HOW NATO WILL GAME THE NUMBERS ON AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCE SIZE

Last month, when the combination of rising green on blue killings and anger over the anti-Islam film finally shut down most joint operations between NATO and Afghan forces, I predicted that this would lead quickly to Afghan National Security Forces falling below the level of 350,000 that NATO has stated to be the goal when security responsibility for the country shifts to Afghan control as NATO withdraws. The prediction was based on already knowing that Afghan forces suffer from huge attrition losses and knowing that the most important aspect of training for Afghan troops occurs during joint patrols that are carried out at the platoon level where only a handful of troops from each side are present. The shutdown of joint operations was for everything below the battalion level, so it seemed to me that with the most important level of training ended, ongoing attrition would decimate the force size.

While reading today's New York Times article in which the Times has finally realized what a huge problem the high attrition rate poses, I finally deciphered how NATO will be gaming the numbers on ANSF size in order to claim that the original plan for withdrawal can be followed without significant changes. The Times tells us:

> Now at its biggest size yet, 195,000 soldiers, the Afghan Army is so plagued with desertions and low re-enlistment rates that it has to replace a third of its entire force every year, officials say.
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> The attrition strikes at the core of America's exit strategy in Afghanistan: to build an Afghan National Army that

> can take over the war and allow the
> United States and NATO forces to
> withdraw by the end of 2014. The urgency
> of that deadline has only grown as the
> pace of the troop pullout has become an
> issue in the American presidential
> campaign.

The reality is that although NATO has set a goal for ANSF size to allow withdrawal, it has completely given up on the idea of those Afghan forces being fully functional. My error when I predicted that cessation (now followed by a resumption that Panetta claims is "nearly normal") of joint patrols would reduce force size was to think that ANSF size would be at all affected by a decreased level of training and experience gained on joint patrol.

NATO will continue to claim that ANSF size is at the goal for withdrawal because, as we see in the Times article, recruitment will continue at the rate needed to make up for the high attrition rate. Recruitment is all that matters for maintaining force size, as the Times noted:

> Colonel Stanikzai, a senior official at
> the army's National Recruiting Center,
> is on the front line of that effort; in
> the six months through September, he and
> his team of 17 interviewers have
> rejected 962 applicants, he said.
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> "There are drug traffickers who want to
> use our units for their business, enemy
> infiltrators who want to raise problems,
> jailbirds who can't find any other job,"
> he said. During the same period,
> however, 30,000 applicants were
> approved.
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> "Recruitment, it's like a machine," he
> said. "If you stopped, it would
> collapse."

It was in reading this Times article that I finally realized that because basic training

for the new recruits (which is only a 10 to 12 week course) occurs on large bases, this first part of training was not interrupted since it was at the battalion level. The interruption in joint patrols will only affect the progress of new recruits from the lowest to the "highest" in categories in terms of operational effectiveness.

When assessing ANSF effectiveness, the most important point to note is that NATO has stopped counting units that are fully functional on their own, because there are no units that meet this definition. Think about that. The war in Afghanistan is now in its twelfth year, Obama's surge is complete, and yet the Times notes "there are still no units that American trainers consider able to operate entirely without NATO assistance".

Look carefully at the table below from the Defense Department's April report (pdf) on "progress" in Afghanistan. It shows how many units in the Afghan National Army are functional at the various levels described by NATO.

Rating Definition Level (RDL)	Headquarters			Unit Type			Total Kandak	Total Units & HQs	Percent of Total
	Corps	Div	BDE	Kandak	GSU	Coy			
Independent w/ Advisors	0	0	1	8	5	1	13	15	7%
Effective w/ Advisors	1	1	14	69	5	11	74	101	46%
Effective w/ Partners	5	0	7	47	8	13	55	80	37%
Developing w/ Partners	0	0	0	8	1	9	9	18	8%
Established	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	3	1%
Not Assessed	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	2	1%
TOTAL:	6	1	22	135	21	34	156	219	100%

RDLs for "Headquarters" are for Corps, Division, and Brigade headquarters only, not a roll-up.
Kandaks = all warfighting Kandaks, CS, CSS, and Commando Kandaks; Coys not included.
GSU = General Support Unit (Kandak equivalent).
Coys = Independent Coys; not part of a Kandak.
Total Kandaks = Kandaks plus GSUs.
A Kandak is a battalion-sized unit; a Coy is a company-sized unit.
Source: IJC CTAG ANSF Development - CUAT Cycle 13 (31 January 2012)

As mentioned above, no units are capable of functioning fully independently, so that category isn't mentioned. Only seven percent of units can even be "independent" when advisors are present. The most frequent description for a unit is that it is "effective" when it has advisors present.

By keeping recruitment at its current high rate and carrying out basic training on large bases at the battalion level where security is believed to be better, NATO will be able claim that ANSF size is still at the 350,000 level

they have stated they need for withdrawal to
occur. The loss of many small-scale joint
patrols will mean that if assessment continues
with the same categories of functionality, it is
virtually certain that many more units will only
meet the "established" and "developing
w/partners" levels while the number of units
meeting the higher levels of functionality will
decrease. But if NATO only focuses on overall
ANSF size, then withdrawal can proceed according
to their original schedule, or perhaps even
faster, as the Times called for in an editorial.