

SHORTER GEN. NICHOLSON: “YEAH, WE LIED EARLIER ABOUT AFGHAN TROOP CAPABILITIES, BUT YOU CAN BELIEVE US THIS TIME”

It would appear that even the Washington Post is beginning to see through the way that the Defense Department continues to make outrageous claims regarding the capabilities of Afghan National Security Forces. An article published last night to the Post’s website carries the headline “Panetta, other U.S. officials in Kabul paint rosy picture of Afghan situation”. The article opens in conventional news-as-transcription-of-government-narrative fashion:

With Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta in Kabul to take stock as the Obama administration weighs how quickly to draw down troops over the next two years, a senior U.S. military commander on Wednesday hailed the progress Afghan security forces have made.

Marine Maj. Gen. Lawrence D. Nicholson, the head of operations for the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan, said NATO troops have begun a radical shift in mission: doing the bare minimum to support Afghan troops, who, he said, are starting to operate unilaterally. “We’re now un-partnering from” Afghan forces, Nicholson told reporters Wednesday evening. “We’re at that stage of the fight.”

The article then plants a hint, stating that if Afghan forces are seen as achieving capability

to function on their own, the US withdrawal can be accelerated from the current plan of taking another two years.

Remarkably, the Post then moves on to provide some perspective for Nicholson's claim:

The assessment Nicholson offered, however, is far rosier than the one that U.S. officials have provided recently. They have been citing the resilience of the Taliban and the shortcomings of the Afghan government and military.

Just one of 23 Afghan army brigades is able to operate on its own without air or other military support from the United States or NATO, according to a Pentagon report to Congress that was released Monday.

But Nicholson wants us to believe that even though the Defense Department has been lying for years about Afghan troop capabilities, they really, really mean it this time and we should believe them:

Nicholson said that although U.S. commanders have made "disingenuous" claims in the past about the extent to which Afghans were acting as equal partners in joint missions, officials now see the Afghan army as ready to operate largely on its own, albeit with key logistical and financial support from NATO. The new strategy as the United States tries to transfer greater responsibility to the Afghan government and military is one of "tough love," Nicholson said.

Sadly, Nicholson's claims appear to have no more credibility than previous DoD claims on ANSF capabilities. Consider this exchange from the briefing held Monday at the Defense Department, featuring as speakers Senior Defense Official "[Briefer name deleted]" and Senior State

Department Official “[briefer name deleted]” where we see that the Post isn’t the only media operation that sees through the duplicity. This exchange starts with a question from Lita Baldor of AP [emphasis added]:

And, then the broader one, just on overall security. We’ve asked this probably at every one of these about the progress of the Afghan Security Forces. According to this, still just one brigade is operating independently with advisers. And, I’m just wondering, looking forward, it’s been very slow, and very incremental progress in sort of the independent operation of a lot of the Afghan units.

Can you just talk a little bit about – are we at a point where we’re going to start to see a bigger jump in this? I mean, has it just taken until now to get to this point? Or, over the next year obviously there’s going to have to be a significant improvement in the number of those that have to operate independently, so can you just talk about those..

SENIOR DEFENSE OFFICIAL: Let me talk about ‘independently’ a little bit, and I’ll get to the Pakistan question in a second.

You heard me earlier say, Afghan – the Afghans are in the lead, and carry out independently many of the operations. So, when – and that – and that measurement that we’re talking about, being operated independently, that means they have every – they have not just the – that their soldiers are capable, and that their leaders are capable, but they have the equipment, including the enablers, including the intelligence-collection ability, including the access to their own air force – air capability.

So, in terms of slow, I would actually disagree with you. I wouldn't say it's slow. I'd certainly say it's been incremental. But, I think in terms of the fighting capability of the Afghan forces, the fact that they go out and carry out – carry out – independent operations at many levels, with some coalition support – sometimes that's actual advisers with them, sometimes that's fighting units with them, sometimes that's intelligence, sometimes that's air support either rotary wing or fixed wing air support – but, that's the actual fighting, the actual operations on the ground, the actual patrolling is being done.

So, I wouldn't – very careful to not confuse the term that we use, "independent operations."

"Independent operations" means that they're independent sort of from bottom through all the range of capabilities when you have a military. But it doesn't mean that they don't operate independently.

Many of the operations they carry out, we get fairly quick notification of and they often don't rely on any assistance from us at all. So there are many, many operations that they carry out – the Afghan forces carry out without any assistance from us.

However, if they were to encounter a major problem and they would need in extremis support, we have that capability in the theater now. But not – we wouldn't rate them independent without advisers until they – until they were at a very high level – so on that section.

That was clearly such doublespeak that another

questioner circled back to the topic later
[emphasis added]:

Q: Jon Harper with Asahi Shimbun. What percentage of ANSF units are operating independently right now? And you seem to make a semantic distinction between operating independently and being able to carry out independent operations? And I was hoping you could clarify that.

SENIOR DEFENSE OFFICIAL: Why don't I clarify that and the – when I say “carry out independent operations,” if you have a battalion, and that battalion sends out a patrol. And that patrol, the Afghan commander believes there may be a Taliban – sorry guys – might be the Taliban over there. And so, they send out a patrol to investigate. If that patrol leaves the operating base where the Afghans are, gets into vehicles, drives there, does a cordon and search, which is a normal operation, so the Afghan troops cordon off the area, search the area, maybe find some Taliban, maybe engage in gunfire; maybe there's casualties.

But all that happens, as it often does, with no U.S., no coalition participation at all. That's an independent operation. However, that battalion that's in that operating base, if it were to, and the Taliban doesn't have the capability right now, but if it were to, and we have to be ready for this, if that – if they were to be attacked by a force of several hundred Taliban, they would likely need some kind of artillery support. Our intelligence would be useful. Intelligence might prevent it from happening. They might even need air support from bombers or whatever.

So, we have – that unit is not rated as able to operate independently because it doesn't have all those capabilities, but

it does carry out many independent operations. And so, again, I use the example of Kandahar or Uruzgan, Zabul – where about 80 percent of the operations are carried out either with the Afghans in the lead or independently.

There are quite operations where except for de-confliction, we have little visibility. The Afghan commander sees the objective, goes out, takes care of it. We'll know the operation is going to take place, when it's taking place. We'll know what happened afterwards, but we don't even play a role in designing it.

And what we have found, that was not the case in the spring of this year in Kandahar. So, they're operating more and more independently. It's a process. It's not a break. And it's not really so much – we do have a scorecard in there – in our thing.

And, from these questions, I'm realizing that we need to adjust our – adjust how we report this. Because, if you ask this question, there are a couple other questions as well, but it's clear to us because we're working on it from the inside is – is not always clear, and – and – and I apologize, not well enough communicated to you.

And our objective is, as I said before, is to have the Afghans in charge of their own security in all the areas – leading security with us still supporting them by the middle of the summer. And, then have them be able to do it independently with us just providing assistance, and of course, a lot of that assistance is monetary in terms of paying for the forces by the end of 2014, so that we're not playing any combat role.

I hope that explains a little better. And, again I take as a – as a tasking from all of you, to do a better job of describing the issues of independent operations – operationally independent because that’s an area where this report needs to improve.

Despite all of this huge amount of spin from Briefer Name Deleted and from General Nicholson, the Defense Department still can’t adequately explain why it is that their own report, using a definition that already has been changed to make the best category easier to achieve, shows only one Afghan unit operating independently while DoD continues to yammer about how independent Afghan forces are becoming.

Maybe in the end we should just take the hint the Post offered early in its article and let DoD continue to make its spurious claims about ANSF capabilities so that we can accelerate our withdrawal.

Postscript: Missing from the “progress” report, the Post article and Monday’s briefing is any real discussion of what the target size is for Afghan security forces when the US finishes withdrawal. Prior to the disengagement from training brought about by the rapid rise in insider attacks, that number was 352,000 and was included in every discussion of how US involvement in Afghanistan would end. I have stated previously that this number is now impossible, given the disruption in training, ongoing loss rates and the elimination of a large number of recruits due to re-screening their security credentials. There most likely will be a new number introduced when a plan for withdrawal rate (and hopefully a new, earlier date for the end of withdrawal) is announced. John Allen is said to be making his recommendation now on that withdrawal rate, so the new number is likely to be a month or two away from being announced.