

American Commander Alters Military Strategy In Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

A US military spokesman reported January 13 that Special Forces soldiers had discovered hundreds of pounds of explosives buried in feed sacks in the eastern Afghanistan city of Jalalabad. The discovery comes on the heels of a decision by the American commander in Afghanistan to expand security- and reconstruction-related missions beyond Kabul, the capital. This shift will improve Afghan stability, but critics say it stops short of a full solution.

Eight thousand coalition troops have given Bagram Air Force base, north of Kabul, the trappings of an American suburb. A visitor follows Disney Drive through Viper City and Cajun Country. The shopping precinct, across from a section called Dragon City, offers Pringles potato chips and popular movies on DVD. Among Dragon City's tents sits a giant tent holding the office of Lieutenant General Dan K. McNeill, who commands coalition forces. McNeill sits so unobtrusively amidst his officers that a journalist stumbles onto him before realizing who he is. (A bank of satellite telephones on his desk hints at his rank).

In recent weeks, McNeill has prepared a Joint Regional Team (JRT) of 70 soldiers, civil affairs officers, engineers, medics and State Department officials to travel to Gardez, in eastern Afghanistan. The team will set up a base in Gardez, one of al Qaeda's firmest strongholds, to help President Hamid Karzai expand the still dormant authority of his government and begin reconstruction projects outside Kabul. Another JRT plans to locate in Kunduz in the north.

McNeill says he reconfigured American military plans over a period of months. "Our prediction was that most parts of the country will soon begin to realize some reasonable degree of security and stability," he adds. The decision comes after months of criticism from Afghans and Western aid agencies such as CARE. Critics charged that the US government was not doing enough to help the Karzai government begin reconstruction of the country and dilute warlords' power in the provinces.

McNeill began holding talks with American and Afghan government and military officials in November. He also consulted with the United Nations; non-governmental organizations (NGOs); officials from Britain, Germany and France; and officers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the multinational peacekeeping body in Kabul. These talks, he says, revealed a "chicken and egg situation," compelling a decision on whether new infrastructure would make people more secure or whether more protection would support rebuilding.

He decided that reconstruction "would pull an improvement of security along." JRTs, he said, will enable coalition forces to foil "the residue of al Qaeda and those who support it" and simultaneously "pursue support for the central government." To do so, McNeill intends to "build teams and disperse them at seven to eight locations coinciding with the international coalition and the United Nations." By summer, he hopes to have JRTs deployed around the country in Bamiyan, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kunduz, Herat, Gardez, Jalalabad and Kandahar. If they succeed, planners could create six more JRTs and many more could follow.

Their work will involve some trial and error. "We had nothing in any book," says McNeill. United Nations officials who have negotiated with General McNeill say the strength of his plan lies in its apparent flexibility. "The United States military has no Donald Rumsfeld-designated model," says one such official, referring to the American secretary of defense. "Instead, McNeill is modifying the plan along the way as stakeholders like the UN or Karzai have questioned some parts of it."

Karzai endorses McNeill's approach, though some say he expressed reservations at first. "My thinking is that JRTs are a good step because I see them as being part of the reconstruction process to speed up economic activity around the country," he told EurasiaNet. "The local administration has to be put in place so that the central government authority is everywhere." Karzai has promised to send honest local officials to work alongside the JRTs.

General Mohammed Qasim Fahim, the defense minister and veteran of the old Northern Alliance, had balked at previous efforts to rebuild the army in decentralized fashion. By late December, he came out in support of the American plan. "The need today is for a central authority and the rule of law," says Fahim.

Deploying JRTs while the United States prepares for a possible invasion of Iraq will demonstrate that the Americans will not abandon Afghanistan. McNeill promises that the JRTs will receive backup, including "rapid deployment of troops," air cover and potential airlift, and need not worry about funding or attention. "The teams will be backed up," says McNeill. Other Western officers say the JRT experience is likely to become hugely important in developing similar teams after a successful Iraq war.

But some experts worry that JRTs will blur the distinction between soldiers and aid workers. In provinces where desperately poor men frequently fight as mercenaries for warlords or extremists, the idea of being mistaken for an enemy soldier can be terrifying. Paul Barker of CARE International warns that the JRTs will have to understand the ecumenical nature of relief work. "If we work alongside armed military personnel, or help one community more than another because they are pro-US, we will jeopardize the safety of our staff," he says. European diplomats, meanwhile, stress that quasi-civilian JRTs cannot substitute for an expanded ISAF.

Officials say the JRTs will try to help local authorities, UN agencies and NGOs to pave the way for the expenditure of \$300 million in aid allocated for reconstruction of rural areas beginning in the springtime. However, US officers admit, the JRTs cannot substitute for the expansion of ISAF or promise to end disputes between national troops and warlord militias. Senior aides to Karzai say they persuaded McNeill that Americans "created" warlords' claims to power by funding strongmen during the autumn 2001 campaign against the Taliban. Under McNeill's plan, each JRT commander will have some flexibility on how to deal with local warlords in cooperation with central government officials. But he insists that JRTs will serve mainly as a backstop and that the central government should "take the dominating role in resolving local friction." The US command has trained some 2,000 members of a new Afghan National Army that officials say will swell to 70,000 soldiers. Once more men are trained, Afghan battalions may accompany the JRTs.

It is impossible to predict what threats they may encounter. McNeill says that he gets many reports about Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, who "may be in a neighboring country." The JRTs address some concerns about reconstruction, but Afghanistan's unpredictable terrain makes it very hard to lay any concerns to rest.

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."