

OBAMA STILL CLINGING TO 352,000 AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCE SIZE MYTH

Before the outbreak of green on blue killings that eventually led to a significant interruption in the training of Afghan security forces last September, it was impossible to read a statement from the US military or NATO regarding future plans without encountering a reference to a required 352,000 force size for combined Afghan National Security Forces. It was our training of the ANSF that was touted as our primary reason for remaining in Afghanistan because we need those trained troops available to take over security responsibility as we withdraw. I have been insisting since the interruption that it will be impossible to continue to claim that a functional ANSF force size of 352,000 can be achieved, as the known high rate of attrition continued during the training interruption. No new troop size prediction has emerged, but it was significant to me that references to the 352,000 force size claim had seemed to disappear.

Last night, President Barack Obama announced in his State of the Union address that he intends to withdraw about half the troops now in Afghanistan within the next twelve months, but he made no direct reference ANSF force size. Here are the three short paragraphs on Afghanistan in the speech as found in the transcript of his address:

Tonight, we stand united in saluting the troops and civilians who sacrifice every day to protect us. Because of them, we can say with confidence that America will complete its mission in Afghanistan and achieve our objective of defeating the core of al Qaeda. (Applause.)

Already, we have brought home 33,000 of our brave servicemen and women. This spring, our forces will move into a support role, while Afghan security forces take the lead. Tonight, I can announce that over the next year, another 34,000 American troops will come home from Afghanistan. This drawdown will continue and by the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over. (Applause.)

Beyond 2014, America's commitment to a unified and sovereign Afghanistan will endure, but the nature of our commitment will change. We're negotiating an agreement with the Afghan government that focuses on two missions – training and equipping Afghan forces so that the country does not again slip into chaos, and counterterrorism efforts that allow us to pursue the remnants of al Qaeda and their affiliates.

Despite the specific force numbers cited with respect to US forces, Obama merely mentions "Afghan security forces" without telling us how many of them there will be. Resorting to the more detailed Afghanistan Fact Sheet released last night by the White House, however, shows that Obama still clings to the myth that there are 352,000 members of the ANSF. The Fact Sheet even goes to so far as to claim that this force level will be maintained for the next three years. I don't believe I have seen this three year claim before:

Today, Afghan forces are already leading nearly 90 percent of operations, and by spring 2013, they will be moving into the operational lead across the country. These forces are currently at a surge strength of 352,000, where they will remain for at least three more years, to allow continued progress toward a secure environment in Afghanistan.

As the international community's role shifts and Afghan forces continue to grow in capabilities, coalition troop numbers will continue to decrease in a planned, coordinated, and responsible manner. By the end of 2014, transition will be complete and Afghan Security Forces will be fully responsible for the security of their country.

I guess we are supposed to ignore the fact that the claims here are completely contradictory, where we plan to keep some US troops in Afghanistan specifically for "counterterrorism efforts" and yet ANSF forces "will be fully responsible for the security of their country".

Afghanistan appears to welcome the drawdown plan. From Khaama Press:

Afghan defense officials on Wednesday welcomed President Barack Obama's decision to bring home half of the 66,000 American troops in Afghanistan with [sic] the next year, saying Afghan forces are ready to take responsibility for the country's security.

Mohammad Zahir Azimi spokesman for the Afghan defense ministry said Afghan troops will fill the "vacuum" caused by the withdrawal of 34,000 U.S. troops over the next 12 months.

Interestingly, there is no prediction for ANSF force size coming from Afghan officials in this article, even though it would seem to be worth including.

Despite all the claims of progress in training that will allow us to leave, however, facts on the ground in Afghanistan continue to paint a very different story. Recall that the claim now is that Afghanistan now is in the lead for about 90% of operations. We have a report today that another five children and four women were killed in a night raid in the early hours of Tuesday

morning, so it appears that putting Afghans in charge is not reducing the civilian toll. We also learn from Khaama Press that the Taliban is still playing a significant role as a legal authority in many rural areas of the country:

According to Afghan attorney general officials, local residents in remote districts and villages of the country are still applying to Taliban militants in order to resolve their legal issues due to lack of access to governmental judiciary institutions.

/snip/

Deputy attorney general Rahmatullah Nazari said the prosecution organizations are not operating in various districts due to instability and people are obliged to apply to Taliban militants in order to resolve their issues.

He said, "People are applying to militants or individuals and groups who have influence in the area to resolve their issues in those districts where security, prosecution and other government officials are not operating. This is the fact which has created tensions among the Afghan people."

So not only has the Taliban not been eliminated from much of the countryside (which was one of the main goals of Obama's surge), we see that many rural civilians still rely on them to resolve local disputes.

It is very hard to see why one would believe that stringing out the US exit from Afghanistan for another two years and even then leaving a counterterrorism force in place will have any tangible benefit for either the US or Afghanistan. I guess the exceptions are that defense contractors and morticians will see their revenue streams continue but everyone else will suffer.