

BEGINNING OF THE END IN AFGHANISTAN? MOST JOINT OPERATIONS BELOW BATTALION LEVEL SUSPENDED

In the most significant move yet that suggests the NATO plan for Afghan security forces to take over as NATO withdraws from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 has failed, the US has halted most joint activities between US and Afghan forces below the battalion level. Any joint action at the lower force level will require approval from a General before it is permitted. Because the bulk of the training and joint patrol work of US and Afghan forces occurs at these lower force size levels, this order effectively brings training to a close until the order is reversed.

Jim Miklaszewski of NBC News first reported this development last night:

Most joint U.S.-Afghan military operations have been suspended following what authorities believe was an insider attack Sunday that left four American soldiers dead, officials told NBC News.

"We're to the point now where we can't trust these people," a senior military official said. So far this year, 51 NATO troops have been killed in these so-called blue-on-green attacks. Sunday's attack came a day after two British soldiers were shot dead by an Afghan policeman, Reuters reported.

"It's had a major impact on our ability to conduct combat operations with them, and we're going to have to back off to a certain degree," the official said.

The suspensions of the joint operations are indefinite – according to one

official, they “could last three days or three months.”

ISAF took issue with some of the early reporting and issued this “clarification” this morning:

Recent media coverage regarding a change in ISAF’s model of Security Force Assistance (SFA) to the Afghan National Security Forces is not accurate. ISAF remains absolutely committed to partnering with, training, advising and assisting our ANSF counterparts. The ISAF SFA model is focused at the battalion level and above, with exceptions approved by senior commanders. Partnering occurs at all levels, from Platoon to Corps. This has not changed.

In response to elevated threat levels resulting from the “Innocence of Muslims” video, ISAF has taken some prudent, but temporary, measures to reduce our profile and vulnerability to civil disturbances or insider attacks. This means that in some local instances, operational tempo has been reduced, or force protection has been increased. These actions balance the tension of the recent video with force protection, while maintaining the momentum of the campaign.

We’ve done this before in other high tension periods, and it has worked well. Under this guidance, and as conditions change, we will continue to adapt the force posture and force protection. The SFA model is integral to the success of the ANSF, and ISAF will return to normal operations as soon as conditions warrant.

It seems to me that just as the “Innocence of the Muslims” video and its associated protests

was used as cover for the sophisticated attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi, ISAF now is using the film and protests as cover for suspending training even though this suspension was a development that was easily predicted when Special Forces halted training of the Afghan Local Police on September 2. As I said at the time:

So, while only Special Operations forces have suspended training for now, it is hard to see how this will not extend to all training of Afghan security forces soon, because the lapses in screening of recruits applies equally to the much larger ANA and ANP forces (approximately 350,000 for those two forces combined, compared to various estimates in the 20,000 range for the ALP and Afghan special forces when combined).

We learned a few days after the suspension of ALP training that a thorough review of credentials for Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police who already had been trained was underway, even though DoD seriously bungled its responses when trying to describe the process to the press. Strip away the convenient timing of the video and it seems likely that ISAF would have had to admit that training has been suspended because the process of re-screening Afghan National Security Forces indicates that a very significant number of the 350,000-strong force were never adequately screened and pose a security threat for green on blue insider attacks.

Despite the attempt by ISAF to downplay the significance of a halt to most training activities, the importance stands out both to major media organizations and, more importantly, to the Afghans. Just as I pointed out in early August, when Afghan troops "trained" by the US are left alone to carry out missions, things do not go well. Today's New York Times article show the same level of failure as the Washington Post report I quoted last month:

Afghan soldiers were not reassured by such talk. Three interviewed as word spread Tuesday said their [sic] many of their units were not yet ready to fight alone – an assessment shared by the Pentagon – and could be in deep trouble without close coalition assistance.

The curtailment of partnered operations is “a big problem for the Afghan Army,” said Maj. Salam, an officer based in western Afghanistan who asked that he only be identified by his rank and last name.

“We rely on the Americans for everything,” he continued. “The army is not in a level to carry out military operations independently, we still need their support. I do not buy the lies that the MOD officials are trying to sell us and the public – we are in the field and we know how difficult it would be for the army without Americans.”

He cited an incident on Monday in which an Afghan Army vehicle struck a hidden bomb. Two soldiers were killed, and the Americans did not respond to a request to evacuate the four wounded troopers.

Instead, they had to wait for help from their own forces, which do not have medical evacuation helicopters. “It took them six hours to bring the soldiers to the hospital. One of them has lost a lot of blood and he might die,” Major Salam said.

This same Times report opens by stating that the “training mission” “is the heart of the Western exit strategy” and is threatened by this move. Reuters characterizes it as “a decision that could complicate plans to hand security over to Afghan forces ahead of a 2014 drawdown”.

Because so much of Obama administration policy in Afghanistan has been governed from the start

by electoral politics, look for the "suspension" of training to hold through the November election, with US troops withdrawing into defensive postures on bases and carrying out only solo, rather than joint, patrols to secure their perimeters. It is very difficult to see how the training mission can be revived in any meaningful form after the election. Although the US has begrudgingly gotten to the point of at least going through the motions of "cultural sensitivity" training, the US still refuses to face up to the most important overarching factor behind violence aimed at the US: the Afghans see the US as an invading force and want all foreign troops out of their country. No amount of "training" Afghan security forces will alter this basic desire by the Afghan people to get US forces out of their country, so leaving is the only realistic option.

Although Obama should begin the process of leaving now, look for him after the election to declare training to have been such a success that the withdrawal process can be accelerated, presumably with an end of 2013 target rather than end of 2014. The process will have to be fast because the defection rate from the ANSF is too high to wait through 2014 before completing withdrawal. He'll of course want to keep a presence of "non-combat" forces just as he did in Iraq and most likely will move to a high frequency of drone strikes, as well, from the few bases he will maintain. At the very least it's hard to see how he could be so dense as to attempt to stick with ISAF's current claim that the training mission remains in place and to actually lift the training suspension.