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Reuters

Analysis: With an eye on 2014, India steps up Afghan role

By Sanjeev Miglani
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India plans to train Afghan army combat units at top counter-insurgency schools, officials say, deepening its commitment to Afghanistan as Western forces prepare to withdraw, a move that will fan Pakistani fears of encirclement.

India may also provide light weapons to the Afghan army and train pilots and ground staff for Afghanistan's small air force under a strategic partnership agreement signed last month.

Up until now India has mainly provided discreet training to Afghan security forces in an unstructured manner, with officers attending largely theoretical courses. Once, in 2007, two platoon-sized units of 30 men each were trained.

But the new agreement sets the stage for a formal Indian involvement in boosting Afghan security forces beyond 2014, when foreign combat troops will withdraw, leaving Afghans to fight a Taliban insurgency now at its most potent in 10 years of war.

"The Afghanistan initiative, so far as I understand it, will be training, including future trainers, in such places as the Army War College in Mhow," said an Indian security official, referring to a top institution in central India.

"This is about ... military exercises designed to enable them to engage in actual combat operations," he said.

A greater and more overt Indian role in boosting Afghan security preparedness, on top of a \$2 billion civil aid effort building highways, power transmission lines and dams, marks an intensification of a regional struggle for post-2014 influence.

It also represents a re-ordering of regional alliances, with the United States seen to have backed the India-Afghan pact after the fraying of its relationship with Pakistan, which it blames for sheltering militants fighting in Afghanistan.

"I think it's a huge deal. It confirms a lot of Pakistan's worst fears about Afghanistan. Moreover, given how many ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) join to fight Pakistan, adding Indian mentorship into the mix strikes me as a terrible idea," said Joshua Foust, a security analyst at the non-partisan think tank the American Security Project in Washington.

"But I think a lot of the decisions are driven by wanting India to pick up this slack the U.S. will be leaving," he said. "This has high-level backing in Washington and Delhi, so it's a done deal. They think there won't be a blowback. I disagree."

RACING THE CLOCK

NATO is racing against the clock to train a force of 350,000 Afghan police and soldiers to take over the battle against the Taliban and other insurgents.

As domestic support for the war falls, U.S. President Barack Obama could be looking at even faster withdrawals, sources said last month after the White House asked the Pentagon for 2014 scenarios that included 2013 troop levels.

Pakistan, which sees itself as the central player in shaping a political solution to the conflict, has warned repeatedly against what it describes as destabilizing Indian involvement.

It also worries about Afghan officers being trained in India because it could mold them into an anti-Pakistan institution.

The Indian embassy in Kabul has been attacked twice, with U.S. and Indian officials blaming the al Qaeda-linked Haqqani network. U.S. officials say the Haqqanis have close ties with Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency.

India, riding one of the world's fastest-growing economies, has signaled it will stay the course despite the threat of a backlash. It also has a wary eye on China's growing investments in Afghanistan's potentially rich mining sector.

"The door has been opened for the training of Afghanistan's army, air force and police in India," said retired Indian army Major-General Ashok Mehta.

He said the Afghans want to build their army on the Indian model of a secular, national force that draws recruits from across the country and from different religious and ethnic backgrounds and turn them into a cohesive fighting unit.

The Afghan army is still seen as a force dominated by the minority Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups, with the Pashtuns who make up the majority of the population under-represented.

"They didn't want to go to Pakistan, even though the Pakistanis have repeatedly offered ... , because they said they didn't want to 'Islamise' the army," Mehta added.

GIVING WEAPONS, TRAINING PILOTS

Mehta said the Afghans were expected to send company-sized units of 120 men for training at Indian bases, including a respected counter-insurgency school in northeastern Vairengte.

Afghan infantry units are also expected to train at a high- altitude warfare school in Kashmir, where Indian forces have had plenty of experience battling revolts over 20 years.

Part of the Soviet Union's exit strategy after its disastrous campaign in Afghanistan relied on training troops, and some pilots, in then Soviet-Uzbekistan. Some soldiers were also flown to Moscow in the mid-1980s.

Under the India-Afghan pact, weapons such as rifles, rocket launchers and artillery would help fill equipment gaps and pilots would be trained on simulators in India.

Kamran Bokhari, vice president of Middle Eastern and South Asian affairs at global intelligence consulting firm STRATFOR, said intelligence sharing would be the biggest, yet least talked-about, part of the India-Afghanistan partnership.

He said military cooperation between the two countries had to be limited because they don't share a border and that a hostile Pakistan lies in between.

"But intelligence is something that doesn't require borders and they can do quite a lot in that area," Bokhari said.