



The post-2014 view from Helmand

By Mike Mount

April 24th, 2012

While a new deal with Afghanistan starts to spell out the U.S. presence after the bulk of troops leave in 2014, a top U.S. general said he has a good idea of what skills will be needed to ensure the country remains stable.

"I think there are some areas that the Afghans will not be able to build capability over the next two years and so they are going to need our support," said Marine Maj. Gen. John A. Toolan, who just returned from commanding NATO forces in southern Afghanistan for the past year.

Toolan is in Washington to promote his efforts during his command in Helmand Province, a large but remote section of Afghanistan squeezed between Iran to the west and Pakistan to the south and poppy fields in between.

Toolan highlighted specific areas where the Afghan security forces will need the most help, at least in his former area of command, which also gave some insight into what adviser roles the U.S. military could play upon the departure of combat forces.

Where do Afghan forces need the most work? According to Toolan, the United States will have to focus on improving roles in intelligence, combat medicine, special operations, artillery and criminal investigation in the Afghan police forces.

"As the conventional forces leave, special operations forces will continue to be required because their (Afghan military) special operations capabilities are going to take a little bit more time to nurture and mature," according to Toolan.

While Toolan said he was pleased with the Afghan military's human intelligence capability, he said they still need the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets only the U.S. military has.

"The Afghans know we have that and they want to have access, so I think we are going to have to provide that for a while past 2014," Toolan said.

While there is little argument some U.S. forces will remain in a post-war Afghanistan as military advisers, both U.S. and Afghan officials have yet to decide on how many and how long troops will continue supporting the Afghan military.

"As the president said, we're committed to an enduring presence and this agreement makes clear that we will have that presence there beyond 2014," Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said Monday while traveling in South America.

"Any post-2014 U.S. troop presence will be at the invitation of the Afghan government and would ensure that we are able to target terrorists and support a sovereign Afghan government. We envision a significantly smaller, sustainable presence to continue to advise and assist Afghan forces and take on critical counterterrorism missions," said Pentagon spokesman Navy Capt. John Kirby.

The framework to a final strategic partnership was agreed upon Sunday by the United States and Afghanistan. While it has not been released publicly, it outlines what the relationship between the United States and Afghanistan will look like, including economic and military assistance as well as the diplomatic relationships, according to a U.S. official.

The official said it is a basic outline and does not contain troop numbers or the amount of monetary support the United States will offer the Afghans in the future.

"That really remains to be worked out, obviously with our NATO allies and with the Afghan government to determine what the nature and the size of that presence will be beyond 2014," Panetta said.

The U.S. and Afghan governments will now use the outline to fill out the full strategic partnership and hope to have a final agreement ready in time for the NATO meeting in Chicago that will focus on the future of Afghanistan. But Panetta thinks it could take longer.

"I suspect that will continue beyond Chicago," he said.

The current target for the Afghan force is around 352,000 army and police. After 2014 that number is expected to dip to about 250,000, with a price of \$4.1 billion a year. Discussions now are ongoing about how to pay for the upkeep. The United States doesn't want to pay the whole amount and U.S. officials say Washington will be asking European and other International Security Assistance Force allies to pay about \$1.3 billion of the bill.

While the numbers of troops and costs remain unclear, some analysts see the partnership as "ensuring Afghanistan remains reliant on the United States for basic funding and security long into the future," and think a partnership is not a good idea.

"The Afghan government only collects about \$2 billion a year in revenue. This does not put Afghanistan on a path to sustainable self-sufficiency, but makes it increasingly dependent on foreign patronage," according to Malou Innocent, an analyst for CATO Institute.

"With this pact, policymakers are pushing for an open-ended nation-building mission by another name," according to Innocent.

But Pentagon officials maintain no final decisions have been made about the ultimate end strength of Afghan National Security Forces.

"It would be premature to speculate about what the costs might be or how those costs are borne. The Defense Department remains committed to a strategic relationship with our Afghan partners and to continuing to improve their security capabilities," Kirby said.

