

The Danger of Unfinished Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan

By Mark Sedra

(Originally published on September 30, 2014)

“Security is a main demand of our people, and we are tired of this war,” Ashraf Ghani declared in his first speech as President of Afghanistan following the country’s first democratic transition of power. Inauguration day was a relief for Afghans and foreign observers alike as it brought an end to several months of political crisis over a run-off election marred by “systemic fraud.” The bitter stand-off between Ghani and his bitter rival Abdullah Abdullah threatened not only to stall the country’s flagging democratic transition but trigger violence in the streets.

By bringing Abdullah Abdullah into a unity government in a newly created Chief Executive position, Ghani avoided a nightmare scenario for Afghanistan. Although it is not entirely clear how the unity government will function on a day-to-day basis, with top-level appointments set to be shared equitably among

the two camps and lower level positions distributed according to merit, the arrangement was nonetheless a political victory. But the glow from this historic achievement will wear off soon enough. While a political catastrophe has been headed off for now, a stubborn security crisis is worsening by the day.

Taliban forces have scaled up their military activity over the past six months, making it the deadliest period since 2001. They are no longer confining themselves to hit-and-run insurgency tactics, choosing instead to mass forces and contest whole districts. Emboldened by the gradual withdrawal of NATO forces, particularly its air power, the Taliban have launched conventional attacks against government-controlled areas across the country. The fighting has exposed the weaknesses of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), demonstrating that that US-

led effort to develop them is at best half done.

It is clear that Ghani understands this fact given that his first order of business after being sworn in as President was to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement that will keep US and NATO troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 to continue training and back-stopping the ANSF. But, without a peace deal with the Taliban – and Ghani called for “opponents of the government, especially the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami, to enter political talks” during his inaugural address – it may be too little too late. The Taliban to date appear none-too-interested in entering talks with the new administration, calling the unity deal “a sham.”

Back in May 2014, the Obama administration announced plans to withdraw all but 9,800 American troops from Afghanistan by the end

of 2014 and pull out the rest by the end of 2016. The move was applauded by outgoing Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who reaffirmed his belief that the ANSF were ready to assume full responsibility for the country's security. Obama's withdrawal plan, intended to end the longest war in American history by the end of his tenure in office, was met with mixed reactions. Proponents argued that the drawdown of NATO forces would help to pacify the security situation. The increasing competence of the ANSF coupled with the declining capability of foreign powers justified a pullout according to this logic. After all, an indefinite military presence would only act as a crutch for the Afghans, fostering dependency and obstructing genuine Afghan ownership over their security.

A contrary school of thought viewed the withdrawal with more apprehension, seeing dangerous parallels with the Soviet pullout that sparked a civil war in the 1990s, eventually facilitating the Taliban's rise to power. Advocates of this school argued that the withdrawal plan hinged on a highly dubious assumption: that the ANSF was capable of securing the country and seeing off challenges by anti-government groups like the Taliban. They questioned NATO's repeated

commitments to maintaining security sector assistance to Afghanistan after the pullout, asserting that massive cuts were inevitable under such conditions.

Sadly, developments on the ground since Obama's May 2014 announcement seem to support the latter school's prediction that the drawdown of the military mission will hinder rather than bolster prospects for a stable transition in Afghanistan. Ironically, the US will be scaling back their engagement at a time when they have finally found a genuine partner in Kabul's Presidential Palace, after a long and fractious relationship with President Karzai, who recently ended his term with accusations that Western donors to his country pursued their "personal interest" in Afghanistan at the expense of peace. Ghani, unlike his predecessor, is a committed reformer, a former World Bank technocrat, and expert on state building, keen to renew strong links with the West.

To be sure, significant progress has been made to stand-up the ANSF. By early 2014, the security transition plan to shift responsibility from NATO to the Afghan government had run its course. This was undertaken in five tranches, beginning in 2011 with

stable districts in the country's central region and ending in 2013 with areas in the volatile south and east. The ANSF grew significantly during this period from roughly 224,000 in May 2010 to an estimated 345,000 by January 2014.

Numbering just over 186,000 troops in February 2014, the Afghan National Army (ANA) has achieved some key operational successes and is widely respected among the Afghan population. Even the Afghan National Police (ANP) – a force rife with corruption, criminality, and factionalism – was perceived to have performed well in providing security for the April 2014 presidential election, a complex and unprecedented Afghan-led security operation that earned it the plaudits of the Afghan media and general public.

The rare optimism generated by these events should not, however, obscure the fact that the ANSF rests on a very shaky foundation. The ANA is weighed down by a startling attrition rate, estimated at 33 percent at the beginning of 2014, while also contending with problems of drug abuse and illiteracy. Once NATO support ends, it must also deal with a noticeable lack of supporting structures, like logistics, transportation,

and medical services, which have often been ignored in favour of developing frontline combat forces.

The ANP is in even worse shape. A significant number of ANP units are believed to be engaged in different facets of the drug trade; more than 50 percent are illiterate; and many have defected to the Taliban over the past two years, including a whole police unit in July 2012. While officially more than 150,000-strong, a significant proportion of the ANP are “ghost police,” owing to the falsification of personnel records by police commanders. Corruption in the force continues to be endemic – from illegal taxation at illegal roadblocks to the sale of government weaponry to anti-government forces.

Overlaying these immediate SSR problems is the question of financial sustainability. At current levels, it will cost roughly 5-6 billion USD annually to field and equip the ANSF. When you consider that in 2013, the Afghan government collected roughly 1.7 billion USD in revenue, the problem is clear. Even if Afghanistan were to sustain double-digit economic growth over the coming decade, it will still require massive foreign subsidies just to pay the salaries of the ANSF.

As the international pullout progresses, the financial picture begins to look even more troubling. There has been, as William A. Byrd states, “a hemorrhage of domestic revenue,” which in the first half of 2014 was 21.5 percent short of the half-year budget target. It is expected that the Afghan government will see a budgetary shortfall of between 500 and 600 million USD this year. The Afghan Finance Ministry had to request emergency funding of 537 million USD from donors in September 2014 just to meet its immediate payroll obligations.

Donors have only committed funding for an ANSF of 228,500 troops, a significant drop from the current force ceiling of 352,000. Despite this fact, it is unclear when or how these force reductions will be made. With the security situation precarious, these cuts do not appear to be operationally feasible and even the prospect of a reduced force ceiling has caused disquiet among ANSF leaders. With the US halving its development budget for Afghanistan in January 2014, and security assistance bound to follow in the years ahead, the budgetary picture will become even more dire for the Afghan government.

The clearest warning sign surrounding the ANSF is the sharp increase in insecurity in 2014. More than 100 Afghan soldiers and police died on a weekly basis in the summer of 2014, prompting the Afghan Defense and Interior Ministries to cease releasing casualty data. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported a 24 percent rise in civilian casualties for the first half of 2014 as compared to the same period during the previous year, the highest numbers recorded since UNAMA first began tracking casualty data in 2009. Importantly, for the first time, the majority of those casualties came from ground fighting between the ANSF and the Taliban rather than roadside bombs. In August and September alone, the Taliban threatened to take control of key districts and transportation arteries in Ghazni, Logar, Helmand, Nangarhar, and Wardak provinces exposing deep vulnerabilities in the ANSF. Clearly, the downscaling of foreign troops has only made the Taliban more ambitious rather than less.

The rosy NATO projections that the ANSF would be ready to secure Afghanistan by the end of 2014 have been discredited. In the years ahead NATO leaders may rue the premature

withdrawal that left the nascent ANSF susceptible to collapse. For a vivid illustration of the dangers of premature withdrawal from a security force development process, look no further than contemporary Iraq, where the Iraqi military, the recipient of billions of dollars in US equipment and training, has broken down in the face of the advance of a small but highly motivated radical Islamist militant group. While the Iraqi context surely differs from Afghanistan, a comparable outcome in Afghanistan is within the realm of possibility.

After more than a decade of international statebuilding and SSR in Afghanistan, a change in the international approach in response to evolving security and political conditions on the ground was absolutely necessary. A modest reduction of assistance levels was also desirable. But the major drawdown of the NATO military mission is imperiling Afghanistan's democratic transition. The Afghan security sector lies on a fragile

foundation prone to reversal and collapse. In light of the fiscal time bomb facing the sector and the escalating security pressures placed upon it, continued Western support will be indispensable. Any major disruption in security-related aid could lead to the breakdown of the security sector, and we are already seeing troubling signs of this. In November 2013, the US Congress halted the purchase of 15 Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters (worth 345 million USD) – crucial to expand the limited airlift capacity of the Afghan military.

As the US commitment to Afghanistan draws down and the war vanishes from the consciousness of donor publics, we are likely to see further such reductions. There are precedents in modern Afghan history for the collapse of the security sector when external security assistance dries up. After all, the Najibullah regime lasted three years following the Soviet departure from Afghanistan, only collapsing when Soviet

subsidies were scaled back. With NATO attentions shifting to a new war against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, sustained support for Afghanistan is by no means assured in the years ahead. Despite encouraging political signs from Kabul, history could be repeating itself.

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