

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL GEORGE T. (TOM) DONOVAN, NATO TRAINING MISSION-AFGHANISTAN, SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY (ANA) CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF SUBJECT: INCREASING THE CAPACITY OF THE AFGHAN MINISTRY OF DEFENSE TIME: 10:30 EDT DATE: FRIDAY, MAY 21, 2010

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PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY: I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers' Roundtable for Friday, May 21st, 2010.

My name is Petty Officer William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question, respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is Colonel George T. Donovan, NATO training mission-Afghanistan; senior adviser to the ANA chief of the general staff who will be discussing top priorities, ministerial development, increasing the capacity of the Ministry of Defense to solve the complex and challenging problems it faces. And sir, if you have an opening statement, you could go ahead with that now.

COL. DONOVAN: All right. Thank you very much.

Again, I'm Colonel George Donovan. I go by Tom -- Tom Donovan. I've been in the Army almost 24 years now. I'm originally from Erlanger, Kentucky.

I advise as a member of the combined Security Transition Command- Afghanistan. I'm the chief adviser to the ranking man in uniform of the Afghan National Army -- that's General Bismullah Mohammadi or sometimes often called General Bismullah Khan.

He's a Panjshiri Tajik, been fighting for the last 30 years of his life. He's a high school graduate; fought with the mujahadeen against the Soviets and then during the civil war with Massoud. And then finally, with the Northern Alliance came into -- fought with the Northern Alliance and came into Kabul in 2001 with U.S. assistance and then

transitioned to the Kabul Security Force and later on to being the chief of general staff of the Afghan army.

A very interesting, charismatic and decisive leader, but he's never been educated beyond high school or attended a military school in his life. Very tactically brilliant, but often needs help in operational, strategic type of processes and understandings and that's where my role fits in with him.

Unlike the United States Army chief of staff, who's only responsible for the organization and training and sustainment of the Army, the chief of general staff of the Afghan army is not only responsible for the army as an institution, he's also the commanding general of the army and fighting the army. So he's dual-hatted compared to our chief of staff. So he has an operational daily requirement in his duties.

His most significant task he's been trying to accomplish in the last year has been the growth of the army -- essentially a force of about 70,000 people through 132,000 and now we're going up to 171,006. So that type of expansion, building the basics, cooperating closely with this command and also with the ISAF joint command has been a major challenge and a major focus of our activities.

That concludes my opening statement so if there's any questions you'd like.

Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And did anybody else join while I was gone?

Okay. Well, with that, I guess we'll go to Andrew. You were first on the line. Q Sounds great.

Hey, Colonel, Andrew Lubin here from Leatherneck Magazine. Thanks for taking the time this afternoon, sir.

COL. DONOVAN: I'm glad to be here.

Q Colonel, when you're growing an army like the ANA is, much of the battle is organizational as much as motivational.

Back in 2006-2007 -- (inaudible) -- brought the CGs from 201st corps out to Okinawa for a couple weeks of training. Are you doing that with your counterpart? With his lack of formal education, would some time in the states help him, do you think?

COL. DONOVAN: Yes, Andrew. We've done that twice in my year here and he's pretty much gone back to the States almost every year since then. But on the two trips I've taken with him, we went to D.C. and we met with the chief of the staff in the Army, a few other members --

leading members in the Army staff. And we specifically looked at a few issues that the ANA is challenged with.

One of those is personnel management to include board processes and selection processes not only for promotions, but also for key billets such as command billets at the brigade and corps level here.

So we had the U.S. Army G-1 of personnel, chief of personnel, give him a detailed brief of how they do it in their army, which differs pretty much from how the Afghan army does it, so they could have some thought about how they could do that, transit to that system in the future.

He also met with the director of the Army staff -- the man that runs the Army staff -- and discussed with him how this individual runs the staff and organizes the staff so the chief could look at that for his own staff.

As the army has expanded here, the requirements of the general staff have increased -- the complexity of problems have increased and they need to look at new ways to organize themselves.

Hopefully, that answered your question, Andrew.

Q Yes, sir.

Paul, let me follow up, because it's just the two of us.

Colonel, to follow up on that, how does somebody run -- how do they run billeting and promotions, yet don't get involved in the old boy network -- in the corruption network that is so widely reported back in the states? Is that -- is it possible over there to break through that?

COL. DONOVAN: I think they're doing a pretty good job. We were just talking about this today with some general officers here.

They have some challenges that are unique -- I won't say unique -- but unlike us and I'll talk through them.

One of them is the United States Army -- and I think most of our militaries -- use a reporting system. In the Army we have an officer evaluation report that evaluates the qualifications or the performance of an officer in various jobs throughout his career. Those are stacked together in a file that when an officer goes before a board for selection either for promotion or command, they're reviewed by those members of the board.

Well, in this army, many officers have served in many different armies over the years. They've been mujahadeen fighters. They were maybe members of the old communist army or members of the king's army or member of some factions between where that system just doesn't exist. And so now they're mainly working off of recommendations from current commanders on who to promote to the next position.

That said, the chief understands he -- there is a written system out there and he wants to transition to that. He just doesn't trust it. It's not mature enough at this point in time.

But they have to balance that against some other requirements. And one of those is ethnic balancing. So the army must maintain by, I believe international agreement at the Bonn Conference, a certain amount of Pashtuns, Tajiks, others -- the Hazara is the main other, but there are some smaller others out there as well -- in the mix of different positions. And so when a board selects someone, say, for brigade command, they're looking at first, who was in that position? Which ethnic group was he? And often, they're trying to put a person with the same ethnic group in that position in order to maintain the balance within that command. Otherwise, if they change the ethnic group then they have to move the chief of staff or XO or operations office or something in order to keep the ethnic balance within that command.

So often there are multiple officers of multiple ethnic groups nominated for one particular assignment. And these other considerations of ethnics -- and also maybe who knows you -- play in there.

Now, that said, because of the culture in Afghanistan, there are quite a lot of phone calls and office calls being made on behalf -- by leading officials on behalf of their relatives or people they know. And from what I've seen, the minister of Defense, chief of staff do a pretty good job of not succumbing to that, but it is a constant pressure.

One way we got around that recently was the graduation of the national military academy just a few months ago. There was an intense amount of political pressure from all components of the leadership in the society on where they wanted their new soon-to-be, you know, commissioned lieutenants stationed. And most of them did not want to get stationed in Kandahar or Helmand. And so ingeniously, they came up with a lottery system that was broken down by ethnic group and by region that basically took the ability of anyone to meddle with assignments out. So that was a pretty unique solution that I think accomplished the task they were trying to do, Andrew.

Q Okay. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay. And Paul, you were next online. So go ahead with your questions.

Q Hey, Colonel. It's Paul McLeary from DTI. Thanks for talking to us today.

As far -- I mean, you're speaking about some of the political pressures. Can you give us a sense of, I guess, civil-military relations at that level in the Afghan army and how, you know, the army works with the Afghan government and ministers and things like that?

Is it pretty smooth or is it still something that they're working out?

COL. DONOVAN: I think clearly it's something they're still working out. There is no doubt that the chief of general staff acknowledges the authority of the minister of defense, as well as the authority of the president of Afghanistan. So that's good. So the chief responds to the directives and the assignments or tasks proposed by either -- or given by either of those individuals. So that simple part of civil-military control is there.

We are working on developing some more, you know, nuanced understanding of that. So exactly what are the roles of the minister of defense, vis-a-vis the chief of general staff? That has not been clearly articulated to date and is one of the major projects that this command is working on at this time.

There is a lot of friction in the society in general due to ethnic issues. The minister of defense is a Pashtun and the chief is a Tajik. And so there are some mistrust they're working on there, but there also is some friction just caused by the lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities and authorities, really.

So currently, the minister probably has more authorities than a typical Western military would give to a minister of defense. For example, he controls all assignments down to the sergeant level. So if you wanted to move a sergeant from one squad to another squad within the same platoon, that requires a piece of paper signed by the minister of defense.

We would like to power down those kinds of authorities and some monetary authorities from the -- you know, not only from the minister, but through the chief general of staff down to say corps commanders or brigade commanders so the army can get more efficient.

But overall, as far as the civil-military, it's coming along. The role of the national security council's coming along. There's a program within this command -- combined security transition command-Afghanistan -- to work on civilianization of the ministry of defense. And that is to take the leading figures -- including the minister and assistant ministers -- and make them civilians over time. That's not going to be a near-term project, but currently we're trying to work on some midlevel, low-level civilians so that experience is gained, understanding is gained so later on they can move to higher-level positions.

Hopefully, that helps you, Paul.

Q Yes, sir. Thanks.

And what's the reporting chain as far as the ANA chief of general staff? I mean, he reports directly to the minister of defense and then to Karzai? And does the ANA chief -- does he meet with Karzai and they strategize and plan?

COL. DONOVAN: That is correct. He is direct report to the minister of defense who directly reports to the president.

That said, he is called to the president's office frequently; I won't say routinely. I think the president would like him to come once every week or once every other week, but that doesn't often happen, just due to other priorities. Both their schedules, they change quite frequently.

But say for example, he was in the minister's -- or sorry, the president's office yesterday discussing some issues associated with Kandahar. And so the president is looking to his chief of the military for advice on his perspectives of things. And the minister allows, you know, the chief to give his, you know, proper military advice, even though that's not necessarily codified in some sort of a law at this point in time in the country.

Does that help, Paul?

Q Yes, sir. Thanks.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And back around to Andrew.

Q Colonel, when you're dealing with the evaluations and the paperwork, how does it work in an army that's pretty much functionally illiterate?

COL. DONOVAN: Well, that is a challenge. The officers have to be literate -- they're supposed to be literate. (Laughs.) We are finding there are some that are not. So it's coming along.

The real challenge with these evaluations is not so much the literacy problem as it is a cultural issue. And that is that it is -- it is embarrassing for a senior officer to have a subordinate officer who's not performing, you know, at the highest level.

So my understanding is all evaluations tend to -- I don't want to say inflated. Inflated is the word we've used in our army -- but more they're all -- they make all subordinates appear great, because no senior guy wants to admit that he has a poor performing subordinate.

So that kind of defeats the whole purpose of the evaluation by the local commander to determine who's good and who's not so good; who should be rewarded with promotion and who should not be. So I think they haven't come to terms with that at this point in time.

Q Then would it be fair to say that the promotions aren't -- I don't want to use the word "valid," because some of them are. Then how do you know whether it's a good promotion or just a friend-of-a- friend promotion? Or is that out of your control?

COL. DONOVAN: No. I think they've got -- given that issue that keeps them from having a Western-type system, it appears -- well, what they're doing is when, say, a new brigade commander's job -- a brigade commander's job is coming open, nominations are made. So the GS G-1 -- I believe what happens is he announces the position, essentially. The corps

commanders will nominate someone for the position; the general staff will nominate someone for the position. There will be a whole slew of candidates of different ethnic groups. And then they are weeded out on information of, you know, do they fit the requirements for the job? And then those names go through a system -- a series of evaluations. Recommendations, really. So the vice chief of general staff gets his cut; the G-1 of the army gets his cut; the chief of general staff gets his cut; the board gets its vote and then the minister of defense gets to review it. And ultimately, for a general officer, it goes to the president of Afghanistan.

So although it's not a perfect merit-based system -- if there is such a thing -- there is a lot of input into it and a lot of, I would say, opaqueness to it -- transparency -- so that a lot of people along the way are seeing it and get a chance to at least make their statement about what it is.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: And back on to Paul.

Q Yes. Well, here's a can-of-worms questions -- question: logistics. I know that's been a big issue, obviously, with the corps and the kandaks and Afghans controlling their own logistics.

Are you working with the ANA chief on this? And what exactly is he doing to try to get more Afghans working on their own logistical problems and taking it out of NATO's hands?

COL. DONOVAN: That's a great question, Paul.

First of all, I'll just say in the structure of the Ministry of Defense and the Afghan national army, logistics is not really the chief of general staff's responsibility. It is under the minister through the assistant minister of acquisition technology and logistics -- AT&L we call it for short.

The AT&L assistant minister is responsible not only for acquisition technology, he's also responsible for the executional logistics throughout the army. So the general staff G-4 is -- the supply or logistics officer is essentially just a planner and a prioritization officer. He is not an executor of logistics.

Now that said, as the army has expanded, this -- and the Afghan army and the AT&L and their support and command, called logistics command, have struggled with effective, timely logistics through their -- you know, to subordinate organizations.

We have gone back -- "we" being this command -- has gone back and talked to several key leaders about maybe we don't have this right. Maybe we imposed too much of a Western system on you or maybe we haven't really understood the Afghan ways; maybe we need to relook it. Additionally, even though this command goes down -- logistics goes down through the AT&L side from the minister, certainly the general staff

needs to have and commanders need to have some sort of responsibility towards it.

And I sat down and had this great discussion yesterday with the general staff -- the chief of general staff, several corps commanders and his general staff, as well as the deputy minister -- assistant minister for installation management directorate -- if I could throw that under the rubric of logistics right now -- on what -- and that's the guys that's on major installations providing mess hall support, food and other, you know, garrison security support -- on what is the role of corps commander on a corps garrison to that garrison commander?

And clearly right now, since that garrison commander works for the -- again, the minister of -- assistant minister for AT&L, acquisition technology and logistics -- there is a disconnect. And so part of what we're doing here -- not just us, but also the chief of general staff -- is trying to, as the army expands, define roles, define standards of professional conduct, define working relationships, cooperative relationships, reporting relationships so that these -- you know, these systems or systems get established and will work effectively.

Hopefully that answers your question. That was kind of a -- that was a broad answer, but I can answer it in any more detail if you'd like to that.

Q Okay. I mean, as far as, you know, logistic issues and other issues, I mean, do you have someone, I guess, on your staff from state or from -- you know, like cultural advisers, I guess? Because obviously, we're very different cultures and the American military is an extremely different culture than Afghan society, the Afghan military.

So do you have folks that you're working with to try to kind of smooth transition from what, you know, we would like to do and what the Afghans are capable of doing or want to do?

COL. DONOVAN: Yes, we do. And there's a -- there used to be a subordinate command of this command called LTAG -- logistics, training and assessment group -- sorry, logistics, training and advisory group. They've since disbanded, but the organization still exists, just they work for the CJ4, our own logistics officer now. And also, work for the assistant commanding general for Afghan national army development. And they're working on this issue.

General Hogg, who just left at the deputy commanding general, he was particularly focused on the issue -- and I believe we're going to continue on with it -- of trying A, understand the problem; B, figure out what a working solution would be. But if I may talk about a specific issue with this, we had a -- the chief of general staff last week had a session with the 203rd corps down in Gardez where he brought together all the leadership of the corps: corps headquarters, the commander, the commander and the staff, all of the brigade commanders and members of their staff and the kandak commanders. And we discussed -- they discussed through a range of their issues.

And one of the things the chief discovered through a very astute question was the brigade and kandak commanders didn't even have the current logistics policies that are out. So that for some reason had stopped at the corps level -- the corps G4 level -- and the brigade and kandak commanders were not even aware of it. So that may point to a significant reason why the current system is not working. The board of commanders just did not understand what they were supposed to do to make the system work.

So there is a group of people that are looking at it and trying to figure out what the best way to go is. In general, over the last year we have switched within ISAF, I think, to listening more and more to the Afghans on how they want to do things. And of course, as the Afghans have become more experience -- and many of have been in this job, their current job, six, seven, eight years -- they're getting more experienced and they're drawing off their lessons learned and they're proposing new solutions too.

So I think the cooperation is improving and we'll find an answer to this problem that will reflect Afghan needs, as well as our needs, to create their army.

Q Is the defense minister and the army chief trying to set up some sort of kind structured training program to do this -- you know, to handle logistics and to train logistics managers?

COL. DONOVAN: Yes. There is a school set up now.

One of the things that this command's working on, along with the minister of defense and chief of general staff, is to institute branch schools. In the next year, within Afghanistan, there should be a series of branch schools set up to specifically train officers, noncommissioned officers and even enlisted, in specific functional areas such as logistics.

So we should start creating, you know, logistics specialists from the inception. And that will, of course, help with it as well.

Additionally, there's sort of this program we just did in 203rd Corps. The chief of general staff has actually taken that to each corps. Every two weeks he's going to a different corps, and this is a teaching program. The corps will talk about their problems. It will be a sharing of ideas of problems. But the general staff primary directors will also teach their subordinate commands about what proper procedures are or what problems are being resolved or when they expect their problems to be resolved.

So there is an intent to professionalization as well through this office professional development program.

Q Excellent. Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: All right.

And back on round two. Andrew.

Q Colonel, let's stick on logistics if you don't mind.

I've been four times in Afghanistan -- not as much time as you, but not bad by journalistic standards. Probably seven months total.

There's a school of thought that the Afghan good enough is in fact good enough. Are we burdening them with excess paperwork to try to blend -- to try to force them into a system that works for us and doesn't work for them? And is that why maybe some of their systems seem to be -- you know, they're not -- they're effective, but not by our standards? Are we making things too difficult for them?

COL. DONOVAN: That's a great question that I probably don't have the answer to.

I think one of the challenges they're facing and the chief -- General Bismullah Mohammadi's been talking about this a lot in the last few weeks. As a matter of fact, he had a meeting with General Rodriguez, the ISAF Joint Command commander, last week and they discussed this issue.

He's been -- the chief has been, and General Rodriguez for that matter -- and even us -- have been very frustrated with the lack of acceptance of responsibility of command on the -- of the Afghan officers in general.

The lack of taking initiative to solve problems. And the chief is trying to address that now and he's giving specific examples of how he wants subordinate officers, commanders to come to him. In the past, he solves the problem himself and tells the company commander way down the line of command how to do it, instead of letting them suggest things and then, you know, he approves or disapproves.

So that applies in the logistics arena as well. There's a reluctance to take responsibility for subordinate commands and the welfare that probably makes the system work. So I don't know if the problem is so much cultural as far as Western versus Eastern, as much as it's just a lack of responsibility. And the chief of general staff, who's purely an Afghan officer, he sees it as a problem. So I think he's probably on the right problem right now, which is teaching commanders how to command and leaders how to lead. And if he can get some progress in that, maybe that'll clear up most of these problems.

Q Let me follow up and then I'll turn it over to you.

Do they have a -- is a typical Afghan officer -- is this more of a bought or family position kind of like the Brits back in the 1800s or is this something they've actually earned?

COL. DONOVAN: I don't think it's necessarily a generational thing. First of all, this army is probably one of the largest armies

Afghanistan's had, other than the army during the communist period, which was I think 200-something thousand. I may have that number wrong.

The chief of general staff is not the son of an officer. I think his father was a farmer. And that's what he dreams about returning to.

I don't -- I know that the XO of the general staff -- another guy I work with closely, Major General Habib, is the son of an officer. But I haven't met too many people who claim to be sons of officers, but I haven't really delved into the question that much.

Q What about the young men at the captain and major and major lieutenant level? What about them? Are they actually motivated? Is this more a job or is this more of an avocation?

COL. DONOVAN: That's a great question. In this job, I don't really have much access to those guys. I'm up here with all the generals, you know, fortunately or unfortunately. So I can't give you that perspective.

I was here as a battalion commander four years ago down in RC East. I thought the lieutenants were pretty motivated. They just had a lot to learn and it's a pretty challenging environment out there to operate in and they had a lot to learn.

Q Whoever --

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Andrew, we --

Q Sorry. Go ahead.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Yeah. We're running low on time, so I'm going to see if -- Paul, did you have any more questions?

Q Just one more, if Andrew is done. Q Yes.

Q As far as operations, how involved is the ANA chief with working with General McChrystal or lower commanders in, you know, operations like Marja or the kind of Kandahar offensive that we're kicking off now?

COL. DONOVAN: Well, the operational commander on the ISAF side is General Rodriguez. And the chief of general staff and General Rodriguez typically travel twice a week to some area of the country to look at operations and see what's going on, talk to subordinate commanders.

And they also typically meet on one morning a week where they talk in an office environment about the issues they want to address and, you know, make coordinations and so on.

So I think he's fairly -- first of all, he's already biased. He likes operations more than he likes, say, being an office guy anyway. So I think he's fairly well involved.

He needs to improve in that area; it's something we're working on. He's not school trained, so he doesn't necessarily understand operations and strategy from the same perspective that an educated officer that's gone to war college would.

He tends to be overly focused at the tactical level. That said, his tactical advice after 30 years of fighting at that level, is incredible. It's very, very spot on and very good.

But again, it's his number one priority. So he doesn't have a problem being involved, it's just more a function of getting him to develop his vision, articulate his guidance to his subordinate commanders and then get his subordinate commanders to take responsibility for it and then report the appropriate information back to them so he can make corrections or make his own assessment of how successful the current operation is.

Q Thanks.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And with that, we are a little bit short on time. We have about two minutes left. So if you have any closing statements, sir, you can go ahead with that now.

COL. DONOVAN: Well, I appreciate you all dialing in today. Hopefully I was able to help you a little bit. It's been an extremely rewarding year for me as an adviser. Never worked at this level before and I'm very grateful for my experience at the Army War College last year to kind of give me some tools -- thinking tools and some tools on how to approach strategy and leadership at this level to assist with this general officer.

It'll probably be one of the most difficult years in my military career, but also probably the one I remember the most just from watching General McChrystal, General Rodriguez, General Caldwell, Minister of Defense Wardak and General Bismullah Mohammadi forge a coalition amongst themselves, discuss issues, resolve issues and move forward during this critical year in the war year in Afghanistan. And I'm glad to be a part of it and contribute in some way.

Good luck to every one of you.

Q Thank you, Colonel.

Q Colonel, thank you for your time today. Appreciate it.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And with that, we'd like to wrap up the call. And thank you to the bloggers who were all on the call today as well.

Today's program will be available online at the blogger's link at dodlive.mil where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with the source documents, such as the audio file and print transcript.

Again, thank you very much, sir, and thank you, blogger participants.

This concludes today's event.

END.