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Bloomberg

Afghan Stability Undermined by Pakistan, General Says

By Viola Gienger

04/24/2012

Hard-won stability in Afghanistan's Helmand Province is undermined by the Pakistan Army's failure to help stem the flow of arms coming into the area and drugs going out, a U.S. general said.

"Everything is good, but it's not irreversible," Marine Corps Major General John Toolan said in an interview in Washington yesterday after appearing before the Atlantic Council, a policy research group. He ended a one-year tour last month as the commander in charge of the NATO coalition's southwestern regional command responsible for Helmand.

Toolan's prognosis highlights the risks as the U.S.-led coalition turns its attention to eastern Afghanistan and prepares to withdraw more forces this year. President Barack Obama plans to cut U.S. troops by 23,000 more this year in preparation for handing control to Afghan authorities by the end of 2014.

With reductions planned by other countries in the 50-nation coalition, about 108,000 personnel will be left until a next round of cuts. The number of U.S. Marines in Helmand is due to drop to 7,000 by October from about 20,000 now, Toolan said in the interview.

"We need to maintain the pressure," Toolan told the Atlantic Council audience. "The insurgency in the south is the greatest threat to the government of Afghanistan."

Haqqani Network

The guerrillas known as the Haqqani network, who mainly operate in the country's east from havens across the Pakistani border, have received attention beyond their potential longer-term impact on Afghanistan, Toolan said. The Haqqanis mainly operate to maintain themselves rather than to achieve any grander designs, he said.

"As the insurgency goes, the Haqqani network goes," Toolan said. "If you can keep a lid on the insurgency, the Haqqani network is not going to be as all-powerful as some people talk it up to be."

In Helmand, the need to place forces at the border detracts from efforts elsewhere in the province to compensate for a weak central Afghan government and drug-fueled corruption, Toolan said.

"I know for a fact that drugs are moving out through Pakistan and lethal aid is coming in on a regular basis," Toolan told the Atlantic Council. "I have had no support from 12th Corps," the Pakistan Army unit in charge of the area across the border, he said.

He said he tried to organize meetings with the corps to discuss the issue. "There always seemed to be something that interfered," he said.

Pakistan's Response

A spokesman for Pakistan's embassy in Washington, Nadeem Hotiana, said coordination on common threats has occurred in regular three-way talks among border officials from his country, Afghanistan and the coalition led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

"There are certain trilateral meetings where such issues can be discussed," Hotiana said yesterday in an interview, declining to comment further.

Pakistan sees it in its own interest to cooperate on narcotics trafficking and the cross-border arms trade because they threaten everyone involved, said another Pakistani official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he isn't authorized to comment publicly. Pakistan's military makes sincere efforts within its limitations, the official said.

The U.S. and Pakistan have struggled to rebuild relations, dashed every few months by a confrontation. In January 2011, a CIA employee shot dead two Pakistani men in Lahore. U.S. special operations forces killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May during a raid conducted without notice to Pakistan in its army garrison town of Abbottabad. In November, helicopters of the NATO coalition in Afghanistan inadvertently killed 26 Pakistani troops at the border.

Poppy Cultivation

In Helmand Province, corrupt Afghan officials and security forces and the continuing financial temptations of poppy cultivation also endanger efforts by the coalition and legitimate local authorities to win over the population from the Taliban, Toolan said.

“If the central government of Afghanistan doesn’t stay strong, then there are individuals in the central government who can significantly hurt the progress that’s been made,” the general said.

The answer may be to more aggressively apply provisions of Afghanistan’s constitution that delegate authority to local officials, he said.

The Afghan army and police will continue to need robust backing from international forces through 2014, Toolan said. That includes intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance technology to supplement their human intelligence sources, as well as training in military medicine and even firing accuracy, he said.

The U.S. is deploying surveillance balloons with full-motion video to buttress the Afghan forces as the coalition draws back to an advising role, Toolan said. The police also need more training by experts in the field rather than the “dabbling” that coalition military forces are able to provide, he said.