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The U.S. Military Was No Match for Afghanistan's Corruption

The Pentagon wasn't just defeated by the country's graft—the Pentagon made it worse.

By R. Jeffrey Smith

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When President Obama met top NATO officials in Brussels on March 26, he publicly expressed renewed optimism that America's estimated \$120 billion effort to reconstruct Afghanistan will leave behind "a stable and secure country that serves the prosperity and the security of the Afghan people."

A month earlier, however, a group of senior U.S. military officers rendered a much harsher judgment in private about the legacy of the 12-year U.S.-led intervention. The officers concluded in a report for the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Afghanistan's ability to serve its citizens' needs remains directly threatened by a deeply entrenched culture of corruption that not only defied the West's intervention but grew substantially worse because of it.

The report, written by a division of the Joint Staff assigned to draw lessons for the future, was based on dozens of interviews with government officials and experts—including 11 flag or

general military officers—and its judgments were approved by top commanders, according to a spokesman.

Among the conclusions:

- In retrospect, U.S. military forces were unprepared to deal with a country where private deal-making dominated public policymaking;
- Early U.S. alliances with Afghan warlords helped solidify a corrupt leadership style and a climate of impunity for those involved;
- Washington made the problem worse by inundating Afghanistan with more cash than it could absorb in legitimate channels to undertake needed reforms;
- American military officers and civilian aid workers alike were unprepared to manage Afghan contractors, resulting in what the report said was “the expenditure of millions of dollars with almost no oversight or alignment with other ... [U.S. government] efforts.”

Obama heard some of this bad news directly in an exit briefing a year ago from the outgoing head of the multilateral military force in Afghanistan, Marine Corps Gen. John Allen. According to the report, Allen told the president that corruption—not an incompetent military, not an inadequate police force, and not the Taliban’s sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, all long-standing U.S. concerns—currently remains “the existential, strategic threat to Afghanistan.”

Allen’s assessment was in some ways unsurprising: The Obama administration is considering an accelerated drawdown of forces there—from a peak of 63,500 in 2012 to as few as 5,000 next year—at least partly due to frustration over the country’s kleptocratic political culture. Independent experts, congressional panels, and John Sopko, the U.S. special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, have all voiced similar criticisms that Washington and its allies have failed to combat what is now generally recognized as that war-torn nation’s most intractable and consequential problem.

But the Joint Chiefs of Staff report stands out for two reasons: It makes clear that some senior officers recognize that a major military incursion can be disastrously undermined by an overriding, nonmilitary factor, namely an illicit national economy. And it acknowledges that the U.S. military itself bears much blame for Afghanistan’s enduring mess, due to its poor understanding of Afghan traditions, mismanagement of key reform efforts, and weak oversight of its local partners. The report displays “a critical awareness and candor often missing from official documents,” says Sopko, the special inspector general.

The depth of the problem should have been clearer, the report suggests, from polls showing that many Afghan citizens believed local officials abused their power and that federal decision-making was itself corrupt. Some citizens viewed the Taliban and its shadowy judicial processes as less prone to the bribery, selective prosecution, and extortion that permeated official government actions.

But international and U.S. forces headquarters were mostly clueless about how to respond, the report suggested. It quoted a complaint from the head of the Defense Contract Management Agency’s efforts in the country that none of the military services “man, train, or equip for countering corruption.” A senior military adviser to the Afghan Interior Ministry said this

shortcoming played into contractors' hands and made those deployed seem like "amateurs confronted with professionals."

Poor training and preparation meant that Western advisers and military officers essentially came late to the party. Little attention was devoted to the corruption challenges until 2009, according to the report, when Gen. Stanley McChrystal assumed command and endorsed a counterinsurgency strategy that recognized the threat posed by "unpunished abuse of power by corrupt officials."

An array of anti-corruption groups were established that year and in 2010, including four run by the military, two by international partners, one by the Treasury Department, and one by the Afghan government. But they rarely worked together, disagreed on the definition of corruption, and were staffed by officers and experts on rotations so short that Gen. Allen said it felt like "12 one-year wars" instead of a sustained campaign.

"The problem was at the highest level. There never was any direction ... to unify efforts—actually the opposite," a deputy to the U.S. ambassador for the rule of law told Joint Staff interviewers. "It was, in a word, a mess," the head of one of the anti-corruption groups said, with no single Western authority assuming overarching responsibility for the problem.

As Obama administration officials flirted with taking a more aggressive stance, Afghan President Hamid Karzai became less and less "receptive," the report said. His government undertook "illusory" reform and slow-rolled Western proposals, the report said. Karzai's attorney general's office regarded prosecutions as a way to "[extort] a bribe," a U.S. Agency for International Development official said.

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Senior Afghans not only resisted implementing reforms, they took countermeasures, a top counternarcotics adviser told the Joint Staff interviewers. By 2011, "what became clear to a lot of the Afghans, especially the bigwigs, was 'I need to start moving whatever resources I can out of Afghanistan,' " the adviser said.

Cash payments by U.S. intelligence agencies to Karzai's office, meant to bolster his cooperation with the West and counter influence from Iran, meanwhile "gave substance to charges of American hypocrisy," the Joint Staff report said. And as security conditions worsened, military contracts with local transport firms began to look increasingly like a U.S.-fueled protection racket.

The U.S. military bears much blame for Afghanistan's enduring mess.

In the end, Western forces faced with preserving security or tamping corruption repeatedly chose the former, even though many security victories were short-lived. An effort by Central Command to stop relying on Kam Air, a privately held airline based in Kabul, due to its alleged involvement in opium smuggling was quickly reversed, according to the report. Western forces helped push out a police chief in Helmand province who was linked to narcotics and killings, then welcomed him back when "the security situation deteriorated," the report said.

Washington repeatedly refused to condition its aid on strict adherence to anti-corruption targets and deadlines, opting instead—according to Sopko—to disburse funds as quickly as it could.

“We never really understood the problem. ... We were naïve,” Lt. Gen. Nick Carter, the Western forces’ deputy commander and incoming British Army Chief of Staff, told the interviewers. “We had a role in contributing to corruption, and that was because of the way we spent our money, because of the way we contracted, and because of our logistics system.”

The obvious question is whether the U.S. military—as well as the rest of the government—will heed these lessons, and undertake the systemic reforms the report urges. These include passing legislation linking U.S. aid more directly to foreign anti-corruption efforts, improving training for military service and contracting personnel, and embracing a radical concept at the Pentagon of using “money as a weapon system” in forcing better behavior by aid recipients.

But it’s not yet clear if the Joint Staff’s conclusions will affect only the dwindling U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, or have a larger consequence for the way that Washington functions. Asked for comment on the overall recommendations, the Joint Staff initially asked only a CENTCOM spokesman to reply.

“All recommendations for ISAF-related matters ... are currently being staffed for integration into current and future plans and operations. In the meantime ... it would be premature to comment on any specific recommendation until ISAF is further along with their analysis,” said Col. Patrick Ryder at CENTCOM.

Eventually, however, Air Force Col. Edward W. Thomas Jr., a spokesman for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, responded more broadly that “we are ... looking at ways to ensure those recommendations are incorporated across the entire joint force development cycle.”

“We have done multiple studies of our operations in Afghanistan,” Thomas wrote in an email. “We have an obligation to ensure those lessons, both good and bad, are correctly learned for the future, and we take that charge very seriously.”