

United States Faces Fault Lines In Building Afghan Army

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By Ahmed Rashid

The United States has begun training a new multi-ethnic Afghan army, but its Defense Department has yet to explain how it proposes to make this army stable.

American coercion could persuade Defense Minister Mohammed Qasim Fahim to fold his largely Tajik troops into a multi-ethnic force, while American funding could help maintain peace in the countryside during the four years it will take to build the army. But local observers say the United States first needs to reconcile its support for a new army with its practice of funding regional warlords who want to undermine it.

Those warlords trying to break the transitional government, threaten Afghanistan's immediate stability. An army is "the cornerstone for any democratic institution to defend itself against threats internally," Lt. Col. Kevin McDonnell, the American commander, told reporters in July. McDonnell's soldiers are finishing a 10-week course for 600 Afghan soldiers. As these Afghan soldiers go through their paces, they are preparing for a daunting task. US President George W. Bush has rejected repeated calls by the United Nations and President Hamid Karzai to deploy foreign peacekeeping troops around the country. Instead, the Bush administration has said a new Afghan army will do a better job patrolling the provinces - even though starting such an army will take at least 18 months, and it will not reach full strength until 2006 at the earliest. European diplomats in Kabul say that American officers rushed in to begin a training program in March without fully understanding the larger political issues. It remains unclear how warlords' militias can join the new army or cede to it. "It is indispensable that plans are in place for the phasing out of those who currently call themselves soldiers and police," Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's special Afghan representative, told the UN Security Council on July 19.

Other nations are issuing similar warnings, and Americans are apparently listening. Since March, British military officers who organized Kabul's International Security Assistance Force, German officers who are training the Afghan police and UN officials have been holding intensive discussions with their American counterparts to convince them of the need for a political strategy to build the new army. "In the beginning the Americans just didn't get it, thinking training was the only issue," says a senior British official. "But now they realize that the real issue is creating a super-structure." The official also notes that American military planners seem to recognize another principle: that reconstruction and job creation depend on the government's ability to lure men away from warlord militias and into civilian life.

A plan to smooth this transition does exist - on paper. Key Western nations and the UN have helped the Afghan government devise a working paper for the new army, which Western donors discussed in early July in Paris. "Establishing an affordable, effective and efficient modern armed forces will require down-sizing of current force levels over time," says the paper, which contemplates a 60,000-strong army, a border guard of 12,000 and an Air Force of 8,000, at a price of \$289 million. A Quick Reaction Corps based in Kabul, with 6,000 soldiers on alert to threats, would be the first division to operate, backed by a combat support division and a service support division of 6,000 men each.

The concept also addresses the need for nationwide security by providing for seven 6,000-soldier corps around the country, each with a rapid-response brigade and two light-infantry brigades. Acknowledging the ethnic tension roiling Afghanistan and the refugee crises troubling its neighbors, the paper defines the army's strategic goals in terms of "international security co-operation in the region ... dealing with internal and external security needs and helping civil society with emergencies and rescue services." This would entail a new National Security Council, which the president would chair and which would include the ministers of Defense, Interior, Finance and Foreign Affairs. This council would ensure that all military recruitment and management runs "on a multi-ethnic basis, free from interference." Fahim would head a Kabul-based Defense Council of the corps commanders.

Even if these plans become policy, the Afghan army may still stall. The Afghan government estimates that 75,000 armed soldiers work for warlords, that over 100,000 armed irregular combatants and war veterans have dispersed around the country and that an unknown number of other fighters remain armed. The plan calls for discharging 30,000 soldiers, reasoning that most commanders would "lay down their arms" given a "reasonable economic alternative." But without more jobs and commerce, the paper warns, "US initiatives on army training could ironically create a security problem rather than solve one, if soldiers not admitted into the army join informal armed groups who offer them money."

This reveals another American dilemma. Bush has been funding anti-Taliban strongmen who do not welcome a supervening national military. Senior aides to Karzai say that although Bush seeks \$50 million from Congress for the new army, the CIA is still paying warlord armies in southern and eastern provinces to help locate al Qaeda elements. Even Fahim has called for a 200,000 strong army in which his largely Tajik troops would be the core. "Only the Americans can deal with Fahim," says an Afghan cabinet minister. Fahim and his confidantes from the Panjshir valley led the war against the Taliban, and Western intelligence officials also say that Russia and Iran are still funding Fahim. US officials say they have made little headway in cutting off Fahim's Russian funds. "Money won't flow from the donors unless Fahim fully signs up [for the national army]," says a European ambassador in Kabul.

As long as the United States remains vague about how it proposes to support Afghan economic development - a challenge beyond the Defense Department's competence - a national army will be a tough sell. The British led ISAF trained a presidential bodyguard of 600 men in March, but 200 members reportedly deserted the battalion after training. Warlords withdrew their support, claiming that Fahim had stuffed the unit with his fellow Tajiks, while British trainers were frustrated that the United States failed to force Fahim to pay, arm or house soldiers. These soldiers, who generally have no civilian skills, will need foreign aid to support their families or find new jobs. Since Western donors have clearly established that reconstruction funds will not reach Afghan coffers until April, it is hard to see how ordinary citizens could abandon their patron warlords. Even officers often remain loyal to warlords or to their own ethnic group. Economic development, which will probably take even longer than military training, can alter this pattern - but only with strict coordination between soldiers and civilians.

As ethnic skirmishes continue to flare beyond Kabul, the new army also looks for financial support. The UN has set up an Army Trust Fund to coordinate donor contributions, while some donor states have been asked to fully fund logistics, medical, artillery, engineer and signals units. So far, Spain has committed to building a medical corps. Donors have so far pledged \$235 million, but UN officials say there is "only a few million in the kitty." With Germany leading the creation of a similarly under-funded police force and rumors swirling about American plans to attack Iraq, Afghan soldiers are marching onto dangerous ground.

Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and author of the books "Taliban: Militant Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia."