

Defense task force on Afghanistan development unravels

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By Rajiv Chandrasekaran

A prominent [Pentagon](#) task force that has sought to help Afghanistan exploit its mineral wealth and expand private-sector employment is being gutted by resignations and will be forced to scale back significantly because of a congressional demand that its operations be folded into the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#).

The director of the task force, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense [Paul A. Brinkley](#), has decided to quit on June 30, a move that has prompted several key members of his 100-person team to announce their departures as well. The exodus has alarmed senior U.S. military officials, including Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, who view the group's job-creation efforts as an important component of the overall U.S. counterinsurgency mission.

The resignations are a result of a few paragraphs tucked into the massive Defense Department authorization legislation Congress approved in January that will cut off funding for the task force on Sept. 30 and direct the Pentagon to transfer its functions to USAID. The move was driven by a handful of key Democrats, then in the majority, who decided that Brinkley's business-development activities, which are largely focused on civilians, should be overseen by the State Department, not the Pentagon.

Brinkley, a former Silicon Valley executive who joined the Defense Department six years ago to help rebuild businesses in Iraq, contends that shifting his group's work to USAID will smother an entrepreneurial organization in a risk-averse agency that is more oriented toward providing development assistance than brokering business deals.

"We do capitalism. We're about helping companies make money," Brinkley said in an interview. "That mind-set cannot exist in a humanitarian organization. It's like asking General Motors to make potato chips."

Brinkley's task force rocketed to prominence last year with the release of a report that projected that Afghanistan has as much as \$1 trillion worth of untapped mineral deposits, although much of it is in places that are too dangerous or too remote to easily access. The report nonetheless raised hope among some in the U.S. government that Afghanistan, which has long depended on foreign aid, will eventually be able to sustain its own government and security forces.

Until last year, much of the group's work had been focused on Iraq, where it helped to facilitate \$8 billion in private investment commitments to former state-run factories. The group has since shifted its attention to Afghanistan, where it is working on minerals-extraction deals, projects to expand the sale of Afghan carpets and fruit, and the development of an information-technology industry. Brinkley recently brought a team from Google to Kabul, and he helped facilitate a deal for fashion designer Kate Spade to purchase Afghan cashmere.

"The U.S. government has spent billions on development in Afghanistan since the conflict began, but the focus hasn't been on the sustainability of the economy," he said. "Tactical economic development expertise is what the people want — and that has been the missing piece of our foreign policy."

A USAID official said the agency is studying the task force's activities "to identify areas for positive collaboration." But USAID does not intend to continue everything Brinkley's group has been doing. It is likely to jettison operations that do not fit in with the agency's development mandate.

A driving force for the reduction is money. Brinkley's task force has congressional authorization to spend up to \$150 million in fiscal 2011. USAID probably will not receive as much from appropriators once it takes over the group.

Although the task force is part of the U.S. government's largest and most bureaucratic agency, Brinkley has been afforded remarkable leeway to operate independently. He pursues deals he wants, without waiting for lengthy consultations with officials at the [State Department](#) and USAID. His team lives on its own in Kabul, outside the embassy and military compounds. His staff members drive civilian vehicles and meet with Afghans far more regularly than many other American officials in Afghanistan do.

"People who come to work with us come with the understanding they'll be in harm's way," he said. "You can't walk around the streets like an astronaut if you want to engage with people."

His team is composed not of career government employees but contractors and appointees, many of whom have private-sector backgrounds and a desire for war-zone capitalism. Instead of staying for the minimum one year, as most State and USAID personnel do, much of his staff has been on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan for several years.

These methods have led to criticism that Brinkley does not coordinate his activities with the rest of the American government. Some U.S. officials and outside analysts also have questioned whether the overall impact of his team's work is as significant as he has asserted.

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"There's a lot of hype," one State Department official said. "As for the reality? It's hard to know, because he's not at all transparent with us about what he's doing."

Military commanders and Defense Department officials hope Congress will rescind the move. In his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee last week, Petraeus put in a plug for Brinkley. And last month, Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) told the committee that Brinkley's team has "made a real contribution."

"I hope that they will continue to do that, but I think it's fair to say that they face a lot of bureaucratic resistance in doing that," Gates said.

But there is little confidence at the Pentagon that Congress will act before members of the task force go their separate ways over the next several months. Brinkley said many of them have told him they would rather quit than work for USAID.

"It's hard to see how you fix this now," he said.