

Conventional Advising: A Tactical Leader's Assessment of a Strategic Initiative

by 1LT Pace L. Jaworski

As Operation Enduring Freedom concludes and International Security Assistance Forces initiate the transition of security and responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces, Armor and Cavalry leaders may be called on to abandon their mounted platforms to conduct an unfamiliar mission as an adviser on a security-force assistance team. This article provides Armor and Cavalry leaders with insight into the challenges faced during the first SFAT mission in Afghanistan from a tactical leader's viewpoint.

Although combat operations will most likely cease by the end of 2014, it is plausible that U.S. armed forces in some capacity will continue to serve in Afghanistan to ensure long-term stability. In 2012, Presidents Barack Obama and Hamid Karzai signed the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States, a legally binding agreement. This agreement ensures our commitment to strengthening Afghan institutions and governance, reinforcing regional security and cooperation and advancing long-term security.¹

The agreement went into effect July 4, 2012, and confirms our commitment to Afghanistan by stating: "The strategic-partnership agreement commits Afghanistan to provide U.S. personnel access to and use of Afghan facilities through 2014 and beyond. The agreement provides for the possibility of U.S. forces in Afghanistan after 2014 for the purposes of training Afghan forces and targeting the remnants of al-Qaeda, and commits the United States and Afghanistan to initiate negotiations on a bilateral security agreement to supersede our current status-of-forces agreement."

According to the agreement, it is presumable that the U.S. armed forces commitment in Afghanistan beyond 2014 will be in an advisory capacity, which the U.S. Army began employing with the SFAT mission in early 2012.

Contrary to popular belief, developing capabilities and increasing capacity through advising is an operation the U.S. Army has conducted for more than one hundred years. The Army has performed advisory missions to increase the capability and capacity of foreign militaries from the Philippine Insurrection at the beginning of the 20th Century to more recent conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

SFAT missions

Advising missions are complex in nature and regularly performed by Special Forces and Civil Affairs units trained extensively in foreign internal-defense operations. Foreign internal defense is typically performed in developing nations with unconventional, small-scale armed forces, making them ideal missions for Special Forces and Civil Affairs. In response to a developing need to train a large-scale force in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army designed and implemented SFATs from modular brigade combat teams to increase the capability and capacity within the various ANSF organizations.

The SFAT mission is crucial to the strategic success in Afghanistan but contains countless challenges that need addressing as ISAF begins to transfer responsibility to the ANSF. The SFAT mission can succeed if the U.S. Army can identify the proper personnel, leverage the appropriate resources, and provide an effective and accurate assessment tool to solve the complex problem sets within the vastly different ANSF organizations.

The SFATs in Afghanistan can produce tremendous results with their partnered

units, provided teams are equipped with experienced leaders extensively trained in advising, an implemented adviser-centric pre-deployment training rotation, and modifications to the current ANSF assessment tool to ensure evaluation of advised units on applicable metrics.

The SFAT is similar in theory to the military transition teams and specialized transition teams that many are familiar with from Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although similar in mission and scope, SFATs provide all personnel from organic, modular BCTs rather than supplying personnel piece-mealed from various Army units.

SFATs benefit from a unified chain of command and team familiarity, whereas various units and personnel unfamiliar with each other until arriving in theater may construct the MTT. For example, my brigade deployed about 350 senior leaders (sergeants first class and above) to construct 30 12-man adviser teams deployed across Regional Command South, Afghanistan. Our team, assigned to an Afghan National Army infantry battalion, consisted primarily of our company leadership, including the company commander, first sergeant, fire-support officer and noncom-



Noncommissioned officers and company-grade officers from the Afghan National Army Corps and U.S. Army attend a map-reading class at Forward Operating Base Shoja, Afghanistan to learn proper identification of friendly-unit locations during missions to the tactical-operations center. This enables the 6th Kandak to gain situational understanding during daily patrols and named operations. (Photo by 1LT Pace L. Jaworski)



1LT Joshua S. Butcher teaches an Afghan noncommissioned officer from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 6th Kandak, 1st Brigade, 205th Afghan National Army Corps, how to properly set the headspace and timing on a M-2 .50-caliber flex machine-gun at FOB Shoja, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. (Photo by 1LT Pace L. Jaworski)

missioned officer, three platoon leaders, one platoon sergeant, a medic and two officers from the brigade's headquarters and headquarters company. The five line companies from our battalion formed teams that all reported to my battalion commander's team, which advised the ANA brigade staff. This alignment was beneficial, as many team members had worked together during the previous deployment to Iraq prior to the SFAT mission in Afghanistan. Preceding the SFAT concept, adviser teams may not have been provided an opportunity to train or work together before deploying, a monumental disadvantage for teams when faced with the complex mission.

An additional benefit of the SFAT model is the unity of command within the reporting chain. With our entire brigade leadership forward, it provided teams with the necessary command-structure support that augmented adviser teams typically do not receive. On the other hand, the SFAT theory can possibly cause friction between battlespace-owning units and the SFAT chain of command.

The SFAT model is unique as a battlespace-owning unit while also responsible for reporting through their respective brigade SFAT, which tactically controls battalion-level teams. Brigade SFAT teams are typically led by a lieutenant colonel, who is a former

or current battalion commander and is accustomed to that level of responsibility. Serving on an SFAT mission is a humbling experience for all leaders, as it requires relinquishing the authority accustomed to in respective home-station units to support the advisory mission.

All things considered, the SFAT concept contributed to our team's overall success in Afghanistan. We were able to build continuity at home station prior to deploying and assembled a cohesive team that was mission-effective in Afghanistan.

Team personnel traits

The SFAT concept is desirable for advising a large, conventional force, but the team's effectiveness to the specific problem set in Afghanistan largely depends on the expertise and traits of the assigned personnel. According to the *Commanders Handbook for Security Force Assistance*, "The most important aspect of advising is the degree of influence an adviser is able to cultivate with his host-nation counterpart."² When we arrived in Afghanistan, I was a 24-year-old lieutenant with two years of active-duty service in the U.S. Army advising a 45-year-old battalion-operations officer with more than 20 years of experience in the ANA. It proved challenging to earn my counterpart's respect and develop a sphere of influ-

ence in a culture that heavily emphasizes the importance of age and respect of elders.

Our SFAT consisted of five lieutenants in similar situations. Our limited training at this point mainly consisted of squad, platoon and company mounted and dismounted maneuvers based on current counterinsurgency doctrine. This training was not enough for the level of responsibility required to advise a battalion staff and created an unreasonable situation for the young officers on the team who lacked the perceived experience of their counterparts. I believe our team could have been more effective had the lieutenants been replaced with higher-ranking officers, either captains or majors, preferably with previous advising experience.

The *Security Force Assistance Introductory Guide* identifies maturity, professional competence, cross-cultural negotiation and problem-solving, leadership and region-specific skills as ideal adviser traits.³ Most junior company-grade officers do not embody these characteristics, and therefore are not ideal for executing the SFAT mission in Afghanistan. From my perspective, an SFAT adviser would have a minimum of two leadership positions. Ideally one of those positions would be from battalion, brigade or division staff. This would provide advisers with experience, knowledge, flexibility and competence that our counterparts require to ensure a successful transition of security from ISAF to ANSF.

Advising is a specialty

Likewise, the U.S. Army could benefit from creating an adviser course with an associated skill identifier to appropriately recognize the subject-matter experts within the force and thus assign personnel to future advising missions accordingly. In an era of persistent conflict, I think the U.S. Army will be expected to execute future advisory missions with large-scale conventional forces similar to the ANSF. The Army's leadership will benefit from the SFAT's flexibility to perform security-force assistance and/or foreign internal defense in possible future conflicts rather than committing combat troops.

The SFAT's success with a conventional force such as the ANSF will allow the U.S. Army to perform this mission set, rather than relying exclusively on Special Forces and Civil Affairs, who are often undermanned due to their complex skill set. Future SFATs could benefit from school-trained personnel with advising expertise who could

train fellow team members on effective advising tactics, techniques and procedures. Furthermore, the Special Forces and Civil Affairs community could provide instructors familiar with security-force assistance and foreign internal-defense operations to enable conventional advisers.

My team was fortunate enough to have a team leader who recently served as a brigade adviser to the Iraqi Army. His knowledge, tact and technique were an invaluable asset to our team, who had little previous advising experience. Although Iraq and Afghanistan are two distinct operating environments, his previous experiences as an adviser provided him with a general situational understanding for our mission. He was able to teach the team effective techniques for counterpart engagements that served him well in the past and contributed to our success with the ANA.

Most SFATs did not have the luxury of an experienced adviser but could have reduced the learning curve on some teams if provided one. If the U.S. Army is provided the ability to efficiently train and identify suitable advising personnel, we could rapidly deploy adviser teams to volatile conflicts while still evaluating the threat to decide if combat troops are necessary.

Joint Readiness Training Center

In addition to our difficult mission set, our team had four months from receipt of our orders to our deployment, which

included home-station training, a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center and block leave. In my opinion, this compressed timeline did not help provide the inexperienced junior leadership with adequate training to perform the SFAT mission.

Our home-station training was beneficial and consisted of weapons qualification, drivers training, situational-training exercises and medical training. This training was developed to ensure all leaders were proficient in Skill Level 1 tasks and battle drills. Due to the limited personnel on the SFAT, first lieutenants were assigned as drivers, sergeant first classes became gunners and captains and/or first sergeants served as dismounts or vehicle commanders in a three-vehicle patrol concept. Clearly, everyone had to be proficient and master the perishable skills that leaders typically do not perform, and the home-station training allowed us all this opportunity prior to deploying.

Although we were provided a security squad when we arrived in Afghanistan, it would have been beneficial if we were assigned a security squad organic to the unit. It would allow for increased continuity within SFATs while enabling the battlespace commander with more combat power.

The JRTC rotation proved to be another challenge due to our unit being the first SFAT rotation in the midst of conventional combat rotations. Our rotation was a hybrid of adviser training with 162nd Infantry Brigade and an Afghanistan-specific training exercise.

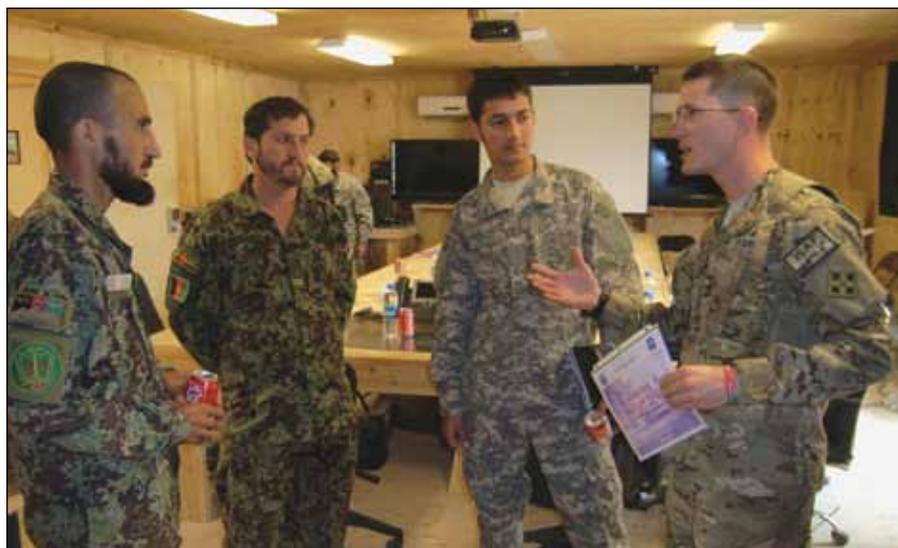
The training exercise proved to be of little value since we conducted similar situational-training exercises at Fort Carson. Unfortunately the JRTC was faced with the challenge of executing an unexpected, irregular rotation. Observer-controllers were unfamiliar with the SFAT mission and unclear about the relationship between the SFATs and battlespace-owning units. Our after-action review comments should help develop a more realistic readiness exercise, which will better simulate the SFAT experience in Afghanistan.

Although the Afghanistan-specific training exercise was of little value, the adviser-specific training conducted by the 162nd Infantry Brigade prior to our field exercise provided us with basic knowledge of the ANSF, a cultural overview and introductory negotiation skills. This was the type of training that future SFAT rotations should be entirely focused on. JRTC was challenged by an unexpected advisory rotation, and although it was difficult as the rotational training unit, I think it provided JRTC with the ability to adjust rapidly for unforeseeable future training missions.

Commander's unit assessment tool

Comparable to our transition from Operation Iraqi Freedom to Operation New Dawn in Iraq, the SFAT mission in Afghanistan will continue beyond the proposed combat troop commitment of 2014. This requires a careful assessment of all respective organizations within the ANSF. Some Army leaders use the term "Afghan good enough" to describe the acceptable progression of our ANSF counterparts. As an adviser to the ANA, I found myself asking what exactly was "Afghan good enough?"

It is crucial for the adviser to understand his counterpart's progression and comprehend "Afghan good enough" for the SFAT mission to be successful. Advisers understand that our ANSF counterparts cannot be expected to perform at the level of coalition forces, but after nine months in Afghanistan, I still don't know how to measure or grasp "Afghan good enough." In an attempt to calculate ANSF progression, ISAF created the commander's unit assessment tool to measure ANSF capabilities and provide situational understanding



CPT Graham P. Shelly (SFAT 36 intelligence officer) meets the 6th Kandak assistant intelligence officer, CPT Abdullah, and 6th Kandak NDS representative, CPT Noorullah, for the first time at FOB Shoja, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. (Photo by 1LT Pace L. Jaworski)

Continued on Page 36



1SG Stephen M. Freeman shakes hands with his Afghan counterpart, CSM Jan Ali, during M-2 .50-caliber flex machinegun training at FOB Shoja, Kandahar province, Afghanistan. (Photo by 1LT Pace L. Jaworski)

for ISAF leaders to evaluate “Afghan good enough.”

The CUAT seeks to provide a complete assessment of a mentored unit on the characteristics of leadership, operations, intelligence, logistics, equipping, personnel, maintenance, communications, training and education, partnership, unit corruption, infrastructure and facilities and drug use. Currently, the rating system tracks these categories through a five-point scale beginning with “established” and increasing to “independent.”

Some would argue that “independence” is an unachievable standard to begin with due to the broken ANSF logistics system, as Adam Mausner writes in his 2010 essay, *Reforming ANSF Metrics: Improving the CUAT System*.⁴ In addition to the contested unrealistic “independent” rating, some CUAT rating standards themselves are misleading and ambiguous. Most of the rating standards are objective and quantitative in categories such as “equipping” but subjective and qualitative in other categories, such as “leadership” and “intelligence.” Each rating is coupled with a subjective narrative portion, which allows the adviser to expand on the rating assessment but does not provide the adviser with guidance specific to the narrative

portion. The result is an inconsistent report that varies from one SFAT to another.

One issue we faced repeatedly with the CUAT is that our mentored unit easily met the quantitative standards for an “independent” rating in most cases but fell far short of this rating in reality. For example, our counterparts were able to conduct an operation independent of ISAF but that did not justify, in our mind, their “independent” rating. There were still issues of lackluster leadership participation, poor planning and less-than-average execution. The CUAT’s rigid guidelines for some rating definition levels need to be adjusted in the future, but more importantly, advisers must qualify each rating with a focused narrative to explain the deserved rating, bring to light key issues and explain the way forward.

Arguably, the biggest issue with the CUAT is the exaggerated, inflated ratings of the ANSF. This can be attributed to the subjective nature of the report. Due to the narratives in each category, most of the CUAT is subjective, and it becomes difficult to observe a clear standard. Advisers may also become pressured through the chain of command to upgrade or rate units at in-

accurate levels to show the ANSF progression according to the ISAF timeline.

After reading the CUAT from our previous unit, it left an impression that there was little room for improvement within our “independently” rated Afghan battalion. This was far from the truth, as my team witnessed within the first 90 days on the ground. This could have been a result of the subjective nature of the report itself, or the previous adviser may have been pressured to rate the unit at a certain level, resulting in an inaccurate report. Advisers may believe their counterpart’s success, or lack thereof, reflects personally on the adviser.

The bottom line is that the ISAF leadership deserves an honest ANSF assessment as they decide where to place limited resources and personnel, and to accurately review the timeline for true ANSF “independence.”

Moreover, the subjective narratives provide flexibility within the CUAT but do not adhere to every organization within the ANSF. The ANSF is comprised of police and military forces, which makes the CUAT unsuitable in attempting to assess the ANSF within a military framework. Mausner confirms this in his essay as he writes, “No system can be useful that does not measure the number of local recruits, men given police uniforms and the interaction between elements of the police and local militias, local government, and a functioning justice system – including courts, jails, etc.”

Although I partnered with an ANA infantry battalion, I can imagine the challenge of assessing a police force within a pure military framework. A separate CUAT for the various ANSF organizations – which include Afghan National Civil Order Police, Afghan Border Police, Afghan Uniform Police and Afghan National Police – would be beneficial for the SFATs assigned within the assorted ANSF organizations. An individualized CUAT for different organizations could allow ISAF to gain visibility on key issues necessary for evaluating organizational growth throughout the ANSF.

Also, the CUAT does not have any rating for civil-military operations. Afghanistan is similar to Iraq in regards to the COIN campaign, which will continue to rely heavily on the ability of the ANSF to successfully engage the

population as the transition from ISAF to ANSF security continues. Unfortunately, the CUAT primarily tracks kinetic characteristics, which is only a portion of COIN operations. The CUAT also ignores rating the ability of the ANSF to work within the governance mission, equally crucial to the success of our efforts in Afghanistan.

Fixes

The lack of civil-military ratings, coupled with the inflexible nature of the CUAT for the distinct ANSF organizations, creates an inaccurate report, incapable of truly providing a complete assessment of the ANSF. Added to the partiality of the report that allows for inflated ratings of partnered units, it's evident that the CUAT must be further revised to suit the intended purpose of the report. I recommend distinct quantitative rating definitions within each category to ensure advisers understand the expectations of ANSF "independence." Hard numbers are less susceptible to open interpretation and, coupled with a narrative, could provide ISAF leadership with situational understanding of an ANSF mentored unit.

After serving on the first SFAT mission, I believe advising the ANSF is crucial to facilitate a successful transition of security within Afghanistan. The United States benefits from more than 200 years of a professional Army, whereas Afghanistan's security forces are in their infancy. The ability to repel the Taliban rests on the capability and capacity of the ANSF to work towards the common goal of securing the civilian population and their borders from potential enemies. It is a daunting task, to say the least, and partly depends on an adviser's ability to teach, coach and mentor the ANSF.

The SFAT mission is the necessary link to facilitate our transition and bring home combat troops that have been fighting for more than a decade. Furthermore, SFATs will be successful in future conventional advising efforts if

provided with the effective personnel suitable for the specific mission set. Adviser teams could benefit from school-trained personnel who have the ability to specialize in an advisory capacity, as I believe the Army will continue to advise large-scale conventional forces in the foreseeable future.

Moreover, the training administered to advisers preparing to deploy is currently insufficient due to the complex problems advisers face within the ANSF. Pre-deployment training must be completely adviser-centric and focused within the specific ANSF problem sets. Brigades are equipped with all the resources at home station to certify and ensure SFATs are able to secure themselves in sector, whereas the rotational training center should be responsible for providing in-depth, adviser-specific training.

Ultimately the SFAT mission will be successful if provided with an effective assessment tool to properly gauge the development of the ANSF. It is too difficult to assess the vastly different ANSF organizations with the current CUAT. Each organization faces unique issues within their various stages of growth and should not be gauged on identical standards. Most importantly, the CUAT depends upon advisers providing an honest assessment of their counterparts that reflect the ANSF's current abilities. If those abilities regress from one reporting cycle to the next, the CUAT should reflect those changes rather than keeping the status quo or needlessly upgrading the unit to an undeserved rating. ANSF leadership may be unaware of their organization's shortcomings and could use an adviser's honest assessment to help grow the organization and show the way forward. Moreover, the ISAF leadership deserves a truthful report to measure the SFAT success.

The U.S. Army is ready to transition security to the Afghans, and the ANSF is completely capable of this responsi-

bility if equipped with capable advisers. The SFAT mission is a key component to assist the ANSF in providing internal and external security. Future advising teams will flourish in Afghanistan if the U.S. Army can identify the proper personnel, leverage the appropriate training resources and provide an effective and accurate assessment tool to solve the complex problem sets within the vastly different ANSF organizations.



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Notes

¹ "The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement," fact sheet, 2012. Retrieved Aug. 23, 2012, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/fact-sheet-us-afghanistan-strategic-partnership-agreement>.

² Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance, *Commander's Handbook for Security Force Assistance*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2008.

³ U.S. Special Operations Command, *Security Force Assistance Introductory Guide*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011.

⁴ Mausner, Adam, *Reforming ANSF Metrics: Improving the CUAT System*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010.

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

ANA – Afghan National Army
ANSF – Afghan National Security Forces
BCT – brigade combat team

COIN – counterinsurgency
CUAT – commander's unit assessment tool
ISAF – International Security Assistance Forces

JRTC – Joint Readiness Training Center
MTT – military transition team
SFAT – security-force assistance team