
TALK MORE SUSTAINMENT, LESS TACTICS WITH AFGHAN FORCES

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“Amateurs talk tactics; experts talk logistics” — this is a common expression in the military that highlights the important but underrated task of planning sustainment in operations. As the U.S. military retrogrades its materials and draws down its forces from Afghanistan, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are taking the lead on the majority of missions.

Marine Corps Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the current International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander, reported in his Summer 2013 commander’s update: “As the ANSF have assumed the lead in their first fighting season, they have proven capable of effectively securing the Afghan people.” However, he continued, “ISAF continues to provide combat support and combat service support where there are remaining ANSF capability gaps.”¹ Though the ANSF has made significant progress over the last few years regarding tactical proficiency against the insurgents, it appears the ANSF still needs improvement in the areas of logistics, maintenance, and medical evacuation.

As with any security force, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) will surely have internal discussions about how to best task organize to resupply and maintain its units in the field. Due to vast cultural and historical differences, the Afghan supply system will develop into something different from the U.S. military’s. Perhaps the system will be more effective than any we have taught them. At the same time, there is reason for concern due to the level of dependence on our logistical system that we have allowed for the past 12 years. From my experiences as a rifle platoon leader and company executive officer partnered with various ANSF elements, I believe that company-level leaders should start prioritizing their counterparts’ sustainment capabilities to ensure the ANSF is able to consolidate its gains and retain recently secured areas after ISAF retrograde. Additionally, with the recent move to regionally-align certain Army brigades, the necessity for lower-level tactical leaders to instruct and mentor foreign armies to sustain themselves is more salient than ever.

My experience working with various AUP and ANA platoon- and company-level leadership in various districts of Paktika Province forced me to realize the importance of self-reliance in sustainment operations. When I arrived to my district in the summer of 2011, it was common practice to provide fuel for the AUP’s trucks when they would patrol with our element. Instead of the AUP patrol leaders moving their convoy to the Afghan police headquarters located only 30 minutes away, they would simply ask us for fuel instead. The road to police headquarters was paved and secure, yet free fuel from our platoon living on the same combat

outpost (COP) was more expedient. In addition, when the AUP’s generators became inoperable, they would expect us to fix the machines so patrolmen could resume enjoying the electricity generated by our fuel. At the heart of the issue is the tension between completing missions quickly and building a long-term sustainment capacity — that is, a choice between efficiency and sustainability. If we wanted the ANSF to patrol with us on every mission, which they were willing to do and would do effectively, we would have to provide them our fuel; if we wanted to force them to practice their own sustainment systems, we could risk them refusing to patrol.

Our company did not realize what we were encouraging until about midway through the deployment when it was apparent ANSF units could not sustain themselves. After a major joint operation with our company and an ANA company to establish outposts in a remote, mountainous area, the ANA company commander requested that we air-lift rice and bread to his position in the mountains. After our battalion coordinated several resupplies to their location, it became apparent that we were doing more harm than good; instead of the ANA learning how to resupply themselves during the fight, they relied on our support. The ANA leadership argued that the road winding the mountainside was too precarious to travel. Adding to the challenge was that this operation was occurring during the winter, making the roads even more difficult to traverse. Working with our battalion security transition teams (STTs), we finally convinced the ANA leadership to force the company to resupply itself with trucks along the roads. We discovered that the ANA was very capable in sustaining itself through ground convoys for the remainder of our deployment.

Our success in this area was two-fold: not only did the ANA provide itself the materials it needed to continue its operations, the company also learned how to properly conduct a secure logistics patrol that was successful in resupplying its soldiers. Furthermore, when ANA company leadership realized the challenges that were present in conducting this convoy, it asked the local AUP for additional trucks to augment its security. The AUP agreed and both security elements conducted a successful joint patrol. As the ANA and AUP conducted multiple resupply operations without U.S. presence, the villagers could see that the ANSF was quite capable of protecting the populace independently. According to a colleague assigned to Regional Command (RC)-South, over the last year security force assistance teams (SFATs) have been successful in weaning their partners off American logistics. However, the ANSF’s long-standing dependency on our support has further implications that reach into other areas such as maintenance and medical evacuation.

So what is the way forward to assist and mentor a foreign army in sustainment operations? There are a few lessons that we as a unit either succeeded or failed to accomplish with our Afghan counterparts, yet after reflection, may be useful for future joint operations with foreign security forces. First, just as in the U.S. Army, we should prioritize sustainment as a training objective in and of itself. In the initial stages of the deployment, we focused on training the ANA on clearing operations and the AUP on detainee operations. During the second half of the deployment, some ANA soldiers asked if we could help fix their high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV), which was unable to start. After speaking with my lead mechanic, he replied, "Sir, we're not helping these guys by fixing things for them. Why don't I teach them how to PMCS (preventive maintenance checks and services)?" The mechanic led a small patrol to the ANA combat outpost and taught a group of soldiers how to identify issues and maintain their vehicles. Sadly, it took me this long to understand that we can train them to become proficient in tactics, but if they can't maintain their equipment, they will surely suffer in the long run.

Central to the issue is the ANSF's lack of a maintenance culture which sometimes even pervades units in our own Army. Due to high levels of illiteracy and unfamiliarity with mechanical systems, many Afghans lack the understanding of how important maintenance is to continue operations in the future. An approach SFATs could take would be not only teaching how to, for example, change the wheels of a vehicle, but perhaps tell a personal story or vignette of how a vehicle became inoperable during a mission and led to failed objectives. By providing an understanding of the future implications of failing to take action on maintenance, the ANSF may realize they could be unable to fight during combat. With tightening budgets throughout the Army, the ANSF will suffer from our inability to provide logistical

support. Thus, not only do SFAT leaders need to help the ANSF understand the implications of maintenance but also help devise solutions that are sustainable for the Afghans post-U.S. involvement.

Another example is at the Maneuver Captains Career Course we practiced creating training plans as SFAT commanders for a hypothetical upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. Our culminating event was an ANA squad live fire, and we scheduled in all the necessary battle drills and collective tasks associated with accomplishing the live fire. However, we did not discuss property accountability, maintenance, or resupply operations at all. After 12 years of fighting (and for some, even more), I would argue that most ANA soldiers are proficient in finding, fixing, and finishing the enemy. Yet to consolidate their gains and hold secured areas, the ANA will need to learn how to conduct resupply and maintain their equipment. If U.S. commanders want to see their counterparts in Afghanistan and elsewhere succeed when we transition responsibility, we as an Army should place more emphasis on sustainment operations.

Second, the ANA and AUP should consider reorganizing their units to ensure there are trained maintenance personnel at each company. One of the issues we encountered with our partnered ANA company was that in order to have their vehicles maintained by Afghan mechanics, they would have to drive through three districts into another province where dedicated maintenance was conducted for multiple provinces. In addition, there was only one mechanic for an entire Afghan kandak (battalion), which is clearly overwhelming for that soldier to conduct the necessary services for the entire kandak's vehicles. Clearly, the ANA will face tighter budgets in the coming years and will want to prioritize line soldiers over mechanics. Yet the ANA leadership should focus more on weapon, vehicle, and radio maintenance during initial training. Furthermore, one

soldier could be given the additional duty of mechanic and could be sent to a course that instructs him on the basics of PMCS. He could then bring this knowledge to his unit to instruct the other soldiers how to properly maintain their equipment.

Third, SFAT commanders and small unit leaders in regionally-aligned brigades should resist the temptation to provide logistical and medical support for operations that the host nation forces could provide themselves. As mentioned earlier, though the foreign security forces will ask for logistical support and providing that support would surely optimize operational efficiency, each time we allow that force to rely on us for sustainment we miss a training opportunity to mentor on sustainment and undermine that security force in the long run. When my ANA executive officer (XO) counterpart asked me for oil for his trucks, I immediately



Photo by CPT Andrew Cochran

A Soldier with the 1st Combat Aviation Brigade shows Afghan service members the different parts of a HMMWV's front axle during training at Kandahar Airfield on 27 January 2014.

contacted my STT representative at the battalion and asked what we should do. He advised me to force the XO to use his channels and order the oil properly even though it would have been much easier for us just to give him our oil. Though there will certainly be frustrations (which even we encountered), working through the frictions is necessary in building long-lasting systems.

According to the colleague assigned to RC-South, medical evacuation is a difficult issue to address due to the high costs of refusing medical support. We are fighting alongside the ANSF and other regional partners and providing care and saving lives is ostensibly morally responsible. Yet the ANSF will have to deal with medical evacuation after our departure and when we can allow them to ground evacuate their own casualties, we should. Commanders should prioritize which casualty types should be air evacuated by the ANSF or the U.S. and which others should be ground evacuated by the ANSF. We can help the ANSF reach sustainability by encouraging more medical personnel to be collocated with maneuver forces and incorporate deliberate medical planning into their decision-making process, which will allow them to provide better treatment en-route to a higher level facility. Clearly, there are circumstances that require the U.S. to provide logistical and medical support to the ANA; for instance, major operations that we would not expect the ANA to conduct unilaterally or a mass casualty situation. Commanders should use good judgment in determining which of those sustainment aspects they can assume risk, and higher commanders should support their decisions to trade short-term expediency for long-term success. Regardless, a command-directed policy at the division level or higher should dictate when the U.S. is authorized to provide support to avoid incentivizing a partner unit to seek out another battlespace owner for assistance.

The ANSF have learned the hard lessons of tactics by simply fighting the enemy. The fact that the ANSF understands the culture and the insurgents far better than we ever will, along with their innate desire to survive, will drive them to find better ways to defend against and

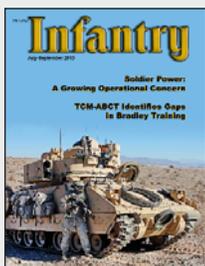
defeat the enemy. However, sustainment is challenging for every army, and U.S. forces should focus on teaching and mentoring the ANA on logistics, maintenance, and medical evacuations. After years of providing support, we must transition to forcing the ANSF to become a self-sustaining force. Gen. Dunford understands the necessity to ensure that the Afghans can continue the fight after our eventual withdrawal: "Much work remains to be done on the systems, processes, and institutions necessary to make our progress enduring, and we are providing support at the ministerial level, as well as the corps level and below."¹ I argue that the focus on sustainment should be made much lower: at the SFAT level where Soldiers and squad leaders understand best how to PMCS their equipment and platoon leaders and platoon sergeants know how to plan resupply and medical evacuations in advance. We should ensure our Soldiers mentor the ANSF on these basic soldiering tasks so we can be confident in their ability to conduct self-sustaining operations against an insurgency it is sure to face after our departure. Moreover, our recent emphasis on regionally aligned brigades means that our partnering and mentoring will continue beyond Afghanistan in the years to come and sustainment should be an immediate priority, not an afterthought.

Notes

¹ USMC Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., "Commander ISAF's Afghanistan Update," Summer 2013, accessed 2 October 2013, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-news-list/commander-isaf-s-afghanistan-update-summer-2013.html>.

² Ibid.

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