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Slow Start for Military Corps in Afghanistan

By [ERIC SCHMITT](#)

WASHINGTON — The military's effort to build a seasoned corps of expert officers for the Afghan war, one of the highest priorities of top commanders, is off to a slow start, with too few volunteers and a high-level warning to the armed services to steer better candidates into the program, according to some senior officers and participants.

The groundbreaking program is meant to address concerns that the fight in [Afghanistan](#) has been hampered by a lack of continuity and expertise in the region among military personnel. But some officers have been reluctant to sign up for an unconventional career path because they fear it will hurt their advancement — a perception that top military leaders are trying to dispel as they tailor new policies for the complex task of taking on resilient insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Each military branch has established career paths, and the type of focus envisioned by the program would take people off those routes.

The difficulties with the program came to light when the chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), in an unusual rebuke within the Pentagon's uppermost circle, chided the chiefs of the four armed services three weeks ago for not always providing the best people.

The program — which is expected to create a 912-member corps of mostly officers and enlisted service members who will work on Afghanistan and Pakistan issues for up to five years — [was announced with much fanfare](#) last fall. So far, 172 have signed up, and Admiral Mullen has questioned whether all of them are right for such a critical job.

The initiative was championed by Admiral Mullen and Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the senior commander in Afghanistan. It is intended not only to bolster the war effort, but also to signal a long-term strategic partnership with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Some military officials argue that it takes time to make such a significant change, and that the program is not lagging at all.

In a [memo](#) sent last month to the chiefs of the [Army](#), Navy, [Air Force](#) and Marine Corps, Admiral Mullen expressed concern that the services were not consistently providing the "best and the brightest leaders" for the program's corps, whose members will work in the field and at headquarters.

"In many cases, the volunteers have been the right people for this very critical program," Admiral Mullen said in the one-page memo, dated Dec. 14. "However, I am concerned that this is not the case across the board."

Admiral Mullen emphasized to the chiefs that the program was the “military’s number-one manpower priority and requires your constant attention.” He stressed that volunteers should be rewarded for participating, and that their involvement should enhance, not hurt, their careers.

The program was conceived as a way to develop a pool of uniformed experts who would spend several years rotating between assignments in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and desk jobs in Washington or other headquarters working on the same regional issues. At the outset, volunteers receive cultural training and 16 weeks of language instruction in Dari, Pashto or Urdu. In time, they are expected to provide a deep bench for assignments that could significantly alter the course of the war.

The military expects to fill all of the positions by the summer of 2011. The first 304 positions — including trainers, military planners and advisers to Afghan ministries — will be assigned in Afghanistan and Pakistan by November 2010.

The first class of volunteers started instruction in November and included 102 people, but the second class, which started Monday, has only 60. Military officials say the smaller second class did not reflect a lack of interest in the program, but was indicative of refinements to the program and a recognition that the first class had grown too rapidly.

But General McChrystal said through a spokesman that the effort had been “understaffed,” and that he had also asked the branches of the military for their top performers. “We have to be willing to break traditional career models; we’ve literally got to break systems to do this,” General McChrystal said.

So far, the Army has provided 69 volunteers for the 363 positions it has been assigned to fill; the Navy, 30 for 183 jobs; the Air Force, 45 for 225 positions; the [Marines](#), 19 for 63 slots; and civilian agencies, 9 for 78 positions, according to a Pentagon tally.

Admiral Mullen’s spokesman, Capt. John Kirby, said his boss, a former chief of naval operations, recognized the challenges faced by each of the armed services in meeting internal personnel needs while also adjusting to the nation’s war footing in Afghanistan.

“Since he is asking for the best, he wants to ensure that those people remain competitive throughout their career,” Captain Kirby said. “Again, if left to their own devices, our systems wouldn’t necessarily support this.”

Captain Kirby said that Admiral Mullen had consulted with the service chiefs before issuing his memo and “has been very encouraged by the way the services are responding.” The Navy, for example, now includes specific language on its promotion boards that discusses the value of the program, Captain Kirby said.

The Air Force has promised to accelerate its participation. “He has encouraged all to have a sense of urgency,” Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, the Air Force chief of staff, said by e-mail. “I believe his memo conveys that well.”

Indeed, one highly regarded Air Force officer recommended for the program happens to be Admiral Mullen’s chief speechwriter, Lt. Col. Timothy R. Kirk. Admiral Mullen approved his transfer, and Colonel Kirk started language training on Monday.

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