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Taliban eat into Afghanistan's core

By Hamza Ameer and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud
2/4/2012

ISLAMABAD - As the United States steps up efforts to engage the Taliban and al-Qaeda in a peace process for Afghanistan, elements of the Taliban have initiated their own plan focusing on regaining the power they lost in 2001 following the US-led invasion.

This involves hijacking the efforts and finances that the US is investing in training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP).

Well-placed sources in the Taliban who are based in the Pakistan tribal region on the border with Afghanistan have told Asia Times Online on the condition of anonymity that massive numbers from both the ANA and the ANP will switch and join the Taliban on the eve of the scheduled withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

The US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) set a deadline for all security tasks to be transferred to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. However, this week, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said that US troops would phase out their combat role by mid-2013.

NATO plans to expand the size of Afghanistan's security forces from the current 310,000 to 350,000 soldiers and police while Washington currently has about 90,000 troops in Afghanistan, down from a high of just over 100,000 last summer. It plans to withdraw another 22,000 by the end of this summer. In all, the International Security Assistance Force numbers 130,000 with troops from 50 nations.

"As many as 32 policemen of the puppet Afghan army have already switched sides and joined the mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate in Wardaj, Badakhshan province [in the northeast of Afghanistan], handing their weapons over to the mujahideen and vowing to fight against the invading forces and their minions," a Taliban member told Asia Times Online.

The Taliban source claimed that leading commanders of both the ANA and the ANP had contacted Taliban leaders through tribal liaisons in southeastern, southwestern and northern Afghanistan and requested to join the Taliban unreservedly once the peace talks bore fruit and paved the way for the draw-down of foreign troops.

Those peace talks are already a source of controversy. This week, the Afghan Taliban denied planning to hold preliminary talks with representatives from the Afghan government in Saudi Arabia. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said this was "not true".

The talks would be separate from planned negotiations between the Taliban and the US in Qatar, where the Taliban aim to establish an office.

A top Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistan Taliban) commander, Mullah Nazeer Ahmad, independently confirmed the Taliban claims of planned defections from the ANA and the ANP. His militants hold sway in the South Waziristan tribal area and across the border in Afghanistan's Paktika, Zabul, Ghazni and Kandahar provinces.

The sources refused to reveal the names or positions of the ANA and ANP commanders who had expressed a willingness to defect due to security reasons and the likelihood of retribution against them from the authorities.

The sources said that they would join the Taliban with their arms caches. In light of this, the Taliban would stop attacking them as a sign of goodwill and focus on foreign troops.

After the end of the Taliban rule in late 2001, the new Afghan National Army was formed by NATO states. Billions of dollars worth of military equipment, facilities and other forms of aid has been provided to the ANA. Some of the weapons arrived from the US, including Humvees and other trucks, M-16 assault rifles, body armored jackets and other types of vehicles and military equipment. The support also included the building of a national military command center and training compounds in different parts of the country.

There were more than 4,000 American military trainers in late 2009 and additional numbers from other NATO member states, providing advanced warfare training to the Afghan armed forces and police.

The ANA is divided into six regional corps, with about 180,000 active troops as of December 2011, although others claim only 100,000 troops are active.

The current Afghan National Police was also established after the removal of the Taliban. It receives funding, training and equipment from NATO states. Various local and federal

government employees from the US, Germany's Bundespolizei and the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defense Police provided most of the training.

The ANP - which serves as a single law enforcement agency across the country - had about 126,000 active members in May 2011, a number that is expected to reach 160,000 by 2014.

The reputation of the ANA and the ANP has already been tarnished by their members attacking the foreign soldiers training them. In the latest incident this week, a man in an ANA uniform killed a NATO service member in southern Afghanistan.

In January, an Afghan soldier killed four French troops, and as a result French President Nicolas Sarkozy suspended all training operations and combat help. In December, another Afghan soldier killed two French soldiers serving in an engineers' regiment.

"The French army is not in Afghanistan to be shot at by Afghan soldiers," Sarkozy said after the January shooting, according to CNN.

France has 36,000 troops in Afghanistan, the second-largest number after the US. They mainly patrol rugged Kapisa province in central Afghanistan north of Kabul.

French forces were due to start handing over security to the ANA in March 2012 until their complete withdrawal by 2013.

A NATO analysis last year found that 52 US and allied soldiers had been killed in "green on blue" attacks between 2005 and June of 2011.