

Were the Afghan National Security Forces Successful in 2013?

Jonathan Schroden • Patricio Asfura-Heim • Catherine Norman • Jerry Meyerle



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The Strategic Studies Division is led by Dr. Eric V. Thompson, who is available at 703-824-2243 or thompson@cna.org. The executive assistant to the director is Ms. Rebecca Edelston, at 703-824-2604 or edelstonr@cna.org.

Cover photo: Afghan National Army soldiers with the 2nd Commando Kandak and a member of the Afghan Border Police, right, pose for a photo during a key leader engagement with village elders in the Khas Kunar district, Kunar province, Afghanistan, Jan. 19, 2012. (U.S. Army photo/Spc. Amber Leach)

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Eric V. Thompson, Ph.D.
Vice President and Director
CNA Strategic Studies

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Introduction

With all of the recent developments pertaining to a possible bilateral security agreement (BSA) regarding future troop presence and military cooperation between the United States and Afghanistan, another important aspect of the future of Afghanistan has gotten much less attention. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) just finished their first year of being fully in the lead for providing security in Afghanistan, with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in support. With 2013 behind us, it is time to take stock of how the ANSF performed.

CNA's Center for Stability and Development recently sent a team to Afghanistan to assess the ANSF, in support of a congressionally mandated study to determine the future requirements for the ANSF's size, structure, capabilities, and posture. We observed the ANSF first-hand and conducted hundreds of interviews of Afghan, ISAF, and U.S. officials at all levels, from national to tactical, in all of Afghanistan's regions. We came to eight major conclusions regarding the performance and capabilities of the ANSF in 2013. These empirical, independent observations, when taken together, show that the ANSF were generally successful in 2013 and performed better than most people realize.



An Afghan soldier presents the Afghan flag during a security transition ceremony on Camp Sayar in Farah City, Afghanistan, December 12, 2012 (U.S. Navy photo/Lt. j.g. Matthew Stroup).

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Observations

The Afghan National Army is tactically sound and willing to fight, but it cannot support itself

Over the course of last year, the Afghan army showed that it can fight well and win firefights on the battlefield. Insurgents tested the army in direct combat but increasingly shifted tactics from direct to indirect attacks (e.g., improvised explosive devices, or IEDs) because they could not tactically overmatch Afghanistan's soldiers. The army spent the bulk of its time standing at checkpoints and conducting local patrols, but it also showed some, albeit limited, ability to plan and coordinate sophisticated operations. As an example, in Operation Semorgh in Logar province (July/August 2013), the army cleared rural areas that served as insurgent staging grounds for attacks into Kabul. The operation involved forces from several Afghan army corps, Afghan special operations forces (SOF), and the Afghan Air Force (which flew resupply missions with its Mi-17 helicopters)—making it the largest Afghan joint operation in 30 years. It was planned, coordinated, and executed by Afghans, with minimal ISAF support, and was generally viewed as having successfully accomplished its operational objectives.



Afghan National Army soldiers leave a helicopter for a patrol through the Musayi Valley July 9, 2013. For the first time, the Afghan National Security Forces helicopters flew the ANA soldiers in an operational mission (ISAF photo/photographer unknown).

But for all its tactical (and occasional operational) successes, the Afghan army continues to struggle with a number of critical functions. These include intelligence support to operations; logistics; maintenance; communications and coordination; fire and air support; counter-IED; medical and casualty evacuation; and operations above the battalion level. Of these, logistics and maintenance are especially problematic, as evidenced by the ANSF's difficulties with vehicle readiness. The primary vehicle for the army (and the police) is a Ford Ranger pickup truck. That may seem a simple enough vehicle to maintain, but even basic maintenance, such as checking fluid levels and putting the right fluids in the right places, can be difficult for largely illiterate soldiers. The Afghan army is often short of trained mechanics, in part because they can make more money in the private sector. It is also often short of spare parts. Hoarding at the regional supply depots and elsewhere in the supply chain is an issue, as is the inability of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to anticipate and plan for shortages. Additionally, spare parts for Ford trucks are seldom available in local markets, since Afghans drive mostly Toyota trucks. This past fighting season, ISAF helped mitigate these issues by using temporary fixes such as mobile maintenance teams; however, these are systemic issues that require sustained attention.

The Afghan National Army is not showing signs of fracture, loss of cohesion, or widespread desertion

Going into this fighting season, it was clear that the ANSF would be doing much more of the fighting (and suffering more casualties) than in the past, and would have significantly less support from ISAF. There was concern that this might lead to unit fracture, loss of cohesion, or widespread desertion within the army. At the end of the fighting season, it is safe to say that the army held together despite these pressures. On the negative side, many Afghan soldiers were killed or wounded last year, and the Afghan army's overall attrition rate was on the order of 3% per month, or 30% for the year—quite high, at least by Western standards. Our interviews made clear that the withdrawal of ISAF medical and casualty evacuation resources, along with shortfalls in the army's ability to quickly process human remains, had an adverse impact on soldiers' morale as the fighting season wore on. But, on the positive side, our interviewees, many of whom were Afghans, generally felt that army casualties had not yet

reached unsustainable levels. Also, soldier recruiting remained robust and the army continues to be very popular with Afghans.



Afghan National Army soldiers march by military leaders and guests of honor during a graduation ceremony at Camp Shorabak in Helmand province, Afghanistan, April 25, 2013 (U.S. Marine Corps photo/Sgt Tammy Himeline).

The Afghan National Police is still largely a paramilitary force, though not a particularly professional one

Despite the publication of a 10-year vision by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) that aims to move the Afghan police force to a civilian law enforcement model, the police ended this fighting season largely stuck in the role of a paramilitary force. Contrary to civilian law enforcement standards, Afghan police do not patrol beats, make arrests, and build case files in support of the rule of law. Rather, a large percentage of them stand at checkpoints designed to disrupt insurgents' freedom of movement and action. Our interviews suggested that 10,000 to 20,000 members of the active-duty uniformed police have yet to be trained, and this contributes to a general view of the police as an unprofessional and corrupt institution. Like many countries' police forces, Afghanistan's police are also subject to local politics and national political interference. This is exemplified by the high turnover rates of district chiefs of police, who are appointed directly by the president of Afghanistan (and are often financially beholden to him or other political actors in return). Afghan police are also largely out-gunned by insurgents; they suffered high numbers of casualties last year. It is thus not surprising that some of our interviewees in the MoI suggested that the police needed heavier weapons—but

these requests underscore how far from a civilian law enforcement model the Afghan police force remains.



Afghan National Police members listen to Lt. Gen. Mohammad Ayub Salangi, Kabul City Police Commander, during his 21-minute address to them prior to a ribbon-cutting ceremony (U.S. Army photo/Jon Connor).

The lines between the various components of the ANSF are significantly blurred

The Afghan constitution assigns distinct roles to the country's army and police. In their day-to-day operations, however, there is significant overlap between their actual roles and responsibilities. Activities such as standing at checkpoints, conducting patrols, and providing fixed-site security are conducted by the army, uniform police, border police, national police, and local police—sometimes jointly. The actual division of labor between these entities is frequently determined locally and is not necessarily consistent. While the security ministries have made some efforts to clarify the intended roles and responsibilities of Afghanistan's various security forces in accordance with the constitution, their visions of an army focused on defending the nation from external conventional threats and a police force supporting the rule of law remain stark departures from the reality on the ground.

Coordination and leadership are directly related to ANSF success or failure

Our observations this past fighting season suggest that the ANSF tend to be successful when their components coordinate and when they have competent, dedicated leaders. A positive example is Operation Semorgh, which was well coordinated across multiple components of the ANSF and generally well led. In this case, the ANSF were largely successful in accomplishing their operational objectives. Negative examples include operations that took place in Warduj district in northern Afghanistan, Sherzad district in eastern Afghanistan, and Laghman province. In these examples, there was evidence that grievances between ANSF commanders led to a lack of operational support to units engaged in combat; that hasty, unilateral operations resulted in the ambush of Afghan forces, followed by ambushes of quick-response forces; and that ANSF leaders made operationally and tactically unsound decisions that unnecessarily put their forces at risk.

Our observations of the ANSF's operations last year suggest that when components of the ANSF act unilaterally, their operations tend to flounder. Where ANSF leaders are incompetent, corrupt, unmotivated, or unwilling to support other leaders due to ethnic, tribal, or personal grievances, operations tend to fail. While ISAF advisors can, and do, try to mitigate these circumstances when they arise, good leadership and proper coordination remain highly dependent on the personalities and personal relationships of ANSF leaders and have not yet been institutionalized across the force.



Afghan Uniformed Police, Afghan National Army, and Afghan Border Police members share a moment at the Joint Sustainment Academy Southwest compound on Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan (U.S. Marine Corps photo/Sgt. Mallory VanderSchans).

The Afghan Air Force is just getting its wings

The air force remains a nascent institution with very limited capacity to support ground force operations. It showed promise last year in specific operations—for example, the resupply missions it flew as part of Operation Semorgh. It also demonstrated a small, but important, capability to support permissive movement of casualties (e.g., from rural airfields to larger ones near city hospitals) and to support airborne raids conducted by Afghan SOF. That said, it has very little ability to conduct close air support—a capability in high demand by ANSF ground forces. It has a small number of airframes, many of which were provided second-hand by other countries after years of use. Some of these aircraft are now nearing the end of their service lives and will have to be retired. The air force relies heavily on contract support for maintenance of its aircraft, and it has a difficult time finding qualified recruits for new pilots and maintenance crews. It flew more hours than it could sustain this fighting season, causing degradations in maintenance and training cycles and eventually leading ISAF to implement a rolling maintenance stand-down of its Mi-17 helicopters. And while the air force's capacity is slated to increase substantially with the scheduled delivery of more aircraft over the next two years, recent laws passed in the United States call into question whether the most useful of these aircraft—the Mi-17s—will even be delivered. In short, the air force is just getting off the ground, but its future remains in question.



An Afghan Air Force Mi-17 helicopter crew waits for the go-ahead to launch on the early morning hours of July 23, 2013, on the first day of Operation Semorgh at Jalalabad Airfield, Afghanistan (U.S. Air Force Photo/Master Sgt. Ben Bloker).

Afghan SOF and special police units are tactically capable but remain heavily reliant on U.S. and ISAF intelligence, air, and logistical support

Afghan SOF and special police units effectively conducted numerous raids and other high-level special missions last year, often without U.S. and ISAF SOF partners on the ground. But they have very limited ability to analyze intelligence data, which is critical to planning missions and generating target packages. Afghan SOF intelligence battalions are just now being built, and coordination with the National Directorate of Security (Afghanistan's FBI/CIA equivalent) remains nascent. Additionally, while Afghan human intelligence sources are often sufficient to enable SOF or special police raids, reliance on sole-source intelligence is generally not a best practice and can result in deleterious second-order effects (e.g., civilian casualties). Afghan SOF and special police also often look to U.S. and ISAF SOF for logistical support, due both to shortfalls in MoD and MoI procurement and resupply processes and to the specialized nature of their gear, which is not common to or well supported by Afghanistan's conventional army and police. Finally, SOF and special police raids are often conducted against fleeting targets that require swift and covert action, which can only be effectively provided by air mobility. The very limited capacity of the Afghan Air Force means that Afghan SOF and special police remain heavily reliant on U.S. and ISAF air assets for mobility—a dependency that is unlikely to change in the near future.



An Afghan National Army commando dismounts a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter during a mission in Chawkai district, Kunar province, Afghanistan (DoD photo/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Clayton Weis).

The security ministries are very much a work in progress

If the ANSF in the field are to conduct effective sustained operations, they must have oversight and support from effective security ministries. Before 2013, the MoD and MoI operated as national-level army and police headquarters rather than traditional government ministries. Although ISAF increased its focus on ministerial development last year, neither ministry has fully transitioned to civilian-run bureaucracies focused on national and strategic support to the fielded force. To date, neither ministry has been able to fully execute an annual budget. Both ministries struggle with planning, programming, and budgeting for future requirements, and have limited capacity to let and oversee contracts—especially when weighed against the large contracting requirements for maintenance and sustainment of the ANSF. The security ministries are still largely staffed by uniformed, versus civilian, personnel and they continue to suffer from corruption and nepotism. The MoI also continues to have high turnover rates at senior levels. In short, while the security ministries made some progress last year in transitioning to the roles they should play, they are not yet capable of independently providing the support that the ANSF require in order to be successful at operational and strategic levels.



Construction site of the Ministry of Defense in Afghanistan (NATO Training Mission Afghanistan photo/photographer unknown).

Conclusion

So were the ANSF successful in 2013, their first full fighting season in the lead? Based on our observations and interviews in theater, we conclude that the answer is yes. It is true the ANSF had some notable failures, suffered significant numbers of casualties, remained reliant on U.S. and ISAF support in a number of areas, and continued to have a nascent support structure. Yet insurgents were unable to seize and hold large swaths of terrain; they were unable to take and hold district centers or other notable political targets; they were limited in their ability to influence major population centers (occasional high-profile attacks notwithstanding); and they remain generally unpopular among the Afghan populace. While the ANSF may not have reached all of their goals this fighting season, they held against the insurgency and prevented insurgents from accomplishing *their* goals. Some would call this a stalemate—and by some definitions it is. But holding their own against the insurgency for an entire fighting season is an important step for the ANSF and for the country as a whole. That they were able to do so with decreasing support from the United States and ISAF implies a positive trajectory to their development even in the midst of strategic stasis. Perhaps more important, the ANSF's performance last year inspired confidence within their leadership and among Afghans as to their ability to stand and hold against the insurgency.

For a force that is very much still in its infancy, the ANSF's performance last year—judged on its own merits—should be considered a success. The ANSF still need to improve in almost every way, but they ended 2013 still fighting, holding, improving, and gaining confidence in their abilities. While political developments such as the bilateral security agreement, peace talks with the Taliban, and Afghanistan's upcoming presidential election portend significant uncertainty for the country's future, the ANSF's performance last year should provide a measure of reassurance that a positive future remains possible for Afghanistan.

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Acronyms

ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
BSA	Bilateral Security Agreement
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
SOF	Special Operations Forces

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