

If Life in Afghanistan were Hollywood? NATO's "Iron Man" Versus Frankenstein's "Militarized Monster"

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-For next year, Nato is well on its way to making a security force in Afghanistan that will consume most of that poor country's resources and operate in areas where it will be seen either as an ethnic 'outsider', a foreign 'invader' or a local 'traitor'. If you're a Pakistani, whether in Karachi, Balochistan or Fata, this should all sound very familiar. Thus, much like a Hollywood superhero fantasy, Nato's mad scientists are inadvertently putting together an (ethnically skewed and over consumptive) 'Pakistan Army model' to tackle the Taliban - and, yes, maybe even the Pakistan Army itself - in Afghanistan. The irony is superb.

Around 200 kilometres from Amsterdam, in South Limburg (famously called the 'appendix of the Netherlands'), lies the sleepy town of Brunsum.

Once home to the Dutch charcoal mining industry, a gas find in the north of the country during the 1950s put Brunsum on the Netherlands' not-doing-so-well list. The Eurocrats didn't struggle too hard to figure what to do with this ailing community: soon enough, Nato was invited to build its Joint Forces Command Headquarters here. Since then, life changed for the locals, as it's not everyday that one's hometown becomes the epicentre of a global military command structure.

Thus, in 1967, when General Kayani was probably filling out his application forms to enter the Pakistan Military Academy as a gentlemen cadet, JFC Brunsum became the forward base for history's mightiest military alliance, overseeing the European theatre as the Cold War reached its peak.

Nowadays, Brunsum is the thinking post for another war, in another continent. The locals are still sleepy, but this new campaign is keeping the uniforms of Brunsum wide awake, even sleepless.

From almost 6000 kilometres away, Nato controls the 10-year-old conflict in Afghanistan. The workday starts early for Marine General John Allen and his staff, who are three and half hours ahead in Kabul, averaging five video-conferences with Brunsum every day. On their part, the intelligence analysts here devise formulae that can help Allen and his Isaf commanders deal with the day-to-day, as well as the long haul, of the war.

These days, the analysts at Brunsum are more worried than usual: the deadline of 2014 looms, the 'transition' phase is in full effect, tensions with Pakistan are at an all-time high, and Nato has to urgently deliver on training and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces. This means that it has to ensure the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National

Police are fighting-fit and corruption-free entities that are ready to secure their country, fast.

Think of it in another way, while trying on Nato's shoes: You're broke and not the man you used to be (an economic crisis and not enough local support for the war have dwindled Natos' efforts); your partner caught you cheating and has filed for divorce (post-Salala Pakistan is hitting back with several punitive measures); and you have resorted to leaving the house while trying to ensure your two delinquent juveniles become responsible adults who can fend for themselves (the ANA and the ANP have to be shaped up ASAP so that they can fill the security vacuum Nato shall leave behind).

If life in Afghanistan were Hollywood, Nato would have low self-esteem, an empty bank account, and a bad drinking habit at this point of the movie.

Thus, much like a badgered Hollywood protagonist, an increasingly desperate Nato is looking for that magic pill that could end its problems, here and now. Keeping our blockbuster in perspective, Nato is now working in overdrive to plug all possible gaps: it can't do much about the financial crunch, nor the weak support for the war effort, neither can it woo Pakistan back easily, so it's spending extra time in the basement trying to hammer together solutions that will make its two affected teenagers - the Afghan army and police - functional and contributing members of society. In this plot, Nato's legacy could be sealed as a good dad and a great creator.

The problem is that this Ironman approach Nato's devising for Afghanistan, by providing it a new suit of armour via beefing up the ANA/ANP, is looking more and more like Frankenstein's rendition of a militarised monster. The formula for saving Afghanistan - a country that has fought itself longer than it has fought foreign powers - by converting it into a multi-polar security state is morphed. Here's how.

Nato's metrics are almost unfathomable in their optimism, as this summary of JFC Brunsum's stated year-end objective for 2012 indicates: Make a 352,000 man army and police force that is not necessarily representative of the ethnic reality and composition of Afghanistan (and is projected by Nato itself to consume around 30 to 40 percent of Afghanistan's GDP), deploy them in an environment where they either don't belong (ethnically) or will face pressures (socially/tribally), give them command authority as well as the weapons and training platforms to perform at the tactical, operational and eventually the strategic level (while the government in Kabul continues to struggle for legitimacy and establishing its writ country-wide)...and then leave!

Let's repeat that again: For next year, Nato is well on its way to making a security force in Afghanistan that will consume most of that poor country's resources and operate in areas where it will be seen either as an ethnic 'outsider', a foreign 'invader' or a local 'traitor'. If you're a Pakistani, whether in Karachi, Balochistan or Fata, this should all sound very familiar. Thus, much like a Hollywood superhero fantasy, Nato's mad scientists are inadvertently putting together an (ethnically skewed and over consumptive) 'Pakistan Army model' to tackle the Taliban - and, yes, maybe even the Pakistan Army itself - in Afghanistan. The irony is superb.

But here's the scary twist. Brunsum's analysts estimate that Afghanistan's cops suffer a 30 percent 'attrition' rate, which means around 45,000 will go AWOL - desert their positions - just this year. Meanwhile, the army has a representation crisis (according to Foreign Affairs

and The Economist magazines, less than 10 percent of the ANA's Officer Corps is Pashtun – the ethnic group that forms the backbone of the Taliban-led insurgency). Thus, Afghanistan's cops are running off, while its soldiers are ethnically opposed to their enemy – and the 2014 pullout hasn't even begun!

Drive through Kabul and you see the chaos of a new police state. Multiple uniforms – Special Forces, regular army, 'Urdu' militia (a shady lashkar which is the only Pashtun-dominated component of the ANSF), national police and local police all guard different turfs within a kilometre of downtown.

It's not fantasy to wonder how benevolent these uniforms will treat themselves, their people and each other when the "kharji" (foreigners) leave, pulling the plug of dollars and authority after 2014. Thus, Nato's monster – Afghanistan's artificial military complex – that has been fed so far, just might feed on itself. Cannibalism versus kebabs? That's the choice Afghans are facing, thanks to Nato's experiment.

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