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## LIMITS AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES FOR THE AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES

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Since June 2013, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have taken over major responsibility for Afghanistan's security throughout the country. Recently, during the two rounds of the presidential elections, they have proved capable of defending territory and preventing major attacks, a fact that has been widely seen as evidence of their progress. After the relatively peaceful 14th June runoff, many observers expressed confidence that the Afghan army and police are sufficiently strong to hold off any relevant military challenge by the Taliban and other Armed Opposition Groups (AOG). Although their recent performances exceeded expectations, ANSF's readiness to confront autonomously the challenges posed by insurgency and their ability to rely on their own capacity remain dubious. ANSF still face a complex set of challenges that derive from the economic, security, political transitions undergoing in Afghanistan. This study discusses the interrelated challenges to transitioning Afghan-led security by the end of 2014, the date that would mark the transfer of all combat responsibilities to Afghan government forces. A special focus is dedicated to the Afghan National Army (ANA), as it is commonly considered the most advanced element of the ANSF.

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## Financial sustainability challenges

Until now, the debate on the sustainability of the Afghan armed forces has focused mainly on financial concerns, which are strictly intertwined with the planned size and cost for ANSF. According to the latest quarter report by SIGAR<sup>1</sup> (based on data provided by the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, CSTC-A), actually ANSF's assigned force strength is 342,809 (excluding Afghan Local Police, ALP), 97% of the ANSF's end strength goal of 352,000 personnel.

At the Bonn International Conference in December 2011 an initial assessment - made on the assumption that the 352,000 combined army and police forces could be trimmed to 228,500 - projected that a fund of US\$4.1 billion would be sufficient to meet the country's needs. The May 2012 Chicago international summit agreed on long-term targets for the size of the ANSF and committed to continued international financial support until 2024. According to the Chicago communiqué<sup>2</sup>, the Afghan government's initial contribution to covering security costs will be \$500 million in 2015, taking over the full financial burden for ANSF by 2024. This implies that the international community's financial support for ANSF would remain in the billions of dollars annually into the early 2020s: "Maintaining the force at current levels through 2013 and 2014 entailed an additional US\$ 2.4 billion, while meeting the proposed US\$4.1 billion has already turned out to be more difficult than expected"<sup>3</sup>.

This high financial burden poses two major challenges, domestically and internationally. Internationally, although the two leading candidates in Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election have said they will sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) if elected, the BSA between the United States and Afghanistan to determine the post-2014 presence and legal status of US forces in Afghanistan remains unsigned. The Afghan government's delay to sign it have already contributed to reduce the political willingness for US and international engagement. The May 27 White House announcement on troop withdrawals from Afghanistan raises further questions about the U.S. commitment to support the size of the future ANSF and the new NATO's mission, Resolute Support: "In the constrained budget environment faced by the United States and its NATO allies, it seems highly likely that money will follow the exit of troops from

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<sup>1</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, April 20, 2014, Report. <http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2014-04-30qr.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nato.diplo.de/contentblob/3530790/Daten/2338290/ChicagoSummitDeclarAFGDLD.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> A. GIUSTOZZI, *The Afghan National Army: Sustainability Challenges beyond Financial Aspects*, AREU 2014, p. 3, <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1403E%20Issues%20paper%20ANA.pdf>.

Afghanistan”<sup>4</sup> as well as that US will be reluctant to maintain previous level of financial support: according to SIGAR report, as of March 31, 2014, the U.S. Congress had appropriated more than \$58.8 billion (46.6 billion disbursed) to support the ANSF.

Domestically, despite some progress toward meeting its initial contribution target (domestic funding of the ANA and Afghan National Police reportedly was \$369 million in 2013 and is budgeted at \$386 million in 2014), the Afghan government showed poor performance in mobilizing its own revenues, giving rise concerns about whether it can achieve its Chicago commitment to assume full funding of the ANSF cost by 2024, as it would need to increase by 26 percent per year on average if the ANSF’s long-term targets for size are not changed.

The broader economic situation does not justify any optimism: Afghanistan is undergoing a major transitions from an economy driven by foreign expenditures on military support and assistance to one more reliant on domestic sources of growth. Nearly 90 percent of Afghanistan’s state revenue still comes from international donors, who have already reduced their financial support substantially, due to the partial withdrawal of foreign troops. Coping with major cuts in outside aid and military spending, Afghanistan faces serious problems in avoiding an economic crisis. According to the latest forecast by the World Bank<sup>5</sup>, economic growth plummeted in 2013 to an estimated 3.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) from 14.4 percent in 2012. “Economic growth is projected to remain weak at 3.2 percent in 2014 due to heightened uncertainty and lower agriculture output”, the document stated, increasing fears that Afghan government will face major problems in funding its entire budget, not just the ANSF.

### **Non-financial sustainability challenges: the case of the Afghan National Army**

The ANA is considered the most advanced element of the ANSF. In the last years, there have been considerable financial expenditure and relevant investment in training and mentoring the ANA, at least since the establishment of NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A) in 2009. According to SIGAR report, as of March 31, 2014, the United States had obligated \$32.4 billion and disbursed \$30.9 billion to build, train, and sustain the ANA, while the overall end strength of the ANA was 189,540 personnel

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<sup>4</sup> W.A. BYRD, “Revisiting Chicago. *The critical need to Maintain Support for Afghanistan’s National Security Forces Post-2014*, United States Institute of Peace, Peace Brief no.173,

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *South Asia Economic Focus*, Spring 2014. <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/SAR/wb-south-asia-economic-focus-spring-2014.pdf>

(182,777 Army and 6,763 Air Force, including 723 women), a number which includes 9,236 ANA civilians and 250 Air Force civilians and that is more than 97% of the combined end strength goal of 195,000 ANA personnel.

For the ANA, the latest RASR<sup>6</sup> report provides assessments of 24 brigades (22 brigades within corps and two brigades of the 111th Capital Division). Of those, 83% were “fully capable” or “capable” of planning and conducting joint and combined arms operations. However, different analysts raised suspicion with regard to the integrity of the assessment. Dr Anthony H. Cordesman, for example, noted<sup>7</sup> that U.S. assessment systems have been often inaccurate in measuring loyalty, unit cohesion, corruption, COIN capabilities, and the military’s ability to sustain itself without US help, while Antonio Giustozzi wrote that it remains an open question whether this progress is genuine or has been dictated by the NTM-A’s need to ‘graduate’ brigades more quickly in light of ISAF troops withdrawal.

### Dependency on external advise and help

According to Giustozzi and other authors, despite some achievements, the effort to establish the ANA has been very inefficient, and it is far from certain that it would be ready to fight its enemies on its own in 2015. Indeed, the ANA - transitioning from force generation and outside support to a sustained war fighting mode - is far from being self-sufficient, still relying on major logistical support by international forces that provide critical needs such as air support and mobility, reconnaissance, intelligence gathering. Moreover, the Army is lightly equipped and its real maneuver capability away from fixed based and support facilities is limited. The lack of logistical capability is seen as one of the most crucial ANA’s weakness, and it may undermine its authoritativeness, as it “may force the Afghan government to depend increasingly on unreliable irregular forces to fight in areas far from the main cities and the highways”<sup>8</sup>. Every meaningful source agree that even in the most optimistic scenario ANA logistic would not be ready before 2015. In addition to the high degree of dependence on external advice and services provided by foreign military forces, ANA also has notable deficiencies in battlefield performance, and has suffered serious losses from fighting: between March 2012 and February 2014, the ANA had 2.166 personnel killed in action and 11,804 wounded in action.

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<sup>6</sup> Since August 15, 2013, ISAF has used the Regional Command ANSF Assessment Report (RASR) to rate the ANSF. The RASR is a “holistic intelligence, operational, and sustainment assessment and reporting mechanism” of the ANSF.

<sup>7</sup> See for example the “Oral Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee Hearing on “Transition in Afghanistan: Views of Outside Experts”, 27 February 2013, [http://csis.org/files/attachments/ts130227\\_cordesman\\_oral.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/ts130227_cordesman_oral.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> A.GIUSTOZZI, (2014).

## Afghan Air Force

From a tactical perspective, the key vulnerability derives from a structural factor: the fact that ANA has been trained to fight with strong air support in 'ground cleaning', a NATO standard tactic. Due to the decision to withdraw US forces by the end of 2016, the initial presumption that ANA would be able to rely on close air support for the long-term created capability gaps, as this tactical model cannot be implemented by Afghans on their own. ANA will no longer have NATO air support after 2014, and the Afghan Air Force (AAF) – which is in an early stage of development - cannot provide real air defense capabilities, despite the considerable investment US has done in the AAF in the last few years: according to SIGAR report, between fiscal year 2010 and 2012 alone, the United States provided more than \$5 billion to support and develop the 6,513-person Afghan Air Force - including over \$3 billion for equipment and aircraft. In addition, US Department of Defense requested an additional \$2.9 billion - including \$1.24 billion for equipment and aircraft – in fiscal years 2013 and 2014 for the Afghan Air Force.

The Afghan Air Force inventory actually consists of 97 aircraft, a force considered definitely insufficient given the size and geography of the country by many observers, including some contractors involved in AAF's training. In 2013 these contractors suggested that another 10 years would be needed before the AAF would be fully operational, while ISAF's more optimistic assessment argue that the AAF would not achieve even its initial autonomous operational capability before 2016. According to the CNA independent assessment released on February 2014<sup>9</sup>, "Afghanistan has a significant need for air support, but the [Afghan Air Force] cannot support more air power than is currently planned".

Thus, most of the actual ANA's weaknesses derives from one point: established in 2002, the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Air Force were fund, designed, shaped and trained by Western intervening forces above the presumption of a long-term international assistance and through "the tendency to import external models into a country which lacks the structural and educational capacity to implement them"<sup>10</sup>. As this presumption is not anymore valid, ANA and AAF would struggle hard to achieve autonomous operational capabilities. On March 12, 2014, General Joseph F. Dunford, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A), during his testimony before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees

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<sup>9</sup> Center for Naval Analyses, *Independent Assessment of the Afghan National Security Forces*, <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/CNA%20Independent%20Assessment%20of%20the%20ANSF.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> A. GIUSTOZZI, (2014).

warned lawmakers: “If we leave at the end of 2014, the Afghan security forces will begin to deteriorate. The security environment will begin to deteriorate, and I think the only debate is the pace of that deterioration”.

### **Attrition**

Attrition is a major challenge for the ANA since the first phase of recruitment and training that started in May 2002 at the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTTC). In more recent years, attrition rates have remained relatively constant at rates higher than desired by the Coalition: although there have been claims that attrition rates declined during 2013, according to different authors the data available for the period cast doubt on this assertion, as in the summer of 2013 the overall attrition rates were higher than in the summer of 2012, while 61% of ANA brigades today are still considered “developing” which means that attrition in these brigades is 3% or more. The high attrition rate that ANA continues to experience is attributable to a variety of factors: retirements, killed in action (KIA), death other than KIA, captured, but dropped from rolls remains the first one. Dropped from rolls accounted for over 80% of attrition in 2012<sup>11</sup>, with 43,887 ANA personnel dropped from ANA rolls between February 2013 and February 2014. The desertion rate is due to low quality of recruits, poor living conditions, low-level salaries, high operational tempo, poor leadership and corruption within the ranks. From a larger perspective, the disinclination to serve in the ANA seems to be linked to three major problems: ethnicism, political interference, lack of state legitimacy.

### **The socio-political environment and its disruptive effects**

Although the Afghan public has recently grown trust in ANA capabilities, in Afghanistan there still exists a widespread concern that ANA are not yet completely ready to ensure security for the entire territory, as they are seen as lacking the necessary experience, suitable equipment and motivation to defend the country<sup>12</sup>. While the first two factors are mostly blamed on the international community, who are felt to have begun the training programmes very late in the day and with deep reluctance, the third is instead believed due to the lack of social cohesion and shared national interests. The largest concern seems in fact to be the internal fragility and the lack of cohesiveness within the ANA, weakened as it is by ethnic affiliations and local political loyalties and interference.

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<sup>11</sup> See B. ATEŞ, *Afghan National Army Challenge with Attrition: A Comparative Analysis*, [http://www.harpak.edu.tr/saren2/files/Makale/GSD\\_19\\_Art\\_6\\_042014.pdf](http://www.harpak.edu.tr/saren2/files/Makale/GSD_19_Art_6_042014.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> G. BATTISTON, *Waiting for 2014. Afghan Civil Society on Peace, Justice and Reconciliation*, [http://www.arculturaesviluppo.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Waiting-for-2014\\_Giuliano-Battiston.pdf](http://www.arculturaesviluppo.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Waiting-for-2014_Giuliano-Battiston.pdf).

## Ethnicism

Across Afghanistan's modern history, efforts to build an effective modern army have been hampered by the low level of integration among the different regions and ethnic communities of the country, and the Afghan army had been plagued by accusations of ethnic bias even during the times of the monarchy. To overwhelm these accusations, a reform in 1963 established that officers and Non-Commissioned Officers were to be recruited under a quota proportional to their share of the population<sup>13</sup>. In recent years, many U.S. officials have acknowledged the issue of ethnically-based patronage in the ANA, together with the need to develop ethnically mixed units in order to solve the imbalance of the immediate post-Taliban years, when ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks (strongly represented in the Northern Alliance) predominated in Afghanistan's new army, at the expense of ethnic Pashtuns. Today, the ANA ethnic balance substantially corresponds to that of the population of Afghanistan, but concerns about it have not disappeared within ANA, especially because among Pashtuns recruitment has been very uneven, and because political factionalism and patronage networks based on ethnic lines are still there: "ISAF and NATO have not been able to tackle the ongoing ethnic rivalry within the ANA. The issue is not so much how many Pashtuns are actually there, but what such rivalries will mean once the ANA has to manage itself without external help. In other words, how sustainable are the effects of the training/mentoring imparted by ISAF?"<sup>14</sup>.

## Interference from political élite

However, many observers argue that the main factor disrupting the consolidation of ANA's chain of command and professionalization is interference from the political elite, rather than ethnicism in itself. According to this perspective, the limited sustainability of the ANA is first and above all a consequence of the as yet unachieved consolidation of the political settlement in Kabul. It means that ANA's success and future stability is primarily linked to the emergence of a legitimate, broad-based, inclusive and truly representative government, able to address the issues that divide the country and to attract consensus, support and confidence

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<sup>13</sup> For an historical background of the ANA, see "A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army", International Crisis Group's Asia Report no.190, May 2010; A. JALALI, "Rebuilding Afghanistan's National Army", in *Parameters*, Autumn 2002; A. GIUSTOZZI, *Rebuilding the Afghan Army*, LSE 2003, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28363/1/giustozzi\\_LSERO\\_version.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28363/1/giustozzi_LSERO_version.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> A. GIUSTOZZI, *The Afghan National Army. Marching in the Wrong Direction?*, in Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo Snapshots (eds), *Snapshots of an Intervention*, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2012\\_AAN\\_E-book\\_Snapshots\\_of\\_an\\_Intervention%20\(1\).pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2012_AAN_E-book_Snapshots_of_an_Intervention%20(1).pdf).

from the Afghan people. But it also means that until this goal is achieved, possible internal conflicts could lead to fragmentation along ethnic lines and/or political affiliation: the recent electoral process, for example, could potentially lead to deterioration in the security environment if competing candidates and groups continue to dispute the outcome, negatively affecting the cohesiveness of the ANA and undermining the central government power, whose authoritativeness might fracture. “An illegitimate process or outcome could polarize the country ethnically, spark a descent into civil war and so frustrate outside donors that they cut off aid or downsize substantially their long-term security commitments”, warned on May 2013 general John Allen, Michèle Flournoy and Michael O’Hanlon<sup>15</sup>.

### **State of the insurgency**

The ANA is not the only military institution within the country, as the Afghan social system is still imbued with military pluralism and the Afghan government has not yet successfully monopolized the legitimate use of force. The territorial control by the state and by the ANSF is weak. The reach and effectiveness of the Afghan central government remain circumscribed, challenged by various armed groups, which still pose a serious danger to the stability of local institutions. Despite a prolonged presence of foreign forces, the Taliban and other AOGs have not been defeated, and would probably attempt to increase their presence, to expand their footprint in areas vacated by Coalition forces and will likely gain some ground and operation flexibility during and after the withdrawal of international forces. It means that in the next few years the ANA and all the ANSF should perform effectively in an increasingly challenging environment. The Center for Naval Analysis study predicts that the insurgency in the country will be a greater and more dangerous threat in 2015-2018 than it is now, due to the reduction in US and NATO forces, while the United Nations’ Secretary General report to the UN Security Council states that the pressure on ANSF has already intensified: 2013 had the second highest level of violence since the fall of the Taliban; the number of armed clashes was up 51% compared to the number in 2012; between November 16, 2013, and February 15, 2014, the number of security incidents increased by 24% over the number recorded during the same period in the prior year.

Thus, the Taliban and other AOG are far from being a residual force, both in military and political terms. In political terms, a peace settlement

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<sup>15</sup> Center for a New American Century, *Toward a Successful Outcome in Afghanistan*, p. 9 [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_Afghanistan\\_Flournoy\\_Voices.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_Afghanistan_Flournoy_Voices.pdf).

between the Afghan government and the Taliban is unlikely in the foreseeable future, mostly because the Taliban leaders firmly believe their prospects for military victory will improve after the U.S. drawdown. Furthermore, the Obama's administration decision to withdraw all of US remaining military forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016 would intensify security competition among regional powers, who might support a range of competing sub-state actors, fracturing the central government and exacerbating ethnic and other fissures within ANSF.

### Conclusions

Although their recent performances exceeded expectations, ANSF's readiness to confront autonomously the challenges posed by insurgency remains dubious. ANSF still face a complex set of challenges that derive from the economic, security, political transitions undergoing in Afghanistan. Due to a heavy dependence on external advice and services provided by foreign military forces, the Afghan National Army is far from being self-sufficient and will struggle to achieve autonomous operational capabilities. With the imminent withdrawal of international troops, the ANA's structural deficiencies will likely emerge with more distinctness, as ANA will perform in an increasingly challenging environment. Furthermore, the Afghan government will struggle to mobilize its own revenues for the ANSF, while the international players may be more reluctant to shoulder the high financial burden. Apart from the financial sustainability, the largest concern seems to be the internal fragility and the lack of cohesiveness within the ANA, weakened by ethnic affiliations and by political interference. ANA and ANSF's success depends primarily on the emergence of a legitimate, broad-based, inclusive and truly representative government, which can attract confidence from the Afghan people and foster ANA's cohesiveness.