

CONFUSION RULES IN AFGHANISTAN

Still steadfastly refusing to admit publicly that its Afghanistan strategy has failed completely and that a new, more rapid timetable for withdrawal must be developed before the November election, the Obama administration and its Department of Defense are reduced to utter confusion in trying to understand the sources of attacks on coalition forces. After halting most joint US-Afghan operations in the middle of September, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta led efforts last Thursday to claim that joint operations had returned to “nearly normal” levels while claiming that each joint operation would be evaluated carefully to reduce risks. It took less than two days for that evaluation process to be shown to be useless, as two Americans and three Afghan troops were killed in an exchange of gunfire while out on joint patrol.

The investigation into this event stands as a microcosm of the confused state of affairs in Afghanistan as the US struggles to understand that resistance to the presence of US forces now spreads through virtually all of Afghanistan and that uniforms for Afghan security forces are a tool for getting close to US targets. The military first announced Saturday’s attack as a green on blue killing and then backed off, claiming for a while that perhaps insurgents who were not a part of the joint patrol fired first and that US forces fired on the Afghan forces out of confusion. Yesterday, the Washington Post published details from a leaked report that suggests that it was indeed a member of the Afghan National Army platoon in the joint patrol who first opened fire and that he was quickly joined by other members of his patrol. Despite all of the accumulating evidence that Aghans resent our presence in the country, defense officials express surprise and confusion that multiple members of an Afghan patrol could all

turn their weapons on US forces:

Two days after the U.S. military resumed joint operations with Afghan security forces last week following a spate of “insider attacks,” a platoon of American soldiers stopped at an Afghan army checkpoint in a volatile eastern province.

The Americans had a cordial conversation and cracked a few jokes with their Afghan comrades during the Saturday afternoon patrol in Wardak province. The Afghans offered the Americans tea. Then, according to a U.S. military official, an Afghan soldier, without warning or provocation, raised his weapon and opened fire – mortally wounding the senior American on the patrol.

In a war in which insider attacks have become commonplace, what happened next made the incident extraordinary, the American official said. Another Afghan soldier at the checkpoint opened fire on the Americans, killing a U.S. civilian contractor and wounding two other American soldiers. Soon, Afghan soldiers and possibly insurgents began firing at the Americans from several directions.

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A preliminary military report, however, has concluded that the gunfight began only after an Afghan soldier opened fire on U.S. troops, according to the American official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

“What sets this apart is that there were multiple attackers from multiple positions and there was zero provocation,” said the official, who had access to the report but was not authorized to speak for the record.

“Typically we are talking about a single gunman who acted in a somewhat rogue

fashion, but in this case we are talking about an entire Afghan army unit and a large loss of life on both sides.”

The “pause” in joint operations ostensibly was called, in part, so that Afghanistan could review the credentials of existing members of their security forces. Saturday’s attack demonstrated that such a process is not possible just as much as it demonstrated that the new procedure of having all joint patrols approved by a high-ranking officer is ineffective at preventing new green on blue attacks.

A further point of confusion likely is going to relate to the overall size of Afghan security forces. Prior to the pause in joint operations, the size of the force was routinely stated as 350,000. On September 21, I noted that this article in the New York Times initially stated that the force size was 300,000. I speculated on whether 300,000 was going to be the “new” size of Afghan security forces once the review of security credentials for the existing force was complete. In the afternoon of September 21, the Times edited the article to change the force size back to 350,000. No note appeared that the article had been changed. By the evening of September 21, the entire section of the article in which the number appeared had been removed, again with no note indicating that such a major change had been made to the article.

Since that strange event, I have followed closely articles in which military sources might cite a size for the Afghan security forces, in order to see if a new number of 300,000 appears.

I haven’t seen a new estimate yet. However, this article from The Guardian, in which we also see that at least NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen admits that a faster withdrawal from Afghanistan is the only move that makes sense, there is this on the size of Afghan security forces:

Nato aims to have an Afghan security force of 352,000 taking over

responsibility for the country in just over two years when the US-led combat operations are scheduled to end.

The article doesn't mention the fact that before the pause the size was already reported to be 350,000. As I have pointed out many times, because of the high rate of attrition, the pause in training was a huge blow that would quickly result in the security force size falling significantly below this target level even before any members were removed for failing security re-screening. Rapid withdrawal while not noting how many ANSF members have been removed in the re-screening seems to be the only way that withdrawal can be accomplished while still claiming that training has not been as big a failure as the other efforts in Afghanistan.

One final note on further confusion in Afghanistan must be made. There was a suicide attack yesterday in Khost province in which at least fourteen people died. This article, along those by other news services that I have read, all mention that the bomber wore a police uniform. The attack is not described as a green on blue attack, though, and none of the stories even includes the usual disclaimer of how easy it is for insurgents to obtain Afghan police or military uniforms. The articles also don't add the three NATO deaths to the current level of 52 green on blue deaths noted by most news services. Why isn't there at least a denial that the attacker was an actual policeman if these deaths aren't going to be added to the total for green on blue?