



REFORMING THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY (ANA)

Getting the most out of the ANA, so we can do less

By Jeff Haynes

Jeff Haynes recently retired as a Colonel from the United States Marine Corps after 24 years of service. During 2008, he commanded Regional Corps Advisory Command-Central where he advised the Afghan National Army's 201st Corps Commanding General and staff. Concurrently, Colonel Haynes commanded 23 Embedded Training Teams consisting of over 600 advisors and support personnel from all US services and 5 contributing nations distributed throughout central and eastern Afghanistan. He is currently the Vice President for Operations of Glevum Associates, which conducts extensive face-to-face social science research in Afghanistan and Iraq on behalf of the Department of Defense and other clients. The views expressed are the author's and do not represent the policy or judgments of any organization of the United States Government.

Current Situation

Since 2002, the United States has expended billions of dollars and deployed thousands of advisors to Afghanistan in order to build the Afghan National Army. Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), the US-led organization tasked with creating the ANA, has made great strides in developing five geographically dispersed Corps, a Capitol Division, and an Air Corps all totaling over 93,000 Afghan soldiers.

Despite CSTC-A's phenomenal achievements, the ANA has not been allowed or required to assume a decisive role in the security and stability of Afghanistan. While numerous Western experts discuss strategies and US troop numbers for Afghanistan, few consider the ANA in any detail and even fewer actually understand its strengths and weaknesses. Most experts typically call for the rapid expansion of the ANA, believing that a larger Afghan army will increase capacity leading to the ANA assuming an ever greater responsibility for the security of Afghanistan. That is naïve. The rapid expansion of the ANA will likely undermine the fragile success that has been achieved to date. It will also set back not hasten its assumption of the lead role in defeating a resurgent Taliban. Unfortunately, too many of the people who are developing Afghan security strategy, have never worked with the ANA and do not have a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

The reality is that ANA effectiveness is already suffering because of an inadequate number of competent leaders and staff officers from the kandak (battalion) through the Corps level. Growing the army too fast will only exacerbate this leadership deficit. However, where the ANA has had strong leadership, for example with the 3d Brigade, 201st Corps, they perform well, sometimes better than the coalition. There is untapped potential within the ANA, which we must leverage now to be decisive in our battle with the Taliban. However, it is not going to be achieved through its rapid expansion.

There is no doubt that we urgently need an expanded and more capable ANA. We also need the ANA to assume a greater role in the fight. That is because, until a larger more competent Afghan National Army assumes ownership of the security situation, a meaningful NATO withdrawal is off the table. Indeed a surge of Coalition troops alone may actually undermine popular support for the fight still further, reinforcing Taliban propaganda, which portrays the coalition as an occupying force. So how do we get the ANA to assume a greater role in the fight while rapidly and efficiently increasing their size?

It's about Leadership, Leadership, Leadership

The author concurs with the view expressed by Dr. Mark Moyar in his recent book *A Question of Command* that counterinsurgency is "leader-centric" warfare, a contest that will be won by whichever side has the best leadership in the field. We have been struggling in Afghanistan primarily because of weak Afghan leadership, in the ANA and even more so in the ANP. Although there are many competent commanders in the ANA, more are needed, especially in the event of rapid growth. As a recently published CSTC-A report has stated, "The most significant challenge to rapidly expanding the Afghan National Security Forces is a lack of competent and professional leadership at all levels, and the inability to generate it rapidly."

Challenge – ANA command selection is based on ethnic bias and personal connections at the Corps, ANA General Staff, or MOD levels. This frequently leads to unfit officers assuming command. Officer accountability is extremely uneven, often due to favoritism or a fear of reprisal from above. Good leadership is impossible in an environment with this type of cronyism. Failure to enforce discipline on officers who have a “benefactor” contributes to a lack of trust between the leader and the led and inhibits operational effectiveness. This affects everything from officer leave allocation, to the distribution of fuel and supplies, to field orders.

Recommendation – A formal command screening process and a general officer selection process should be established and monitored by advisors to ensure that the most qualified applicants are selected. ANA senior leadership may balk at such an intrusion, but the ANA has demonstrated that they cannot impartially select key leaders. Given the amount of blood and treasure we’ve expended on this army and the critical role the ANA must play in the future, we should attach more strings to our support and force through this reform.

Recommendation – The ANA must break up the Kabul officer clique. Many senior officers have rotated throughout Kabul units, to include the ANA General Staff, for far too long. These officers must be required to serve outside of the Kabul area or forced to retire. The stagnation of officers in Kabul leads to cronyism and lowers morale among the ranks of less connected officers serving in hotspots across the country.

Recommendation – The senior enlisted ranks offer fertile ground from which to harvest new junior officers. The ANA must select and grow leaders from the ranks now by instituting a commissioning program for senior NCOs, especially sergeants major. Many are suitable to serve as Captains or Majors now without additional training. Senior NCOs indicated to this author they were departing the service because they are not valued within the ANA and there is no upward mobility for sergeants major beyond the Corps level. Many of these quality leaders are in their late 20s or early 30s and ready for increased responsibility. Unfortunately, the Soviet mentality among the ANA officer corps translates into little delegation of responsibility to senior NCOs. There is a fear that the NCOs will outshine the officers. Senior NCOs often exit the army fed up with mediocrity. It is not uncommon from them to take contractor jobs making three or four times their ANA salary.

There is Hope – Show the Way

In May of this year, the 201st Corps Commander and key staff toured Third Marine Division units in Okinawa and spent time with functional area leaders to gain firsthand knowledge of how a professional force functions in garrison. This visit included roundtable discussions regarding leadership, accountability, the role of the NCO and the US military justice system. The trip was all the more effective: many 201st Corps mentors are sourced from the Third Marine Division and provided examples of personal accountability and NCO leadership. The author could personally see the “light come” on as the Marines spent a week showing the Afghan officers Marine Corps best practices.

Recommendation – To professionalize the ANA, the coalition must increase these types of well-planned, meaningful activities. CSTC-A should also dramatically increase Afghan quotas to American professional education programs and ensure the most deserving officers and senior NCOs are selected to attend.

Recommendation – In the mid-90s, Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak instituted a core values program, which was successfully embraced throughout the Marine Corps. This program positively influenced individual Marine behavior. A similar program should be introduced in the ANA designed to encourage personal accountability, responsibility, selfless service, and integrity. The ANA should be the leading trusted institution in the war against corruption, setting the example within the Afghan government.

Consequences of Growing the ANA Too Fast

Growing the ANA too fast will result in poorly trained, less effective units on the battlefield. Lacking adequate leadership, ANA soldiers are much more likely to engage in criminal activity. Corruption and AWOLs will increase, and the reputation of the ANA will decline, as more allegations of abuse against the Afghan people surface. With poorly led, quickly manufactured units, the chances increase of ANA units breaking and running on the battlefield—it has happened before with a few brave advisors preventing disaster. Collaboration with the enemy could also increase. Worst-case scenario - entire formations could switch sides, as ANA units have occasionally done throughout Afghanistan’s history, a point ANA officers shared with the author in confidence. These problems are, indeed, a recurrent theme in the history of counterinsurgency. As Moyar noted in his recent *New York Times* article, “Past counterinsurgents who tried to expand under similar conditions, like the British in Malaya (1948 to 1960) and the Salvadorans (1980 to 1992), discovered that too many inexperienced officers took command and the experienced officers were spread too thinly. In addition to fighting poorly, badly led troops usually alienate the population by misbehaving and they often desert or defect.”

What Wrong Looks Like - Eastern Zone 2008

We can ill-afford the situation that existed in mid-2008 in Nuristan Province, the Korengal valley, and the city of Jalalabad. The ANA brigade commander at the time was in command only due to ethnic and political ties. The same was true of the kandak commander in Nuristan. The only solid commander in the brigade was Col. Esok in Sarkoni, a fine commander with excellent potential, who could not secure a seat on an advanced education program or get promoted due to his lack of political connections.

The abysmal leadership in the brigade was putting the author's US advisors in danger. It was readily apparent that the Corps Commander was experiencing resistance in replacing these officers. At one point, the author had to explain to senior ANA leadership that either the Nuristan kandak commander improved or the author would be forced to pull the advisor team off support for the entire kandak. Without that team, they would have no cash, fuel, or lifeline to emergency casualty evacuation or fire support. Finally, after several months of persistent "advice," ANA HQ authorized the corps commander to make the necessary personnel changes.

What Right Looks Like - Tagab Valley 2008

The ANA excel under good leadership. One such example is BG Zameri, Commander of 3d Bde, 201st Corps operating primarily in Sarobi area of Kabul Province and the Tagab valley of Kapisa Province. Gen Zameri demonstrated an innate sense of how to interact with the population. He knew when to inspire and when to coddle or intimidate always seeming to strike the correct balance between carrot and stick. With extensive mentoring, Zameri's 3d Bde in Jun 2008, conceived and commenced a holistic counterinsurgency campaign in the Tagab valley of Kapisa Province, approximately 60 miles east of Kabul, which continues to this day. Through good leadership and engagement with the population, the ANA have set conditions for a better life for the population and an untenable environment for the insurgents.

Interestingly, Zameri led with security and development nearly simultaneously. He wisely engaged the population, and they became a force multiplier by providing information regarding insurgents and cooperating with development efforts, agreeing to grow saffron on the exact ground where, just weeks before, they had harvested poppy.

Components of the campaign included: expeditionary camps built by the ANA with no coalition assistance, observation posts overlooking villages and key roads, and ANA Engineers using ANA equipment to improve roads critical to the movement of security forces and the movement of goods to market. The campaign also facilitated increased pomegranate production and packaging, and the digging of irrigation wells. These activities were supported by radio addresses, town hall meetings, sermons by the 201st Corps religious officer, and humanitarian aid deliveries. Much of this was covered on Afghan TV. The population in Tagab now believes in the government of Afghanistan through the efforts of the ANA, and is now helping the ANA to deny the valley to the enemy. In fact, once the campaign started improving the lives of the people, Zameri began receiving cell phone calls identifying the location of IEDS, which were found and reduced by ANA engineers.

The Tagab campaign was exclusively ANA led and implemented with the exception of French paratroopers in the northern end of the valley that conducted operations in support of the ANA. When combined operations were appropriate, the commanders and advisors met with French commanders to plan the operation. Each force was given separate tactical tasks that leveraged their strengths. There was not a formal partnering relationship, just a gentlemen's agreement on who is the supporting or supported commander during a given operation.

What is clear is that the population prefers the ANA, rather the coalition and will accept a mediocre ANA solution over a well-executed coalition one. Naturally, the ANA conduct tactical tasks that involve more contact with the population. Certainly dismounted ANA soldiers are far better received than French heavy vehicles or Marine HMMWVs.

Zameri's relationship to coalition forces is based upon mutual respect and trust and it should serve as an example for coalition and ANA commanders to follow. With aggressive ANA leadership and accountability, supported by competent advisors, the ANA can turn a valley once beholden to the enemy, into a valley where people's lives are improving, and then into a valley that is proud of a self-sustained ANA presence. Zameri did this with very little coalition support. It is the model for ANA effectiveness.

Growing the ANA Effectively

Don't let your audacity outrun your *leadership* capacity

As of Sept. 09, ANA troop strength was approximately 93,000 with approved growth set to reach 134,000 by Dec. 2011. Based upon the ISAF September assessment, ISAF and CTSC-A are requesting the ANA reach 134,000 by Oct. 2010. This unsustainable growth rate will exacerbate the current dearth of ANA quality leaders and is highly unlikely to result in an increase in ANA operational capacity and effectiveness. A larger Army does not equate to a more effective army.

Recommendation – the author therefore advocates initially increasing the number of rank and file soldiers in existing units instead of generating new ones. This approach provides more time for current leaders to improve, while the larger troop population provides a deeper pool from which to select future leaders.

Challenge – Currently, CSTC-A is creating a fourth 649-man infantry kandak (battalion) in each of the 18 ANA infantry brigades. This equates to 11,682 additional soldiers--a manageable number when it comes to recruiting, training, and equipping. However, 18 additional kandaks require 18 additional battalion commanders, and 18 battalion executive, logistics, and operations officers, plus 90 company commanders, not to mention other subordinate officers and senior NCOs. Where is the ANA going to get these key leaders?

Recommendation – A much simpler and more supportable solution is to increase the table of organization of all 54 currently fielded infantry kandaks by adding 216 soldiers to each kandak, for a total of 885 troops per kandak. Given the current AWOL, desertion and leave rates, an 885 man kandak is manageable and more in line with the requirement for a counterinsurgency focused, population centric force—exactly what we need in this type of fight. By not creating eight additional kandaks, the advisor requirement is reduced by over 300 based on 17 member Embedded Training Teams per kandak. This also reduces the demand for MRAPs, UAHs, crew served weapons, and communications gear to support these teams.

Recommendation – Commensurate efficiencies could be achieved by delaying the creation of the five Corps Support Battalions. The Corps' supply, services, transport, and maintenance capabilities are adequately covered by ANA capability at the brigade level. These more technical fields are expensive, harder to mentor, and not even required at the Corps level. They reek of an unhealthy desire to build the ANA in our own image.

Competent, Experienced, Trained Advisors are Essential

Commanding 23 teams with personnel from 5 countries and all US services has allowed the author the opportunity to compare how well the advisor teams were prepared and how they approached their role as advisors. The type of mentor we need is one who can lead by example, an advisor who has left his ego at the door and measures his success by how well his ANA are doing. An advisor must understand the culture of the Afghans but more importantly the service culture of the Afghan National Army. We need mentors who endure, who persevere, who insist on leading the ANA to achieving a higher standard. To be effective, advisors must have specialized training. The Marine Corps has a very deliberate advisor-training program that culminates in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Mojave Desert. The author's Marine teams had seasoned leaders with promising careers who were primarily advising within their occupational field. The author also received some stellar Guardsmen, but it is asking a lot for a part time soldier to make the transition from civilian to full time soldier to advisor with the little time and training we give them.

Recommendation – We must pay the advisor bill with the best, brightest and bravest, even if it means diverting O-5 and O-6 command level talent to work with the ANA rather than their current service. This may meet fierce resistance from the services, but how much longer can we shortchange the advisor mission by filling only half the requirement? We can no longer afford to make our own forces the focus; the focus must be on developing Afghan sustainable solutions so we win the COIN fight in the long term. While dozens of suitable officers inhabit the offices of ISAF and CJTF 82 planning solutions for the Afghan people, with little or no contact with ordinary Afghans, too few are deployed with the advisor teams.

Partner Early - Then Leave it to Advisors

The September ISAF estimate contains language regarding “enhanced partnering” between coalition units and Afghan units. Currently, coalition force units are required to have an Afghan National Security Force element with them on all operations. However, the ANSF are not bound by an edict requiring that they must operate with the coalition. During the author's tour, he repeatedly had to prevent coalition units from “borrowing” ANA units so they could conduct an operation. That is not partnering. For partnering to work, coalition units must be well trained in how to partner and be under the command of an officer who “gets it.” He understands his job is to mentor the ANA not do the job for them.

We must also guard against over-partnering. When the ANA feel they own the problem, they excel. When we push them to the back or when we do too much for them, we stunt their growth or stifle initiative. When the ANA are living too close to the coalition, they are more apt to become stale and are all too ready to let the coalition do the heavy lifting. The ANA often feel inferior, and in effect say to the coalition, “you have the fire support, helicopters, equipment and expertise...knock yourself out, you're only here a year, we're here for the long haul, we'll stay on the FOB.”

Recommendation – The author believes that “partnering” will be most effective under the following conditions: 1) early in the ANA unit lifecycle, 2) of limited duration until the ANA unit reaches an ability to operate independently, and, most importantly, 3) with a focus on improving ANA effectiveness as the purpose of the partnership. In addition, a partnered unit should not be a substitute for embedded advisors.

Many analysts and some US military personnel predicted that the Iraqi army was not ready to assume control of the cities when the US military pulled out in June. Yet to date they have been forced to step up to the plate and do a good enough job protecting the Iraqi population. Afghan units can do the same. Properly led, and advised, and given the lead role, they can assume ever-greater responsibility.

The Transition Plan – Give the Horse its Head

Where are the Afghans? Why, after seven years of pouring money into the ANA, are the Afghans still not responsible for their own sectors? We must drop the coalition use of the term “battlespace owner,” because it lets the ANA off the hook. The “land owner” and the “land” are named after the unit in country at that time. For example, TF Warrior would own battlespace of the same name, and when they rotated, the name would change to the new battlespace owner, e.g. TF Cyclone and so on. We keep renaming parts of their country and printing new maps to go with it. This practice reflects a very US centric view of Afghanistan, and it sends the message to the Afghan Government that the coalition owns the problem instead of the ANA.

To get more out of the ANA and decrease the requirement for additional US troops, we urgently need a construct that creates a sense of ANA responsibility and accountability of the security situation in a given area. ANA culture is such that appearance and face saving are strong factors in a leader’s decision-making process. The desire to not “look bad” permeates everything they do. It is pointless to try to change this aspect of their culture, so we must exploit it. Couple their face-saving tendencies with the lack of a clearly articulated ISAF security transition plan and you get the lack of initiative and failure to take risks that we often see in the ANA. Overlay the Soviet background of many of the officers, and you have today’s ANA leadership deficiencies.

Multi-National Force-West’s 2007 Memorandum of Understanding in Al Anbar province with the Iraqi Army (IA) is a successful security transition model worthy of close examination. This agreement defined relationships between coalition and Iraqi units with an eye always toward handing over areas of operational responsibility to the Iraqi Army. Once capable, an IA unit was released from the Tactical Control of the coalition and given responsibility for a specific area of operations (AO) while MNF-W units remained in overwatch as required by the threat and the competence of the Iraqi unit. The purpose was always to take the “training wheels” off as early as possible while maintaining a watchful eye to prevent catastrophe. Embedded advisors provided the linkage to in-extremis US support. Further, MNF-W and the Iraqi Army had the option to establish a Combined Operating Area “when both 1st IA Division and MNF-W ground forces are conducting combined tactical operations within the same area of operations.” A MNF-W like model must be developed and implemented in Afghanistan now, with an eye toward Provincial Afghan control as soon as possible. Further, as the ANA assumes battlespace, coalition Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) should mentor the establishment of ANA PRTs. The PRT resources will round-out the ANA COIN fighting capability.

Tie Transition to Metrics

The current Capability Milestone (CM) system provides an excellent readiness snapshot based on personnel strength, logistics, training, but was originally intended to serve as a resource management tool during the force generation process. To continue to use the CM system as the sole measure of success is confusing potential with results. CM ratings alone do not persuade commanders to take action, although a high rating should be a pre-condition prior to assuming battlespace control. For example, an ANA unit must be CM-2—capable to lead operations with ISAF support—before it is awarded battlespace. To instill initiative and accountability, the graduate level metric of an ANA commander should be his ability to conduct independent operations and generate desired effects such as reducing levels of violence or setting conditions for development within that battlespace.

Summary of Recommendations

What the author is proposing will be a challenge. It will try our collective patience. It requires a paradigm shift both within the Afghan National Army and coalition forces. A sustainable solution to our Afghan woes must include a significant Afghan component or we’ll continue to flounder as we try to do it ourselves. With competent advisors and appropriate partnering of well-led kandaks and brigades, the ANA can develop and execute campaigns that transform key valleys in order to permanently defeat the insurgency. Outlined below is a summary of key recommendations:

- Generate *larger* formations, especially infantry, not more formations, to reduce the requirement to create more ANA leaders.
- Take immediate action to improve existing ANA leaders—e.g. enlisted to officer accession program, advisor monitoring command screening and G.O. promotion processes, increase in school quotas.
- Commence campaign to instill core values and reduce corruption within the ANA. Make the ANA an example as a

non-corrupt Afghan institution.

- **Partner with an eye toward transitioning battlespace to the ANA. Do not overpartner.**
- **Do not use partnered coalition units as a substitute for advisors**
- **Put competent, experienced leaders in advisor roles.**
- **Develop a construct to transition battlespace to the ANA now. Consider the 2007 MNF-W memorandum as a model. This will prompt action and initiative on the part of ANA commanders.**
- **Evaluate ANA commanders based on their performance in their own battlespace. The Capability Milestones rating alone is an inadequate measure of success.**
- **ANA must be given COIN enablers: Afghan PRTs, funds for projects, and access to non-governmental organizations.**

By implementing now, the coalition can achieve a decisive and measurable improvement in the capacity and effectiveness of the ANA, possibly within a year. A successful, self-assured ANA assuming ever-greater responsibility for the battlespace and growing in experience and confidence will provide the solid framework for a significant expansion of the ANA within two to three years. In contrast, the rapid expansion of the current ANA will exacerbate and magnify all of its shortcomings and reduce and perhaps even nullify its limited successes.

Of Related Interest

What Afghans Want, by Andrew Garfield, October 2009

<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200911.garfield.whatafghanswant.html>

Reforming the Afghan National Police, An FPRI-RUSI Study, September 2009

<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200909.rusi.reformingafghanpolice.html>

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