

Afghan National Security Force:

Upcoming Challenges and Implications for South Asia

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Introduction

The ongoing drawdown of American troops in Afghanistan foreshadows the culmination of what has been the longest US military engagement since Vietnam. This ‘retrograde’ process, which is due for completion towards the end of 2014, will ultimately see the US spend anywhere between US\$ 4 trillion and US\$ 6 trillion on conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, with a major portion of this sum still pending payment.² In an era of budget cuts, sequesters, debt-ceiling and government shutdowns, these conflicts have added US\$ 2 trillion to the United States’ national debt and burdened the nation with long-term financial obligations.³ Given the high cost of engagement, the US and its coalition partners would want to protect their legacy in Afghanistan and safeguard it from reversal following the drawdown in 2014.

The Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) remains critical to this endeavour and has been principally tasked with maintaining stability in the country after the transition. Yet questions abound over the capacity of the ANSF to carry out its mandate. The current plan to reduce the ANSF numbers by approximately 35 per cent from 2017 onwards reveals ominous portents

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² See Linda J. Bilmes, “The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets”, *Harvard Kennedy School*, (March, 2013).

³ Ibid.

for the future of Afghan stability.⁴ This planned reduction of force levels from 352,000 to 228,500 troops – according to US and its NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) partners – is part of a carefully designed roadmap to convert the ANSF into a “sustainable” force. It is conceivable, however, that the motives behind this restructuring are driven by the economic imperatives of a reduced budget (from US\$6 billion to US\$4.1 billion) and, contrary to claims, are in discord with the anticipated security conditions. To argue that an ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) drawdown of approximately 65,000 troops followed by a further 120,000 troop reduction in the ANSF, albeit in a phased manner, will not negatively affect the prevailing and potential security environment seems improbable when already the latter’s ability to preserve stability seems tenuous. The projected reduction in the ANSF numbers is contingent on the international coalition cutting annual funding to US\$ 4.1 billion from US\$ 6 billion and seems especially harsh when one considers that in 2012, the US spent US\$ 4.1 billion on combat operations in Afghanistan every 12 days. What might seem like a negligible figure for the US and its allies qualifies as the majority of funding for the ANSF and could endanger the US-NATO vision of enduring stability in Afghanistan. Even this figure of US\$ 4.1 billion in funding is under the scanner: According to a US Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, there is a difference of US\$ 600 million between donor-pledges and the stated amount of funding.⁵ Furthermore, it is unclear whether Afghanistan’s beleaguered economy can gainfully absorb 120,000 discharged armed personnel.⁶ A 2012 International Labour Organization (ILO) report on ‘the State of Employment in Afghanistan’ cites unemployment at 7.1 per cent and adds that there are 823,000 unemployed Afghans. The ILO report further stresses that over 90 per cent of those currently employed are considered vulnerable to unemployment. An addition of 120,000 to the labour force will place undue stress on the economy and compel many to find jobs outside the jurisdiction of the state.

Indian Discomfiture

In the short term, the ANSF is facing shortages in capacity ‘enablers’. As US and coalition forces begin handing over responsibility, Afghan forces are being increasingly tested in combat operations. This has exposed a variety of shortcomings in logistics, casualty evacuation, counter-improvised explosive device, surface fires, engineer and explosive ordnance, and aviation.⁷ Cognisant of these gaps, Afghan forces have been in the market for military hardware; yet there remains a scarcity of suppliers willing to offer arms to

⁴ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Audit 13-18. Available at: <http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-Audit-13-18.pdf>

⁵ United States Government Accountability Office (GOA) Report to Congressional Addresses, “Afghanistan: Key Oversight Issues” (February, 2013). Available at: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/652075.pdf>

⁶ Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services (June, 2012). Available at:

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hrg75146/html/CHRG-112hrg75146.htm>

⁷ Written posture statement of General Joseph F. Dunford on the situation in Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee (16 April 2013). Available at:

http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2013/04%20April/Dunford_04-16-13.pdf

Afghanistan. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to India in May 2013 generated significant media attention owing to the 'wish list' of military hardware that he brought with him.⁸ According to reports circulating in the Indian media, the list of military hardware contained orders for 105 millimeter artillery, An.32 medium-lift aircraft, bridge-laying equipment, trucks and helicopter gunships. With US\$ 2 billion in development aid (India is the sixth largest donor) and approximately 100 companies having invested in Afghanistan since 2001, it is fair to say that New Delhi is an important stakeholder in the region.⁹ Indeed, the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in October 2011 laid emphasis on enhanced security and defence cooperation and signalled that India's interest in the region was not transitory. Yet despite what India's Ministry of External Affairs calls an "abiding commitment to peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan", the issue of sharing military equipment failed to progress during President Karzai's visit; clearly in this instance the shadow of Pakistan looms large in India's engagement with Afghanistan.

The issue of military supplies was once again taken up by the Afghans during Vice-President Karimi Khalili's visit to India in August 2013 – indicating the exigent nature of the matter. But this time New Delhi was ready with an explanation; according to sources, due to end user agreements from suppliers, the Indian government was constrained in its ability to supply arms to Afghanistan.¹⁰ Furthermore, India's own military modernisation programme means that supplies must first be directed towards its own armed forces. Whether these are justifiable explanations or merely convenient excuses would depend largely upon the nature of arms sanctions that Afghanistan faces. The relevant UN Security Council Resolution 1390 (2002) is a counter-terrorism measure and applies to the sale or transfer of military equipment to any and all entities affiliated to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.¹¹ Given that India would be supplying directly to the Afghan government and not to any armed faction, it is unclear whether New Delhi would be in danger of violating the arms embargo or any other end-user agreement. India's rationale is cast into further doubt in light of its attempts to export indigenously developed military hardware to other countries. It is well documented that the Afghan Air Force faces critical gaps in capacity and that the newly self-reliant ANSF has been taking heavy casualties in the absence of ISAF air support or medical evacuation capabilities. India's indigenously developed *Dhruv* Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH), identified as a flagship defence export item and sold to eight other countries, would be a major force-enabler for the ANSF; yet it remains absent from ANSF's inventory. As the Afghan endgame draws nearer India will find it increasingly harder to reconcile its concerns regarding the future of Afghan stability with its reluctance to support the ANSF in a more

⁸ There is some debate whether the 'wish list' was a not so-veiled signal to the Pakistani government following border clashes, as opposed to a request to achieve ANSF aspirations. But there is a case for *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, particularly because this wish list is not the first of its kind.

⁹ "Economic links between India and Afghanistan" (paper presented at the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan, New Delhi, 28 June 2012). Available at: <http://dsafghan.in/pdf/India-Afghanistan.pdf>.

¹⁰ Shubhjit Roy, 'India Cites Hurdles in Supplying Arms to Afghanistan', *Indian Express*, 26 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-cites-hurdles-in-supplying-arms-to-afghanistan/1160069/>

¹¹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1390 (2002). Accessed on: 25 October 2013. Available at: http://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/afghanistan/1390

proactive and unconditional manner. In the meantime, the ANSF is falling victim to larger geopolitical concerns.

The Demilitarisation Conundrum

The labyrinth of rules and regulations affecting the transfer of military equipment to foreign governments, as highlighted by the Indians, is already disturbing the ‘retrograde’ process. Citing “complicated rules governing equipment donations to other countries” and the inability to transport all military equipment back home, Washington has taken the extraordinary decision to scrap US\$ 7 billion worth of military hardware.¹² The situation remains far different from Iraq where the US could rely on easy access to sea ports, hospitable terrain and proximity to other US military bases in the region for transportation. This reality has massively increased costs and made it prohibitively expensive to transport equipment back to the US, leaving the government with few alternatives but to scrap a portion of the equipment. The US has wide-ranging concerns about leaving equipment behind in Afghanistan and they are linked to US presidential directives on conventional arms transfer policies; these directives are then regulated through the Export Administration Act (EAA), the Arms Export Control Act (AECA), and the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) amongst others. In part, the issue revolves around ensuring accountability so that the equipment does not fall into the wrong hands and contribute to terrorism or stoke internecine warfare in Afghanistan. Export control laws are also invariably tied to economic competitiveness wherein the US Government cannot compromise the commercial operations of its own defence contractors. Limits on transfer of equipment might also be placed in case of host nation’s inability to repair or refurbish equipment; in such cases, absent a contract for sustainment with a US firm, the Pentagon is unable to leave equipment behind. Thus constrained, the Department of Defense (DOD) must return the military equipment to its own inventory, transfer to another country or demilitarise.¹³ The last option involves removing critical features from a piece of equipment so that it may not be used for its original purpose; in other words, scrapping. The DOD has identified 20 per cent of its equipment in Afghanistan which is too expensive to ‘reset’ and therefore must be scrapped.

Faced with such a harsh reality, the ANSF will be feeling especially hard done by. Their misfortune is compounded by the fact that the disposal effort includes over 2,000 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs).¹⁴ These are armoured vehicles which are primarily designed to protect against Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks and were

¹² Ernesto Londono, ‘Scrapping Equipment Key to Afghan Drawdown’, *Washington Post*, 19 June 2013. Available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-06-19/world/40067061_1_afghanistan-war-mine-resistant-ambush-protected-kandahar-airfield.

¹³ DOD Manual 4160.28, vol. 1, *Defense Demilitarization: Program Administration* (7 June, 2011).

¹⁴ Ernesto Londono, ‘Scrapping Equipment Key to Afghan Drawdown’, *Washington Post*, 19 June 2013. Available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-06-19/world/40067061_1_afghanistan-war-mine-resistant-ambush-protected-kandahar-airfield

pressed into service in 2008 to replace unarmoured ‘humvees’. It is widely acknowledged that the ANSF is plagued with a limited number of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams, which makes them an easy prey for IED attacks; with 4,100 casualties in 2012, IEDs are the leading cause of injuries and fatalities in the ANSF.¹⁵ However, this grim situation could be turned around if ANSF capabilities were to be augmented with MRAPs. Yet they are destined for demilitarisation. In an interesting development, the US Army recently placed a US\$ 113.4 million follow-on order for 135 Mobile Strike Force Vehicles (MSFVs) for the Afghan National Army, taking the total to 634 MSFVs on contract order.¹⁶ Given that MSFVs are based on the M1117 armoured security vehicle, which is a type of MRAP, the destruction of 2,000 MRAPs raises certain questions and leads back to the economic premise of protecting the commercial interests of defence contractors.

Pakistan’s ‘Proxy’ Threat

It is a troublesome fact that the ANSF’s fortunes – and indeed those of Afghanistan – are inextricably linked to happenings across the border. Pakistan’s tacit support for the Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban has ensured that the situation remains highly volatile along the Durand Line and in southeast Afghanistan, where the ANSF’s influence is severely diminished. An aggressive withdrawal strategy, coupled with increased activity by Pakistan-supported ‘proxies’, could overwhelm the ANSF and end the military stalemate.¹⁷ For the Pakistani establishment, engagement with Afghanistan is dominated by the overriding fear of India’s expanding influence in the region and concern over the resurgence of ‘Pashtunistan’. And as long as Islamabad does not recalibrate its strategic calculus in support of Afghan stability there is always going to be a sanctuary for Afghan insurgents within Pakistani territory, making it extremely difficult for Kabul to eradicate the insurgent threat completely. Pakistan’s own domestic insurgency should serve as a cautionary tale; its indefinite fielding and backing of ‘proxies’ in Afghanistan may eventually come to an end, in which case Pakistan will be in better position if it hasn’t already nurtured the Haqqani Network into a position of strength.

Afghan Stability: Key Considerations

The current situation is a far cry from past ANSF aspirations; at one point, the ANSF was touted as the “lynchpin” of the US and NATO strategy for a successful outcome post-2014.¹⁸ Today, the realisation that a political settlement is the most likely option means that the ANSF star is on the wane. However, even though a successful battlefield outcome remains

¹⁵ DOD Report to Congress on ‘Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan’, (July, 2013). Available at: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Section_1230_Report_July_2013.pdf

¹⁶ ‘Mobile Strike Force Vehicle (MSFV), Afghanistan’, *army-technology.com*. Accessed on 22 October 2013. Available at: <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/mobile-strike-force-vehicle-msfv/>.

¹⁷ See Joint Subcommittee Hearing: ‘After the Withdrawal: The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Part II)’. Available at: <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-after-withdrawal-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan-part-ii>.

¹⁸ Vanda Felbab-Brown, ‘Aspirations and Ambivalence: Strategies and Reality of Counterinsurgency and State Building in Afghanistan’, *Brookings Institution*, 2013.

improbable, the ANSF still has an important role to play in the future stability of Afghanistan. Policy makers must consider certain key issues going forward. *First*, Washington and Kabul can successfully leverage the ANSF to gain a favourable political settlement. The belief that the US and its allies will depart the region, come 2014, will give the Afghan Taliban a certain confidence going into negotiations. Here a resilient ANSF will create uncertainty within the ranks of the Afghan Taliban and test their resolve and at the same time reduce their room to manoeuvre during negotiations; it will also validate the pragmatists within the Taliban. *Secondly*, Pakistan must consider that stability in Afghanistan means stability for Pakistan. Active or even passive sabotage of Afghan stability through proxies could lead to a crisis- slide in Afghanistan post-2014. Such a scenario will strengthen the insurgent network in southwest Asia and could also lead to a refugee crisis in Pakistan similar to that in the 1990s. This would have dangerous implications for a Pakistan already wrestling with its own domestic insurgency. *Finally*, India must expand its diplomacy with Pakistan and encourage the latter to positively engage with its Afghan neighbour. A new political regime in Islamabad and change of guard at the helm of the Pakistani military mean that New Delhi has a rare opportunity to effect a change in Pakistan's thinking vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan. The situation would benefit from a containment of issues; in the past, progress in certain areas has not been forthcoming because both countries have linked issues together. A policy of fashioning solutions in single domains would improve Indo-Pak engagement on Afghanistan and create an environment where cooperation is not restrained by a host of other issues where India and Pakistan do not see eye-to-eye.

As the timeline for withdrawal steadily progresses, the ANSF must endeavour to augment its capacity and gain the trust of the population – or else the vacuum created by the departure of US and NATO troops will result in fissures and fractures and encourage the revival of the old warring factions. It is clear that as the situation evolves it will have wide-ranging consequences not just for Afghanistan but rather for much of South Asia. Those involved must shed their zero-sum mentality and adopt a more inclusive approach towards stabilising Afghanistan and the wider South Asian region.

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