

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

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Phantom Forces

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September 7, 2010

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This summer, [NATO reached its goal of expanding the size of Afghanistan's army and police to 240,000](#)^[3], achieving a key measure of progress in its nine-year campaign. Politicians, security experts, and pundits applauded the news. Some even argue for further increases to an end strength of 400,000, but if the current abysmal state of the Afghan national security forces is a harbinger of things to come, they shouldn't.

Last month, Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, the head of NATO-led training efforts, told reporters that his command is making ["measured progress"](#)^[4] toward meeting the goal of 306,000 Afghan soldiers and police by October 2011. Currently, the Afghan National Army (ANA) numbers 134,000, while the Afghan National Police (ANP) stands 115,000-strong. Even if we believe these numbers (corrupt local commanders have in the past exaggerated the number of recruits in order to pocket the salaries of non-existent 'ghost' soldiers^[5]), it's clear that numbers only tell part of the story. Indeed, figures tell us little about the quality of recruits.

From illiteracy and corruption to poor vetting and low pay, the current training effort has yielded a force of compromised caliber. Lt. Gen. Caldwell acknowledged that he had previously underestimated how important remedial education would be toward making the ANA an enduring, professional force. With nine out of 10 soldiers unable to read, many have trouble accounting for their equipment, ordering supplies, and even getting paid.

Yet another challenge to instilling an "ethos of service and loyalty" into officers, says Caldwell, is heavy drug use, occasionally before setting out on patrol. "I wouldn't say I feel threatened. But they act silly, just like anybody who smokes weed," [says U.S. Sergeant Ryan Gloyer to al Jazeera's Clayton Swisher](#)^[6]. "It's hard to get them to focus... They've just got the giggles." A more widely-cited problem is poor professionalism, which according to Caldwell is a "key ingredient to an enduring force that can serve and protect its people." Current attrition rates, which include deaths, desertions, and dismissals, often due to positive drug tests, are about 23 percent in the ANA and around 16 percent in the ANP. But figures vary widely, with some police units reporting rates as high as 47 percent. In terms of performance, American trainers with experience working with Afghan recruits complain of Afghan counterparts shirking their duties to exhibiting [remarkably bad marksmanship skills](#)^[7].

Perhaps even worse is the lack of ethnic balance in the army. For example, Tajiks, the second largest minority group representing 27 percent of the population [8], are over-represented at 34 percent [9]. According to one estimate, 70 percent of battalion commanders are Tajik. [10] An AP reporter on patrol with Americans at Combat Outpost Ware in the Arghandab Valley found that when the Afghans go on patrol they are treated as outsiders. "When they see us, the old men say, 'They are the sons of the British [11]," Lt. Haskar said, explaining that the villagers equate both the Americans and the Afghan soldiers with the British attempt to colonize Afghanistan in the 1800s.

A report released last spring by the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned that the ANA, despite being one of the war's very few success stories, is rife with ethnic and political tension:

"Kabul powerbrokers are distributing the spoils of increased NATO spending on army development among their constituents in the officer corps, fuelling ethnic and political factionalism within the army ranks," the report said.

One retired military officer told the ICG: "From the lower officers upward, it is not a national army. It is a political army. You have people working for different factions within the ministry of defense, so today what you have is an army that serves individuals not the nation."

Current policy focuses on the south and east of the country, where insurgent activity is strongest. Of nearly 400 districts nationwide, U.S. military and civilian resources are focused primarily on 81, with another 41 of secondary emphasis. This is the wrong strategy.

Rather than build a large, expensive, and conventional military ill-suited for fighting a classic guerilla war, the army and police could concentrate on the calmer provincial capitals, large towns, and main transportation routes in the west and north, which has recently experienced increased Talibanization. As a contiguous portion of territory, indigenous institutions have already taken root, and residents are unlikely to present a determined opposition compared to the south.

I should note that I favor scaling down the U.S.-led campaign to a much narrower counterterrorism mission. But since policymakers have clung to counterinsurgency and foreign-internal defense, limiting indigenous security forces to defensible areas would be a more modest approach. It's well past time for the NATO-led training effort to prioritize quality over quantity.

More by

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[4] <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2010/08/mil-100823-afps05.htm>

[5] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/drugs-and-desertion-how-the-uk-really-rates-afghan-police-1929508.html>

[6] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MZWPcRi4RU>

[7] <http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/09/afghan-armsmanship-pointing-not-aiming/>

[8] <http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/tajikistan-and-afghanistan>

[9] <http://www.defencetalk.com/gates-warned-over-afghan-army-problems-23301/>

[10] [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4889&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=167&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4889&tx_ttnews[backPid]=167&no_cache=1)

[11] <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/07/27/world/main6717786.shtml>