

Molding an Army

■ Afghan Forces

Afghans are tough and can fight, but **illiteracy, corruption, and lack of discipline** hold them back.

KABUL, Afghanistan—After the United States assumed control of the mission to train the Afghan army, Maj. Gen. Robert Cone took charge of a staff of 8,000 and a budget of \$7.4 billion. But Cone, the former commander of the National Training Center, the U.S. Army's premier training site in the California desert, knew going in that he would have to make up for lost time.

"We did squander a long period where there was almost no growth in Afghan security forces. But the past year has been our best ever, with 24,000 new Afghan troops added, and I keep arguing that this needs to be our main effort now," said Cone, speaking at the Kabul headquarters of the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, the organization charged with training the Afghan forces.

"There's a giant game of Whac-a-Mole going on out there in the field, with an endless supply of bad guys coming over the border with Pakistan. And my job is to field Afghan security forces that can go out there and defeat the Taliban, just like they defeated the Russians. Because this country's great strength is that these wiry little guys will flat-out fight. Most of them have been firing weapons and fighting since they were 15, and they are tough. So we're trying to harness that strength."

Given the deterioration in security this year, Cone would like to see the Afghan security forces grow to about 134,000 army troops and 82,000 national police. The Afghan Defense Ministry believes it needs a 200,000-man army, but as with so many other challenges plaguing one of the world's poorest countries, the decision on troop levels will boil down to who gets the bill and how much it will be. For a U.S. military struggling mightily to pull forces out of Iraq fast enough to plug gaping deficiencies in Afghanistan, the cost-benefit of fielding Afghan forces more quickly seems obvious.

"The point I try to make is that it costs NATO \$34 billion to keep its present forces in Afghanistan for a single year. It cost the United States roughly \$15 billion just to keep the 101st Airborne Division here for a year," Cone said. "The Afghan security forces I want to build will cost roughly \$3.2 billion to sustain each year. To me, from a financial standpoint alone that is a no-brainer."

Finding the right balance between quality and quantity in Afghan security forces, however, remains a constant juggling act. The four Afghan special forces brigades that have graduated from a tough U.S. Army Ranger training regimen have received high marks by their mentors in the field, for instance, while regular forces manned by Afghan recruits who often cannot read

or write often struggle to master the basics of modern military logistics, command-and-control, and fire support.

Plenty of Afghan enlistees are willing to sign up for the \$100-a-month pay, but it has been a struggle to find men qualified to serve as midcareer officers and sergeants in a country that has had no formal army for more than 15 years.

For all their vaunted warrior instincts, the Afghans also struggle with discipline when it comes to firing their weapons. Officers still talk of the Afghan soldier who downed the helicopter he was riding in when he accidentally discharged his weapon. The risks of growing the security forces too fast, with insufficient vetting of personnel, also became obvious after an assassination attempt on Afghan President Hamid Karzai in April. When NATO forces tracked the serial numbers of the weapons used in the attack, officials discovered that the Transition Command had originally issued them to Afghan security forces.

"I will tell you that this business is 'three steps forward, two steps back,' and I'm now sitting on warehouses full of equipment that I refuse to give out until I know exactly who is getting it," Cone said. "Otherwise, it will end up in the hands of the Taliban, and I'll have the Government Accountability Office on my back conducting an audit."

Overall, Cone gives the Afghan army a B but concedes that the national police rate no better than a D-minus because of pervasive corruption. The problem is so widespread that the Transition Command was forced to create a carefully vetted five-battalion force of

national police officers who routinely replace regional police personnel, who are then retrained and rotated back into the field with new, hopefully less corrupt leaders.

"The problem is endemic corruption in a country that had virtually no economy for 30 years other than narco-trafficking, so the way cops made money was to stop vehicles at checkpoints and demand money," Cone said.

As former warlords who put their cronies on the police rolls, many of Afghanistan's governors are also lukewarm to police reforms. "If you gave them truth serum and asked if they wanted a good, non-corrupt police force, probably only 30 percent or so would say yes," Cone conceded. "For years, corrupt police is how they've made money."
—J.K.



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