‘Afghanisation’ of the Security Sector:
An Assessment

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Continuing symbolic and high profile suicide attacks in Afghanistan pose questions to the claims by the United States that the surge in its troop levels has been successful in blunting the Taliban-led insurgency. The Obama Administration is set to commence a symbolic drawdown of forces in July 2011 to assuage a war weary domestic constituency, even as debate between the civilians and the military in the Administration rages on the timing and numbers of the downsizing of forces. As the transition of security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) gains traction, this article assesses the capabilities of the ANSFs for independent action. It attempts to address the gaps in the security sector and by drawing lessons from the Indian context, and suggests an alternate course of action for effective transfer of authority.

US Drawdown of troops and Local Competencies

Drawdown of American forces from the ‘long war’ in Afghanistan, and the abrupt and unilateral announcement of December 2009 as the date by United States President Barack Obama, have since been made contingent upon conditions on the ground. The US, while remaining committed to effect some cut in its presence in July 2011, appears to be prepared to stay put in the country at least till 2014, by which it time it envisions the strengthening of the capacities of the ANSFs for independent action.

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Analysts in the field are, however, divided over such a prospect. While a majority point at the continuing weaknesses and deficiencies among the ANSFs, a predictable minority, of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military commanders seem optimistic and profess that a goal of Afghanisation of security structures is indeed possible in the future. Their vision and plans are also shared by the government in Kabul. What are the merits in these conflicting arguments? Is making the ANSFs predominantly responsible for Afghanistan's security by July 2014 a feasible scenario? The article attempts to assess the growth and capacities of the two major components of the ANSFs, i.e. the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) and suggests recommendations to addressing the gaps in actualisation of the goal of Afghanisation of the security forces in the near to medium term (2011-14).

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The article is predominantly based upon primary as well as secondary sources of recent origin and field inputs collected during visits to Afghanistan by one of the authors in the summer of 2007, the later part of 2010 and early part of 2011. An attempt has been made to steer clear of facts that have lost their relevance amidst the fluidity of the war situation.

Assessing the Growth and Capacities of the ANSFs

There are two ways of looking at the ANSFs: one as young and middle-aged men who have been undergoing a process of capacity augmentation and are emerging capable of undertaking the tasks entrusted to them. The other view, more dominant in open source literature, portrays these men in a poor light by describing them as not only insufficiently motivated but also incapable of living upto the task, primarily as they are products of a flawed system. The protagonists of the second line of argument detail the following deficiencies in the ranks of the ANSFs.

- **Numbers vs. Quality:** Experts differ on the adequacy of ANSFs to be in charge of Afghanistan's security. While the US/NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) project a desired level of 171,000 for the ANA and 134,000 for the ANP by December 2011, a few experts opine that the March 2011 level of

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159,000 ANA and 122,000 ANP personnel is more than adequate. Analysts are quick to categorises the ANA, at its current strength, as already 'unmanageable' and, hence, terms the expansion as nothing but a paradox.[1] Reports also suggest that the ISAF and the Afghan government has done exceedingly well in terms of managing to garner the numbers, both for the ANA and the ANP, at a fast pace. Afghanistan recruited 70,000 personnel for the ANA in 2010. The pace of such recruitment is problematic, impacting on the quality and professionalism of the recruits for military and policing duty. Lessons drawn from separate conflict theatres indicate that key elements of quality are mostly compromised in order to reach such high numerical targets.

- **Illiteracy:** Illiteracy at the entry level has remained a major problem for the ANSFs. This is perhaps unavoidable in a country which has a low level of literacy of 28 per cent, a consequence of more than three decades of war and destruction. However, a professional police and army can ill afford to be illiterate. Many of the ANA and ANP recruits are illiterate, and thus, remain incapable of undergoing the finer aspects of military training. Assessments portray only a creeping pace of improvement in the state of literacy among these personnel. For example, an article in 2009 indicated that the 90 per cent of the ANA was incapable of reading and writing.[2] By January 2010, literacy had improved marginally upto 14 per cent and has stayed there since.

  Corrective measures initiated by the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) may prove to be a daunting task to accomplish. NTM-A's mandatory literacy programmes to address the problem hopes to enrol 100,000 soldiers by the end of June 2011. However, these 64 hours' programmes are merely elementary, highly insufficient "to plot an artillery solution or to conduct a supply inventory as a logistician."[3] These programmes can at best turn the illiterate recruits into soldiers. However, the problem of leadership and development of officer corps, a nagging factor that has inhibited the growth of the ANA, would remain. In the admissive words of US Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, commander of NATO's training mission, "We can build a soldier, train, develop and equip a soldier fairly rapidly ... but to produce a leader takes longer."[4]

- **Attrition and Desertion:** The net result of putting incompetent, ill motivated and vastly unprepared boots on the ground can be devastating, both for the forces as well as for the environment they operate in. The ANP that serves as the single law enforcement agency across the country and includes uniformed police, border police, highway police and the criminal investigation department, has reported a significant rate of desertion among its personnel, ascribed to reasons like lack of proper training, lack of modern equipment, low salaries, fear of Taliban reprisal, indiscipline and widespread drug abuse. British Foreign Office statistics showed that nearly 20,000 ANP personnel left service in 2010.[5] The attrition rate among the ANP including losses caused by deaths, desertion and dismissals, often due to positive drug tests was estimated to be 18 per cent in 2010.

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  The attrition rate among the ANA remains far too high at 32 per cent, a fact acknowledged by the NATO sources. As a result, only two-thirds of the men recruited for duty remain available for some sort of engagement. Experts point out that the US Defence Department's use of the phrase "trained and equipped" ANA personnel has little meaning as the number of troops present for duty is significantly less than the original recruits in view of the attrition and desertion. "It is estimated that at least one-third of the ANA evaporates every year through desertions and non-reenlistment."[6] Moreover, the deserting personnel, if available for the recruitment by the Taliban, are likely to constitute a far greater threat than the mercenary insurgents. NATO sources have identified 'lack of leadership' as the primary reason behind attrition and blame the significant deficit in the officer and NCO corps for the continuation of the trend."[7] A March 2011 US government report on Afghanistan and Pakistan puts the shortage at 4,326 officers and 10,824 NCOs (non-commissioned officers).[8] While the officer deficit is expected to remain constant, NATO hopes to bridge the deficit in the NCO corps by the end of 2011.
- **Question of a Delicate Ethnic Balance:** Serious questions have also been raised on the representative character of the ANSFs. Afghan expert Antonio Giustozzi point out that nearly 70 percent of the ANA Kandak (battalion) commanders are

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Tajik, which is a throwback to the time of the Northern Alliance. Historically, the Pushtuns have retained dominance in the political and security sector. Any perceived imbalance works towards further alienation among the Pushtuns.[9] The domination of one ethnic group over the leadership structure in this ethnically divided nation only discourages other tribes, who assume that their rise within the organisation would only be minimal. The Ministry of Defence has set for itself a personnel goal of 42 per cent Pushtun, 27 per cent Tajik, 9 per cent Uzbek, 9 per cent Hazara and 13 per cent others. However, the zeal to reach the magic number of 171,000 might be undermining any such ethnic considerations.

- **Unsustainably Costly:** While more boots on the ground appear to be a critical necessity, fending for the bourgeoning force might soon become an issue for external aid-dependent Afghanistan, whose annual budget hovers around US$1 billion. Critics point out, "The Obama Administration's budget request for the fiscal year 2012 of US$ 12.8 billion to train and equip Afghanistan's expanding army and national police force..... it will be extremely difficult for Afghanistan to manage and sustain a force of that size and expanse over the long term without protracted external financial and material support."[10]

Problematic Training Programme?

At the root of the problems of creating an insufficiently competent armed force is a structurally flawed, frequently revamped and underresourced training programme designed and implemented by the international community. The 'lead nation' theory of training the ANSFs and the resultant lack of consensus on a suitable model of training has plagued the international efforts. The American model of conventionally training the ANSFs was hailed as a success till the need and consequent inability to undertake 'hold', in place of the 'clear and sweep' operations punctured such claims.

The rush to meet the superficially imposed deadlines in terms of recruitment as well as training only added to the complexities. By all means, till the November 2009 creation of the NTM-A, the training programme for the ANA and ANP was conducted by the European Union and remained affected by a plethora of problems.

In February 2011, Britain's House of Lords European Union Committee's report concluded that the decade-long training EUPOL-Afghanistan was too small, too bureaucratic, too disconnected from NATO and being largely confined to Kabul, geographically too restricted. It summed up that the EUPOL-Afghanistan is "unlikely to succeed in its overall mission of achieving a literate, non-corrupt Afghan police force."[11]

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Implementing an accelerated priority to boost the number of the ANSFs following Obama's December 2009 speech, 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 Defense (building the ANA) and the Ministry of Interior (building the ANP)."[12] In 2010, the NTM-A added engineer, logistics, and signal corps to the infantry-centric ANA and also formed an aviation school. Similarly, NTM-A, the lead agency in training the ANP, has begun addressing the problems of rampant corruption affecting the police training programmes of earlier years.

However, several problems persist. NTM-A still is in want of 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, shortage of trainers remains a problem area. Training, to a large extent rather unsatisfactorily, continues to be performed by contractors, thereby inhibiting the prospect of a self–sustaining national army.[13]

Quick-Fix Solutions vs. Institution Building

The search for quick fix solutions to address the gap in effective policing and to make the security architecture all enveloping as well as cost-effective may generate fresh problems in the long-term. One of the instruments the international community has started experimenting upon is the Afghan Local Police (ALP), teams constituted of local militias, and in some cases, some former Taliban fighters who promised to switch sides. In 'dangerous' areas devoid of ISAF and ANSF presence, ALP teams are "expected to man checkpoints, detain individuals and turn them over to regular

forces, and to provide intelligence on Taliban activities. For other issues, they are expected to call in ANSF or ISAF for support."[14]

The ALP has indeed emerged as critical to Gen David Petraeus' plan of securing the country. In his briefing to the US Congress on March 15, 2011 Gen 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."[15] Petraeus obviously is trying to draw from the reportedly successful Anbar Awakening Programme in Iraq, in which Sunni tribes were armed to fight Al Qaeda. There are inherent dangers in replicating the Iraq model as the nature of the Afghan tribal society has been transformed by decades of war and has been even supplanted by radical structures.

Described as "night watch with AK-47s", ALPs certainly come cheap. With three weeks' training, an annual salary of US$1440, which is 40 per cent less than that of the ANP personnel, the security architecture woven around the ALP is much cheaper and affordable than maintaining a regular force. However, sanctioned to operate in areas devoid of any official troop presence, the ALP can easily degenerate into the sole dispenser of justice. Although the programme is said to be secured with a vetting programme, it runs the danger of promoting anarchy by legalising private militias. Several cases of abuse by the ALP have been reported, especially from the northeastern provinces of Kunduz and Banghlan. "These militias are known to collect forced 'taxes' from feeble locals, create illegal checkpoints, seize property, and detain people in private jails—all at gun point,"[16] indicates a media report.

Historically, *arbakai* militias were a critical part of the security apparatus in southeastern Loya Paktia or Greater Paktia Afghanistan consisting of Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces. Linked loosely to the government in Kabul, they provided security in areas where governance was an absent phenomenon. The experience of the southeastern districts is being replicated over entire Afghanistan. ALP units of roughly 300 men each are being deployed in dangerous areas of 70 districts where there is little ANA or ISAF presence. Gen Petraeus has speculated that if successful, the ALP might be expanded to 40 additional districts.

Similar deployment or legalisation of private militias or surrendered militants in India's conflict theatres has created enormous problems. The state sponsored civilian vigilante *Salwa Judum* movement in the Naxalite affected Chhattisgarh has promoted impunity and has done more harm to the state's image rather than boosting the effectiveness of the security force operations. Similarly, the experiment with the surrendered United Liberation Front of Asom

(ULFA) militants in Assam proved counter-productive in the late 1990s.[17] The ALP, in fact, constitutes the third attempt by the ISAF to create local defence forces. The earlier initiatives of creating the Afghan Auxiliary Force (AAF) in 2007 and Afghanistan Public Protection Police (AP3) in 2009 had failed.

The ANSF Performance So Far

Starting with the July 2003 Operation Warrior Sweep, which involved 1,000 ANA personnel and was the first ever joint operation between the coalition troops in the Zormat valley region of Paktia province, the ANA and the ANP have come a long way, as far participation in counter-insurgency operations is concerned. In addition to several joint operations along with the ISAF, the odd 'solo' operations have also been undertaken by the ANA. For example, in August 2010, the ANA and the ANP for the first time led a major operation in the central Helmand province which resulted in the recovery of "IEDs at the *rate of one an hour*"[18] In January 2011, about 100 ANA Special Forces, commandos, US Army Special Forces, and soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division took part in a two-day joint operation in the Tangi Valley of Eastern Afghanistan. The operation resulted in the arrest of nine members of the Taliban improvised explosive device (IED) team.[19] In February 2011, around 800 ANA troops and 500 British troops took part in Operation Omid Sey (Hope Six) aiming to rid parts of Helmand province from the influence of the insurgents. The four-day operation was hailed as a success. A military commander noted, "From an ANA perspective, therefore, the operation has been a huge success and has shown that the ANA are more than capable of conducting these operations with less and less ISAF support."[20]

The US and ISAF military commanders have optimistic projections of ANA's performance, noting the rise in troop levels, the ratio of Afghan forces in operations and the *esprit de corps*. Such appreciation is understandable, for the transfer of authority is critically linked to the success of the ANSF, perceived or otherwise. Moreover, no scope for independently assessing the ANA exists on the ground. The main assessment process, called the Capability Milestone (CM) rating system, was managed by the same institutions responsible for training the ANA, namely the CSTC-A and the NTM-A. From late 2009 to early 2010, the ISAF joint command managed the CM rating system, before abandoning it. Since then, the Commander's Unit Assessment Tool (CUAT) has replaced the CM system and relies more on qualitative assessment.[21]

Contrary to the official position, media reports indicate that the role played by the ANA, thus far, in the operations against the insurgents remains far from

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satisfactory. By all means, in spite of the reportage on the independent operations undertaken by the ANA or the lead role played by them, their war-fighting capacity against a battle hardened enemy remains untested. Moreover, problems of insubordination and indiscipline continue to affect the ANA's performance. According to the ANA's own estimate, one quarter of its men remain addicted to hashish and heroin, which are cheap and readily available. In the words of an ANA captain, "Some soldiers are addicted [to hashish], and they fight well against the enemy. It's good for fighting the Taliban."[22] In the last quarter of 2010, as the international forces prepared to take on the Taliban in the southern Zhari district, nearly one quarter of the 800 ANA personnel disappeared ahead of the fierce confrontation. As the battle began in October 2010, another 150 deserted after their leave applications were rejected.[23]

Beginning of the Transition: A Reality Check?

President Karzai had made the announcement during the Kabul Conference of July 2010 that by 2014, the ANSFs "should lead and conduct military operations in all provinces."[24] In keeping with the promise, July 2011 would mark the beginning of the security transition, bringing some areas under the control of the ANSFs. In a speech on March 22 in Kabul, Karzai announced ensuring ANSF predominance in seven areas. As the issues of civilian casualties and his own legitimacy are periodically raked up, Karzai is a projecting an independent and assertive posture. An overwhelming element of hope in the ability of the local forces, thus, was clearly evident in Karzai's speech. "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."[25]

However, commentators assess that the proposed transfer of authority will not test the capacities of the ANSFs in traditionally peaceful areas such as Herat, Bamyan and Panjsher as "none of them has ever really been dependent on help provided by the ISAF."[26] Mazar-i-Sharif on April 2, 2011 witnessed orchestrated violence, ascribed to militants among the civilians, on the United Nations (UN) facility, leading to the killing of nine persons. The protesters were agitating against the Quran burning incident in the US. Otherwise, the area has been among the peaceful lot in the

country. The remaining three areas, Mehter Lam in Laghman province, Lashkar Gah in Helmand and the capital Kabul (to be transferred with the exception of Surobi district), however, have witnessed varying levels of insurgent violence. These would test the capacities of the ANSFs to a large extent. On March 26, the Taliban kidnapped 50 people, mostly police officers, in the area near Mehter Lam and reportedly asked for swapping of imprisoned Taliban fighters to release the captured men. In Lashkar Gah, the Taliban forced the mobile phone operators to shut down service since March 22 (the shutdown was in effect till the writing of this article), the day Karzai announced the proposed transfer of security. With security supposed to pass into Afghan hands in July in these areas, this sign is ominous.

Security sector reform will have to be a part of the overall efforts to improve governance in Afghanistan.

It is still too early to assess the capacities of an evolving ANA and the ANP. There are weaknesses among them, and at the same time, there are inherent strengths compared to the better armed ISAF. The ISAF commanders point at the natural instinct of the ANA men in locating IEDs. The ANSFs are able to connect much more easily with the local populace and ANP has the potential of becoming a steady source of intelligence. However, it is apparent that they are made to rush against time to take up responsibilities they have hardly trained for. Raging insurgencies often expose the proclaimed capacities of the established security forces. The example of the paramilitary forces in India is a pointer towards that direction. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), a force set up in 1939 and which boasts of decades-long experience in fighting insurgency movements, has been found severely wanting in its fight against the Naxalites and has suffered repeated casualties, due to indiscipline and leadership problems. To expect the ANSFs to deliver in less than a decade of their founding, especially when their ability has been honed through a highly insufficient and largely problematic training programme, is too much to ask for.

What is bound to create problem for the ANA, however, is the persistent weakness among the ANP. The training of the ANP is said to be at least 18 months behind that of the ANA. The ANP is expected to perform counter-insurgency, security, law enforcement, border protection and counter-narcotics functions. Since the role of the police in intelligence gathering and also in the 'hold' operations—as provider of security in areas cleared of insurgent presence—is of paramount importance, a weak ANP institution is bound to remain a chink in the security armour. This can be ignored only at the cost of making the security operations merely counter-terrorism, and certainly not counter-insurgency.

Further, security sector reform will have to be a part of the overall efforts to improve governance in Afghanistan. To expect both the ANA and the ANP to perform effectively in an environment of weak and failing government institutions would be unrealistic. As former Interior Minister Ali Jalai argues, the development of the ANA and the ANP "without regard to the other weaknesses in the Afghan government, such as rule of law, corruption, and the influence of non-state power brokers, will seriously undermine the effectiveness of the force, no matter how numerically strong it may be."[27] The credibility and sustainability of the military institutions can only be judged in tandem with those of the civilian government and administration.

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