

GAO CATCHES DOD CHANGING DEFINITIONS TO CLAIM PROGRESS TRAINING AFGHANS, MISSES REAL RISKS

Patrick Eddington pointed us toward a report (pdf) released yesterday by the GAO. The report is titled “Afghanistan Security: Long-standing Challenges May Affect Progress and Sustainment of Afghan National Security Forces”. GAO describes their reasons for the report (which is also Congressional testimony):

This testimony discusses findings from GAO reports and ongoing work that cover (1) progress reported and tools used to assess ANSF capability, (2) challenges affecting the development of capable ANSF, and (3) use of U.S. Security Force Assistance Advisory Teams to advise and assist ANSF.

The report does a very good job of catching the Defense Department redefining the highest category of ANSF capability in order to claim progress in the percentage of units that have achieved the highest level. However, as Eddington pointed out in his tweet, GAO falls far short of its second goal of enumerating the “challenges affecting the development of capable ANSF”, as the report is entirely silent on the two biggest hurdles faced: defections and green on blue killings.

Here is Reuters’ Missy Ryan describing the use of changed descriptors to claim progress:

The Pentagon’s decision to change the standards used to grade the success of Afghan police and soldiers, who are a centerpiece of U.S. strategy for smoothly exiting the war in Afghanistan,

helped it present a positive picture of those forces' abilities, a U.S. government watchdog reported on Tuesday.

"These changes ... were responsible, in part, for its reported increase in April 2012 of the number of ANSF units rated at the highest level," the Government Accountability Office said in a new report on Afghan national security forces, known as ANSF.

In a twice-annual report to Congress in April 2012, the Defense Department reported that Afghan police and soldiers "continued to make substantial progress," classifying 15 out of 219 army units as able to operate 'independently with assistance' from foreign advisors. Almost 40 out of 435 police units got the same rating.

And what was the redefinition of terms that was used? Merely a slight change that completely negates its meaning:

"Key definitions used in capability assessments ... have changed several times," the GAO said. Its report said the Pentagon's highest rating for Afghan forces had changed from 'independent' in early 2011 to 'independent with advisors' later that year.

Gosh, the only way that DoD could show that the ANSF had increased the number of units rated at the highest level of capability was to redefine that highest level of capability. So, instead of "independent", the most capable units are now "independent with advisors", which is, you know, NOT independent. That semantic trick is completely in parallel with other Obama administration moves that make the bulk of their agreements regarding Afghanistan into shams that mean essentially the opposite of how they are sold.

Looking more closely at the report, they also lowered the criterion for whether the unit is even intact:

The change to “independent with advisors” also lowered the standard for unit personnel and equipment levels from “not less than 85” to “not less than 75” percent of authorized levels.

Is the lowering of the personnel and equipment levels a direct attempt to cover for defections? After all, even though GAO does not address defections, they are becoming more prominent. On the very day the report was released:

An Afghan police commander and 13 junior officers have joined the Taliban in the western Afghan province of Farah, in what correspondents say could be the biggest defection by police.

They say the commander, named as Mirwais, was in charge of a 20-man checkpoint when he defected on Sunday.

The men are said to have taken heavy weaponry, radios and police vehicles including US-made armoured Humvees.

It’s a good thing the definition of intact unit lowered the requirement for equipment, too, given how it appears to be joining the defectors.

But the situation is much worse than that. Looming much larger than defections to the Taliban are defections that are merely losses of trained personnel. Back in March of last year, Time reported that “the Afghan army loses 32% and the police lose 23% of their personnel to attrition each year.”

As I pointed out on Monday, one of the most recent green on blue killings involved an Afghan policeman turning his weapon on a trainer who was a contractor instead of a member of the military. It appears that there may be an effort

on the part of the military to avoid calling this event a true green on blue event because the victim was a contractor instead of military, raising the suggestion that there could be many more such deaths that have been hidden due to this semantic game.

In summary then, while GAO did a good job in exposing one use of semantics by DoD in order to claim progress in ANSF training, they completely missed the huge issues of defections and green on blue killings. For the record, the "challenges" that GAO did find were: 1) Cost to sustain ANSF. 2) Key skill gaps in ANSF. 3) Limited capacity of ministries supporting ANSF.