



Early Mistakes with Security Forces Advisory Teams in Afghanistan

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IN MID-2011, THE commander-in-chief announced the withdrawal of combat troops in Afghanistan by 2014. Overnight, the security forces advisory team (SFAT), rather than the brigade combat team (BCT), became the focal point of the war effort. Senior level military planners had the unenviable task of converting the theoretical into reality. When the first wave of these advisory teams were set to deploy in spring of 2012, the entire leadership of several BCTs received orders to start planning for a short-notice deployment as combat advisors. Such a dramatic strategy shift from the BCT to the 12-man SFAT in Afghanistan was a necessary change in methodology, but brought with it the natural friction and challenges inherent to any rapid change of mission.

Future SFATs will be more prepared with more advance notice and a more deliberate train-up prior to deployment. However, senior leaders must address other significant shortcomings before the next wave of advisors arrives or we are doomed to fight through the same “ambush” repeatedly. Most critically, we must organize SFATs more appropriately for their assigned missions, and once assigned, it should be rare if not unheard of to alter that SFAT mission or partner. Frivolous reassignments can, at the stroke of a pen, render weeks or months of training useless and indicate an attitude that predeployment training is irrelevant.

Defining command and support relationships (a headache for the majors and lieutenant colonels of division, brigade, and battalion level staffs) must be clearly outlined. We wasted weeks while members of our small advisory team muddled through the steps of learning how to support themselves in an austere outlying base, determining who to report to, and more importantly, who was their higher headquarters. Was it the landowning battalion commander or the brigade?

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PHOTO: LTC Michael McDermott, commander, 3d Zone, Afghan Border Police (ABP), Security Forces Advisory Team, speaks to Afghan LTC Gholam Rasoul, operations officer, 3rd Zone Afghan ABP, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 15 April 2011. (U.S. Army, SGT Joseph J. Johnson)

Campaign plans and orders seemed nebulous and poorly understood as they applied to SFATs. While we expect the teams to operate in relatively unstructured environments, a unifying theme or framework should address the benchmarks for success. If a document with such content does exist, a commander needs to take the time to look SFAT members in the eye and brief his expectations.

Team Organization: Getting the Basics Right

Given the necessity to be self-sustaining, and the relatively small size of a SFAT, composition and selection are of far greater importance than in a larger more conventional unit. Yet we found the organization of our team to be almost arbitrary.

The original requirement for our own SFAT mission was to form a 12-man team configured to collaborate with an Afghan Border Patrol battalion. These units are paramilitary and have a bit more firepower than a police district. They have access to indirect fire, and their geographic location tends to put them in remote bases closer to the border with Pakistan. They tend to engage in direct fire engagements more frequently and their missions are analogous to dismounted infantry patrolling. These factors influenced us to select several fire supporters for the team, and to weight our composition with combat arms officers and soldiers.

Training focused nearly as much on being able to defend ourselves and fight as a squad as it did on advising Afghans. We made this decision based on the assumption that we would not have additional combat power assigned to assist us with force protection and to help run day-to-day operations on our outpost.

We divided precious time between trying to learn unfamiliar communication systems, reviewing small unit tactics, qualifying drivers in new vehicles, and catching up on the latest advances in command post and TOC operations. Simultaneously, our team was learning to train an Afghan to be a border policeman. Frankly, we were trying to learn what the border police does. This dichotomy came at a cost. Rather than becoming experts at all the right skills, we could only train to mediocrity at dozens of potential skills we might need. Moreover, once we finally thought the team was ready to take

on the challenge of advising a border patrol unit, we received an extemporaneous change of mission. Our team would pair with an Afghan Police District headquarters.

This revelation (among others) came in the final weeks prior to deployment. As it turns out, we had our own security platoon to provide us fixed site security and mobility around the battlefield. In an instant, virtually half of our training and several of our teammates' positions became irrelevant. Now we had six junior NCOs and soldiers without a day of staff experience and without any specified purpose. A capricious development of SFAT organization, paired with last minute changes of mission and a lack of timely information, put our team at significant disadvantages before we had even arrived in Afghanistan. Advanced warning and timely information about our future mission would have significantly changed the selection of our team members.

However, the most significant change of team composition occurred without warning after we arrived in Afghanistan. Upon our arrival in country, our SFAT discovered that two unknown National Guardsmen would fill the position of team leader and NCOIC. My first sergeant and I were no longer the team chief and NCOIC. This same stunning announcement surprised several other SFATs.

Personnel changes create significant turbulence in small units. The sudden change in leadership after the team had already coalesced into a tight-knit group called for enormous amounts of patience, flexibility, and professionalism from everyone. Our team knew how its membership behaved in stressful situations, how each sounded on the radio, and what kind of decisions the leadership made. My first sergeant and I had developed a well-functioning command climate, one consistent with our leadership style. That chemistry changed significantly with the addition of new leadership. I do not mean to skewer our newer team members. Through no fault of their own, they too were put in a difficult position by this capricious decision.

Professionals have to work through challenges presented by egos and other inconveniences. However, our point of contention with this last decision was less about ego than it was about the fickle and arbitrary change in team leadership at a vulnerable point in our deployment. These changes ran at



LTC Michael McDermott, commander, 3d Zone, Afghan Border Police Security Forces Advisory Team, meeting with Afghan Border Police during Operation Lara Pranistal in the Shorabak District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 12 April 2011.

cross-purposes to the central strategy of providing an effective advisory effort. If the SFAT is to be an enduring and decisive part of our strategy, we as an institution must be more deliberate with its selection and composition. The senior leadership involved in these changes seemed out of step with war effort.

Command and Support Relationships: Who Does Number Two Work For?

Given the relatively unconventional nature of the SFAT effort, it is understandable that there is some inherent difficulty developing doctrinally orthodox command and support relationships. Still, we have to meet the challenge and cannot shrug it off as an academic exercise in doctrine. We found that officers at every headquarters were hesitant to address this issue. One can only ask “why?”

The battalion’s task organization chart did not depict or define its relationship with the SFATs in doctrinal terms. We did not know, but had to assume we were under the operational control of the battalion headquarters. We did not know, but had to assume that the platoon supporting us was under our tactical control. These questions are not trivial, and it was not long before our inadequately addressed command-support relationship was an obvious liability.

This gap in our understanding became especially apparent in reporting. Our SFAT, whose primary responsibility began as simply advising, crept more and more into the purview of a battalion or brigade staff. Brigade staff officers began sending direct tasks to our team. Mindless assignments of tasks to SFATs required advisors to be absent for days at a time to receive “check the block training” at some mega-base away from our Afghan partners. Even division staff would occasionally issue tasks

directly to SFATs. The tasking headquarters did not often consult battalion headquarters or notify it of these direct tasks. There seemed to be a systemic division-wide violation of the principle of unity of command.

We took on more and more responsibilities for meetings and reporting that only had a tangential connection to our advisory mission. We submitted redundant daily situation reports, personnel reports, and closure reports to a myriad of organizations in a myriad of different formats. Fusion meetings, linguist meetings, fuel meetings, targeting meetings, tactical infrastructure working groups, partnered back briefs, commanders' update briefs, and their required reports sapped our energy and time for advisory efforts. The division became its own worst enemy. We found ourselves building slides and sitting on conference calls or Adobe Connect meetings to such an extent that our partnership with the Afghans took a backseat. We had no recourse because *no one could articulate to which headquarters we belonged*.

Rather than feeding our reports through a single battalion staff, we were obediently sending information to everyone and every organization who demanded it. Somewhere along the way, we became a de facto liaison to the Afghan Uniformed Police, rather than their advisors. In such situations, one cannot help but think they are being set up for failure.

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To make matters worse, we found that our own Afghan District Police had a higher headquarters whose advisors did not fall under or report to our own ISAF brigade headquarters. The entire idea of shadow-tracking communication between the Afghan echelons was lost in our own ISAF headquarters misalignment. Our assumption for training was that we would have access to advisors partnered with our Afghans' higher headquarters. That would allow us to determine the breakdown in their staff

systems if we could follow a report or request from its originator to the intended recipient, allowing for unity of effort. However, confusing and illogical reporting channels and arbitrary unit boundaries obscured an otherwise simple process.

Much of our work could not take place within a formal structure because these advisors had no obligation to maintain routine communication with us and vice versa. Without a unifying U.S. headquarters to force the provincial level advisors to communicate with their district counterparts, we never managed to break through this gridlock. Many opportunities to leverage the Afghan chain of command were lost to this senseless lack of organization.

Equally challenging was the dearth of sustainment support. Although at least a half dozen organizations required daily or weekly reports and meeting attendance, none was too keen to offer sustainment support. Again, the lack of a clearly outlined command-support relationship meant there was no one and no organization responsible for sustaining our SFAT. This problem was less prominent for those operating on larger forward operating bases with a battalion- or brigade-provided base defense operations center, but in outlying bases, it was outright crippling.

In the end, our logistical advisor assumed responsibility and succeeded in ensuring our outpost received the sustainment we needed, but it came at the expense of his partnership. We were never able to break the stalemate of struggling to provide for ourselves in an austere base and helping the Afghans become better at sustaining themselves, two jobs that were enormous in themselves.

Moreover, all of his procurement and support efforts depended on informal networking and in some cases calling in favors from fellow officers, a time-consuming process that put a premium on personal charisma and relationship development rather than forcing the logistics system to work as intended. One can only imagine that the staff and commander who conceived this mission framework had worried about anything but how the system would work. Army Doctrine Publication 5-0 provides adequate structure to help define these relationships, but battalion and brigade headquarters have to take the responsibility of assigning and enforcing them in a knowledgeable way.

The Gap between Campaign Design and an Executable Plan

Kandahar Province's constantly changing and highly complex environment required the staff in RC-South to design a plan that allowed for a great deal of flexibility. This problem set was poorly defined and constantly evolving, and therefore a perfect candidate for campaign design methodology, the Army's preferred technique for such unstructured environments. But planners might have overlooked the doctrinal imperative that we integrate our conceptual design methodology with a more detailed process like the military decision-making process to produce an executable plan.

SFATs found themselves searching for a sense of purpose and mission in the early months of the deployment. We saw specific guidance issued to battalion and company headquarters, but every echelon tiptoed around the thorny problem of issuing guidance to dozens of SFATs operating in RC-South. There seemed to be nothing substantive enough for an SFAT to base planning on. We needed something more tangible than a line of effort arrow that says, "Afghan Security Forces Development." We needed guidance that was broad enough to allow us to develop an adaptable plan but with enough specificity that we could plot a few discrete benchmarks to measure progress.

We faced the dilemma of planning in a vacuum. This vacuum was particularly large given the unorthodox mission of security forces advising and the ethereal guidance in brigade and battalion orders. How do we develop our own campaign plan? What should our plan look like? If we are writing an order for ourselves, what are the decisive points? Whose base order do we use to ensure we are properly nested and at the appropriate level?

Eventually, we settled on what became the Police Garrison Concept as the keystone planning guidance for the remainder of our time there. It was never an annex to an OPORD; nor was it ever briefed in a formal setting. We did not direct, or even suggest, that the Police Garrison Concept *was* the framework plan we needed. It was simply, the closest thing to guidance that we could apply to SFATs partnered at the district level.

It took shape, rather spontaneously, in the paragraphs of emails exchanged between advisors. PowerPoint slides with measures of performance



A member of the Afghan National Civil Order Police participates in a dismounted patrol in Sher'Ali Kariz, Maiwand District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 25 February 2012.
(U.S. Army, SPC Jason Nolte)

and measures of effectiveness sometimes landed in our inboxes. Phone conversations between advisory teams informally determined what they ought to do and what was achievable, but always in a casual manner that did not denote that these bits of email traffic and phone calls amounted to the SFAT operational framework.

All police advisory teams did not universally understand this Police Garrison Concept. To some, it meant a blueprint for constructing future police stations or checkpoints, while to others it was a Mission Command plan, and to others still, it was a plan to zone the police districts. While there was some truth to each of these, none by themselves captured the essence of the concept. Essentially, the Police Garrison Concept was the plan for district level Afghan police advisors. Subtly and gradually, we found the guidance that we had been looking for quite by accident.

Advising requires acting without highly specific guidance in highly unstructured environments, but some idea or overarching concept must provide an azimuth to unify our efforts or we will expend our energy fighting in a dozen different directions. Of course we had some of our own ideas coming into the mission and developed more as we went, but without a commonly understood framework like the Police Garrison Concept, our efforts were not focused, and we had difficulty deciphering what battalion, brigade, or division leaders defined as successful for the advisory effort.

Conclusions

It is tempting to view advisory teams as being flaccid, sapping combat power to secure, and yielding minimal visible results. Institutionally, we tend to defer to the warfighter. That is where leadership is most comfortable and the terrain most familiar. In the current operating environment, company commanders have to secure advisors at the expense of their own combat power. Operations officers have to apply scarce resources to advisors whose missions they often do not fully believe in or whose personalities make them unpleasant to interact with. Battalion commanders are often the same rank as advisors or possibly even junior to SFAT leaders who fall under their operational control. These factors intensify the sometimes-adversarial attitudes that can develop between conventional forces and their advisor counterparts. In the end, the solution is nothing new or unique, but will require the attentive officers and noncommissioned officers who lead the joint task forces, regional commands, and major Army commands to make decisions that may not be popular or with which they may not be comfortable.

Leadership at the BCT, regional command, and combatant command level can and must negotiate the often-uncharted waters of the advisory team and land-owning unit relationships without flinching. We must define, codify, and enforce the relationship without regard for rank-related discomfiture. Pride must give way to strategic interests. Division and brigade staffs must respect the orders process and base their interaction with SFATs upon the command-support relationship

rather than bypassing intermediate headquarters and directly tasking them. This will necessarily place greater stress on battalion headquarters, but we can mitigate it by adding a senior captain or major to act as a liaison to the SFATs. Every headquarters must ruthlessly seek out and eliminate redundant reporting.

Forces command and regional commands must take a more deliberate approach to building and assigning the SFAT composition. A change to an SFAT's mission after the completion of home-station training and the requisite rotation to the Joint Readiness Training Center is a clear indicator that we are not respecting the institutional differences between Afghan Security Forces. Afghan Army, Border Police, and Uniformed Police each require a very different approach as they have significantly different cultures. SFATs are not as interchangeable as infantry squads. Advisors must train, research, and prepare for their specific partnered force. Just as we would expect a BCT to remain on a consistent glide path for predeployment preparation, so we must provide that same stability to the SFAT if it is to succeed.

Finally, the brigade and battalion leadership must have all their subordinate SFAT leadership in one room and issue guidance that clearly states the benchmarks for success in the advisory effort. Time is too short for advisors to deduce their commander's guidance over the course of several months. These benchmarks must have enough specificity to give direction, but enough latitude to adjust to the local conditions of each SFAT operating environment. The possibility of Afghan Security Force failure is worth considering. We must accept this will occur at times and honestly report failure when it happens. Occasionally, brigades and battalions must revisit these benchmarks to maintain relevance and feasibility, particularly when Afghans have setbacks.

Not all is gloomy in the SFAT mission. There are more successes than failures, and there is much to be proud of, especially when one considers the sudden development of the mission and the agility SFATs and conventional formations alike exhibit. Yet, consider how much more powerful and effective the SFAT could be if we applied more effort to these problems before the next advisors arrived in Afghanistan. **MR**