

NATO WANTS US TO BUY \$22 BILLION SOFA IN AFGHANISTAN

Both Reuters and the New York Times carry stories this morning reporting that NATO has floated the idea of extending the 352,000 Afghan National Security Force size for a number of years beyond the current plan that calls for it to fall significantly after the US completes its withdrawal. There are a number of problems with this idea. The first is that the 352,000 number bears little relation to reality at this point, since the ongoing high attrition rate for Afghan forces continued during the prolonged disruption in training due to green on blue attacks. Although ISAF continues to claim that recruiting and initial training goals to support the 352,000 level were met, the likelihood that this level of troops still exists and is integrated into ANSF is very low. (See this post for just one example of the deployment deficit at an Afghan National Border Police facility.) Second, the US bears the bulk of the budgetary load for maintaining ANSF, so extending the commitment to the increased troop level is asking for a large financial commitment from the US at a time when budget deficits are the panic *du jour* in Washington. Finally, because only one Afghan National Army unit now is reported to be able to function without any advisor input, a large number of US advisors is required to achieve the required ANSF force size and there is not yet a negotiated Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that grants immunity to US troops remaining in Afghanistan after the planned withdrawal at the end of 2014. The lack of such an agreement in Iraq resulted in our rapid withdrawal of advisors there.

Here is how the Times described the proposal:

NATO defense ministers are seriously considering a new proposal to sustain Afghanistan's security forces at 352,000

troops through 2018, senior alliance officials said Thursday. The expensive effort is viewed as a way to help guarantee the country's stability – and, just as much, to illustrate continued foreign support after the NATO allies end their combat mission in Afghanistan next year.

The fiscal package that NATO leaders endorsed last spring would have reduced the Afghan National Security Forces to fewer than 240,000 troops after December 2014, when the NATO mission expires. That reduction was based on planning work indicating that the larger current force level was too expensive for Afghanistan and the allies to keep up, and might not be required. Some specialists even argued that the foreign money pouring into Afghanistan to support so large a force was helping fuel rampant official corruption.

Recall that the Obama administration managed to quash the semi-annual report on “progress” in Afghanistan that was due in October until after the November elections, but once it finally came out, the New York Times reported:

As President Obama considers how quickly to withdraw the remaining 68,000 American troops in Afghanistan and turn over the war to Afghan security forces, a bleak new Pentagon report has found that only one of the Afghan National Army's 23 brigades is able to operate independently without air or other military support from the United States and NATO partners.

So we see that there is a huge dependence on “advisors” (=US troops) who are required for there to be any semblance of function for the ANSF. And yet, as I discussed back in November, there is not yet a SOFA in place that provides

full criminal immunity to US forces who are in Afghanistan posing as advisors after 2014. Is NATO floating the idea of extending the large force size myth as an enticement to Afghan officials to keep their corruption dollars coming in by approving US troop immunity in the new SOFA?

Rather than extending the 352,000 force size, I have been expecting a shortening of the time until we see the official number for the force size to go down. If we go to the "October" report itself (pdf), we see this (emphasis added):

Afghan security ministries have made measured progress in developing the institutional capacity necessary to oversee, manage, and sustain the ANSF. Despite progress, corruption remains a critical issue, especially in the MoI, Afghan Border Police, and the Afghan Air Force – a condition that threatens to undermine public perception of the security ministries and ANSF as capable and legitimate security providers for Afghanistan. The Afghan Parliament's vote of "no confidence" in the MoI and MoD ministers in mid-August 2012 and President Karzai's subsequent replacement of the head of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) have further stressed the security ministries, slowing progress in some areas. All ministries, however, exhibited sufficient institutional cohesion to withstand these changes at the minister level.

ANSF will continue to face significant challenges to its growth and development, including attrition, leadership deficits (including Non-Commissioned Officer shortages in both the ANA and ANP), and limited capabilities in staff planning, management, logistics, and procurement.

The ANSF also continues to require enabling support from Coalition resources, including air (both transport and close air support), logistics, ISR17, counter-IED, and medical evacuation support.

As Afghanistan continues to become more secure and stable through 2015-2016, and as the relative costs and benefits of the current ANSF force size and structure become clear, the Afghan government, in coordination with the Coalition, will begin to refocus the ANSF toward enduring security roles, and consider how to reshape the ANSF into a more sustainable force.

That last bolded bit is what I see as setting up the early reduction in ANSF size. It looks to me like the US military wrote this report from the vantage point that they have done what they need to do in order to reach the magic 352,000 number, but once the Afghan government has all functions in its hands, it will undoubtedly decide that it cannot maintain the large force size. Since we are now in the final phases of handover of all responsibility to the Afghan government, I expected their move to "a more sustainable force" to happen sooner rather than later and for the reduction to be announced by Afghanistan rather than NATO being forced to admit that it failed to reach the magic force size number.

I don't see any other explanation for NATO's proposal than it being an attempt to buy a very expensive SOFA. At about \$5.7 billion a year from the US for supporting the 352,000 ANSF size, by extending the size for four years NATO appears to be offering over \$22 billion as enticement for Afghanistan to approve US troop immunity. That's some SOFA. Heck, I'd sell them my old sofa for half a billion.