions. In particular, the framework can diagnose why there is currently an upswing in the *relative* number of green-on-blue attacks. It can also provide rough predictions of what will happen as Western countries reduce their presence in Afghanistan in 2014.

Diagnostically, the framework has interesting implications for both current and future state-building and counterinsurgency efforts. It suggests that absent a sufficiently high level of counterinsurgent control of the population and territory of an area of operation, building indigenous security capacity is likely to result in a growing relative number of insider attacks. This diagnosis fits with what is currently happening in Afghanistan. While the indigenous security capacity of the Afghan state has grown significantly, the span of counterinsurgent control of the territory and population has likely waned or at least remained fairly low. The result is a growing relative number of green-on-blue attacks as the insurgency is able to coerce individuals within the ANSF into undertaking insider attacks.

For current and future indigenous capacity development, the proposed framework suggests that increasing the span of counterinsurgent control must precede any significant expansion in indigenous security capacity. Otherwise, higher levels of green-on-blue attacks are likely. To the extent the framework accurately describes the relationship between counterinsurgent control, indigenous security capacity, and green-on-blue attacks, it is clear that the need to develop indigenous capacity before handing over all security operations to the ANSF by 2014 has resulted in a rapid movement along the z-axis without a preceding or concomitant movement along the x-axis. The result, as expected, is an increased and rising number of green-on-blue attacks.

The framework can also provide a prognosis about what will happen with green-on-blue attacks as Western forces withdraw. Obviously, as the number of Western troops declines, the ability for ANSF personnel to launch attacks on Western counterinsurgents will fall. However, ANSF forces might still be targeted by elements within the indigenous security apparatus and the logic, as outlined in the framework above, should still apply. Since the span of counterinsurgent control over the population and territory of Afghanistan will likely decrease as Western forces are

withdrawn, the predicted expectation would be that the number of intrasecurity force attacks (green-on-blue and green-on-green) should probably rise further still.

Overall, the framework developed here has implications for both future counterinsurgency missions and the ongoing mission in Afghanistan. Counterinsurgent control of the population and territory of a theater of operations is crucial in limiting green-on-blue attacks because it minimizes the external motivator of such attacks, which revolves around the insurgency's ability to coerce the families and dependents of indigenous forces into launching attacks. Put another way, building up the ANSF without first establishing a high enough level of effective control over Afghanistan has resulted in another avenue through which the insurgency is able to attack coalition forces. Counterinsurgency is a slow, tiresome business, and attempting to build indigenous forces without first beginning to win the war simply results in more problems. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Those familiar with L.F. Urwick's concept of a "manager span of control" will recognize the turn of phrase used in this article. See L.F. Urwick, "The Span of Control," *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 4, no. 2 (1957), 101–113.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), xi. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>3</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley A. McChrystal, *Commander's Initial Assessment* (Kabul: Headquarters International Security Assistance Force [ISAF], August 30, 2009), available at <[http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf)>.

<sup>5</sup> Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 16, 2012), 6, available at <[www.brookings.edu/~media/programs/foreign%20policy/afghanistan%20index/index20120516](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/programs/foreign%20policy/afghanistan%20index/index20120516)>.

<sup>6</sup> Charlie Maconochie, "Green on Blue Attacks Must Not Deter Us in Afghanistan," *The Telegraph* (London), September 18, 2012, available at <[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9550536/Green-on-Blue-attacks-must-not-deter-us-in-Afghanistan.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9550536/Green-on-Blue-attacks-must-not-deter-us-in-Afghanistan.html)>.

<sup>7</sup> Since the end of 2012, the number of attacks has risen to a total of 80, as of July 2013. For a breakdown of the statistics, see Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, "Green-on-Blue Attacks in Afghanistan: The Data," *The Long War Journal*,

August 23, 2012, available at <[www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/green-on-blue\\_attack.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/green-on-blue_attack.php)>.

<sup>8</sup> James Kirkup, "Britain's Afghan Commander: Rising Threat of 'Green on Blue' Attacks," *The Telegraph* (London), October 23, 2012, available at <[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9628586/Britains-Afghan-commander-rising-threat-of-green-on-blue-attacks.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9628586/Britains-Afghan-commander-rising-threat-of-green-on-blue-attacks.html)>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Edwards, "Afghanistan Green on Blue Attacks Continue," *PM* (Australia), audio and transcript, October 11, 2012, available at <[www.abc.net.au/news/2012-10-11/afghanistan-green-on-blue-attacks-continue/4308638?section=world](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-10-11/afghanistan-green-on-blue-attacks-continue/4308638?section=world)>.

<sup>10</sup> Maconochie.

<sup>11</sup> Roggio and Lundquist.

<sup>12</sup> All Asia Pacific Foundation surveys on Afghanistan are available at <<http://asiafoundation.org/country/afghanistan/2011-poll.php>>.

<sup>13</sup> See Eric Jardine, "Controlling Territory and Population During Counterinsurgency: State Security Capacity and the Costs of Power Projection," *Civil Wars* 14, no. 2 (June 2012), 228–253.

<sup>14</sup> For the seminal work on control and the behavior of the population, see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> For data on security incidents in Afghanistan's provinces see, for example, the provincial indicators page, available at <[www.cimicweb.org/AfghanistanProvincialMap/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.cimicweb.org/AfghanistanProvincialMap/Pages/default.aspx)>.

<sup>16</sup> For a lucid study of the drivers of indigenous force performance, including how the context of the indigenous units' recruitment matters and can lead to insider violence, see Yoav Gortzak, "Using Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency Operations: The French in Algeria, 1954–1962," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 2009), 307–333.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Thom Shanker, "General Notes Taliban Coercion in Some Attacks on Troops," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2012, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/asia/general-notes-taliban-coercion-in-some-attacks-on-troops-in-afghanistan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/asia/general-notes-taliban-coercion-in-some-attacks-on-troops-in-afghanistan.html)>.

<sup>18</sup> Although our topics and axes differ, I first came across the idea of modeling conceptual ideas in three dimensions by reading the great work of Jeff Goodwin on revolutionary movements. See Jeff Goodwin, *No Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Jardine.