

NEW, LOWER NUMBER FOR AFGHAN SECURITY FORCE SIZE FINALLY APPEARS

From the time that training of Afghan forces first became disrupted by the security measures put in place in response to the spiraling rate of green on blue killings, I've been convinced that at some point NATO is going to be forced to give up on the concept of a target size of 350,000 Afghan security forces to be in place as NATO withdraws from the country. Despite the simple math that says any slowdown on feeding new recruits into a system that has such a high rate of loss means the overall size must decrease, it has appeared so far that NATO has been planning to game the numbers while adhering to the 350,000 force size.

On Saturday, a very long article was published by the Washington Post outlining a long litany of the problems associated with how the ANSF was expanded so rapidly and to such a large force size. Only by reading to the very end, though, do we get to what I think is the most important news in the article:

That now appears to be the direction U.S. commanders are heading. The White House and Pentagon have decided that the 352,000 will only be a "surge force" that will eventually be reduced to 228,500. The decision has prompted unease among senior U.S. commanders and protests from Levin, McCain and other congressional supporters of a large Afghan army. The Obama administration has billed it as a cost-saving move, but some U.S. officials see another motivation.

"Now we can start concentrating on quality," said the senior U.S. official

involved in Afghanistan policy.

But the planned cutback, which will not begin until 2016, already is fueling a new round of concern because the U.S. and Afghan governments have not started to develop a program to systematically demobilize soldiers and policemen by providing them alternative employment. If not, thousands of men with at least nominal military training will find themselves jobless the very moment the country's economy will be struggling to cope with a drastic reduction in foreign spending resulting from the departure of most NATO troops.

Those who worry about "dismantling" ANSF to reach the lower number have nothing to worry about. The high rate of attrition says that any lowering of force size can be achieved rapidly merely by slowing input into the system. Afghanistan already is awash in thousands who were "trained" and then deserted the security forces, so the fears of releasing more are too late. Also, my prediction is that the projection that the cutback will not start until 2016 is merely a way to get agreement first on the smaller force size. Once the smaller size is a familiar concept, then I expect the timing for it to be changed dramatically to coincide with the actual withdrawal of NATO forces. Look for the withdrawal timing also to be accelerated greatly once the US election has taken place. By mid-December, I expect the plan to be for a withdrawal of the bulk of NATO troops within a twelve month timespan with a target ANSF size of 228,500 by the end of withdrawal.

But don't expect Obama to admit that reality at tonight's debate. He will steadfastly maintain that all 352,000 members of the ANSF are properly vetted (they aren't) and trained (they aren't) and stand ready (they aren't) to take over as we leave by the end of 2014 instead of 2013. Look for Romney to hint that he wouldn't really favor withdrawal, especially on a

"timetable". In other words, neither Obama nor Romney will say much of anything about Afghanistan that will align with how events will unfold after the election.