



Lessons from Advising in Afghanistan

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Since the first major combat operations in Afghanistan, the question of how and when the war will end has loomed in the minds of conscientious Americans. Now, as the conflict begins its end stages, the moment has arrived. How will coalition forces transfer the security of Afghanistan to its own security forces as effectively as possible? A critical shift is occurring from responsibility for Afghan security being an International Security Assistance Force mission, to a national Afghan mission. Security Force Advisers become a crucial component for the movement from partnered operations with Afghan defense forces to Afghans running their own operations. While U.S. forces generally understand, advising as a key part of the transition in Afghanistan, the implementation of advising in theater still has difficulties to overcome.

As an infantry first lieutenant currently serving as an intelligence adviser to an Afghan National Army (ANA) Infantry Kandak (Battalion) in Regional Command-East, I had the opportunity to develop some observations on the current

implementation of Security Force Advise and Assist Teams (SFAATs) that I will share in this paper.

Prior to this deployment, I attended the SFAAT Academy at Fort Polk, working as an Operations Adviser for an Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) district. Following the SFAAT Academy, I stayed at Fort Polk and did a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center, and took charge of a team for an AUP district. Based on these experiences and my observations while deployed to Afghanistan, I learned both general and specific lessons concerning the advising policy in Afghanistan. These insights, summarized in six broad areas, are: selecting qualified people, selecting amiable people, proper preparation, understanding context while deployed, providing the right environment to improve, and keeping the big picture at the forefront.

Qualified people: The concept of advising requires an experienced individual mentoring a less experienced or knowledgeable mentee toward competence, expertise, or even wisdom. The goal is to have the mentee near the same level of skill and knowledge as the mentor,

which requires a wise advisor. Wisdom is not simply rote memorization of doctrine or a high degree of competence in a particular task or field. The security advisers on SFAATs must have a thorough understanding of and experience with our respective war fighting functions. They must also understand their role in the bigger picture, as they cannot help their counterparts to think systemically if they themselves do not. The adviser must be more than knowledgeable, but also talented, intelligent and thoughtful.¹ The ability to communicate knowledge well and patiently is more essential than subject matter expertise. The ideal adviser is culturally attuned, and able to explain what he knows to different kinds of people with different thought processes or values. This presents challenges.

Commanders are likely to see a personnel conflict preparing for a deployment when they need to keep their most talented leaders and soldiers in their direct combat power. Adviser teams formed for a brigade deployment must include individuals from that brigade. A commander may feel this requires giving away his

finest and most experienced soldiers. This perceived conflict often leads to assigning less senior, less experienced, or less “essential” individuals to adviser teams leading to teams composed of junior officers and non-commissioned officers, who now must advise at levels potentially far above their current skill and experience. SFAATs may be composed of selected individuals considered non-essential rather than for traits that would guarantee success. In a worst case, malcontents or those considered incompetent are placed on teams to marginalize them. Ultimately, the determination of team composition is likely to prioritize preservation of combat power over an individual’s particular talents or capacity to be an effective adviser.

When this personnel issue presents a conflict, the consequences have a detrimental and counterproductive effect on our relationships with Afghan advisees, and harm their confidence in us. This is especially true in Afghan culture where rank and status are extremely important. Having to listen to lower ranking and sometimes far younger advisers from another nation is a cultural affront difficult

for some of our counterparts to overcome. In my own advising experience, my SFAAT faced great difficulty advising one of the ANA company commanders for this very reason. The ANA commander was a Major in the Afghan Army, and had been a major for the better part of 22 years. Therefore, he considered it an insult to have to listen to first lieutenant or captain advisers who had barely been alive as long as he had been a major. Trying to advise such an officer with a great deal of experience is difficult for even a senior officer; imagine the challenge for junior officers, who could potentially make up a large proportion of SFAATs for reasons mentioned above.

When a team diverts resources away from combat power, or is composed of expendable figures, that team is more likely to be marginalized in theater. An SFAAT that is marginalized by their battalion and brigade (Battle Space Integrators or BSI), will find it very difficult to work effectively because we by design, rely on a parent unit. Until battalion and brigade commanders fully 'buy into' the advisory role and the concept of security forces advising, the SFAAT mission will continue to operate ineffectively in Afghanistan. However, much of this tension can be diffused when commanders differentiate expertise from a talent and passion for teaching. Needs are met all around if they assign candidates who may not be the most expert, but are highly competent and very effective communicators and

mentors. Therefore, a commander can still preserve many of his top people as part of his direct combat power, if he properly understands the advising mission and what types of people are best suited for the role.

Personal qualifications: One of the key components of advising, highlighted during Fort Polk's Adviser Academy, is to build rapport with your counterparts. Rapport is critical. It increases the likelihood advisees will take guidance. It also assists advisers in understanding where they can be most effective. A solid, respectful working relationship also helps reduce resentment that leads to certain types of green-on-blue incidents (term used for insider attacks when members of the Afghan security forces turn on coalition forces). Army doctrine publications on advising, such as FM 3-07.10, state that an adviser should be agreeable, reflective, and empathetic. These traits all serve the purpose of building rapport, and are not taught in a short time, but often inherent in a person's nature. Certain traits are not trained, take years to develop, and should be considered when assigning personnel to adviser teams. The adviser to look for is easygoing but disciplined, assertive but not aggressive or condescending, respected by his peers, and respectful even when stressed or frustrated. The ideal adviser is also open minded, welcomes discussion, and works collaboratively rather than autocratically.

As mentioned previously, rapport is arguably the single most important resource an adviser team has. Two critical aspects of rapport are cultural sensitivity and professional courtesy. Effective advisers understand their advisees' culture, language, and values. An adviser who does not see advisees as professionals and show them respect as such, will accomplish very little, if anything at all. An adviser needs to be an exceptional person in his home unit if he expects to build trust with people from another culture that is inherently distrustful of outsiders. A difficult, insensitive, or pushy individual breeds contempt toward himself and his fellow advisers, which increases the risk of incidents. An example of this occurred when an ANA kandak was pressured, repeatedly and sternly, into supporting an operation that was not in line with their stated objectives and interfered with their planned missions. The resentment developed during this encounter made it difficult for weeks following the mission to get the ANA to meet with, listen to, or even return phone calls from their advisers. For this reason alone, selection of advisors with character and people skills is paramount. Understanding why people skills are such a high priority may increase adherence to this guidance for assembling adviser teams. Failure to do so will also lead to lapses in the professional respect necessary for successful advising.

Training priorities: Imparting the right job-specific knowledge and skills to

advisers is essential to mission success. This seems obvious, but there are serious consequences when training does not keep pace with the reality of the SFAAT mission, which can be a cause for concern. While schools like the Adviser Academy offer good preliminary training for this unconventional assignment, only so much can be accomplished within a time-restricted classroom setting. From my experience, the limited time could be better prioritized. The advise and assist role has been rapidly evolving since its implementation² and the academy is a very powerful tool if it keeps pace with the evolution.

The Adviser Academy would be significantly more effective if instructors were constantly fine-tuning their curriculum based on feedback from their currently deployed classes. It would maximize the limited training time to use recent real life scenarios that current advisers consider essential, or most importantly, wish we had been taught. For example, the ANSF units that I interacted with were all familiar with U.S. doctrine and processes such as the Military Decision Making Process. However, many of these same ANSF units struggle with organizational problems, such as insistence on commanders not issuing guidance to subordinates. This requires changes in organizational culture to fix. Drawing from suggestions by recent classes, a trend might appear that places less value on ability to teach American processes in detail and more

emphasis on organizational attitudes. It would be more beneficial to learn the basics of changing an unhealthy organizational ethos or positively influencing the culture of an organization.

Many of the essential skills for advisers are not allocated adequate time nor have they been properly identified for training. The essential skill of rapport building is difficult to teach and takes practice to master. There is simply not enough time during the course of the Adviser Academy to hone rapport building. Time limitations are also a concern at JRTC, as the only extended interaction time between SFAATs and their counterparts is during the force-on-force exercise. This valuable role-playing experience lasts only 8-10 days. Additionally, unlike the Special Forces teams the SFAATs are loosely modeled on, we are not organic and self-sustaining; most teams receive support and security from their parent unit. Therefore, additional time for more pressing priorities could be made by reducing time spent on training like team convoy standards or team react to contact drills. Close-quarters reactionary shooting, Guardian angel plans, or simple conversation practice in Dari, which are all things uniquely important to the SFAATs, would be far more beneficial.

Instruction on American doctrine is another potential area for time optimization. While learning the finer points of our doctrine enables us to explore the underlying principles of why we do

what we do, it is only marginally useful for advising as such. Much of American doctrine, especially counter-insurgency doctrine, has only been codified recently and is still undergoing major changes.³ More importantly, Afghans do not possess the full array of personnel, training, and technology that our doctrine relies upon for successful implementation. A focus on learning the why of our doctrine empowers advisers to teach our counterparts how to think for themselves. Our goal cannot be to teach them to mimic or replicate our systems, without understanding why (or more critically if) they work in a given context.

Afghans seem good at figuring out a how, as long as they understand the why. For example, the unit my SFAAT advised had no organic bomb disposal capability but found that it could remove command wire detonated improvised explosive devices by hooking the command wires to a truck battery. While this is not the safest approach to reducing the threat, it is an effective means of removing it with the resources they do have, and helps them to accomplish the goal of securing a route. Additionally, advisers would benefit greatly from more time learning Afghan doctrine (which can differ significantly from our own) and further training on the hardware and weapons systems Afghans use that we do not. Understanding how they think and why they do what they do enables us to engage them on a deeper level. We can then either persuasively

overcome resistance to our guidance or collaborate to combine the best of both American and Afghan doctrine in a sustainable way.

Context is key: After over a decade, this war has been the daily reality year in and year out for most units and individuals in the ANA, the AUP, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, while American forces rotate through. They have seen multiple American units—and even more advisers. They are more accustomed to advisement than we are to advising, and generally understand our systems and the assistance we provide. We must remember that a newly arriving SFAAT is not starting with a blank slate. In most instances, it is no longer the mission to build a staff from the ground up, but to refine or fix processes that Afghans worked on over the course of years with advisers. The core of our work is contributing fresh insights and challenging organizational dysfunction, while respecting the work they have done. An example is getting the operations staff of the Kandak to draw information from the intelligence staff for planning purposes. The kandak showed a preference for direct reports from informants rather than relying on their own intelligence staff. Because of this, their operations sometimes missed the larger picture or failed to anticipate the enemy's likely reaction properly. The intelligence staff was actually quite adept at collecting and processing intelligence, but there was

an organizational bias against using them properly. The solution to the problem did not come in the form of teaching the intelligence section proper intelligence processing or simply telling operational planners to get intelligence from the intelligence section, but a nuanced and time intensive process of building trust between the two sections. In fact, this entrenched problem was not addressed by better intelligence or operational processes, or teaching U.S. doctrine, but by understanding the organizational dynamics and learning the kandak's recent history. This led to insight which could be shared, and when integrated, improved the kandak's abilities.

Earlier on, advising often meant hovering over the shoulder of uneducated individuals learning to perform staff functions. That is still what pre-deployment training emphasizes. While this may happen some places down range, it has certainly not been characteristic of this my experience or of any other team within my area of operations. Because scenarios at the Adviser Academy and JRTC have not kept pace with the evolving SFAAT mission, advisers may become discouraged when their advisees do not benefit immensely from quick fixes. At this point in the conflict, most of the easy, overnight changes to the ANSF are complete. The target now is marginal changes that raise them above mere competency to sustainability and excellence. This requires significant effort and produces

less dramatic results. Furthermore, the problems of ANSF units advised for many years are rooted in deep cultural norms or serious chronic issues, like corruption or lack of education. There are no easy fixes to these problems and they will require exhausting, delicate, and innovative solutions. Training at JRTC and the Adviser Academy must reflect both the more advanced abilities of advisees and the more nuanced challenges of advising competent counterparts to improve above sufficiency to mastery.

The Army must adapt and update conventional measures of success for the advise and assist mission, because it is doubtful even exceptional mentorship will have a dramatic impact. At this point, it is highly unlikely the number of missions conducted or targets neutralized will greatly increase. Even the standard ANSF evaluations are metrics-heavy and presume quick, easy fixes. The metrics used no longer accurately evaluate progress with Afghan units that are in advanced stages of development. These benchmarks cannot accurately measure the amount of important work finished and its value to the advised unit. The perception of failure is demoralizing for advisers despite their consistent hard work. Failure only appears so because the increments of success are out of touch with the evolving mission. Therefore, like many other elements of the advising mission, metrics of success must continue to evolve. Developing metrics designed to

measure accurately the kinds of success SFAATs are currently working toward is possible, reasonable, and important to the future of the ISAF mission.

Learning to pick yourself back up:

The advising mission is responsible for developing the capacity in Afghan forces to move from partnered operations to Afghan only operations. As part of this process, coalition forces' enablers, soldiers, and other direct support will continue to decrease until the Afghans themselves run everything. Unfortunately, as part of this process of removing support, the ANSF will, at points, stumble. This is a painful, but inevitable part of diminishing support. It is invaluable, though, because failures and setbacks confront the ANSF with hard lessons they must learn and changes they must make.

Afghan forces will best learn how to conduct operations and support themselves, by dealing with the positive and negative consequences without involvement from us. For example, if every time an ANA unit gets into a firefight with enemy forces, the U.S. unit in the area sends air support; the ANA will rely on that air support and not learn to call higher or parallel ANSF units for support. Consequently, while the air support does prevent casualties in the near term, it is not sustainable. That ANA unit—which learned to operate dependent on a temporary condition of American air support—will undoubtedly suffer greater casualties and setbacks than were

prevented by our intervention. While an adviser team can strive to instill in our Afghan counterparts the need to do things without Coalition Forces' support, they must gain real-life experience operating independently or they will not be adequately prepared.

Imagine for a moment, removing a new bicycle rider's training wheels after a period of supervised practice sessions, then sending them out alone onto the street. This is obviously unsafe, and potentially disastrous. The reasonable thing to do is remove the training wheels while guidance and some support is still being offered, so they can practice without the training wheels before going it truly alone. It is equally unsafe to withdraw support from the Afghans too early in their development, which can also cause irreparable damage. Our job as advisers is to help coordinate a graduated transition of American support backing off as Afghan capabilities increase. At times, it is also necessary, despite the risks, to push them beyond their current abilities to promote continued growth.

Advisers and BSI units must accept stumbling and setbacks as a necessary part of growth so we can walk the fine line of providing support without artificially propping up Afghan forces. To provide appropriate levels of support, advisers and BSI's need to be attuned to the capabilities of our Afghan counterparts, yet gently pushing them to use fewer and fewer coalition forces and enablers.

Since advisers are most in touch with their counterparts' capabilities, it is also key for BSI commanders to trust their SFAAT's recommendations.

Afghan sustainability: The overarching ISAF mission is to transfer control to a stable and effective government and security forces, which are capable of sustaining themselves against insurgents and subversive elements. While American systems and tactics are optimal in many ways, if they are not sustainable or intuitive for our Afghan counterparts, they will fail. The only way to create a sustainable, stable, safe society that does not require outside assistance is to encourage Afghans to take the best of our knowledge, apply it within their own cultural context, and understand their own unique needs and limitations. Too often Adviser and American units lose sight of the big picture by judging Afghan systems only by the standards used to judge American systems. Especially as success is currently measured, advisers can get bogged down in implementing the finer details of American systems. Instead, the focus must be helping the Afghans design their own systems that accomplish our joint goals in ways that make sense with their capabilities, needs, and limitations. While some Afghan systems may not work as well as a fully-operational American system, if the American way is impractical, unsustainable, or culturally incongruent for them, it will crumble when we withdraw. That, ultimately, is a waste of our efforts and

resources, because it does not accomplish the mission objectives in the big picture. 'Afghan-sustainable' is not an excuse for laziness, compromising adviser goals, or lowering appropriate standards. Advisers acknowledge that Afghans will require their own unique solutions, which may not necessarily conform to U.S. doctrine.

The means are truly as important as the ends. We must advise our Afghan counterparts so they thoroughly understand the process and rationale, so they do not focus solely on achieving desired ends. We must make space for them to develop their own mutually agreed upon ends. We must also not let our desire to avoid certain ends (such as battle losses by ANSF) to interfere with their learning the proper means. It is a delicate balance, but one we must achieve to complete this mission.

The SFAAT concept has been pivotal, and to optimize success, the processes of selecting and training advisers, and understanding the nature of this mission demands reevaluation as the mission evolves. Individuals with experience, competence, and wisdom must also have teaching skills and relate well to others. To function optimally we need 1) additional training in rapport-building and organizational psychology, 2) awareness of Afghan culture, doctrine, equipment, and 3) practice dealing with the most prevalent kind of security risk we face, namely, insiders. We need to arrive with realistic expectations about our counterparts and the systems already in place.

We need measures of success that accurately reflect the unconventional nature of the mission's objectives. Finally, we need to focus on the key objective which is sustainability, rather than getting lost in the minutia of exactly replicating American systems.

Advising fulfills that critical step in transitioning from combat missions to completed reconstruction and the host nation resuming complete responsibility for security. Success at this step is essential for the future security of the U.S. and the world. While there are problems in training for and executing the advising mission, there are many young officers dedicated to mission success who are learning lessons and trying to fix the problems within their sphere. However, until we recognize this at the operational and tactical levels, the advising mission will continue to suffer setbacks, and the U.S. and ISAF goal of Afghan self-sufficiency will continue to be delayed. Key improvements are within reach and must be implemented as soon as possible.**MR**

NOTES:

1. Nicholas J. Armstrong, "Afghanistan 2014-2024: Advising for Sustainability," *Small Wars Journal* (May 4, 2012), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/afghanistan-2014-2024-advising-for-sustainability> (accessed October 8, 2013).
2. Wesley Moerbe, "Early Mistakes with Security Forces Advisory Teams in Afghanistan," *Military Review Journal* (May-June, 2013): 24.
3. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-24.2: Tactics in Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC, April 21, 2009), Introduction.