

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3860 | FEBRUARY 25, 2013

U.S. Should Back a Robust Afghan National Security Force

Luke Coffey

Overshadowed by the announcement in President Obama's State of the Union address that 34,000 U.S. troops will be brought home from Afghanistan was an acknowledgement that the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) need to improve. The U.S. should argue that the ANSF should not be reduced in numbers as currently planned, and the White House should press international partners to commit funding for the Afghan forces well into the future.

Future Size of the ANSF Still in Doubt. Success will be achieved in Afghanistan when it is able to manage its own internal security in order to prevent al-Qaeda and its allies from re-establishing terrorist bases in the country. In the context of security, NATO's modest goal is to raise the Afghan forces to a level where they can—without the help of tens of

thousands of NATO troops—take on the Taliban and prevent international terrorist groups from coming back to Afghanistan.

Currently, the ANSF has 352,000 Afghans in uniform. However, under current plans, the ANSF will be reduced to a level of 228,500 by 2017. This planned reduction will take place during the first two years after NATO troops end combat operations in the country and during a period when Afghanistan will be at its most vulnerable. There are no plans for what will happen to the 123,500 militarily trained young men who will need jobs when this reduction takes place. With Afghan unemployment estimated to be as high as 35 percent,¹ the lack of opportunity for former members of the ANSF could draw them into the insurgency.

The NATO decision to reduce ANSF numbers was based on financial concerns and not a realistic assessment of Kabul's security needs. As the former Afghan defense minister, General Abdul Rahim Wardak, pointed out when this debate was taking place inside NATO:

Nobody at this moment, based on any type of analysis, can predict what will be the security situation in 2014. That's

unpredictable. Going lower [in Afghan troop numbers] has to be based on realities on the ground. Otherwise it will be a disaster, it will be a catastrophe, putting at risk all that we have accomplished together with so much sacrifice in blood and treasure.²

Security Is Not Cheap.

Afghanistan will need financial support from the international community for the foreseeable future. A major part of the post-2014 commitment to Afghanistan will be mentoring, training, and funding the ANSF. Maintaining the ANSF at a reduced level of 228,500 troops will cost the international community approximately \$4.1 billion per year. To place this sum into perspective, the U.S. spent this amount every 12 days in Afghanistan on combat operations in 2012.

Sadly, the international community's financial contributions have come up short. Although the U.S. has so far committed \$2 billion, other NATO members such as the U.K. (the world's seventh-largest economy) and Germany (the world's fourth-largest economy) have contributed only \$110 million and \$200 million, respectively. The international community is still short \$1.8 billion

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3860>

Produced by the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

for the years 2015–2017 for ANSF funding.³ Keeping ANSF figures at their current level of 352,000 troops beyond 2015, instead of reducing the force to 228,500 as planned, would be costly, but it would be money well spent.

Afghan Local Police: Part of the Solution, Not the Problem.

The Afghan Local Police (ALP) initiative was one of General David Petraeus's most successful programs. It was established soon after he arrived to Afghanistan in 2010 and was based on his success at mobilizing local forces in Iraq. Local auxiliary forces such as the ALP are a crucial part of any counterinsurgency campaign.

The ANSF is a national force—not a provincial force. It is recruited from across Afghanistan and from all ethnic groups. An ethnically Uzbek recruit from Balkh Province, for example, can end up fighting in the Pashtun heartland in the south. The ANSF cannot always be present in some of Afghanistan's extremely remote villages. This is why the ALP is important.

There are currently 19,600 members in the ALP, but there are proposals to increase their numbers to 45,000. The ALP brings local knowledge and local ownership to local security, something foreign troops—and in some cases even Afghan troops—will never be able to do. The ALP uses local residents as static security forces for checkpoints and roadblocks. Administratively, the ALP is under the auspices of the Afghan Ministry of the Interior. ALP

troops are not trained in maneuver warfare and are lightly armed.

Human rights organizations and some NATO countries (such as Germany) have been critical of the ALP program without offering a credible alternative. The ALP is not perfect, but neither is any other police force in the world. As the ANSF becomes more capable and security conditions across Afghanistan improve, the Afghan government will need to develop a plan to transition ALP units into formal ANSF structures.

The Way Ahead. As NATO troops start to reduce their numbers in Afghanistan, the responsibility of security will be left to the Afghans themselves. The U.S. and its NATO partners have come too far in Afghanistan to let their achievements be squandered by an unwillingness to properly fund the ANSF after 2015.

The U.S. should ensure that:

- **The ANSF remains at 352,000 for the foreseeable future.** The ANSF should not be reduced to 228,500 by 2017 as planned. The strength of the ANSF should be determined by the security conditions on the ground. NATO leaders should resist the temptation to reduce the ANSF's size and capability simply for financial reasons.
- **International partners provide their fair share of the funding for the ANSF.** Everyone benefits from a strong

ANSF. However, maintaining a robust Afghan force will not be cheap. The U.S. should continue to press international partners to commit adequate funding for the ANSF for the foreseeable future.

- **The ANSF remains capable.** The U.S. should ensure that the ANSF has the equipment and capabilities required to fulfill their mission—especially helicopters and counter-improvised-explosive-device capability.
- **The ALP continues to play a role.** So far, the ALP has been a success story. The ALP should be increased in size and be used well into the future as the security situation requires.

Learn the Lessons of History.

The ANSF are just developing the capabilities required to carry out autonomous operations. While far from being perfect, perfection was never NATO's goal for the ANSF. The goal is to raise the forces to a level where the Afghans can provide their own internal security.

When Russia stopped funding Najibullah's regime in 1992, the Afghan air force was grounded due to lack of fuel, and Afghan army desertions increased by 60 percent due to lack of pay and food shortages. This established the chaotic conditions in Afghanistan that, in part, helped to bring the Taliban into power in 1994. NATO should learn the lessons of Afghanistan's recent history

1. Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook, "Afghanistan," February 12, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html> (accessed February 22, 2013).

2. Yaroslav Trofimov, "Afghan General Sounds Alarm," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204059804577229081438477796.html> (accessed February 14, 2013).

3. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan: Key Oversight Issues*, GAO-13-218SP, February 2013, p. 22, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/652075.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2013).

and ensure that the ANSF are fully funded and capable.

—Luke Coffey is the Margaret Thatcher Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.