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Defend, Defect, or Desert?: The Future of the Afghan Security Forces

POLICY BRIEF



“Together with our allies, America struck huge blows against al Qaeda core and pushed back against an insurgency that threatened to overrun [Afghanistan]. But sustaining this progress depends on the ability of Afghans to do the job. And that’s why we trained hundreds of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police.”

President Barack Obama, May 28, 2014

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are soon to become the center of gravity for security in Afghanistan. In September 2014, U.S. and Afghan leaders signed a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and have since announced that approximately 10,800 U.S. service members will remain in Afghanistan as the formal portion of the international combat mission ends.² The size of the U.S. support mission in Afghanistan is scheduled to decrease even further. Earlier this year, President Obama stated that the United States would drawdown to a “normal embassy presence” by the end of 2016.³

In the coming months, Afghanistan will depend on increasingly independent Afghan security forces to fight a tough insurgency—one that is perhaps even as strong as it was four years ago during the height

of U.S. and coalition operations.⁴

In order to achieve its strategic goal to deny safe haven to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the United States must continue to provide support to the ANSF. To be sure, Afghanistan is only one part of a larger U.S. mission to disrupt and destroy the Al-Qaeda network. Both the 2010 National Security Strategy and President Obama’s comments this year highlight that the shift towards an advise and assist mission in Afghanistan will afford the United States greater “flexibility to fulfill different missions” in the rest of the world.⁵ However, while refocusing to other parts of the globe, the United States must remain committed to sustaining the ANSF. Without functioning security forces, Afghanistan will be unable to defend even the most fundamental population areas and transportation routes. This may undermine the ability of U.S. special operations forces to conduct counterterrorism operations—and will almost certainly deny the United States a host country partner in disrupting the Al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan and Iraq are vastly different places, the

crumbling of Iraqi security forces in northern and western Iraq this summer demonstrates what the collapse of military forces means for state stability and the devastating impact that it can have on U.S. counterterrorism strategy.⁶ Similar developments in the ANSF would be strategically and politically disastrous.

The good news is that the Afghan security forces are not doomed. Over the past decade, the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) and Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) have manned, trained, and equipped an ANSF that is 350,000 troops strong – composed of the Afghan National Army (which includes the Afghan Air Force), the Afghan National Police, and the Afghan Local Police.⁷ The quality of forces has improved as well. As of September 2014, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) trainers assessed 33 of 40 ANSF units to be either “capable” or “fully capable.”⁸ Moreover, the ANSF are now “in the lead” for security operations across the country and are scheduled to be fully responsible for this mission by the end of 2014.⁹

At the same time, the ANSF will face serious challenges going forward. Throughout Afghan history, national military units have been notoriously difficult to build. Once formed, they have been even more troublesome to control. At several points in Afghan history, Afghan military units have disintegrated or defected to adversary forces in the face of military confrontation or political crisis – and senior military officials in Afghanistan have launched coups against civilian leaders. Today, many of the current indicators for sustainability of the ANSF are troubling. Two interrelated factors, the rate of attrition in the Afghan National Army and the fiscal costs associated with Afghan security forces, highlight future sustainment challenges. Going forward, the ANSF will need

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continued support in key areas, as requested by newly elected Afghan President Ashraf Ghani earlier this fall.¹⁰ Without it, the ANSF stands little chance of holding together.

Things Fall Apart: Historical Challenges in Building an Afghan Military

The history of military development in Afghanistan brings to mind three key themes. First, Afghan political leaders have consistently struggled to build professional military units. While Afghan culture valorizes bravery in combat, a centralized military contradicts traditional societal preference for local political autonomy.¹¹ For centuries, Afghans have mobilized, both politically and militarily, along sub-national affiliations, such as tribe, sub-tribe, or *qawm*. The ability to mobilize beyond locality has fluctuated based on factors including, but not limited to, the stature, influence, wealth, or foreign support of a group’s leader. Accordingly, the recruitment and training of a national military parallels the broader challenge of establishing political legitimacy in Afghanistan. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Afghan political leaders attempted to consolidate a central Afghan state with varying degrees of success.¹² The military was one important component of this state-building effort, but simultaneously alienated and provoked local leaders, leading to resistance and revolt.¹³

Second, once established, the loyalty of professional military units has been difficult to maintain, leading to coups, mass desertions, and defections to enemy forces during political crises or military confrontations. Professional military forces in Afghanistan have not always remained loyal to political leadership.¹⁴ For example, despite its steady growth and professionalization during the mid-twentieth century, the Afghan military initiated a series of coups in the 1970's – first to overthrow the monarchy and later to emplace (and purge) a communist regime.¹⁵ Simultaneously, Afghan military units throughout the country crumbled during the early part of Afghan communist rule. The rise of the communist PDPA and subsequent Soviet invasion of the country prompted vehement resentment throughout the country, triggering a parallel fragmentation of the military.¹⁶ Numerous military revolts broke out; some military units disintegrated altogether.¹⁷ Other times, Afghan officers undermined the institution by coordinating efforts with rebel forces from inside.¹⁸ Between 1979 and 1983, the number of Afghan soldiers plummeted from 120,000 to 30,000, later prompting hasty drives for recruitment.¹⁹ The Soviet military attempted to rebuild the Afghan security forces, but continued to struggle to maintain loyalty, as mujahedeen attempted to infiltrate the Afghan military.²⁰

Third, since the founding of Afghanistan in 1747, the government has relied on external funding to sustain central military units. The experience of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan highlights some important lessons about the necessity for sustained financial support – as well as the inability of the regime to survive without it. When the Soviet Union withdrew forces in 1989, the PDPA military did not immediately fall apart. On the contrary, troops proved capable in battle against massed *mujahedeen* formations attempting to seize key terrain, as seen in the 1989 assault on Jalalabad.

The Afghan President, Mohammad Najibullah, successfully held the military together for nearly four years, largely due to continued access to Soviet assistance in the form of arms and money. The Soviets supplied Kabul with airplanes, tanks, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft weapons, rocket launchers, SCUD missiles, and fuel – totaling some \$3 billion per year.²¹

However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, financial support to the Afghan regime ceased. By April 1992, the PDPA regime collapsed and the military followed suit. Once Kabul lacked the resources to sustain its security forces, key commanders simply chose to change sides. As one prominent historian describes, “the PDPA regime was less defeated militarily than reorganized as its components defected to various *mujahedeen* factions.”²² This is not to say that the PDPA military had survived solely because of the financial support afforded it. One key policy change that Najibullah adopted was to expand the size of the force, more heavily relying upon rural militias and coopting local patronage networks through the distribution of weapons and funds.²³ All the same, without external funding, the PDPA military could not hold and the government lost control over these rural militias. As a result, Afghanistan was thrown into a period characterized by internal violence and political chaos that facilitated, at least in part, the Taliban's rise to power.

The Coming Struggle: Sustaining the Afghan Security Forces

Today, the United States and its international partners are in the process of gradually reducing their security presence in Afghanistan. Policymakers should strongly consider two issues: (1) while the size and quantity of the ANSF has improved over the past decade, current indicators demonstrate remaining weaknesses and challenges for sustainability; and (2) if the ANSF is to have any chance of

prone to defection, past insider or “green-on-blue” attacks reveal internal tensions. Insider attacks spiked to a total of 48 in 2012, accounting for approximately 15 percent of coalition deaths for the year.³¹ Taliban infiltration and personal grievance may have played a role in up to a quarter of these killings.³² Indeed, insider attacks are most frequent in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, in which the security situation is most precarious.³³ Attacks have dramatically declined, with only 15 in 2013 and six thus far in 2014 reported by U.S. forces.³⁴ The U.S. military drawdown may have contributed to the decrease in insider attacks—but there is little publically available data on “green-on-green” attacks (Afghan forces attacking Afghan forces). Still, the murder of Major General Harold Greene at Camp Qargha (formerly Camp Phoenix) in August 2014 is a reminder of a lingering insider threat that the ANSF will face in the coming years.³⁶

Finally, the ANSF could also break apart along factional lines in the event of a political crisis. While over a decade of U.S. presence has modified the configuration of political power, it has not erased historical patronage networks. Some of these networks have been coopted into the formal government, but as U.S. military presence declines, patrons could revert to previous affiliations to dominate local areas through force.³⁸ The recent struggle between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani is just one high-level instance of the political factionalism endemic to Afghanistan; some reports indicate that supporters of Mr. Abdullah may have been primed to revolt against the government this July.³⁹

ISSUE TWO: SUSTAINING THE ANSF FINANCIALLY

The future of the ANSF is not without hope. Historically, no insurgency in Afghanistan has successfully overthrown the government while Kabul enjoyed the strong financial backing of a world power.⁴⁰ As such, the ANSF needs sustained support. Without the money for military salaries

and even the most basic maintenance (such as food, ammunition, fuel, and barracks electricity), the ANSF stands little chance of surviving. Indeed, the crumbling of the Afghan military after the end of Soviet funding highlights the primary importance

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of continued financial support.

The fiscal requirements associated with the ANSF are large and have recently been increased. In May 2012, NATO leaders at the Chicago summit pledged to spend \$4.1 billion USD per year on the Afghan security forces. NATO agreed to increase this number temporarily to \$5.1 billion USD at the Wales summit in September 2014, corresponding with an expansion of the ANSF to cope with continued security challenges not previously anticipated. The increase aside, the international community has pledged funding until 2024, but the Afghan government is to begin paying \$500 million per year toward the ANSF budget starting in 2015, with an intent to assume full responsibility for the security budget no later than 2024.⁴¹ This, however, is an optimistic projection. In 2013, the annual GDP growth rate in Afghanistan dropped to 3 percent, after maintaining an average of 9 percent per year since 2001.⁴² As such, it is no surprise that the Afghan government is in the midst of a budget deficit crisis – although this does not currently impact payment of military salaries.⁴³ These economic challenges may further worsen as U.S. and international development aid slows.⁴⁴ Even in the best-case scenario – assuming that security conditions improve, the ANSF force levels are reduced

Figure 2: Transition Model for Contributions to ANSF Budget

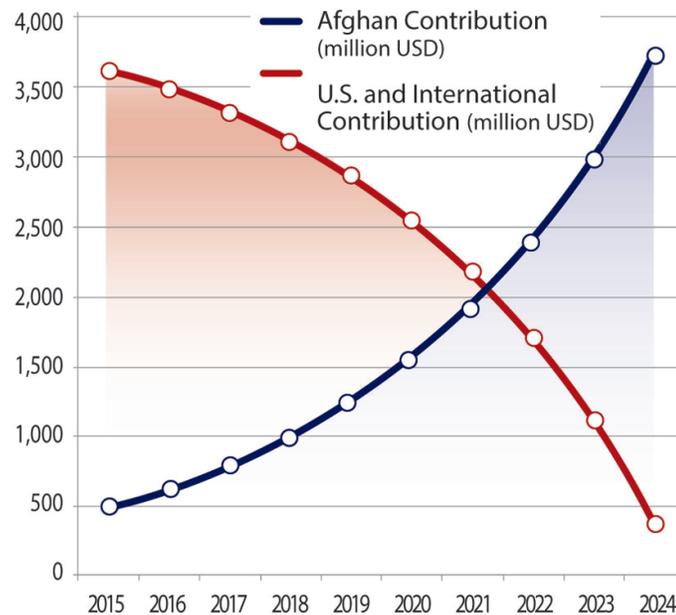


Figure 2: Contributions to ANSF Budget (Afghanistan vs. United States/International)⁴⁹

to previous levels, and the Afghan economy grows enough to meet revenue requirements – the international community will still need to continue support for the foreseeable future. As a recent analysis from the U.S. Institute of Peace notes, even if the ANSF budget returns to the level agreed upon at the Chicago summit and the Afghan contribution increases by roughly 25% annually (the percentage increase required to reach \$4.1 billion by 2024), it will require billions of dollars in external support until at least 2023 (see Figure 2).⁴⁵ Moreover, even if Afghanistan is capable of raising the funds, it currently lacks a robust programming and planning capability for its military budget, as highlighted by current ISAF commander General John Campbell in his confirmation statement,

requesting additional management support.⁴⁶

The problem is in maintaining resolve. Under the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between the United States and Afghanistan in May 2012, the United States has committed in principle to seek annual funding from Congress to sustain the ANSF through 2024.⁴⁷ Yet, with fewer U.S. or NATO forces in Afghanistan after 2014, this will prove a political challenge. Current and future administrations may struggle to secure funding from Congress. Indeed, U.S. developmental assistance in post-conflict countries – such as Iraq, Haiti, Kosovo, and Bosnia – has historically decreased dramatically after reductions in troop levels.⁴⁸ It cannot afford to do so in Afghanistan.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The health of the ANSF represents a critical component to the future stability of Afghanistan. Trends in the Afghan insurgency have not substantially changed over the past five years. In the coming fighting seasons, the Afghan National Security Forces will face many of the same insurgent groups that the U.S. military battled. This is a tremendous challenge to undertake. While the ANSF has made progress toward a more professional and competent force, the risk remains that ANSF units will crumble before a formidable opponent or political crisis. Such events would bear resemblance to events in Afghanistan's history. While it is difficult to predict how the ANSF will behave with limited U.S. military presence, current indicators – such as attrition – do not bode well. Although the situation in Iraq is significantly different from that in Afghanistan, the failure of Iraqi Security Forces this summer is an important reminder of the potential impacts of an ineffective security force.⁵⁰

In light of these developments, the United States government should consider the following policy recommendations:

1. The United States should continue the Bilateral Commission with the new Afghan government, as outlined by the Strategic Partnership Agreement. The goal of this annual dialogue should be to develop common understanding of ANSF sustainment requirements and report those requirements to both the international community and the U.S. Congress.
2. The United States should continue its diplomatic effort to seek international financial support for the ANSF. Contributions should flow through a coordinated multilateral framework, such as the ANA Trust Fund, in order to ensure a coherent sustainment effort and to minimize the risk of politicized aid. As a sign of good faith, the United States might consider committing to a fixed percentage of annual international support for the ANSF.
3. Even if international aid wanes, however, the United States should be prepared to shoulder the remainder of the \$4-5 billion sustainment requirement unilaterally until Afghanistan is capable of funding it autonomously.
4. Senior military leaders should conduct a candid review of options for ANSF force posture that might lower future costs. The new ISAF Commander, General John Campbell, has already stated that: “[...] as the security environment continues to improve and the ANSF becomes more efficient, forces can be scoped differently and thereby allow GIROA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] to meet the cost of the ANSF sooner.”⁵¹ However, there is an obvious tradeoff between reducing ANSF force levels to fiscally sustainable levels and maintaining numbers sufficient to provide for Afghan national security – especially in the next year.
5. At the same time, U.S. policymakers should have realistic and clear-eyed expectations concerning the level of security that the ANSF will provide. Washington cannot hope to secure U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan based solely on the assumption that the ANSF will maintain stability throughout the country. On the contrary, while working to avoid degraded ANSF capability, the U.S. must plan for contingencies in which the post-2016 ANSF is both smaller and less capable than U.S. strategists might hope.

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Non Commissioned Officers of the Afghan National Army, recite the oath ceremony of the first term bridegrooms, July 15th, at the Gazi Military Training Center, Kabul, Afghanistan.

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