Partnership at Platoon Level: Experiences from Afghanistan

by 1LT Raphael Moyer

During my scout platoon's training cycle and deployment to Afghanistan, we found no doctrine that explained how to partner with the Afghan National Army (ANA) at the tactical level. We had to create tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) on our own; this article shares our lessons-learned.

Our training on partnered operations consisted of 10 days at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), during which we learned by trial and error as we worked with mock foreign forces. While Field Manual (FM) 3-07.1, ***Security Force Assistance***, explains how to advise and assist foreign security forces (FSF) at the battalion staff level and above, there is no similar FM about how platoons can effectively mold company-and-lower-level units. My platoon needed a manual to guide us in arranging our forces on the battlefield to best mentor the ANA, especially in those crucial first 90 days after arrival in theater. More specifically, we needed a doctrinal framework with sequential steps to wean the ANA off U.S. support and metrics, thereby enabling continuous assessment of the ANA's competence.

Building ANA capacity has become the main effort in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Armor Soldiers on the frontlines of the partnered fight have a critical need for a guide on partnered operations.

Without doctrine, my troop had to create TTP to build the ANA's capacity from scratch, using the previous unit's operations as a baseline. When we conducted our relief-in-place with the outgoing unit, there was no formalized assessment of our partnered ANA forces – we knew the opinions of the outgoing company commander and platoon leaders, but we had no metrics to help us create a plan to assist the ANA in their weakest areas on a platoon-by-platoon basis.

Based on my troop's operations, this article develops some specific TTPs for planning and executing partnered operations at the tactical level. Using these TTPs, my troop was able to shift partnered ANA forces from fully integrated to independent operations. While some parts of the TTPs may be idio-

syncratic to operations in mountainous terrain, the basic concepts can be applied anywhere.

Area of operations

Over a nine-month deployment, my motorized cavalry troop's area of operation (AO) comprised about 420 square kilometers of very mountainous terrain surrounding the Khost-Gardez (K-G) road in Paktia Province. We were tasked with building the capacity of the ANA kandak (battalion) responsible for the K-G road. The kandak was comprised of its headquarters, a heavy weapons company (HWC) with three specialty platoons and two ANA companies at a separate combat outpost (COP) some seven kilometers away. (The kandak had more companies outside our AO.) At our COP, we also had a security-force assistance team (SFAT) responsible for developing the kandak staff.

My troop's objective was to build an ANA force capable of conducting independent operations in known insurgent strongholds, a task which would likely continue beyond my unit's tenure. Once on ground, we encountered vastly varying levels of competence across the ANA companies: the platoons within the HWC were all capable of semi-independent operations to varying degrees; one of the companies at the separate COP needed a great deal of guidance; and the second company at the separate COP could conduct some operations independently, depending on the patrol leader.

The ANA patrol schedule was generated at kandak level but was often not communicated to the outlying companies. ANA company commanders were not empowered to make their own patrol schedules or to push their ideas for patrols to battalion headquarters. Also, poor maintenance meant the ANA sometimes had trouble mustering the number of vehicles needed for any given patrol.

Framework for tactical-level partnered operations

Partnered operations require junior leaders to strike a tough balance: they must continually push FSF to be self-reliant and conduct ever-more-difficult operations while providing enough support to ensure FSF do not fail. If U.S. units pull back support too slowly, FSF will never stand on their own; too rapidly and FSF might sustain a defeat that will destroy both self-confidence and credibility with the population.

Thus, "as much as possible, FSF should begin with simpler missions [and] as their confidence and competence grows, these forces can assume more complex assignments," according to FM 3-07.1. A gradual approach is necessary by which FSF are slowly weaned off U.S. military support. The process of pulling U.S. support can be painful, as partnered units can initially be very reluctant to move independently without U.S. armor protection and fire support.

In the following, I lay out several grades of tactical-level partnership used to build partner capacity slowly, with an endstate of fully independent FSF operations. As the amount of assistance U.S. forces provide decreases, the U.S. ability to influence operational outcomes and assess FSF proficiency also decreases.

Also, the amount of U.S. support was not wholly dependent on the FSF unit's competence. FSF units possessing minimal ability to plan complex operations can execute some patrols because of their simplicity or routine nature. In our AO, these sorts of operations were conducted as part of our partnered kandak's daily routine, including observation posts (OPs) along the K-G road, a patrol clearing for improvised explosive devices (IEDs) daily and rudimentary traffic-control-point (TCP) operations.

Beyond these routine patrols, ANA and partnered U.S. platoons also conducted patrols to villages and known insurgent staging areas. These type of patrols, especially those to hostile villages, often required tactical acumen the ANA lacked; dismounted route selection became key as patrol leaders needed to balance speed with security. OP positions needed to constantly move to maintain direct-fire support of friendly forces; mounted elements needed to overwatch friendly movement while implementing strict fire-control measures to prevent fratricide; cordon elements needed to move rapidly to pre-planned blocking positions.

Even simpler tasks, such as land navigation, team-level fire control and dismounted movement formations could prove challenging for some partnered ANA units. Because of their radically varying levels of competence, each ANA company required

different mentorship strategies for planning and executing operations. My troop found that the ANA's ability to plan future operations inextricably linked with their ability to execute current operations. When the ANA leadership developed and disseminated a quality patrol schedule, ANA platoons could take the lead in operations; without a clear schedule, the ANA would often show up with no plan at all, making it impossible for them to lead.

Phase I: integrated operations

One of our partnered ANA companies at the outlying COP proved to be largely incompetent when my unit arrived. The ANA leadership had minimal map-reading skills and often did not know their daily patrol objectives. Tactical-movement formations and discipline were poor. In these conditions, my troop had two choices: push kandak headquarters to disseminate better plans and hope the ANA began to patrol, albeit with poor tactics, or take the lead in partnered operations, mentoring the ANA and forcing them to patrol their sector. We chose the latter, seeing that the ANA unit would likely not improve if we waited for change to stem from kandak level. Tactically, this meant integrating U.S. and ANA units at the individual and vehicle level.

Upon arriving at the separate COP, my platoon linked up with the day's ANA patrol and conducted a planning session with patrol leadership. Through probing questions, my platoon sergeant and I guided the ANA to develop a ground tactical plan including overwatch positions, vehicle placement, react-to-contact plans and task-organization of forces. As the partnered patrol left the COP, we interspersed ANA and U.S. vehicles, at first with U.S. vehicles leading and, after further ANA progression, with ANA vehicles leading. The arrangement gave the ANA the benefit of U.S. electronic-warfare (EW) capabilities and more armor protection in the convoy, allowing the ANA the confidence to get out into sector.

While dismounted, U.S. and ANA Soldiers interspersed so the ANA could observe good dismounted patrolling techniques, especially in terms of route selection, bounding overwatch techniques (which we often used in mountainous terrain) and dismounted movement formations. ANA and U.S. Soldiers also manned partnered OP positions to overwatch friendly movements in the villages below. Throughout, U.S. team and squad leaders mentored ANA Soldiers on sectors of fire, weapons emplacement and patrolling basics. Because of the risk of green-on-blue violence, at the rear of the formation would always be two or more U.S. Soldiers.

Within villages, the ANA frequently took the lead in engaging the populace and searching suspicious areas, ensuring the ANA were the face of the operation. U.S. Soldiers also entered the village, observed ANA activities, mentored the ANA on search techniques and conducted biometrics on suspicious persons. Especially in the valleys closer to the COP, the ANA knew the locals and preferred that U.S. forces stay on the periphery, worried that we would be culturally insensitive and jeopardize relationships. We usually granted this request while still maintaining close eyes on the ANA.

Depending on patrol objectives, we let the ANA stop and drink chai with local leaders to enable them to build relationships in the AO. (During time-sensitive patrols, we would often have to tell the ANA that drinking chai was not permissible.) When the ANA were rushing the patrol or were staying stagnant without showing initiative, my platoon sergeant or I intervened to get the patrol back on track.

With ANA and U.S. elements interspersed and U.S. Soldiers either taking the lead or closely guiding the ANA, my platoon was able to mentor the partnered ANA patrol at the individual, team and squad level. In contact scenarios, my team and squad leaders could exert high levels of control over our partners, preventing the "death blossom." Accurate assessments of the ANA were easy as we could directly observe the ANA as they moved, set up in OPs and entered villages. We also controlled the ANA tempo, preventing the ANA from getting ahead of us.

At the same time, the ANA had little incentive to exercise initiative and could simply follow U.S. forces while learning little. Realizing this, my platoon began to make even the less-competent ANA platoons lead interspersed formations. During patrols, we pushed the ANA patrol leader to make and

enact good decisions, which often took U.S. mentorship.

Interspersed formations quickly became a crutch for the ANA, and the transition from interspersed formations to ANA platoons in the lead was difficult. It proved especially hard to convince the ANA to put their vehicle formations ahead of ours and to conduct dismounted route clearance in IED danger areas, as the ANA possessed fewer IED-defeat devices, lacked EW protection and had no armor on their Ford Rangers. Interspersing elements was clearly a short-term answer. While interspersion got ANA forces out into sector, taught them the basics of patrolling and made it easy to keep an eye on their movements, it also made them highly dependent on partnered U.S. units.

Phase II: putting ANA in lead

The next stage of partnership involved putting ANA patrols in the lead with a U.S. platoon in close support. (The platoons in the HWC were all capable of this upon my troop's arrival.) Key was ensuring that the plan for the patrol was ANA-generated, and that patrol objectives were disseminated to the ANA patrol leader from higher headquarters. When the ANA did not have a plan at link-up, my platoon waited for the company to communicate with its kandak or helped develop a plan on the spot using shortened troop-leading procedures (TLPs). This process ensured the ANA could not revert to earlier and easier stages of partnership with the United States in the lead while also pushing the ANA to patrol in sector. (In later phases of partnership, we would not support an ANA patrol without a plan.)

While mounted, all ANA vehicles usually led the patrol, with U.S. vehicles behind. (Because of terrain, the only vehicle formation possible was the column.) In this formation, the ANA lost U.S. armor and EW protection, causing the ANA to dismount and clear IED danger areas more frequently, which often slowed infiltration. During the dismounted clearance of IED danger areas, U.S. dismounts moved behind the ANA clearing elements, sharing some risk while using IED detection equipment. During high-tempo missions like battle-damage assessment and time-sensitive targeting, we would put U.S. vehicles in the lead, enabling partnered patrols to more comfortably move mounted through IED danger areas.

During dismounted movements, the ANA moved 50 to 200 meters ahead of the partnered U.S. patrol, depending on terrain. In certain circumstances (for instance, when searching for caches), partnered patrols followed parallel routes to cover more ground. When set in overwatch for friendly forces moving at the base of valleys, ANA and U.S. elements established mutually supporting OP positions, constantly bounding to maintain effective observation and fire support. At no point would an ANA OP be the only position supporting a U.S. element below because of fratricide risks and frequent ANA indiscipline while scanning assigned sectors. (Sometimes ANA would drink chai on OPs without security established.)

As partnered patrols moved through villages, the ANA element was the only element interacting with locals and searching suspicious areas and buildings. U.S. forces stayed within 50 to 100 meters of the ANA on the outskirts of the village, conducting biometrics on locals the ANA deemed suspicious and acting as a quick-reaction force (QRF) if anything went wrong. If the ANA found weapons or ordnance, a U.S. team with a tactical site-exploitation expert assisted the ANA in proper handling of evidence. While dismounted elements were moving through villages, U.S. vehicle crews maneuvered in synch with ANA vehicles to maintain fire support.

With an ANA platoon in the lead, operations appeared to the local population to be wholly ANA-driven. Often U.S. forces had minimal interaction with locals. Separate ANA and U.S. OP positions, by increasing the total amount of ground under observation, dramatically improved observation of potential insurgent firing positions and infiltration routes. With U.S. forces following behind, the U.S patrol leader could adjust the amount of guidance he gave the ANA on a patrol-by-patrol basis, actively coaching the least experienced ANA leaders via radio or at short halts while allowing the best ANA platoons (who often resented U.S. guidance) to conduct near-independent operations.

There were some problems with this partnership technique. While both mounted and dismounted, ANA elements would sometimes

speed off, leaving U.S. patrols behind. Fire control proved a challenge, as the ANA typically lacked enough radios for all elements because of the inherent difficulties in using a translator to communicate over frequency-modulation (FM) devices.

Also, the U.S. patrol sometimes could not observe ANA activities within villages, on OP positions and while searching for caches, making it difficult to assess where the ANA required more mentorship. Often, my platoon had to accept the ANA doing a good enough job with us in support, which was far better than us doing a great job with a reluctant ANA patrol in tow.

Phase III: independent ANA operations with U.S. support

After an ANA unit demonstrated competence on patrol and was capable of more independent operations, my troop would put the ANA fully in the lead while remaining within supporting distance. The tactic, called follow and support, gave the ANA space to maneuver independently while maintaining confidence-boosting U.S. support in the form of QRF and fire support.

ANA planning capability became even more critical, as U.S. forces offered minimal guidance during patrols. If the ANA patrol lacked a clear plan at link-up, the partnered U.S. patrol simply returned to base. This sent a clear message to the ANA: if they were not prepared to conduct operations, they would not receive U.S. support. The kandak could no longer ride on U.S. operational planning to get patrols into sector.

In this final phase of tactical partnership, the ANA maneuvered as far as three kilometers ahead of U.S. elements. The ANA moved through a village, engaging the local populace and searching for caches while maintaining OPs on the surrounding ridgelines for security. The partnered U.S. patrol found key terrain from which to observe ANA movement and overwatch exfiltration routes to prevent insurgent ambushes. While U.S. forces could still observe the ANA patrol, direct-fire support was often impossible because of the long ranges involved.

If the ANA entered heavy contact, however, U.S. forward observers could provide indirect fires, close air support and close combat attack to prevent the ANA from becoming overwhelmed. Also, the partnered U.S. patrol could move as a QRF to prevent the ANA from being decisively defeated. Key to such fire support and QRF movement was good communication with the ANA, often gained through FM communications or, during larger-scale operations, by the co-location of an ANA staff or command element with U.S. forces. Good communications with and observation of the ANA proved crucial to maintain situational awareness of ANA movements and prevent fratricide.

Follow and support was a challenging but critical step in the development of our ANA partners. U.S. forces lost the ability to make recommendations to the ANA, especially about lower-level tactical issues such as patrolling techniques. U.S. forces also could not perform tasks such as biometric enrollment or tactical site exploitation unless specifically called on to do so by the ANA. All guidance from U.S. forces was via radio or through the co-located ANA staff element and, much of the time, the ANA was disinclined to accept advice. U.S. forces similarly lost the ability to assess ANA operations, as observation of ANA movements and activities became limited at longer ranges.

Long distances between U.S. and ANA forces complicated observation of enemy positions and identification of friend or foe, creating difficulties in providing accurate and timely fire support. At the same time, follow-and-support operations allowed the ANA to become fully independent, giving them the confidence to continue operations when U.S. forces leave while preventing them from failing catastrophically. Also, follow and support forces the ANA to plan operations, addressing perhaps their biggest weakness. Though the ANA might not execute independent operations to a U.S. standard, even after years of partnership, follow and support provides the ANA the opportunity to achieve the standard of "Afghan good enough," with which they will surely operate after U.S. forces leave Afghanistan.

Conclusions

U.S. tactical leaders at the troop-and-below level need a formalized way to assess partnered ANA platoons and companies, and

also need doctrine that describes how to transition ANA forces (and future partnered FSF) from incompetent to "competent enough." U.S. units have a tendency to want to immediately conduct aggressive operations upon arriving in theater, meaning they may revert to earlier stages of partnership to accompany the ANA onto the objective. While such behavior may produce better tactical results, it constitutes a reversal in partnership objectives. Also, the ANA may see the arrival of a new unit as an opportunity to return to easier and safer integrated operations since the new unit may not be fully cognizant of their partners' tactical readiness.

Transitions between units can often be counterproductive for partner capacity, as much of the ground gained over a long deployment can be lost. Formalization of partnership metrics would smooth the transition between units and allow units to accurately track ANA capabilities, thus preventing backtracking in partnership efforts and establishing a means to provide targeted mentorship to the ANA units needing the most work. Formal metrics also give commanders the ability to report tangible progress to higher headquarters, allowing units to focus on the partnership mission rather than on achieving kinetic effects. If the Army makes building partner capacity a core mission for conventional forces, it will need to build doctrine and training that elevates partnership concepts to the same level as the fundamentals of maneuver warfare. While there are no cookie-cutter solutions to partnership, there are certainly fundamental concepts and effective tactics.

For my unit, partnership was never a clear-cut progression from one phase to the next, as it might appear in this article. Often, there would be one step forward and two steps back, as ANA who led one mission well proved unmotivated and tactically incompetent during the next. Our own missteps in trying to push "competent enough" ANA leaders to do even better sometimes made the ANA reticent to work with us. My unit's aggressiveness sometimes worked against building ANA capacity for independent operations, as we were initially too quick to take the lead when the ANA faltered.

The ANA after-action review process was clearly broken, as after large-scale patrols the kandak staff and ground-force leaders ignored glaring tactical and sustainment issues in favor of self-congratulatory speeches. With U.S. forces curtailing operations in preparation for the 2014 withdrawal, our partnership process was artificially accelerated to rapidly prepare the ANA for unilateral operations. We often found that what the ANA lacked – fire support, tactical discipline, maintenance and sustainment – they made up for with their ability to relate to the populace, giving us hope for the ANA's future. As the U.S. Army begins to exit Afghanistan, partnered operations have become the main effort, and it is critical that some sort of doctrine or guide be published and widely disseminated to the platoons and troops tasked with developing Afghan national-security forces.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ANA – Afghan National Army
AO – area of operation
COP – combat outpost
EW – electronic warfare
FM – field manual
FM – frequency modulation
FSF – foreign security forces
HWC – heavy weapons company
IED – improvised explosive device
K-G – Khost-Gardez (road)
OP – observation post
QRF – quick-reaction force
TTP – tactics, techniques and procedures