



# THE EVOLUTION OF THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY FROM 2001 TO THE PRESENT

*Lieutenant-colonel Traian MAGHERCĂ\**

The conflict begun in Afghanistan in October 2001 has not ended, and the current context of negotiating a peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban group does not guarantee the cessation of hostilities in this hot-zone of the world. This aspect coupled with the statements of the U.S. President regarding the withdrawal of the US Armed Forces from Afghanistan entitles us to state that a vital role in the evolution of the security environment in the Afghan space is played by the security institutions of this state, in particular the army and the police. The army, in fact the entire state apparatus, is going through a long process of reformation. The process of transformation of this institution has been very difficult, and the challenges and obstacles that have arisen over time have determined the slowing down of the optimistic pace triggered by the plans of reform and development of the Afghan national army.

**Keywords:** security environment; Afghan National Army; reform; Taliban; international coalition; Afghanistan.

## Introduction

After the defeat of the Taliban regime, in the fall of 2001, the Afghan interim government assumed the task of reforming all institutions in order to build a rule of law in which respect for the laws would be the basic principle. Within this broad movement, security institutions play a vital role as threats from terrorist groups, operating on the territory of this state, have manifested, themselves permanently, in the most violent forms. The Afghan authorities have been supported during this process of transformation by leading nations that contributed by means of financial resources, materials and specialized advisers in the assumed fields. Thus, the U.S. pledged to support the reform of the army, Germany took over the responsibility of coordinating the police transformation process, the U.K. assumed the role of nation leader in counter-narcotics, Italy undertook to advise the Afghan government in the reconstruction of justice, and Japan was involved in the disarmament process, the cessation of arms, trafficking and the reintegration of insurgent group members back into society.

The army reform was and still is a process that has undergone numerous changes of strategy based

on the effects and consequences of the measures applied by the Afghan authorities as a result of the recommendations and suggestions received from international partners. In the following paragraphs, we intend to make a brief analysis of the reform process and identify the issues that have prevented the development of this sector at the estimated pace at the start of the actions.

## **The actions of the international coalition to trigger the process of reforming the Afghan national army**

The initial proposal by the Afghan government authorities was to set up a large army to be led by those involved in defeating the Taliban and removing the latter from power. Subsequently, according to the Afghan Defense Minister's plan, the number of troops was to be reduced to about 60,000 soldiers to form a supple army capable of annihilating possible actions triggered by the military forces of the neighboring state, Pakistan, considered, at that time, the main external threat. As it can be seen, terrorist organizations, in particular Al Qaeda and the Taliban, were moved to the background as an opportunity to threaten the activities of government authorities, but history has shown that this was the first mistake in the strategy proposed by the Afghan interim government.

On the other hand, the U.S., as a leading nation for the reform of the army, proposed the establishment of a small security force that would take over from the international forces the responsibility of ensuring a stable security

*\* 30<sup>th</sup> Guard Brigade „Mihai Viteazul” member of multinational coalition's missions in Afghanistan in 2008, 2011, 2017  
e-mail:traianmagherca@yahoo.com*

environment in the shortest time. The intention of the American side was to consume as little time, resources and energy as possible until the new army was operationalized and to leave the Afghan space within a maximum of three years. In the U.S. view, the main threat to the realization of this strategy was represented by the struggle between the internal factions that had emerged after the fall of the Taliban regime and which wanted to occupy as many leadership positions as possible within the established institutions. After a more in-depth analysis, U.S. experts reviewed the initial plan and proposed the establishment of an army corps deployable in any part of the country, capable of resolving domestic conflicts. This armed force was to implement security measures during the presidential elections scheduled for 2004.

As time went by and a further analysis of the situation in Afghanistan was developed, U.S. representatives realized that the initial estimate was unrealistic and that the proposed deadlines were not feasible. The first disadvantages were that at that time, at the level of the U.S. Department of Defense, there was no doctrine applicable to the situation in the Afghan space, just as there was no specialized structure at the level of the U.S. military to manage a reform and development process of foreign security forces.

The first major measure imposed by the U.S. advisers to the Afghan authorities had to do with the appointment of a civilian as Defence Minister. This decision was very hard to accept by the Afghan side familiar with the Soviet model, and the compromise solution was to appoint a leader of a local military group who renounced his military status.

The actual training of the Afghan Armed Forces began in the spring of 2002 and it was implemented by members of the U.S. special operations forces structures. At the same time, other nations contributing personnel to the multinational force deployed to Afghanistan expressed their willingness to support the army's development effort. Thus, the United Kingdom and France have assumed responsibility for the military education field, more precisely, they have set up institutions to train the corps of non-commissioned officers and officers. Turkey joined U.S. efforts to train professional military recruits from the civilian population<sup>1</sup>. Given that Afghanistan is characterized by the

presence of several ethnic groups (Pashtu, Tadjik, Hazara, Uzbek, etc.), and the relations among them are a very sensitive topic, the international coalition decided to adopt the principle of proportionality on an ethnic basis when recruiting staff for all categories of military.

The equipment of Soviet origin from the Afghan army provided the first major obstacle in the training process, and the solution to this problem was the co-operation of instructors and advisers from countries that had the same types of equipment: Romania, Bulgaria and Mongolia<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the leading nation in the process of reforming the armed forces, the U.S., realized that the members of the special operations forces are not the best fit for a mission of advising and training regular forces and decided to displace a brigade from a mountain division<sup>3</sup>. The main task of this unit was to focus its efforts on the tactical level structures, from the level of the Army Corps down, the strategic level being allocated to a specialized civilian structure from the USA. The brigade-level structure was relocated to the theater of operations in Iraq with the outbreak of conflict in this country and replaced with members of the National Guard.

The deficient U.S. approach combined with other unforeseen factors (lack of infrastructure and military equipment, low recruitment base, high level of illiteracy, lack of a communication network and lack of a banking network to support the payment of wages) led to huge consumption of energy, time and financial resources. Therefore, the yield of the actions of the members of the international coalition was very low, and the progress in the process of transformation and development of the army was almost non-significant. Other negative aspects from the Afghan authorities were added to these failures. The Defence Minister made appointments in the key positions based on loyalty to the party which he was a part of, thus managing to almost completely manipulate the process of reforming the military institution. All this was added the emergence of the corruption phenomenon at the level of the leaders who managed the financial resources according to personal interests.

The established Army Corps was forced to act in the battlefield earlier than the deadline for achieving full operational capability due to the fact that meanwhile, insurgent groups in this area of the

world, of which Al Qaeda and the Taliban were the most important, began to carry out violent armed actions on the military facilities and personnel who were part of the security structures. At the same time, terrorist attacks had begun to be carried out throughout Afghanistan trying to prove to the public the inefficiency of public authorities in their efforts to reform the state. These actions were planned and conducted from the training camps set up in safe havens located on the territory of neighboring Pakistan, along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

At the level of the international coalition that acted under the aegis of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), it was decided to establish four other army corps located throughout the territory. This measure was adopted following the conclusions of the reports prepared by the international experts according to whom the mobility level of the large unit initially set up was very low due to the lack of means of transport and roads.

In the context of a poor evolution of the process of transformation and development of the armed forces and of the deterioration of the security environment increasingly marked by the actions of the insurgent groups, the U.S. changed the strategy of support and assistance of the Afghan governmental authorities and adopted the principle of conditionality in regarding the fulfillment of the main stages of the reform plan. Thus, the important phases were considered completed when several conditions considered decisive were completed. However, a deadline was set for the complete withdrawal of international forces and the surrender of responsibility to the Afghan government no later than 2012. The evolution of the situation showed that this term was totally unrealistic, and the reform of the Afghan army was not completed at this date either.

The failures of the government authorities were due to system weaknesses and the development of corruption. Because of this, the confidence level of the population in the state institutions began to decline. Moreover, the inability of the security forces to annihilate the actions of the insurgent groups increased the influence of the leaders of these organizations on the territories especially in the rural areas. Under these conditions, the Afghan Minister of Defence proposed to increase the army's staff, and the coalition partners involved in

the development of the armed forces set up regional training centers to train the recruited personnel.

In 2007, the necessity of establishing air forces and equipping them with transport aircraft was discussed. Even though the Afghan authorities called for the establishment of air combat structures, the leading nation had drawn up a plan for the development of air transport units which were joined by several states that had been committed to providing aircraft and helicopters. During the same period, the first battalion of special operations forces was operationally certified. The members of this unit, selected from the best trained military, were the beneficiaries of special training programs, and the efficiency demonstrated in the battlefield determined the members of the coalition to establish several similar structures.

In parallel with the structural development of the Afghan security forces, the process of advising, training and evaluating them by the military belonging to the international coalition nations was carried out. A major impediment to these efforts was the fact that the training of advisers for the mission did not cover all the aspects required to perform such a function, especially in a demanding environment such as Afghanistan. They acted in programs developed by the U.S., Embedded Training Team (ETT), on the one hand, and NATO, Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT), on the other. The members of these teams also had the task of evaluating the progress of the armed structures at the tactical level, participating with them in the operations carried out against the insurgent groups<sup>4</sup>.

Providing essential equipment was a major challenge for the international community. The first measure in this area was the donation of technical means, communications, weapons, ammunition, uniforms by the participating nations in the conflict, but this practice led to problems related to technical compatibility. Moreover, the donated materials were very old, and the poor endowment level affected the morale of the troops, which led to mass desertions by Afghan soldiers and their enrollment among insurgent groups. Following the reporting of these issues, the U.S. decided to purchase and equip the Afghan army with new Western equipment. This decision led to other obstacles created by the lack of specialists in the fields of logistics, and their preparation was another

major challenge for the coalition. Their theoretical gluing involved consulting the instructions for using the equipment, but the lack of knowledge of the English language and the low level of education of the Afghan population were real obstacles in the development of the logistics field, as stated by an officer participating in this process in an interview with a U.S. military publication<sup>5</sup>.

## **2. The transformation and development of the Afghan national army in the context of changing the strategy of the leading nation**

The takeover of the ISAF mission command by U.S. General Stanley McChrystal in 2009 involved a change of strategy in the theater of operations in Afghanistan. The new ISAF commander proposed a significant increase in the number of international coalition and Afghan security forces that would allow a counterinsurgency campaign, take over control of all areas, complete the operationalization of the army and gradually surrender to the armed forces the responsibility of ensuring a stable environment. This proposal was agreed by all participants at the 2010 NATO Lisbon conference.

The increase in the number of personnel also occurred among the international military advisers, and the effect of this increase was to be seen in the acceleration of the process of transformation and development of the armed forces. Based on the new approach, more funds were allocated for the acquisition of communications assets, functions were set up for advising the ministerial level in the fields of human resources, financially, logistically and with international experts, but the expected results were not due to the reluctance, the lack of concern and the delayed reaction manifested by the authorities. Another effect of the new strategy was the rapid increase of the number of military recruits, but the pace of employment far exceeded the rate of the position of instructors assumed by the international community. Under these conditions, the need to prioritize the support and assistance of the armed structures appeared, a phenomenon that led to the concentration of the counseling effort on certain units that had progressed to the detriment of others who had stagnated or regressed.

A report issued by the U.S. Department of Defense in 2013<sup>6</sup> emphasized that if in 2008 the number of military personnel in the Afghan army

was below 80,000, in 2013 their number had reached 185,000 with possibilities of growth. If from a quantitative point of view the situation was presented at a satisfactory level, from a qualitative point of view, the level was very low, especially in the areas in which developed computer systems were used. During this period, the number of joint operations carried out by the international coalition members and members of the local security forces greatly increased, but with the remarkable results obtained in the counterinsurgency fight, a dependence was created on the support provided by the international coalition, especially in the field of air support. This has led to the neglect by the Afghan authorities of air force development programs, especially since during this period the issue of budgeting of military-specific actions from the Afghan government fund was discussed. Joint military actions carried out throughout Afghanistan had the effect of taking over the doctrines, techniques and procedures used by members of the international coalition and implementing them by Afghan security forces.

In 2011-2014 the special operations forces developed at a very alert rate and gave a special performance in the counterinsurgency fight. Unfortunately, after the complete transfer of responsibility to the Afghan authorities, many dignitaries, politicians with influence in the state apparatus misunderstood the purpose of creating these structures and set them as tasks of guarding institutions or, more importantly, personal property.

A permanent obstacle in the effort to advise the leaders of the Afghan structures was the beliefs and skills of Soviet sources acquired during their formation in the military educational institutions of the former Soviet Union. In order to change the mentality and the easier understanding of the Western methods, some of the young officers were sent to leadership courses in the West. Afterwards, following the proposals of the international advisers, they were promoted on functions in which to exploit the accumulated knowledge and skills.

The ongoing discussions and advisory actions prompted Afghan army leaders to focus in a very serious manner on the development of the air forces that had come under the direct command of the General Staff. The U.S. involvement in this area consisted of providing transportation

aircraft and financing a program through which Afghan pilots received training and courses in U.S. military educational institutions. As in the case of special operations forces, Afghan leaders used air transport for their personal purposes, issues that were uncomfortable in the coalition-Afghan military relationship. With the passing of time, through sustained efforts of international advisers and trainers, the air force succeeded in reaching the proposed level: performing the air missions independently, under the full command and control of the Afghan authorities with security responsibilities.

The beginning of 2015 was the moment when the main objective of the coalition was achieved - the transfer of responsibilities in the field of ensuring the security environment, in full, to the Afghan armed forces. Under these conditions, the number of countries participating in the Afghanistan conflict was substantially reduced, and the sole task of the coalition, under the aegis of the Resolute Support mission became to train, advise and assist security structures until they are able to carry out actions of planning, organization, execution and objective evaluation in all areas: human resources management, intelligence, operations, logistics, communications, training, financial, medical etc. At this moment, the mission of the international coalition is exercised on three levels. In the first case, we refer to the counseling of the personnel who fit structures at tactical level (from army corps level down), activity that is carried out daily with the purpose of assessing the implementation of the measures established in the joint agreements concluded between the representatives of the international community and the leaders of Afghan security institutions. The second type of counseling that is performed with a lower frequency is aimed at the personnel who hold key functions at the level of the Defense Ministry and the General Staff. The last type of counseling has an expeditionary character and is carried out at the express request of structures located in any area of the country. The duration of this action is approximately two weeks and is aimed at all fields of activity.

The initial operations plan of the Resolute Support mission stated that by the end of 2016, all international armed forces would leave Afghanistan. The evolution of the events, however, forced the coalition to review the plan and extend the terms

initially proposed. The causes of non-fulfillment of the obligations assumed by the Afghan side are related to the poor leadership, the misuse of funds, the extension of the corruption, the lack of transparency, the alarming increase of the number of fratricide events, superficiality in organizing counterinsurgency operations. Under these circumstances, the coalition leaders were forced to extend their presence in the theater of operations in order not to hinder all the efforts made by the international community over the last eighteen years in the process of reconstruction of the rule of law in Afghanistan, of reform and development of the institutions that govern this state of Central Asia.

### **Conclusions**

The process of reforming the Afghan national army has been going on for a very long time, and at this time the international community is not optimistic about the term of completion of this process. An objective analysis of the actions and measures adopted over time reveals a number of issues that have made it difficult to carry out the activities according to the plans. We can say that there were many mistakes made by the international coalition, and assuming them stands as identified lessons that could improve the development of a similar potential in the future. My participation, as a staff officer in the multinational headquarters of the Resolute Support mission, in 2017, gave me the opportunity to come into direct contact with this process of reforming the Afghan security forces. There are two key elements, essential from my point of view, which could have accelerated and improved the development of the steps in this area: the deeper knowledge of the culture, traditions, customs, level of education, political, ethnic and religious situation, of the behavior of the population by the international advisors, which would probably have involved other working methods or a gradual imposition of Western methods and procedures and the early establishment of specialized structures for counseling and training among the international armed forces participating in the conflict. Only in 2017, following the lessons learned, did the U.S. set up Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB), which began to be rotated in the theater of operations in Afghanistan starting 2018.

At the beginning of 2017, at the level of the

Afghan presidential administration, a multiannual strategy was launched. It regarded the evolution of security institutions, which stated that the reform of the Afghan national defense security forces in the shortest time is the essence of the entire process of reforming and developing the state. The analysis of the degree of implementation of the measures established by the new strategy leads us to state that, unfortunately, not even this time can we be optimistic regarding the compliance of the terms related to the completion of the reform of the Afghan security structures and this situation, most likely, will extend the presence of the international community on the territory of the Afghan state.

#### NOTES:

1 Gl.lt. Karl Eikenberry, in the interview given to Lisa Beckenbaugh November 27 2006, published in *Eyewitness to War, vol. III, US Army advisors in Afghanistan - oral histories series*, 2010, pp. 19, 46, downloaded from [https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/EyewitnessToWar\\_Volume III\\_Brooks.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/EyewitnessToWar_Volume III_Brooks.pdf) on April 6 2019

2 *Ibidem*, p.19

3 Col. (U.S.A.) Mark Milley, in the interview given to Lynne Chandler Garcia June 6 2007, published in *Eyewitness to War, vol. III, US Army advisors in Afghanistan, - oral histories series*, 2010, p. 98, downloaded from [https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/EyewitnessToWar\\_Volume III\\_Brooks.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/EyewitnessToWar_Volume III_Brooks.pdf) on April 6 2019

4 Donald Rumsfeld, General McCaffrey's Report on Afghanistan, "Memorandum to General Pete Pace", Rumsfeld Papers, 15 iunie 2006, p. 6, <http://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/2215/2006-06-14%20to%20Gen%20Pete%20Pace%20re%20General%20McCaffreys%20Report%20on%20Afghanistan-%20Memo%20Attachment.pdf>, accesat la 18.05.2019.

5 John Schroeder interviewed by John McCool in

*Eyewitness to war* in February 16 2007, p. 117, accessed at [https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/EyewitnessToWar\\_Volume III\\_Brooks.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/EyewitnessToWar_Volume III_Brooks.pdf) on May 18 2019

6 DOD, *Report on progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan*, November 2013, p. 45, downloaded from [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October\\_1230\\_Report\\_Master\\_Nov7.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf) on May 22 2019

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Donald Rumsfeld, „*General McCaffrey's Report on Afghanistan*”, Memorandum to General Pete Pace, Rumsfeld Papers, June 15 2006, <http://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/2215/2006-06-14%20to%20Gen%20Pete%20Pace%20re%20General%20McCaffreys%20Report%20on%20Afghanistan-%20Memo%20Attachment.pdf> accessed on May 18 2019

\*\*\**Eyewitness to war*, February 16, 2007

\*\*\**Eyewitness to War*, vol. III, *US Army advisors in Afghanistan - oral histories series*, 2010

\*\*\*Department of Defense, *Report on progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan*, July 2013

\*\*\*Department of Defense, USA, *Report on progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan*, November, 2013

\*\*\**Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework 2017-2021*, 2017

\*\*\*Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the US Congress*, July 30, 2018

\*\*\*Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, DC: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, January 30, 2019), p. 70, available at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>, accessed on October 5 2019