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The Afghan National Army in 2014

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It took the British in India a full century of trial-and-error (1757 – 1857) to finally come up with the organisation of a native army with which India could be kept stabilised for their needs. The first instance of a serious shock actually caused the local army that they were most satisfied with, the East India Company's Bengal Army**[1]**, to completely dissolve in the Mutiny of 1857.

By contrast, the US believes that in the mere 10 to 11 years since its entry into (or invasion of) Afghanistan in October 2001, it has hit upon the best possible model for a new Afghan National Army (ANA) to turn the security of the country over to by the end of 2014**[2]**. Given the convoluted history of the region and of the modern political entity known as Afghanistan since the mid-1970's, it is worth taking a closer look at this American-designed and built ANA (Version # 3)**[3]**.

The new ANA, supported by a new internationally-created Afghan Police, is expected to take over and maintain security once the USA has withdrawn the bulk of its troops in 2014. It is a new-look army, combining elements of organization from the older Afghan Army pattern with some completely-new elements copied from the US Army. The big question is: Can such an army hold Afghanistan together once the inherent fissiparous tendencies of the multi-ethnic state begin to gain strength?

The known weaknesses of recent efforts at army-creating in Afghanistan are (1) lack of modern-style professionalism, greatly caused by illiteracy and lack of education, (2) high desertion rates/poor retention rate of soldiers, and (3) lack of equally-distributed proportional representation by all the major communities, with some of the predominantly Pathan (Pashtoon or Pakhtoon) areas such as Kandahar and Helmand contributing less than the Farsi (Dari) speaking Tajiks and Hazaras. The resultant of the above had been poor operational efficiency, and even low motivation for offensive action against motivated local Taliban fighters with an Islamist *jehadi* agenda.

The US has tried to address all these weaknesses, by (1) applying itself to the training of the new recruits and active mentoring of ANA units and sub-units in the field, (2) increasing the salaries of ANA soldiers and introducing a very generous pension scheme, reportedly the full salary even after retirement if a soldier serves his full term of engagement, which has been increased to 10 years**[4]**. In the earlier scheme of things when the US began its army-building effort, it was offering a mere three-year term of enlistment and a meagre salary, and the desertion rate before completion of their enlistment period was as high as 25 percent of enrolment. By early 2010 the salary of new ANA soldiers had been doubled to US $ 140 per month, comparable to what the Taliban were paying their anti-establishment forces, and recruitment picked up.

The ANA is now about 43 percent Pathan (Pashtun), 32 percent Tajik, 12 percent Hazara and 10 percent Uzbek, with the rest made up of smaller ethnic groups, which is approximately the percentages of these communities in the Afghan population. Any spirit of camaraderie among different ethnic groups of new

recruits within the ANA is very new, as recent as early 2010, and cannot possibly become universal by end-2014. The American attempt to build unit motivation levels however, is suspect because the class composition of the ANA ‘s combat units, all presently ‘normal’ infantry and some commando-type, is an ethno-racial-linguistic mix of various ethnic communities, using the national language Dari**[5]** as the common medium of communication. This attempt at creating a ‘nationalistic spirit’ has two major flaws in the current Afghanistan political scenario: (1) The ANA could change its loyalty ‘en masse’ to an alternate contending political regime after the US and international forces are drawn down, and/or (2) The ANA’s operational effectiveness could be seriously compromised if some soldiers in every combat unit refuse to take part in operations, if required to do so against their ethnic/linguistic kin.

The British resolved the second issue by adapting the British Army’s regimental system to the Indian Army they created, by not having all ethnic groups of men mixed at random in their fighting arms, the infantry, the cavalry (later converted to a tank corps), the artillery, and the combat engineering units. Instead, each regiment and unit was composed of a ‘fixed class composition’, which had entire companies of a particular ethnic community, while the unit (a battalion of infantry, or a regiment of cavalry or of artillery) had what could be considered a ‘balanced’ mix of communities. Thus the different communities in a battalion could not only cooperate with each other, but also acted as a check against the disaffection, for whatever reason, of any of the other communities. At the same time, they were composed from somewhat similar communities of a broader general region, so that there were some commonalities of food habits and culture. Such units could be used against Indians of other regions without much hesitation among the troops, with a deliberately fostered regimental ‘esprit de corps’ overcoming any feelings of ‘Indian-ness’. The British also created some units on a ‘single class’ basis, which gave them the additional flexibility to use such a unit against Indians of other regions and culture without problems of hesitation. This system of military organization allowed the British to conquer whatever was left outside their domination in India after 1857, using a combination of Indian troops and much fewer British troops, and to hold it firmly thereafter. Though the system underwent a gradual evolution, the principles of human organization were as described and continued all the way till after the First World War, standing the test of time till feelings of Indian nationalism picked up in earnest after the Second World War.

Under the regimental system used for the Indian Army of the British, a battalion of the Punjab Regiment of infantry, for example, could have a rifle company of Hindu Rajputs, another of Jat Sikhs, and two companies of Jat Punjabi Muslims (PMs). A battalion of the Frontier Force Regiment of infantry would normally be composed of one company of Hindu Dogra Rajputs, a company of Jat Sikhs, a company of Jat PMs, and a company of Muslim Pathans. There were other ‘fixed class’ regiments with other combinations of ethnic groups. Among the few ‘single class’ regiments were, for example, those of Gorkhas and of Marathas. The key to the entire system, and of the choice of military manpower, was political reliability. Both the underlying logic and the method have relevant lessons for the Afghanistan of 2014, where ethnic loyalties and tensions are liable to come into play again.

Afghanistan is a political state whose boundaries were created by the conquests of a king, and which were then finalised by two European powers, Britain and Russia. In a country without a strong nationalistic feeling or tradition, ethnicity will continue to greatly influence events. Only a politically-reliable army can ensure security and stability. The ‘all-classes-mixed’ or ‘nationalist-pattern’ ANA, which might be quite suitable for a modern nation-state, does not yet inspire confidence in its ability to hold Afghanistan together from 2014 onwards. There are, however, some very positive innovations in the ANA Version 3, which have the potential of off-setting some of the perceived weakness in human organization. These are the Commando Units and the US Army-type Special Forces**[6]**.

To fully appreciate these, however, it is necessary to look briefly at the overall organization and apparent

tasking of the ANA. The overall strength of the ANA is 160,600 soldiers**[7]** and officers, and the intention is to increase it to 171,600 by October 2011. There is also some discussion on increasing the strength to between 195,000 and 208,000 by October 2012. The ANA is presently divided into six Corps located around the country, each with two to four brigades (but with no intervening Divisional HQ), and an independent Division in the capital area, along with a Special Operations Command of Divisional HQ size, which commands the Commando battalions and the Special Forces. The deployment pattern (**see map**) indicates that the ANA, as organised by its primarily American organizers, is an infantry-predominant force deployed for counter-insurgency operations, if required, in their own respective 'area of operations' (AOR), with a reserve Division for the defence of Kabul, the capital, and a counter-terrorism (CT) capability being built up in the Commando battalions. The Special Forces, organised as 'A' Teams like the US Green Berets, is meant to help villages and groups of villages to organize their own local defensive militias. The nine Commando battalions will be grouped under two Commando Brigades, probably only for administrative purposes. The Special Forces will have four battalions under a Special Forces Brigade HQ, with each battalion having 18 'A' Teams, making a total of 72 'A' Teams for the whole country by 2014. As a tasking, organization, and deployment strategy this makes eminent sense. The question is, can such an organization be actually made to work?

What the above does not indicate is whether the meagre quantum of fire support and tank support will be sufficient after the Americans scale down and eventually leave. Can the various operational Corps in their respective AOR, particularly those in eastern and southern Afghanistan, withstand air and armoured assault from any un-envisaged Taliban air force and Taliban armoured troops led by tanks? The Combat Support Battalions in each brigade under the deployed Corps currently have only a maximum of three D-30 122 mm howitzers each. The level of integral armour available to the 111st Division protecting Kabul is only one battalion of T-62 tanks and one mechanised infantry battalion with M-113 APCs and some BMP-1s. Will this be adequate? How much fire support from artillery assets will be available for Corps in particularly vulnerable AOR, and how much close air support (CAS) can be expected from US air assets in-country and afloat in the Persian Gulf? The ANA Version.2 had an Air Force with MiG-21 fighter aircraft and some amount of CAS training – the new Afghan forces have no combat air element, neither fixed wing nor attack helicopters with anti-tank missiles.

Finally, and most worryingly, can an ANA of near-illiterates (the rank-&-file has 86 percent illiteracy), of various often antagonistic ethnic groups be turned into a cohesive modern army after a mere 15 weeks of recruit training? This is about one-half or less of the time the Pakistan Army takes to turn an educated young recruit, from the same or similar human communities, into a disciplined professional soldier in an army based on the ethnicity-based regimental system.

The other big question is: Will the new ANA be able to withstand any determined offensive from the east? The very-professional Pakistan Army and the Pakistan Government have a strong geo-political incentive for capturing and controlling Kabul – will the new ANA be able to physically prevent this?

The answers to both the two big questions depend entirely upon the organizational structure, the military ethos created, and the training imparted to the new American-created Afghan National Army.

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[1] The largest of their three armies created in India, the other two being the Madras Army and the Bombay Army. All three were merged after 1857 when the British Crown directly took over the further conquest and administration of India.

[2] As per the US withdrawal plan announced by President Obama on 21 June 2011.

[3] The two previous modern Afghan Armies were Version.1 during the reign of King Zahir Shah and later Mohammed Daoud Khan, and Version.2 the Soviet-style, Soviet-funded one from before and during the Soviet occupation, from about 1977 to the mid-1980's.

[4] As stated to this author by a former serving US Army Defence Attache at the American Embassy in New Delhi.

[5] A dialect of Farsi, (or Persian, the language of Iran).

[6] Of the 'Green Beret' type, as opposed to commando units of the Indian and other armies.

[7] In March 2011.

About the Author

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The author was in the Indian Army from 1968 to 1991, and was an officer of the infantry. During his service he has helped train Afghan Army officers of an earlier Afghan Army in two different military disciplines, viz., weapons skills on infantry crew-served weapons, and operational staff-work at brigade level and above.

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