



# Rebuilding Afghanistan's National Security Forces

## Fighting Asymmetry with Symmetry

Major General Michael R. Boera, U.S. Air Force, and Lieutenant Colonel Paul R. Birch, U.S. Air Force

Major General Michael R. Boera is the director of Plans and Programs, Headquarters Air Combat Command, Langley Air Force Base, VA. From September 2009 to September 2010, he was the commanding general, Combined Air Power Transition Force (CAPTF), NATO Training Mission, Afghanistan, and Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan (NTM-A/CSTC-A) in Kabul. He led a Joint organization to mentor, train, and assist the Afghan Air Force. He holds a B.S. from the University of Colorado and an M.A. from Central Michigan University.

Lieutenant Colonel Paul R. Birch is the director of operations, 335th Fighter Squadron, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, NC. From September 2009 to September 2010, he was the strategic initiatives lead for the Combined Air Power Transition Force. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Air Force Academy, an M.S. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a M.A. in military strategy from the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL.

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PHOTO: Afghan National Army Air Corps personnel conduct a pre-flight inspection of their Mi-17 helicopter before a training mission at the Kabul Airport, Afghanistan, 5 February 2009 (photo by MCPL Robert Bottrill).

**A**SYMMETRY: WAYS TO exploit it, and means to counter it pervade the thinking of military professionals as much today as it did a decade ago. *The Guardian*, immediately after 9/11, pointed out that “asymmetric warfare” had become a “buzz phrase.”<sup>1</sup> The need for military professionals to be experts at asymmetric warfare has become a dominant theme in Western military literature and thinking.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense directive that addresses irregular warfare says plainly, “IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.”<sup>3</sup> Quoting this guidance, U.S. Joint doctrine advocates asymmetric means for conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare.<sup>4</sup> Individual services’ doctrinal publications continue the theme, and many nations either borrow directly from U.S. doctrine with respect to this point or echo similar themes.<sup>5</sup>

To those engaged in the campaign to build security capability within Afghanistan, the conflict remains “asymmetric” by current definitions of the term. Insurgent military capabilities exhibit (to borrow from General Montgomery Meigs’ definition of asymmetric warfare) “an absence of a common basis of comparison” with the military capabilities of the coalition nations fighting and working to stabilize Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Although earlier U.S. Joint doctrine identified asymmetry as applying only to techniques used against friendly forces, later scholarship recognized that asymmetric techniques are used by both sides. In fact, the search for an asymmetric advantage is the key to *any* successful combat endeavor, whether in irregular war or conventional war.<sup>7</sup> Whatever insights we have gained into asymmetric warfare in recent years, solid techniques for waging successful asymmetric warfare are harder to come by.

Those of us gathered around a dining table at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) compound listened intently, therefore, when a senior advisor and retired flag officer from one of our coalition partner countries asserted, “*We must combat asymmetry with symmetry.*”<sup>8</sup>

This was a novel turn of phrase. Was unfamiliarity with the wars occurring in southwest Asia causing him to neglect the character of war there? No: he was drawing on extensive experience as a veteran of the Iraq War and had been working for months in Afghanistan.

Had he dismissed the body of knowledge germane to fourth-generation warfare, expanded recently at the expense of thousands of coalition and Afghan lives?<sup>9</sup> Was he advocating that the coalition find a way to turn the struggle in Afghanistan into a conventional war, one that ignores “hearts and minds” and instead uses large-scale maneuver tactics to bring stability to Afghanistan?

The answer to these questions is an emphatic “No.” Far from dismissing received wisdom about how to conduct effective counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, the speaker, British Lieutenant-General Sir Graeme Cameron Maxwell Lamb, was offering a useful way to consider the nature of asymmetry and helping spur some creative thinking essential to success in asymmetric warfare. In summarizing

his observation—“symmetry of all parts of the government, its armed forces, the coalition, the international community, those in the fight, and those supporting the fight will, if applied with rigor, overwhelm those who have had to contest by asymmetric means”—he offered something that all coalition forces must appreciate: some of the most effective force multipliers in the Afghanistan COIN struggle are the professionalism, standards, and discipline that coalition forces impart.<sup>10</sup> Military organizations displaying—and passing on—these positive influences offer a welcome alternative to the chaos and misery inflicted on a nation that has suffered for more than three decades under insurgency, civil war, and oppressive governments.

General Lamb’s comments have immediate relevance to members of the NATO command charged with building effective security forces in Afghanistan. The Combined Air Power Transition Force—which in September 2010 was renamed the NATO Air Training Command (NATC)—is a subordinate command to the NATO Training



US Navy, MCS2 David Quillen

**BG David W. Allvin, commanding general, 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, NATO Air Training Command- Afghanistan, left, BG Michael Boera, commanding general Combined Air Power Transition Force, LTG Gilmary Hostage, commander, U.S. Air Forces Central Command, Southwest Asia, and LTG William B. Caldwell, commanding general, NATO Training Mission and Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, stand at attention for the national anthems of Afghanistan and the United States during the change of command ceremony between Boera and Allvin held on the Afghan Air Force base in Kabul, 7 September 2010.**

Mission, Afghanistan and the Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan (NTM-A/CSTC-A), commanded by Lieutenant General William Caldwell, IV. The NATO Air Training Command is a coalition advisory team that works with the Afghanistan Air Force (AAF) and other national security institutions as a catalyst to rebuild national aviation capabilities. Members of NATC have observed the value of a specific kind of “symmetry” in waging a COIN campaign. In this article, we set forth two perspectives from which this kind of symmetry helps Afghanistan. One is the pursuit of military effectiveness, and the second is the larger effort to restore social order. These perspectives should shape the current approach to COIN warfare, particularly in generating security forces. They are integral to the success of the 46-nation coalition that is trying to restore order and peace to Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

## Military Perspective

The case for military effectiveness is a fundamental perspective to address because generating capable, sufficiently large, and competent Afghan security forces is the NTM-A/CSTC-A’s main effort. In building these security forces, striking a balance between COIN and conventional capability is important. COIN doctrine possesses a specific understanding of asymmetry. In this setting, “symmetry” has a pejorative context, so we have to distinguish the kind of symmetry we are advocating. Like Lieutenant General Lamb, we do not call into question the utility of indirect methods or engaging the population, the cornerstone of our current COIN doctrine. Nor do we dispute that unique, unpredictable measures are required to fight insurgents here. The coalition is not fighting a conventionally equipped enemy in Afghanistan whose equipment and tactics mirror our own. An

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approach that uses symmetry to engage asymmetry does not ignore asymmetric advantages and disadvantages.

**Symmetry and order.** Instead, this approach equates symmetry with order, and prioritizes it as a precondition for military success. Before Afghanistan’s internal security forces can employ effective “irregular” tactics, they need a strong foundation of basic and advanced military competency. To construct this competency, we must follow a building-block approach of consistent training, reinforced at every step with detailed instructor feedback and documented with a written record of performance. Although it may seem obvious to anyone who has participated in military training, this structured approach constitutes an indispensable symmetry in the pursuit of COIN capability.

The former ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, described the building of COIN capabilities within the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) as imperative “so that Afghans themselves can assume greater responsibility over the security of their country.”<sup>12</sup> Afghan aviation, elementary though it is now, provides proficient battlefield mobility and promises to grow into a robust system able to transport Afghanistan’s infantry-centric COIN forces to fight at the right time and place. The Afghan Air Force can reliably provide medical airlift capability for wounded soldiers and police, and in January 2010 demonstrated its ability to control rotary wing attack assets with newly minted forward observers. On 13 February 2010, the air force conducted its first operational air assault mission.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of these successes, we must be relentless in our pursuit of airlift, aero-medical evacuation, and close air support capabilities—they are the heart of COIN-centric air power. However, to be effective, our basic methods will be neither unconventional nor creatively novel. On the contrary, they will exhibit a great deal of conventional order and symmetry.

**Aviation capacity development.** It is worth mentioning here that the ANSF includes more than just traditional military forces. In Afghanistan, the effort to build effective police forces is at least as important as the effort to create military capacity. The need for police forces capable of conducting

operations in the style of light infantry, for example, has made the European Gendarmerie Force a model of choice for the development of civil-order police in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> The government of Afghanistan is so enthusiastic about the concept that it has changed the name of the erstwhile “Afghan National Civil Order Police” to the “Afghan Gendarmerie Force.”

Coalition aviators, likewise, make contributions to air policing. In addition to building COIN capacity among the Afghan airmen who operate and support the fixed-wing and rotary-wing fleets, NATC personnel help develop the aircrew of a rotary-wing aerial interdiction squadron in the Ministry of the Interior’s Counter-Narcotics Division.

Regardless of the category (military or police) of the aviation forces, analyses using “mission, enemy, terrain/weather, troops/support, time available, and civil considerations” (METT-TC) inevitably causes concern when one considers the “troops” (or “airmen”). Often, these concerns focus on the training these aviators have received.

In all militaries, aviation training is a complicated endeavor. Basic pilot training alone takes at least a year, and advanced courses to make operators tactically proficient must follow the initial training. Additionally, aviation’s common language is English, and Afghanistan’s flyers must be proficient before they can continue flight training. This requirement often adds a year of intensive language training to the time investment, but it is essential that pilots conform to the International Civil Aviation Organization standards, which stipulate operations in English. Further, age imbalances in the Afghan Air Force’s demographic makeup mean that it will be decades before Afghanistan has a self-sustaining pilot training pipeline.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, investment in aviation capability requires a long-term vision. Before NATC’s involvement as a bridging force for the air force, training was almost non-existent. Afghanistan’s limited aviation capability was cobbled together from surviving remnants of the last decade of



U.S. Air Force, SSgt Sarah Brown

LTG William B. Caldwell, IV, NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan commander (center), and Afghan Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak, Minister of Defense, watch an Afghan Air Force pilot candidate use a rotary wing simulator at the Thunder Lab in Afghanistan, 10 August 2010. The Thunder Lab is an English immersion course that teaches new Afghan lieutenants about Western culture, leadership development, and aviation operations in preparation for their pilot training.

civil war. To its leaders, dedicating platforms and flight hours to training missions seemed irresponsible. Yet, without this short-term sacrifice, the overall system will stagnate, withering when Afghanistan's already-aged operators can no longer fly.<sup>16</sup> Emphasis on long-term goals and the need for replacement training is a form of symmetry that NATC contributes. We must graft the structure required to instill a long-term view onto Afghanistan's military organization through external advisors and give it time to take root. Building meaningful training structures requires patience on the part of NATO allies and relies on a consistent, symmetric approach applied over many years.

**Command and control.** The need for patience in applying a consistent mentoring approach is important to every commander charged with building Afghan security forces, and it grows in importance with the level of complexity. Just as it takes decades for a soldier to progress from basic infantryman to a *kandak* (battalion) commander to a general capable of commanding a corps, the development of meaningful institutional command and control processes takes time. One of NATC's biggest challenges on this front is developing effective command and control for Afghan air power. The Afghan Air Force must clear this final hurdle if it is to take full responsibility for internal air power-based security.

To help instill this form of symmetry, NATC works diligently to train Afghan Air Force personnel and expose them to effective types of aviation command and control. The current favored mode of controlling aviation assets here is something we call "cell phone command and control." This is a practice during which senior commanders make allocation and apportionment decisions at the last minute, asserting authority by giving orders into a handset. Part of the reason for this institutional habit is Afghanistan's previous use of a Soviet model of

highly centralized control. Soviet command and control in the 1980s was far from using "mission command" as a foundational principle, and the lack of initiative among tactical commanders brought up under that system is striking.<sup>17</sup>

The problem is not purely cultural, however. Afghan's cell phone command and control reflects a tendency for technological "reach back" to become "reach forward" by higher headquarters, a problem experienced by the U.S. Air Force in the opening years of Operation Enduring Freedom and with which all modern air forces continually struggle.<sup>18</sup> It is not just cell phones that increase the temptation to centralize all aspects of air power command and control; the modern air operations center has the same effect.<sup>19</sup>

Cell phone command and control works passably for a tiny fleet of airplanes—and complements Afghanistan's traditional culture of patriarchal, centralized decision making, but it will fail as air power capacity expands. To help facilitate the ANAAC's development of effective command and control, NATC has helped establish an air corps command center. The nascent capabilities of this organization have begun to interface with the larger allied air operations controlled by the ISAF Joint Operations Center at Kabul International Airport. As Afghan air presence increases, the interface will grow larger, until Afghanistan is ready to take control of all its airspace and all of the air power employed here.

**Leadership development.** In helping the Afghan Air Force develop these capabilities, we expose its leadership to NATO's best air power command and control organizations to demonstrate the practices to run the extensive network of coalition air power arrayed over Afghanistan. In a recent example, Brigadier General Abdul Wahab Wardak, the Afghan Air Force chief of staff, and Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad Tahir, deputy chief of air plans for the Afghan Ministry

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of Defense, joined members of NATC for a tour of several organizations that operate at Bagram Air Base. Major General Curtis Scaparrotti, the Combined Joint Task Force 82 commander, and Brigadier General Steven Kwast, the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, sponsored the trip as a way of increasing cooperation between Bagram units and the Afghan people they support.

Follow-on training opportunities have centered on helicopter training with the 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade and aero-medical evacuation training with the 455th Aero-Medical Evacuation Squadron. Both operations allow our Afghan counterparts to see effective command and control being practiced on a large scale. Tangible evidence of success in this area came when the Afghan Air Force made the decision to send more helicopters from Kabul to Kandahar to support operations in southern Afghanistan. The move was coordinated at a national level and was not a last-minute agreement between regional commanders.<sup>20</sup>

Imparting a long time horizon for training and instilling a command and control vision in the Afghan Air Force are but two examples of needed symmetry in Afghanistan's military forces that NATC fills. While the need for symmetry is easily evident in developing basic military capability, a broader goal in Afghanistan is that the growth of symmetry in the military will have a far-reaching effect on the society it protects. This is a much more ambitious goal, but it is a tacit assumption in the strategy that has made growth of Afghan security forces the NTM-A/CSTC-A's top priority.

## Societal Perspective

The value of symmetry in NATO's Afghan COIN efforts appears in a second, societal frame of reference. Two facets of it—the osmosis of military order into a society and the ways a society perceives attempts to imbue it with order—reveal a deep appreciation of symmetry's benefits.

Consider first the value of military structure and discipline in a civilization. Simply having structured systems in place may be helpful for military efficiency, but the ideals that make militaries work can also form a foundation upon which societies stand. Samuel Huntington paid homage to the professionalism of a modern officer corps in his classic work *The Soldier and the*

*State*. In his depiction of the order and symmetry of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he rhapsodized about how military structure can bolster the society it exists to protect: “On the military reservation the other side of the South Gate, however, exists a different world. There is ordered serenity. The parts do not exist on their own, but accept their subordination to the whole . . . The post is suffused with the rhythm and harmony which comes when collective will supplants individual whim.”<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the order of West Point, the chaotic streets of today's Kabul are an apt metaphor for Afghanistan's corruption, the country's most pressing problem in many public officials' estimates. Corruption begins at an individual level with a “get-mine-first” attitude that values short-term personal gain over long-term social stability. Endemic corruption surfaces in all of the nation's institutions, and the Afghan Air Force is no exception. In the context of military training and operations, NATC advisors stress to their Afghan Air Force partners the importance of rejecting theft, graft, and bribery in building an effective organization.

The idea of “stamping out corruption” is not in itself an effective strategy, however. Of greater importance to NATC is helping Afghan military leaders build transparent institutions. As individual members of the Afghan Air Force see their organization reward high performance and promote based on capability and effort rather than tribal ties or family connections, their concept of national service will change. Although reducing and eliminating corruption is an unavoidable step, the development and reinforcement of similar values that percolate back into Afghan society is a prerequisite for building a sustainable ANSF. More recent civil-military relations literature has argued the specific point that military norms facilitate the growth of functioning democracies, and there is reason that effective military discipline can directly reinforce Afghanistan's new experiment with openly elected government.<sup>22</sup>

Still, using military structure alone as a blunt instrument with which to reshape a whole society is too simplistic. The imposed structure must accommodate the society, even as it hopes to rehabilitate it. By way of analogy, consider the example of “broken windows” policing techniques, which aim to tackle minor neighborhood disorder before it



U.S. Air Force, Ssgt Sarah Brown

**Afghan children play near the base of a mountain-top cave overlooking the city of Kandahar, 2 June 2010. The overlook is also the site of an Afghan National Army remote outpost.**

blossoms into serious crime.<sup>23</sup> Many Americans associate these methods with former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his first police commissioner, William Bratton.<sup>24</sup> Reputable studies have validated the success of “broken windows” techniques.<sup>25</sup>

The overall effort to grow the ANSF has parallels to “broken windows” policing. Above all, it is an attempt to create order in the face of chaos. The commitment of the international community reflects its confidence that the Afghan people can secure their own future under an initial umbrella of enhanced protection, just as a neighborhood free from thuggish behavior can reverse a tide of crime after a few months. Studies differentiating effective policing techniques from those that merely increase fear in the minds of residents point to the care with which we must administer those programs. Successful programs make it clear to innocent residents that the increased patrols and enforcement are targeting crime, not them.<sup>26</sup>

Our challenge is similar in Afghanistan. Despite the best coalition intentions, efforts amount

to naught if the people we aim to help do not perceive our involvement favorably. Unless the structures and techniques we offer to the ANSF are appropriate for this environment, coalition presence becomes a burden rather than a balm. NATC and other commands that operate under the NTM-A/CSTC-A have captured this idea in the phrase “listen to the mountains.”<sup>27</sup> Borrowed from the school-building mountaineer Greg Mortenson, the slogan reminds us that we cannot attempt to build a military for Afghanistan that is a replica of Western militaries or we will isolate the very people we are trying to help.

As an example, Afghanistan is nowhere near the U.S. military in its information technology (IT) capability, but it has a very robust human intelligence capability, one that is better than those of most Western countries. Trying to saddle the Afghan Air Force with an IT-intensive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance system like that of the U.S. Air Force would not only overwhelm this society, but also distract the force from effectively employing a capability that it now enjoys. Coalition “assistance” would be perceived as—and

would *be*—unhelpful meddling, not the useful symmetry that we can provide as advisors with a constant awareness of what is appropriate for our Afghan partners.

In contrast, air power that is appropriate is the airlift support that enables national elections. In August 2009, Mi-17 helicopters flew to all parts of Afghanistan, including areas inaccessible by road or any other kind of aircraft, to deliver official ballots. This is a perfect example of how NATC's efforts create a basic military competency—the ability to fly to isolated areas—while at the same time enabling democracy. Similar synergy will come from Afghan Air Force recruiting efforts. Those who choose to serve their country as pilots, gunners, and aircraft maintainers—“Eagles for Afghanistan”—will continue to build military capability.<sup>28</sup> Even greater, however, will be the effect on thousands of schoolchildren, buoyed by the concept that diligent study can lead them to a career in their nation's own advanced air force. There is no better way to combat

the asymmetric challenge of the extremist *madrassa* than by expanding opportunities and motivation for the symmetry of a modern education.

## Maintenance of Symmetry

The examples above show how improving the Afghan Air Force's military capabilities can benefit Afghan society. In the act of rebuilding the national ministries, military institutions, and unit capabilities, the presence and maintenance of symmetry offers hope to a war-torn country. “In order,” Huntington wrote, “is found peace; in discipline, fulfillment; in community, security.”<sup>29</sup> General McChrystal defined the pursuit of order in Afghanistan as ISAF's main effort. NATC, proceeding on its urgent mission to equip Afghanistan with enduring air power capacity, shares the same vision. In modeling discipline and symmetry to the aviators with whom we interact, we are confident that the people of Afghanistan possess the ability to defeat the myriad asymmetric challenges arrayed against their society. **MR**

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15. “Self-sustaining” means that Afghan pilots with operational experience can train the entire set of prospective future ANAAC pilots. Afghanistan does not have enough experienced pilots to do this at present. ANAAC leadership has expressed

a desire to segregate older pilots from new pilots. The intent is that the modern capabilities and tactics they learn will not be corrupted by the habits of senior officers whose skills have stagnated over decades of inactivity and whose tactics are of an outdated Soviet mode.

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28. The AAF's official recruitment slogan translates from Dari to “Be an Eagle for Afghanistan.”

29. Huntington, 465.