

IMPROVING YOUR POSITION: *SECURITY AND THE HUMAN TERRAIN*

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Always improve your position. In a patrol base, conduct reconnaissance and security (R&S) patrols and cover your dead space. In a combat outpost, develop alternate, supplementary, and subsequent defensive positions. In a foxhole, dig deeper. Wherever you are, always improve your position.

From basic training to Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) to Ranger School, physical security is drilled into us so we can be better prepared for the next kinetic threat. This is a good thing. Security will — and should — always be the top priority on patrol. But by focusing exclusively on physical security, we are missing some important pieces of the puzzle. In an urban environment — or, realistically, anywhere that your platoon isn't sitting alone in a swamp — the human terrain can be every bit as important in preparing for — or even preventing — the next kinetic fight.

My platoon was deployed as the security force (SECFOR) for a security force advise and assist team (SFAAT) in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom XIV and Resolute Support Mission. The bulk of our missions revolved around going to the same locations, day in and day out, as the SFAATs met with the governor, police leadership, or military staffs. While this repetition felt dangerous (the limited routes available, inflexibility of our schedules, etc., made our travel patterns uncomfortably predictable), it also created opportunities for us to constantly improve our security.

After a few days of going to the same locations, we had physical security down to a science. My NCOs and I worked together to figure out the best positions for each truck in each compound. Every truck had established fields of fire and sector sketches drawn onto their gridded reference graphics. Each driver watched dead space and blind spots for their gunners. We developed procedure words for our guardian angels (GAs) to covertly signal the rest of the platoon if something didn't feel right or if they detected a threat in their meeting. We planned, briefed, and rehearsed emergency exfiltrations under various hostile circumstances at every location.

On every mission, I would think back to all the nights spent setting up patrol bases in training. Establish and adjust the perimeter — check; ensure interlocking sectors of fire — check; develop sector sketches — check; distribute alert, evacuation, and withdrawal plans — check.



A platoon leader with Combined Task Force Dragoon and an interpreter speak with a local Afghan man at Forward Operating Base Zangabad, Afghanistan, on 12 August 2013. (Photo by SPC Joshua Edwards)

As numerous Afghan civilians and police wandered through the compound and conducted their business, it became clear to me that we were missing out on an essential aspect of our security — the human terrain. We knew the Afghan counterparts of our SFAAT advisors, but what about everyone else? What about the guard in the tower overlooking our trucks, the civilian walking in the front gate, or the policemen walking by? How do we improve our position by accounting for them in our security plan? I quickly decided we needed to incorporate a version of R&S patrols. Rather than moving in a “T” fashion to map out dead space, these mini-patrols would be focused on getting to know and understand the guards and civilians in our area — the human terrain.

These patrols became a standard part of my battle rhythm. Every day, after our trucks moved into position and our GAs escorted the SFAAT advisors into their meetings, I would take a Soldier and an interpreter with me to conduct my R&S patrols. I would meet with the governor’s bodyguards, the police quick reaction force, civilians wanting to see the governor, or tower guards along the compound perimeter. I soon learned which guards to expect at which towers, which policemen were trustworthy, and which civilians to be wary of.

Over time, these relationships proved beneficial for a variety of reasons. One policeman alerted us to U.S. military equipment being taken off the base by contractors to be sold in the downtown market. One bodyguard would tell me the police chief’s travel schedule when the police chief himself was being cagey and hiding information from our advisors. A few times, staffers and policemen would call me at night to alert me to a bomb or shooting in their district long before the normal reporting channels found out.

One day, I noticed a new guard was in the tower closest to us. I went to go meet him. After the usual greetings and small talk, I started asking him about his job. I was frustrated that he couldn’t answer basic questions like “what will you do if someone starts shooting at your tower?” or “if you see something happen, how will you tell your commander?” I quickly realized that this guard had no training, had not been briefed, and had no radio or phone to communicate with anyone else.

As I continued to ask these questions, he broke down. Through the interpreter, he unleashed: “I don’t know what I’m doing here. My commander is stupid. He is very mean and he abuses me. He always cusses at me and calls me a dog and hits me and threatens me. I can’t work with him anymore. He treats me like a dog and I won’t take it anymore.”

Then, he calmly and clinically told me how he would solve his problem: “The next time he comes up to this tower, I’m going to shoot him in the face.”

I hid my shock and tried to lighten the situation while telling him that he can’t shoot his commander. He continued. “I will shoot him. If I try to escape, the other guards will catch me,” he explained as he pointed to the other towers guarding the exit points from the compound. “So I’ll jump down from this tower over the wall, cross the street, go down that alley, and hide at my cousin’s house.”

Realizing that this was a well-thought out, premeditated plan and not just a temporary fit of rage, I contained my nervousness and attempted to talk down the guard from his plan. I tried to convince him to talk to his superiors and that he would be caught and killed if he went through with his plan. Eventually, I got a shaky promise that he wouldn’t kill his commander today.

As I climbed down the stairs from the tower, my mind was racing. What if he shoots his commander while we’re here? What if some stray rounds hit our trucks or, worse, a gunner? What if my GAs or the advisors get caught in the crossfire from a green-on-green attack and the ensuing chaos?

This situation drove home the importance of understanding the human terrain that was so crucially intertwined with our physical security. Ultimately, the situation resolved itself. The police chief was very concerned to learn about this, the abusive commander was quickly removed from the compound, and the would-be assassin was effusively grateful. The threat never manifested itself, but it forever changed how I developed our security plans.

Whether you’re in a police compound, a city center, or a sparsely populated village, only by engaging and interacting with the locals — conducting R&S patrols of sorts — can you find the blind spots and cover the dead space that you won’t see on any maps or imagery. After your physical security is coordinated and established, finding out which guards aren’t prepared or equipped for their jobs — or which ones are planning a violent attack — may just be the key to being ready for or even preventing the next outbreak of violence. The next time you’re on patrol and you’ve gone through your mental checklist of all the principles of security, just remember: always improve your position.

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