

Company Coalitions: Multinational Partnership at the Lowest Level

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Soldiers from the U.S. Army, Romanian Army, Afghan Public Protection Forces, Georgian Special Mountain Battalion, and USMC Georgian Liaison Team conduct a base defense commanders meeting.

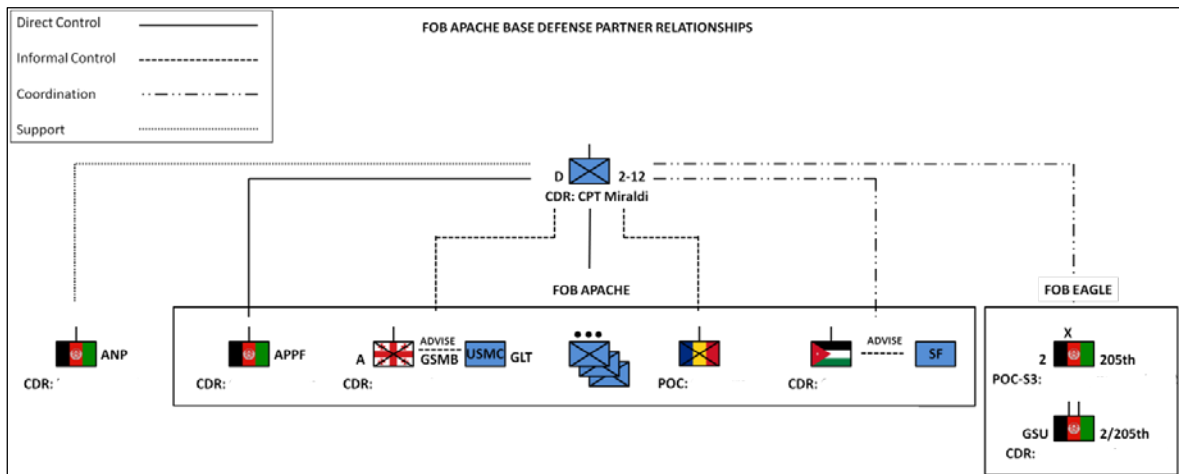
Photo by 1LT Kyler Bakhtiari

The United States has fought alongside dozens of coalition partners during the global war on terrorism. Whether in Iraq or Afghanistan, American Soldiers have lived, worked, and fought with a mélange of multinational partners. In Afghanistan's Regional Command - South (RC-S), the problems and opportunities associated with the multinational approach were legion. Upon arriving at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Apache in Zabul Province, I was confronted with the daunting problem of having to manage and coordinate base defense operations with four nationalities, two of which had their own advisor teams, as well as the full gamut of Afghan Nation Security Force (ANSF) units including Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP), and the Afghan Public Protection Forces (APPF). Each of these entities needed to work together to conduct base defense operations. Myriad cultural (both national and military) differences and a supremely complex command relationship presented a difficult and unique problem set — one that, it quickly became clear, had little to no doctrinal framework.

The nature of the coalition at FOB Apache was unique in the sheer number and type of different units responsible for base defense operations. While we had a plethora of combat power, my company had the complex task of coordinating and synchronizing the operations of each of our partnered contingents to successfully defend the FOB. The problem is best articulated through the chart shown in the figure below.

Though my company (Dagger Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment) was ultimately responsible for the overall defense of FOB Apache, we shared that duty with a company from the Romanian Army,

one company from the Georgian Special Mountain Battalion (GSMB) with its associated U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) Georgian Liaison Team (GLT), one company of Jordanian Special Operations Forces (JORSOF) with its associated special forces detachment, and a company of APPF. Each element provided tower manning, entry control point (ECP) support, or patrols in support of base defense security zones outside the FOB. In addition to the support provided by FOB Apache elements, my company was also responsible for coordinating base defense and local area security operations with the ANP and ANA. FOB Eagle was attached to FOB Apache and housed the headquarters of the ANA's 2/205th Corps which had its own base defense elements and mission command nodes. In coordination with elements from 2/205th Corps, my company conducted joint base defense operations while simultaneously advising those same elements on engagement area development and defensive procedures. Outside the FOB we coordinated our base defense security zone patrols with ANP elements and helped develop ANP checkpoint defensive procedures. In extreme cases we were also available to provide them with supporting combat power.



The thoroughly complex layout that comprised the base defense at FOB Apache was further confused by the difficult and varied command relationships among each element. Though my company was overall responsible for defense, I only had direct tasking authority over my own platoons and the APPF. I had “indirect” control over other elements within the task force (Georgians, Romanians), which meant I had the ability to determine what I wanted each of these elements to do but needed a battalion fragmentary order (FRAGO) to actually task them to do it. Other elements I had no control over but was required to coordinate part of the base defense with (JORSOF, 2/205th Corps ANA), and others still I coordinated with and supported with combat power as part of local area security efforts (ANP). This complexity extended higher up the chain of command through parallel command structures to my task force which included the Special Operations Task Force-South (SOTF-S), the GSMB, and Marine GLT channels, each requiring different levels of interaction and tasking methods.

None of the organizational complexity was as daunting as the requirement to manage different levels of capacity among each of our partnered contingents. From equipment and training to linguistic capabilities, interactions with each nationality brought with it an entirely separate set of considerations that significantly affected their use as part of base defense. The Georgians did not have enough Kartuli (Georgian) interpreters to maintain one at the ECP at all times, occasionally making situations at the ECP more difficult than they might have been with English speakers. The APPF maintained a battalion-level staff but did not have the ability to task its company or to request supplies and operational support from higher headquarters. JORSOF existed as a separate entity entirely removed from the rest of the FOB within

the special forces (SF) compound. The idiosyncrasies of each partnered country presented challenges every day.

I looked for any doctrinal guidance that could help me develop a way to successfully engage with each multinational element I was partnered with. How was I supposed to ensure that the base was secure despite the disparate training level and discipline of each national contingent? Was there a way to conduct combined planning with my partners without it devolving into bickering? How would I manage to maintain my ability to be overall responsible for the defense of the FOB without upsetting or alienating my partnered commanders, especially those higher ranking than me?

After doing some research and coming up empty, I began to look into joint planning doctrine as well as some special operations doctrine with limited success. I found only a few publications that were of some value: Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning* (August 2011) and JP 3-16, *Multinational Operations* (July 2013). Though JP 5-0 was written to support strategic-level planning, some elements of the Joint Operational Planning Process (JOPP) specifically addressed the complexities of planning and executing missions in conjunction with several different agencies or organizations. Similarly, JP 3-16 is strategic-level planning doctrine that provided a broad framework and gave me some guidance as to how to plan with my partnered nations.

However, neither of these documents could provide me with any concrete understanding of how, at the tactical level, to plan and execute operations with such a complex array of forces. Nothing I could find within Army doctrine was able to articulate a similar problem set to the one I found myself presented with despite the fact that I was not the first company commander presented with such a problem. Most doctrine related to a multinational coalition effort was either based in strategy and a poor fit for executing at the company level, or it was related to train, advise, assist doctrine borne out of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, also a poor fit due to there being limited need to train, advise, or assist most of my partners.

Without a clear doctrinal framework to build around, I was left to cherry-pick from some of the strategic considerations pulled out of JP 5-0 and JP 3-16 and to develop on the fly. To manage and synchronize efforts across our partnered forces, the company developed several different means that were informed by JP 5-0 and JP 3-16 but built by trial and error to aid in planning and in engaging each contingent. Some were successful, some were not. I'd like to highlight three attempted solutions to the problem of synchronization to better illustrate some of difficulties in solving this problem.

1. Platoon – Partner Relationships

Upon arrival of our last base defense partner (the GSMB), I assigned one set of platoon leadership to each national contingent as a way to maintain constant contact with each partner and to build relationships. The goal was for our base defense partners to feel and be more of a team with the members of Dagger Company and to ensure that any issues or concerns that each partner had were addressed by my company's leadership. I tasked 1st Platoon to liaise with the GSMB, 2nd Platoon to partner with the ANA at FOB Eagle, 4th Platoon to work with the Romanian company from their TF, and the fire support officer (FSO) and other headquarters elements to work with the APPF.

Each platoon linked up with its partner and attempted to develop a relationship. This quickly fell apart in all cases but the APPF. There were several reasons for this: The APPF was the simplest because we had direct control over their operations, and my company's chain of command quickly morphed into a de facto APPF chain of command. The Romanians and Georgians, on the other hand, existed only under indirect control of my company and therefore were not obligated to share any information with my platoon leadership. Nor were they keen to partner with us in the more traditional sense.

This effort broke down quickly due to the complex nature of our command relationship with our partners. Not having any direct control over the Georgians, Romanians, or the ANA made it impossible to act in the advisory role taken in the past when working with Afghans. The relationship with other NATO and coalition allies did not fit well with advise/assist templates.

2. Base Defense Commander's Huddle

We developed a weekly meeting of the base defense commanders so that I could be sure that each element representing the base defense team was able to contribute to planning and that there was a forum for concerns or recommendations to be aired. The commanders of the Georgian, Romanian, and APPF companies, as well as points of contact from the JORSOF and the Marine GLT, were typically present to discuss evolving base defense issues.

This meeting was very successful in letting the various commanders broach their concerns, but it quickly became apparent that I was personally required to prevent the meeting from devolving into unending complaints. My needing to arbitrate or redirect the arc of the meeting did not necessarily hurt discourse, but it did limit the free exchange of ideas I had hoped the meeting would be. Frequently, the meeting felt more like a briefing to me than a working group comprised of equals. The meeting also suffered from operations security (OPSEC) concerns that prevented us from discussing some pertinent issues due to the presence of Afghans or other partners.

The commander's meeting did help identify several issues, but it never took off as a collaborative effort among equally responsible commanders.

3. Base Defense Zone/Ring Concept

When the GSMB company arrived, FOB Apache's base defense team was flush with combat power. To make the most of this opportunity, we developed a concentric ring system for our local security patrols and then divided those rings into a GSMB area of operations (AO) and a Dagger Company AO. The nearest ring consisted of short reconnaissance and surveillance patrols out to about one kilometer. The next ring comprised longer daily patrols to assess nearby village atmospherics and changes to the environment. The final ring constituted our disruption zone where entire platoons would conduct ANP support operations and overwatch missions to limit enemy freedom of movement. The Georgians were responsible for the nearest ring and the southern portion of the middle ring, with my company conducting longer duration patrols in the furthest ring.

This concept and associated graphics were given to the ANA at FOB Eagle, which used them in conjunction with our weekly meetings to build their own reconnaissance and surveillance patrol schedule, and the ANP who, through their understanding of our local security operations, were better able to support disruption operations in the furthest ring.

This split of the local security area between the Georgian company, Dagger Company, and ANSF was quite successful despite the lack of formal command relationship between our three organizations. By giving the Georgians and Afghans a general task and purpose and a well-articulated AO, we were able to push much more combat power into the AO while also expanding my company's reach and increasing the FOB's stand off from potential threats. The ring system allowed us, the Georgians, and the ANSF near FOB Apache flexibility in our patrol planning so as to change up tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and routes for each patrol while still working toward a common goal.

The rings and the associated guidance for each area allowed me to have some measure of control over the Georgians and ANSF without having direct tasking authority over them, skirting one of the primary issues we saw with many of our other attempts to solve coordination and synchronization problems.

Each initiative described above sought to solve the problem of how to bring the disparate elements of the team together to improve base defense. Some worked, some did not, but each success or failure yielded observations that could potentially be used in the future to build basic guidelines for a company commander confronting his own coalition. Here are a few of those observations:

1. Develop baseline guidance and graphics that can be applied across the team.

By developing a standard template like the ring system, you are able to more concretely and efficiently influence the actions of your partners than by engaging them individually. By applying the same basic concept to all partners, it will streamline understanding across the team and will allow you to shape the actions of your partners without explicitly dictating their actions. It will lessen the daily coordination load but still ensure that your end state is being met.

2. Be prepared to act as the “First Among Equals.”

Especially during planning, your role as the U.S. commander is one that other leaders in your coalition will defer to. It is unlikely that you will get a fully open and honest discussion among the other nationalities of your team. Regardless of the command relationships with the members of your team, more often than not when you are all in the same room, you will be the decision maker.

3. You may spend most of your time as a commander playing diplomat.

Building and maintaining relationships is absolutely essential to working around and through the command relationship issues, cultural issues, and general day-to-day difficulties that coalition operations entail. By ensuring that you have face time with your partners, you will be more likely to get the work you need out of them. You will better understand their needs and their concerns, both of which will help you accomplish the mission.

As the Army moves toward smaller deployments of battalions and companies in support of regional alignment or acute crises, company commanders are more likely than ever to find themselves in the position of leading a coalition. Company commanders will be forced to work, as they have been during the global war on terrorism, at levels well above that of a tactical commander. They will be required to interface with foreign militaries and work hand in hand with partners of varying capabilities over which they may have little formal control. The Army must recognize the need for tactical leaders to be able to handle that situation and build training and doctrine to facilitate our leaders' ability to accomplish a mission that in the past was well outside the tactical leader's purview.

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