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The Afghan National Army

Marching in the Wrong Direction?

The effort to build a new central army in Afghanistan has been dogged with problems since the beginning. In the early days (2002–03), the problems included a modest allocation of resources, the slow pace of the programme, the lack of a standardised approach to training (with each participating country using its own methods) and the modest financial package offered to recruits. The formation of the Afghan National Army (ANA), which occurred in December 2002, was initially not a priority. The Taliban insurgency was in its early days and was widely dismissed as the irrelevant effort of a few remnants of the emirate. The ANA was designed as a tool to re-centralise control over the periphery against warlords, militias and local power brokers. It was to have a limited amount of armour, artillery and air support and did not even receive training in anti-tank and anti-aircraft tactics; at the time of writing (late 2011) it was still not scheduled to receive those, despite intensifying pressure from the leadership in Kabul, which wanted tanks and jet fighters. The intent was transparency so as not to alienate neighbouring Pakistan, a country already worried about the friendliness of the new Afghan government to India.

As now known, the Pakistani neighbour was alienated anyway, and the Taliban insurgency spread faster and faster, particularly from 2006 onwards. Because of its slow development and limited capabilities, the ANA was slow to get involved in fighting the insurgency. The police bore the main burden, until in 2008 the ANA started

getting involved more seriously. However, as of 2010, the casualty rate of the ANA was still significantly lower than that of the police.

The expansion of the insurgency forced NATO and the American Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) to revise the plans for the training and deployment of ANA units, allocating more and more resources to it. The training gradually accelerated, facing little difficulty in finding recruits among the poorest communities in Afghanistan. Conditions offered to the rank-and-file improved, leading to a decline in the desertion rate. The quality of the training, quite low at first as the priority was to produce statistics of rapid growth, also improved after a major overhaul of CSTC-A into NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) and the appointment of Lt Gen William Caldwell, a training specialist who revised the basic training programme, and who was assigned to lead the training effort at the end of 2009.¹ Caldwell had extensive experience in army training and imposed higher standards in basic training, while maintaining a priority for numbers over quality. However, as the ANA expanded, a number of new problems became evident.

The first problem was that the type of training imparted, modelled after the US light infantry battalion, while appropriate for the tasks expected in 2002–03, was not the most useful to confront an insurgency. The ANA battalions, with the exception

¹ CSTC-A and NTM-A are the organisations put in charge of training the Afghan army and then also the police.

of a few units of commandos, did not have the ability to deploy and fight in small units, as required to seize the initiative against the insurgents.

The second problem was that recruiting suitable candidates for officer positions turned out to be very problematic; the inflow of recruits was overwhelmingly composed of illiterate young men – up to 90 per cent according to some statistics. While junior officers could, to some extent, be expected to emerge from the rank-and-file, a different problem was posed by the need to identify senior officers of adequate skills who could manage a rapidly growing army. Waiting for them to emerge from the ranks would take many years, even in the presence of an effectively meritocratic system, while no serious effort was being made to train them. As of 2010, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mentors interviewed by the author roughly estimated that about half of the battalion commanders were sufficiently competent to lead their unit or at least had potential to grow to the task. Most tactically competent officers were former Mujahedin, while among senior officers, where management and logistical skills matter more, the majority of the capable ones had backgrounds in the pro-Soviet army that fought against the Mujahedin in the 1980s. This highlights the limited impact of ISAF training, even after more than eight years of involvement.

The announcement in July 2010 by President Karzai, that he wanted to see the Afghan security forces take over responsibility from ISAF by 2014, raised another issue with the development of the ANA. The prioritisation of combat units over command structures and logistics has led to an ANA that is heavily dependent on ISAF support. The problem is not easy to resolve as logistics and command structures require qualified staff in large numbers, whereas they are already in short supply. The extensive mentoring and partnering programme, which since 2003 has seen each Afghan unit first mentored by an ISAF team and from 2009 also partnering with ISAF units, has produced mixed results. It increased the capabilities of some units but did not produce many units capable of operating autonomously. It could be argued, therefore, that mentoring and partnering tend to breed dependency. Finally, the ANA is totally dependent on ISAF for close air support; at the time of writing there was no plan to start training Afghans as close air support controllers or to allow Afghans to call in ISAF air support. The Afghan Air Corps will never be even remotely in a position to replace ISAF air support effectively.

At the same time, ANA has suffered damage from political bargaining in Kabul. Originally, the group Shura-e Nezar, led by the late Commander Ahmad Shah Massud, exerted a dominant influence in the ministry of defence. ISAF-sponsored efforts to rebalance the staffing of the ministry yielded some results, but until mid-2010 one of Massud's lieutenants (Bismillah Mohammadi, chief of staff) was still the main power broker within the ministry. Most of the brigade and battalion commanders were believed to be loyal to him. Defence Minister Wardak, loyal to President Karzai, did not manage to assemble more than a modest network of influence and was unable to oppose Mohammadi. With the transfer of Mohammadi to the ministry of interior and the appointment of General Karimi as the new chief of staff, efforts driven by the presidency began to weaken the hold of Mohammadi over the officer corps. The corps commanders were quickly replaced, but the commanders of fighting units (infantry battalions) were dealt with much more cautiously, in order to avoid having the struggle to control the ANA wreck its ability to fight. The risk of a wide purge is that it may demoralise the army and replace too many competent and experienced officers with political appointees devoid of experience.

Similarly, ISAF and NATO have not been able to tackle the ongoing ethnic rivalry within the ANA. The issue is not so much how many Pashtuns are actually there, but what such rivalries will mean once the ANA has to manage itself without external help. In other words, how sustainable are the effects of the training/mentoring imparted by ISAF?

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ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

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