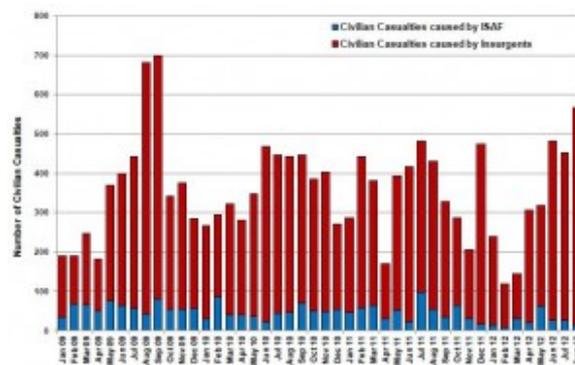


PANETTA, DOD USE SEMANTIC GAMES TO CLAIM JOINT OPERATIONS NEARLY NORMAL AGAIN IN AFGHANISTAN



Civilian casualty rates in Afghanistan updated through August of 2012, as obtained by Spencer Ackerman at Danger Room. Click on image for a larger view.

Late Thursday, Leon Panetta contributed even further to his diminishing credibility by trying to claim that joint missions between US and Afghan troops are returning nearly to normal levels. From the Washington Post:

Most U.S. and NATO combat troops have resumed joint operations with Afghan forces, the Pentagon said Thursday, although U.S. officials said they remain worried about the threat of fratricidal “insider attacks.”

U.S. commanders had substantially scaled back the joint operations 10 days ago in an urgent effort to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. and NATO troops.

At a news conference, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said “most” U.S. and NATO units had “returned to their normal

partnered operations” with their Afghan allies. But he offered few details, and other Pentagon officials offered conflicting accounts of how many missions were still being conducted separately.

The new information was also found to be unclear by the New York Times:

In a significant restriction on a core element of the Western exit strategy from Afghanistan, the American-led military coalition said last week that all joint operations with Afghan forces conducted below the battalion level had to first go through a formal approval process – an effort to stem attacks by members of the Afghan security forces that have killed 51 American or allied service members this year. Officials now say those approvals were being handled efficiently enough that the number of partnered operations was returning to normal. . . . The number is now climbing again, said officials, who declined to offer specifics.

Spencer Ackerman is having none of this ploy, though, and the title of his piece from Thursday evening tells us all we need to know: “Whatever Pentagon Says, U.S. Patrols With Afghans Aren’t ‘Normal’ Yet”:

The U.S. defense chief announced on Thursday that the U.S. troops have returned to their “normal partnered operations” with their Afghan counterparts, after a recent policy shift put a big layer of bureaucracy in between Americans and Afghans. Only that policy remains in place, the Pentagon confirms.

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Yet although Panetta said the *tempo* of

operations has mostly returned to normal, the two-stars still have to approve the operations themselves. "The FRAGO [fragmentary order] that directed approval for partnered operations below the battalion level be maintained at the R.C. [Regional] Commander-level remains in effect," says Air Force Lt. Col. Jack Miller, a Pentagon spokesman. Marine Col. David Lapan, the spokesman for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confirmed that the directive is still on the books.

If that sounds bureaucratic, it should. The reason for the shift is to create a layer of protection for U.S. troops against the newly urgent "insider" threat from the Afghan troops they mentor. If the threat is so great that a general in charge of securing vast swaths of Afghanistan thinks an operation at the company, platoon or squad level needs to be shut down, the theory goes, that ought to save American lives.

Panetta and the Defense Department are facing the difficulty of dealing with a war and a war strategy that has clearly failed and yet they must delay full acceptance of that failure until after the November election. Semantic games are a preferred ploy by the DoD under Obama, as seen when troops were redefined as "non-combat" in order to claim the end of combat operations in Iraq or in the redefinition of what an independent unit is when describing the training of Afghan security forces. Ackerman added even further pressure on the Defense Department Thursday when he published a leaked set of statistics (pdf) for "progress" in Afghanistan through August of this year. As shown in one figure from that set reproduced above, during the vaunted "surge" in Afghanistan that began in early 2010 and ended this month, civilian casualties have remained virtually unchanged.

Any claims about "momentum" being in favor of the US are simply unfounded.

I find it very hard to see how Leon Panetta can remain as Defense Secretary in a second Obama term. He has been the source of two major leaks, identifying Dr. Shakeel Afridi as working for the CIA to find bin Laden and leaking Pakistan's plans for military operations in the insurgent havens in the tribal areas. He also keeps making statements that present a far rosier picture of the status of the war in Afghanistan than is justified.