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Prospects for ‘Transition’ in the Afghan Security Sector: A Reality Check?

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Abstract

As the talks of transfer of authority gains currency, the Taliban insurgency wants to demonstrate its capacity by systematic targeting of the new and fragile Afghan security forces. The gradual reduction of international forces is slated to coincide with the ascendancy in the capabilities and presence of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) that will be responsible for securing the country against insurgent attacks. Will these forces – product of a rushed, under-resourced and frequently revamped recruitment and training procedure – be able to deliver? There are serious reasons for worry. The rush to pass the responsibility to relatively new and fragile force might prove disastrous for the country and the region. This paper while assessing the effectiveness of the ANSFs argues that a sustainable transition in the security sector can only be achieved by long-term vision and efforts in institution building.

In the afternoon of 2 April 2011, a sizeable crowd gathered around an operations centre for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in the relatively stable and peaceful northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Protesting against the burning of the Holy Quran by an extremist pastor in Florida, the demonstration was one of the several that had taken place across the country that day and was expected to be peaceful. However, by 4.30p.m., the nature of the protest suddenly changed. Armed men among the demonstrators took over.

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Even as the Afghan National Police (ANP) personnel kept firing into the air, the peaceful demonstration degenerated into a violent attack on the UNAMA facility leaving three United Nations (UN) staff members and four Nepali security guards dead. At least five Afghan protestors were also killed. Among other things, the incident seriously exposed the lack of crowd management, riot control abilities and general level of preparedness among the ANSFs in a traditionally peaceful area. Mazar-e-Sharif, incidentally is one among the seven areas that will be transferred under the jurisdiction of the ANSFs by July 2011, beginning of the much publicised Afghanisation of security in the war-ravaged country.

July 2011 will mark the commencement of the United States (US) President's December 2009 promise to pull out troops from the 'Long War' in Afghanistan, a process President Barack Obama wishes to complete by July 2014. Even though the pace of such drawdown has been subsequently linked to the security conditions on the ground, the US and the international community is hopeful of achieving this goal through a process of 'Afghanisation' of the security structure by making the ANSFs predominantly responsible for the security of the country by 2014. Notwithstanding such hopes and ambitions, experts and reports from the field point at the continuing weaknesses and deficiencies among the ANSFs.

Chronic Deficiencies

Indiscipline, high level of illiteracy, drug abuse and corruption among the ANSF recruits are some of the commonly identified problems that are said to afflict the performance of the ANSFs. As of March 2011, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is said to have 159,000 troops while the ANP is estimated to have 122,000, both are considered to be far too large to be either managed effectively or properly funded by the Afghan government. There are serious concerns of creating a 'hyper-militarised'² state, particularly when the appropriate model of civil-military relations is not chalked out, the civilian leadership is considered weak and the Taliban are going to gain ascendancy in the power structures through the process of reconciliation and the international community's rush towards the 'end-game'.

The rapid pace at which recruitment for both the ANA and the ANP has been made is said to have compromised the quality of the personnel recruited. Analysts suggest that the ANA and the ANP are already 'unmanageable' and hence, term the expansion nothing but a 'paradox'.³ The illiteracy among the ANSF recruits is estimated to be at least 86 per cent, making them unfit to understand and master the finer aspects of military training. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) of late has introduced

² Julian Glover, 'Few politicians say it, but most think it: our Afghan war is a disaster', *The Guardian* (11 April 2011), www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/11/afghanistan-strategy-failed. Accessed on 11 April 2011.

³ Thomas Johnson and Matthew Dupee, 'Transition to Nowhere: The Limits of "Afghanization"', *Foreign Policy* (22 March 2011), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/22/transition_to_nowhere_the_limits_of_afghanization. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

compulsory literacy crash courses, but these are unlikely to bring in drastic improvements in the quality of the personnel's ability. The grooming of leaders and development of officer corps among the ANSFs, thus, is likely to continue to be a long-term problem.

Illiteracy and lack of leadership, combined together, has led to rampant indiscipline among the forces, which have further resulted in phenomena like desertion and a high and unacceptable level of attrition rate. The ANP serves as the single law enforcement agency across the country – which includes uniformed police, border police, highway police and the criminal investigation department – has reported a significant rate of desertion among its personnel. British Foreign Office statistics had shown that nearly 20,000 ANP personnel left service in 2010.⁴ While the attrition rate among the ANP was estimated to be at 18 per cent in 2010 – which included losses caused by deaths, desertion and dismissals, often due to positive drug tests – ANA personnel loss was estimated even higher at 32 per cent. As a result, only two-thirds of the men recruited for duty remain available for some sort of engagement.⁵

To be effective in an ethnically fragmented Afghanistan, the ANSFs need to mirror the numerical strength of the ethnic groups. Predominance of any particular group, either at the personnel or the leadership level, is bound to antagonise other groupings, thus leading to a lack of cohesion and camaraderie among the forces. Afghan expert Antonio Giustozzi points out that nearly 70 per cent of the ANA *Kandak* (battalion) commanders are Tajik, which is a throw back to the times of the Northern Alliance. Historically, the Pushtuns have retained dominance in both political and security sectors. Any perceived imbalance works towards further alienation among the Pushtuns.⁶ The Afghan Ministry of Defence has set for itself personnel target numbers of 42 per cent Pushtun, 27 per cent Tajik, 9 per cent Uzbek, 9 per cent Hazara and the remaining 13 per cent others to make up the ANA. However, the zeal to reach the magic number of 171,000 by the end of 2011 might be undermining any such ethnic considerations.

For a number of years, training of the ANA and the ANP was carried out under the 'lead nation' arrangement under which separate countries developed the training programmes, based on their own national models and with little or no considerations of the local needs and specificities. A lack of consensus was apparent not only among the international community but also between what the 'lead nations' considered useful and what the Afghans needed. Subsequently, the American model of conventional training for the ANSF was hailed as a

⁴ Rajeev Syal, 'Afghan police crisis threatens British withdrawal as thousands quit force', *The Guardian* (12 December 2010), www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/12/afghan-police-crisis-threatens-british-withdrawal. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

⁵ Thomas Johnson and Matthew Dupee, 'Transition to Nowhere: The Limits of "Afghanization"', *Foreign Policy* (22 March 2011), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/22/transition_to_nowhere_the_limits_of_afghanization. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

⁶ This purported dominance by the Pushtuns, however, has been questioned by other groups, especially since there has been no census in Afghanistan for the past three decades. Based on discussions by the author with locals during a field visit to Afghanistan in October 2010 and March 2011.

success, until the need and consequent inability to undertake ‘hold’, in place of the ‘clear and sweep’ operations punctured such claims. The training programme conducted by the European Union (EU) remained affected by a plethora of problems. In February 2011, the British House of Lords EU Committee’s report concluded that the decade-long training EUPOL-Afghanistan (European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan) was too small, too bureaucratic, too disconnected and, being largely confined to Kabul, geographically too restricted from The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It summed up that the EUPOL-Afghanistan is ‘unlikely to succeed in its overall mission of achieving a literate, non-corrupt Afghan police force.’⁷ In 2009, the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) was created to implement an accelerated goal of putting adequate boots on the ground. Since then, the NTM-A along with the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), have ‘subsumed several separate training endeavours and synchronized those efforts across both the Ministry of Defence [building the ANA] and the Ministry of Interior [building the ANP].’⁸

However, several problems persist. The NTM-A still has a want for training centres outside Kabul. Short-term deployment of trainers by NATO countries prolongs the problems of continuity in the training programmes. Although, the ANA training programme is considered to be more successful than that of the ANP, a shortage of trainers remains to be a problem area. Training, to a large extent, continues to be performed by contractors, thereby inhibiting the prospect for a self-sustaining national army.⁹ Moreover, the training programme for the ANA and the ANP remains roughly similar. The lack of policing abilities among the ANA, as a result, is being reflected in incidents like those on the 2 April 2011.

Although both the ANA and the ANP have participated and on occasions led anti-Taliban operations, they have been targeted by the Taliban, which has led to demoralisation among the forces and frequent desertions. On 26 March 2011, in an area by Mehter Lam, the Taliban kidnapped 50 people, mostly police officers, and reportedly negotiated for a swapping of imprisoned Taliban fighters for the captured men. On 7 April 2011, six ANP personnel were killed as Taliban insurgents detonated a bomb hidden in an ambulance at an ANP centre near the city of Kandahar. On 9 April 2011, a suicide bomber detonated explosives strapped to his body targeting an ANA bus in Kabul, wounding seven soldiers and three civilians. The demonstrated targeting and success of such Taliban attacks on the ANSFs has further posed questions on the ability of these men to withstand the repeated onslaughts of insurgency. Such attacks are projected to grow in months to come.

⁷ Lisa Curtis and Sally McNamara, ‘Afghanistan: Time for Political Strategy to Capitalize on Military Gains’, *The Heritage Foundation* (15 March 2011), http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2011/pdf/bg2530.pdf. Accessed on 2 April 2011.

⁸ Lt. Gen. William B. Caldwell, ‘A response on the training of Afghan Forces’, *Foreign Policy* (29 March 2011), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/29/a_response_on_the_training_of_afghan_forces. Accessed on 2 April 2011.

⁹ Lisa Curtis and Sally McNamara, ‘Afghanistan: Time for Political Strategy to Capitalize on Military Gains’, *The Heritage Foundation* (15 March 2011), http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2011/pdf/bg2530.pdf. Accessed on 2 April 2011.

During the July 2010 Kabul Conference, President Karzai had made the announcement that by 2014 the ANSFs ‘should lead and conduct military operations in all provinces’.¹⁰ Keeping with the promise, in a speech on 22 March 2011, Karzai announced that by July 2011, coinciding with the beginning of the pullout of US forces, ANSF will take control of the security in seven areas. Karzai said, ‘The people of Afghanistan no longer desire to see others defend their country for them. This day will be a defining moment in the history of the country.’¹¹ While four of these seven areas – Herat, Bamyan, Mazar-e-Sharif and Panjsher – have been traditionally peaceful, ANSF abilities will be put to test in the remaining three – Mehtar Lam in Laghman, Lashkar Gah in Helmand and Kabul.

The persisting weakness among the ANP is bound to affect the ANA performance. The ANP is expected to perform counter-insurgency, security, law enforcement, border protection and counter-narcotics functions. Since the role of the police is in ‘hold’ operations and intelligence gathering – as provider of security in areas cleared of insurgent presence – which is of paramount importance, a weak ANP institution is bound to remain a chink in the securities armour. This can be ignored only at the cost of making the security operations merely counter-terrorism and not counter-insurgency. Stop gap measures of recruiting the tribal militias and surrendered insurgents under the Afghan Local Police (ALP)¹², would only run contrary to efforts of long term institution building in the security sector.

Moreover, efforts to improve governance in Afghanistan must accompany any reform in the security sector. To expect both the ANA and the ANP to perform effectively in an environment of weak and failing government institutions would be simply unrealistic. Credibility and sustainability of the military institutions can only be judged in tandem with that of the civilian government and administration.

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¹⁰ ‘Afghans to get full control over security by 2014’, *Daily Times* (21 July 2010).

¹¹ Muhammad Tahir, ‘Sorting through the Hype in Afghanistan’ *Radio Free Europe: Radio Liberty* (1 April 2011), www.rferl.org/content/gandhara_tahir_afghanistan_karzai_security/3543785.html. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

¹² In his briefing to the US Congress on 15 March 2011, General Petraeus stated that the ‘Afghan Local Police initiative was an important addition to the overall campaign’ to secure the war-torn country and deny the Taliban control in key districts. C.J. Radin, ‘Afghan Local Police vital to General Petraeus’ strategy’, *The Long War Journal* (26 March 2011), www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/03/afghan_local_police.php. Accessed on 29 March 2011. Also see, Mujib Mashal, ‘Rogue militias abuse rural Afghans’, *Al Jazeera* (12 January 2011), <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/20111114112880358.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2011.