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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES:  
CLOSING THE GAP BEFORE 2014**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** Afghan National Security Forces: Closing The Gap Before 2014

**Author:** Major Ryan P. Benson, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** In order for Afghan National Security Forces to be in a position for independent operations in 2014, the United States needs to decouple general purpose forces from partnering now and focus strictly on advising under independent conditions.

**Discussion:** After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States' primary goal was the destruction of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. A secondary goal was the development of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) as a method of security force assistance (SFA). The US and NATO had to subsequently build the organizational infrastructure, while recruiting, training, mentoring, and advising all ANSF. The US and NATO leaned heavily on Special Operations Forces (SOF) for this mission, but operated in unfamiliar territory. While advising and training foreign security forces is a SOF doctrinal mission under foreign internal defense, SOF had never had to build the organizational infrastructure. When SOF turned the SFA mission over to US general purpose forces (GPF) in 2003, a shortfall in advisor teams as well as GPF personnel with advising experience led to an over reliance on partnering as the predominant form of SFA. The over reliance on partnering operations resulted in ANSF dependent on US operational forces to meet Afghanistan's internal and external Taliban threat. A gap now exists in capability between the current state of ANSF and the goal of an independently operating ANSF in 2014.

**Conclusion:** In order to close the capability gap, NATO needs to decouple GPF now and allow the ANSF to conduct independent operations with the support of advisors. This will allow embedded advisor teams to refine all internal ANSF operations and processes while also retaining a NATO GPF backstop to stem operational failure and reinforce success prior to the 2014 deadline.

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## INTRODUCTION

The United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies have been engaged in security force assistance (SFA) of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) since 2001. United States Special Operations Forces (US SOF) initiated the mission of security force assistance (SFA) by advising the Northern Alliance in their defeat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This mission eventually transitioned to SFA of a fledgling Afghanistan National Army (ANA). This was an ideal situation as advising is a subset of Special Operations Forces' (SOF) doctrinal mission of foreign internal defense (FID) and unconventional warfare. Unfortunately, US SOF quickly became stretched thin due the mission in Afghanistan, the recently initiated war in Iraq, and other enduring SOF missions around the globe. The finite number of SOF teams and limited personnel forced the SFA mission in Afghanistan to become a US Army and Marine Corps general purpose force (GPF) mission. Since receiving the SFA mission, Army and Marine Corps GPFs have made great strides in becoming extremely competent training, mentoring, and advising. That being said, most of the Army and Marine Corps GPF units have focused on a robust partnering effort as an SFA corner stone and not advising. While partnering has its merits in initiating SFA, advising is a much more effective form of SFA for fostering independent operations. Partnering can actually become counterproductive to effective SFA as the targeted foreign force progresses. A gap currently exists between the current state of ANSF and the goal of an independent ANSF because of a reliance on partnering. The timeline for ANSF independence is becoming increasingly constrained. The President of the United States has stated that the end of 2014 will conclude the transition of security from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to ANSF<sup>1</sup> and NATO echoed President Obama's words by endorsing on the President's 2014 exit strategy.<sup>2</sup> The nexus between dependent and independent operations

needs to be closed now and whatever shortfalls there may be need to be solved using Afghan means. In order for Afghan National Security Forces to be in a position for independent operations in 2014, the United States needs to decouple general purpose forces from partnering now and focus strictly on advising under independent conditions.

### UNDERSTANDING SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE

Throughout this paper, security force assistance (SFA) will be used as an umbrella term which incorporates training, advising, and mentoring. In the last ten years, the military lexicon with regard to training, advising, equipping, security assistance, has changed multiple times. SFA will be used predominantly throughout this paper because according to the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance, SFA “equates to those activities (organize, train, equip, rebuild/build and advise – OTERA) that support the development of FSF [foreign security force] capability and capacity.”<sup>3</sup>

The evolving military lexicon is also true with regard to the teams designated to carry out the SFA mission. Teams designated to carry out this mission have been identified as mobile transition teams (MTT), embedded training teams (ETT), advisor teams (AT), and most recently security force assistance advisory teams (SFAAT). For the purpose of this paper, the teams designated to carry out the SFA mission will be referred to as SFAATs or advisor teams.

While advisor teams come from GPF, they receive specialized training in SFA prior to deploying for operations. The teams can be formed from either single or multiple GPF units, but after forming, they are sent for specialized SFA training as a single entity. Advisor teams are typically much smaller than the units that they advise. As an example, an advisor team designated to support an Afghan kandak, which is equivalent to a U.S. battalion, is generally comprised of twenty to thirty personnel while the kandak is comprised of 600-750 personnel.<sup>4</sup>

Advisor teams have a dedicated SFA mission and do not own the battlespace in which they operate. The Afghan unit that the advisor team supports is the battlespace owner. An advisor teams' specialized training, personnel ratio, and specific mission are important to understanding its differences to other GPF units.

GPF units also conduct SFA. The heart of the US military GPF is the maneuver unit. A maneuver unit conducting SFA is roughly equal in size to the Afghan unit that it is in support of. A US maneuver unit is commanded by a maneuver commander and typically owns the battlespace in which it operates. A maneuver unit's training is normally tailored to the mission and battlespace in which it assumes. Its mission is specific to its battlespace and a maneuver commander is responsible for all lines of operation (LOO) and lines of effort (LOE) within his battlespace. "If kinetic operations are the top priority, then SFA is often made more difficult."<sup>5</sup> This means that SFA may not necessarily be a maneuver commander's primary mission. As a result, the maneuver unit will likely conduct partnering as its method for SFA. The maneuver unit partner is its Afghan unit counterpart.

Partnering will need to be defined in order to come to an understanding of why it is an inefficient and counterproductive method of SFA when developing FSF capable of independent operations. "Partner units are coalition units that form habitual relationships with Afghan units and conduct operations with them."<sup>6</sup> Partnering is a method of SFA in which a US unit combines with an Afghan unit of roughly equal size to conduct operations in a given area of operation. Under ideal conditions the two partner units will have the same mission, operational goals, and operate within the same unit operational boundaries. An example of this is a US infantry battalion partnering with an Afghan infantry kandak. The battalion partners with the kandak down to the squad level. Each US squad, platoon, company, and staff section has an

Afghan counterpart. When conducting operations at the squad level, half of the squad is made of US personnel while the other half is comprised of Afghan personnel. This is mirrored up to the battalion level. This is often difficult to achieve as the partner units frequently have different priorities and operate in areas of operations with boundaries that do not coincide.

This baseline understanding of SFA, SFAATs, GPF maneuver units, partnering, and advising will be important throughout the progression of this paper. Partnering and advising as methods for SFA will be covered through a more in-depth process later in the argument. In order to understand the current operating environment in which the US, NATO, and other coalition forces find themselves in, it will now be important to build a historical foundation.

#### HISTORY OF SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “the primary goal of US strategy in the emerging campaign against terrorism was to disrupt and destroy the al-Qaeda organization in Afghanistan.”<sup>7</sup> A secondary goal was the destruction of the Taliban which had been harboring al-Qaeda forces and training camps within Afghanistan. US Special Operations Forces and NATO allies were deployed to Afghanistan with the mission of advising and assisting the Northern Alliance forces in defeating both al-Qaeda forces and the Taliban. US SOF was also given the mission of eliminating senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership through direct action engagements.<sup>8</sup> Upon the initial defeat of Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in 2001, the US and other coalition countries agreed to train a small, professional, and capable Afghan army and police force to provide security for the country.

On December 5, 2001 the Bonn Agreement set forth the stipulations for the establishment and training of what would eventually become the Afghan National Security Forces.<sup>9</sup> The agreement requested assistance from the international community in this endeavor along with the

reintegration of former Northern Alliance militia forces into the ANSF.<sup>10</sup> The Bonn Agreement also established the NATO International Security Assistance Force (NATO-ISAF) in 2002. The international community held another conference near Bonn, Germany in December later that year. Known as Bonn II, the agreement that stemmed from that conference further established that the Afghan National Army (ANA) would become an ethnically diverse entity of 70,000 personnel.<sup>11</sup> The Office of Military Cooperation-Afgansitan (OMC-A) was initially charged with the mission of training and equipping the newly established ANSF subordinating the mission for training and advising the ANA to US SOF.<sup>12</sup>

US Special Operations Forces began this mission by establishing a ten week training program for soldiers and newly established Afghan Kandaks at a training center in Kabul. SOF teams are uniquely qualified for this type of mission. US SOF has a long history of training and advising foreign militaries which pre-dates the America's official involvement in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> The Special Forces (SF) teams that comprise SOF maintain unique skill sets which include cultural and language skills making them the optimal entity to carry out the SFA mission in Afghanistan. Additionally, SF personnel spend the majority of their career within the SOF community without rotating back to the GPF, which means that the skill sets and experience necessary for SFA are retained within the SOF community.<sup>14</sup>

In 2003, there was a significant shift in the manner in which SFA would be conducted. The mission of training ANA was transferred from SOF to Army and Marine Corps GPF under Task Force Phoenix. "Task Force Phoenix took responsibility for educating and training all new ANA recruits, while OMC-A, [which would be renamed Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A)], continued to have responsibility for all other aspects of ANA development."<sup>15</sup> In addition to training all new Afghan recruits, Task Force (TF) Phoenix

took responsibility for all individual and collective training of ANA regular forces.<sup>16</sup> This meant that US Army and Marine Corps GPF would now comprise the teams assigned to all ANSF entry level training centers as well as the teams assigned to train and advise all levels of ANA GPF from the platoon through the Corps level. SF teams were still be responsible for advising and training Afghan Special Forces units, but US GPF were now be responsible for conducting SFA with Afghan GPF.

In April of 2006, NATO-ISAF established CSTC-A in Kabul to succeed OMC-A in the training and development of ANSF.<sup>17</sup> In 2010, the training and development of ANSF was further subordinated to NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) which falls under the command of CSTC-A.<sup>18</sup> During this time, beginning in 2004, Taliban forces returned to Afghanistan from safe havens in Pakistan and other countries. US conventional forces became the primary means of combating the Taliban while carrying out the NATO-ISAF mission. This culminated in 2009 when President Barrack Obama ordered a surge force of 30,000 US personnel into Afghanistan to “break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s capacity”.<sup>19</sup>

What is important to understand is that in 2003, almost all of the specialized and requisite skills for training foreign forces resided in the SOF community. This did not mean that Army and Marine Corps regular forces were any less competent, but the level of proficiency in conducting SFA was significantly lower than SF units. There would have needed to be a significant increase in training to close the gap in SFA training and advising capabilities. At the time there was no training system in place for GPF advisor teams. Nor was there a common understanding for the manner in which regular Army and Marine Corps units should carry out SFA. Additionally, due to the significant increase in Taliban activity after 2004, GPF maneuver

commanders were placed in a position of operating along all LOOs and LOEs, focusing significantly on security, while trying to remain focused on SFA and ANSF. GPF advisor teams were engaged with ANSF at this time, but not at a significant ratio to be effective over the entire spectrum of operations. This caused a significant fracture throughout US GPF in the proper implementation of SFA at both the maneuver unit and advisor team level.

### PARTNERING

The manner in which US GPF conduct SFA through partnering at the maneuver unit level and advising at the team level gets to the heart of this paper's argument. After 2003, when the SFA mission was turned over to Army and Marine Corps GPF, there was a significant shortfall in the number of advisor teams, then called embedded training teams, that the GPF were able to field.<sup>20</sup> This was due in large part to the fact that many of the requisite training and advising skills resided in SOF. At the same time, maneuver unit commanders were still responsible for the training and mentoring of the ANA units in their battlespace as this was still one of the LOEs for which they were responsible. The shortfall in advisor teams coupled with the continued training and advising mission became major factors in the US development of a forced partnering effort.

The US adopted partnering as a method for SFA because it was an easy method to implement. Partnering does not necessarily require any additional specialized training at the maneuver unit level. Under ideal conditions a maneuver battalion can partner with an Afghan kandak in the same battlespace and conduct partnered operations from the squad level to the battalion and staff section level. NTM-A and the Afghan government have stressed that almost all operations should be conducted as a partnered force with the idea that it will increase the overall operational effectiveness of the partnered ANSF units.<sup>21</sup> Afghan soldiers can learn from

their American counterparts through an on the job training type of philosophy. Under the partnering model, a maneuver unit can teach and mentor its Afghan counterpart at all levels through real world operations. Ideal partnering means that mentoring takes place not only at the leadership level, but also at the individual soldier level since an equal amount of US soldiers/Marines marry up with an equal amount of Afghan soldiers. Eventually, partnering allows for a transition of responsibility from US command to Afghan command.

The partnering methodology is similar to that of a relief in place (RIP) between two units. An example of a relief in place would be a US maneuver unit that is returning from combat operations in Afghanistan being replaced by another US maneuver unit of similar size and composition from. The relieving unit must conduct a complete and thorough transition of authority as well as a RIP with the unit being relieved. The relieving unit's personnel are echeloned into the area of operation (AO) as the personnel from the unit being relieved are echeloned out. This allows for the relieving unit to receive a thorough battle hand over from the unit being relieved. A "[b]attle handover is a coordinated operation executed to sustain continuity of the combined-arms fight and to protect the combat potential of both forces involved."<sup>22</sup> This process is typically referred to as left seat/right seat.

Left seat/right seat is a metaphor for how the RIP process takes place. The metaphor is symbolic of someone learning to drive or a student driver and instructor relationship. In the beginning of the RIP as the relieving unit's personnel are echeloned into the battlespace, they are in the right seat, learning the "rules of the road" to the AO. Personnel from the unit being relieved are in the left seat "driving" operation and teaching the "rules of the road" of the AO to the relieving unit. As the RIP continues, more personnel from the relieving unit arrive in the AO and a greater understanding of the AO is attained. When this happens the two units switch seats.

The relieving unit gets in the left seat and begins to drive operations while the unit being relieved moves to the right seat to observe and mentor in a more advisory role. This process continues until all personnel from the relieving unit are in zone and a transition of authority takes place. The relieving unit then has complete responsibility for the AO.

This RIP process is similar to how the partnering methodology should work in an ideal situation. The process begins with the US maneuver battalion in the left seat teaching and training the ANA maneuver kandak as they conduct operations together throughout the AO. This portion of the process would proceed until the ANA kandak has the capacity and capability to conduct the full spectrum of operations necessary to begin the transition to the left seat. As the ANA kandak transitions to the left seat, the US maneuver battalion would begin echeloning unnecessary forces out of the AO. The US battalion would retain the necessary forces in the AO to remain in the right seat to advise and mentor the kandak as the Afghans prepare for complete transition. The process would conclude with a complete transition of authority as the kandak takes responsibility for the AO. This process would take place over a number of rotations of US battalions transitioning in and out of the AO.

Looking at the partnering process with an objective eye, it is easy to understand why this process was implemented by almost all maneuver units in every NATO command. Partnering makes sense to any maneuver commander who is responsible to conduct operations along every LOE within his assigned battlespace as well as the assigned responsibility of training and mentoring a counterpart Afghan unit. Unfortunately, partnering is a long and arduous process when establishing a foreign military from the ground up and although it is thorough, it can be completely counterproductive when attempting to decouple and drive independence.

Early-on in the establishment of the ANA, kandaks were often under manned due in large part to desertion and poor manpower management.<sup>23</sup> In order to compensate, maneuver commanders who partnered with depleted kandaks would often consolidate the kandak personnel and distribute them equally throughout the battlespace. This would allow for each subordinate unit a modicum of Afghan soldiers to partner with. This became increasingly important as NATO and Afghan leadership stressed the importance of partnering in all operations. The problem was that by distributing ANA personnel across the battlespace, there was little continuity left within the kandak. When the ANA soldiers were consolidated and redistributed, they often no longer operated in any type of formal unit. The outcome is a small number of ANA soldiers “assigned” to a US company, platoon, or even a squad at a comparable outpost. This distribution of ANA personnel throughout the US battlespace is conducted so that any operation or patrol that takes place within the AO includes at least one or two ANA soldiers so that “partnering” is accomplished. While this looks good on paper so that every operation is partnered, very little progression towards transition actually takes place. This of course is actually counterproductive to the very essence of what partnering and SFA is supposed to accomplish.

In order to maintain progression towards an independently capable Afghan unit, the integrity of each ANA sub-unit is imperative. Partnering on every operation, patrol, and guard post should not be the goal when it is not conducive to progression. It is easy to become singularly focused on partnering at every level when it is looked upon at higher levels of authority as a metric for success. ANA units need to partner with comparable US units regardless of ANA personnel shortfalls. A US platoon does not need to partner on every patrol at the expense of the ANA platoon’s progression. The ANA unit’s progression should be the singular focus so that when new personnel arrive to fill shortfalls, the unit will be in a position to

take the next step towards progression instead of waiting until all personnel shortfalls are filled in order to begin whole unit operational partnering.

The synchronization of operational boundaries is also important to the implementation of partnering at all levels. This has been a problem because as the ANA has grown and more kandaks, brigades, and corps have been established, unit operational boundaries have shifted. ANA units of various sizes have had boundaries that have crossed multiple US operational boundaries from the battalion up to the regional command level. This has made partnering a significant issue because when operational boundaries do not match up, an Afghan unit will often find itself partnering with multiple units. This can be a significant problem when there are conflicting goals and missions. The US partner will have a difficult time training and mentoring its ANA counterpart when the two missions conflict due to competing interests based on operational boundaries. Additionally, the ANA will have a difficult time trusting that a US unit will support its interests if an ANA objective is outside of the US unit's operational reach.

Finally, a US unit can actually inhibit ANSF progression through partnering in a manner which builds Afghan dependency. This sounds counterintuitive, but there is a point at which assisting its Afghan counterpart will reach a point of diminishing returns for the US partner.<sup>24</sup> Due to major shortfalls in the ANA logistical system, Afghan units often rely heavily on their US counterpart for food, fuel, building material, and other supplies. US units will often help their Afghan partners in order to fill a shortfall so that they can remain operationally relevant in the near term. This is a problem because although it is true that the ANA logistical system does need attention, it will never get fixed unless it is forced to function in its intended manner.<sup>25</sup> In order to meet long-term expectations, the ANA must be forced to use their systems so that shortfalls can be identified and fixed now. Partnering will never force ANA units to depend on

their own systems when their US counterpart is always there as a crutch.<sup>26</sup> This will ultimately prolong the time until the ANA are in a position to decouple from their US counterparts.

### ADVISING

When the US turned the SFA mission over to the GPF, advising with small teams was still the most effective way to prepare FSF for operational independence.<sup>27</sup> The problem of course was that all of the requisite knowledge in advising FSF remained in the SOF community. This meant that there was a need for major improvements for the manner in which the GPF sourced, trained, and fielded SFA advisor teams (SFAATs). From 2007 to 2012, US advisor teams were deployed to Afghanistan with limited results due in large part to a shortfall of well sourced, trained, and effective GPF advisor teams.<sup>28</sup> This led to an over reliance on partnering as the main form of SFA. This shortfall was recognized and in 2009 when President Obama called for an increase in the US training and advising capacity as part of the 30,000 personnel surge force.<sup>29</sup> This led to an increase in the number of advisor teams deployed to Afghanistan. Training the teams improved as well. A greater focus was spent on language skills and proper advising techniques based on lessons learned from both GPF and SOF advisor teams. This ultimately led to improvements in SFA capacity in Afghanistan.

Advisor teams require specialized training, which requires additional time and funding, in addition to the normal pre deployment military training requirements. Prospective advisors should be evaluated to ensure that they have the proper mindset and baseline skills to become an effective member of a small team.<sup>30</sup> Advisor teams need to be comprised of the proper personnel to fill a diverse set of skill sets in order to prepare for the team to train, mentor, and advise their Afghan counterparts through the full spectrum of military operations.<sup>31</sup> This entire process can

be both time and cost intensive, but the final product has the ability to provide an effective means of SFA.

Advising is effective because it forces the FSF unit to use its own processes, systems, and resources to be an effective unit. This is often referred to as the “by, with, and through” method.<sup>32</sup> It is through this method that the FSF gains legitimacy to its population, its nation, and its soldiers.<sup>33</sup> This methodology is one of the baseline principles for US Advising. Advising does not rely on its Afghan unit to be at full strength in order to become operationally relevant. Advising maintains the integrity of the Afghan unit at all levels. When an Afghan unit is supported by a US advisor team, the unit retains its own operational boundaries. The supported Afghan unit not only retains its own mission, it must develop it on its own. Advising fosters progression by forcing the Afghan unit to use its own methods and resources<sup>34</sup>. Advising is successful in the areas where partnering struggles to gain traction.

The methodology of an advisor is not to implement western thought processes, planning processes, logistical processes, or any other type of military process. An advisor must force the Afghan unit to utilize its own processes. An advisor cannot force the Afghan unit into an unfamiliar methodology because once the advisor team leaves, the Afghan unit will simply revert to what it knows. The advisor team must in turn take what is already in place in terms of methodology and systems, help the Afghans improve it and then force them to use it.

An example of this is leadership, which is a finite resource that Afghan units often have difficulty sustaining.<sup>35</sup> The advisor team forces the Afghan unit to conduct operations with the personnel that it has. This means that the Afghan unit must fill its leadership shortfalls from within in the short term while utilizing the ANA manpower mechanism to request leadership for the future. This also forces the unit to foster an environment in which young capable leaders

have the chance to perform with increased responsibility in the interim. The Afghan unit may be limited in the number of operations it can conduct, but it will not be limited in the types of operations it can conduct. The advisor team does not circumvent the Afghan process for filling leadership shortfalls within its personnel requirements. The team forces its Afghan counterpart to utilize the Afghan manpower system through the Ministry of Defense (MOD) to fill its leadership shortfalls while fostering leadership development from within. It does not matter if the Afghan system is inefficient, the system must be utilized and improved through Afghan means.

Afghan missions and operational boundaries cannot be set by coalition forces. An Afghan unit must receive its overall mission and operational boundaries from its higher authority. If this is not operationally feasible then the unit must set its own mission and operational boundaries. This cannot be conducted when adhering to coalition boundaries or coalition missions. Afghans understand the terrain, communities, and influencers better than coalition forces can ever hope to. This understanding must be utilized. Advisor teams do not hold any type of command authority and do not have the ability to dictate mission authority or operational boundaries. An advisor team forces the Afghan unit to work through its own planning process based on what that staff believes is operationally pertinent in order to make its own decisions. This is an extremely effective method for preparing an Afghan unit for operational independence.

Advising fosters progression because it forces its Afghan counterpart to do just that. The Afghan logistical system is often seen as the linchpin of future operational independence. US units often circumvent the Afghan logistical system in order to ensure that their partner Afghan units have the necessary equipment, fuel, and sustenance to conduct continued operations. This

is effective in the short term as the Afghans become reliant on their US counterpart to circumvent the Afghan system instead of actually using their own logistical system. Advisor teams force the use of the Afghan logistical system because they do not have the throughput to circumvent the Afghan system due to their small size and limited capacity. An Afghan unit is forced to use its own logistical system through its higher authority and the MOD in order to fill its requirements. This may mean that there will be an initial inefficient use of resources and a limited capacity for resupply, but it is the only way to make improvements. By forcing the Afghans to use their own methods, advisors can help improve efficiencies now so that they can be prepared for operational independence prior to the 2014 deadline.

Advising is the preferred method of SFA because it is a methodology that is focused on a self sufficient FSF capable of independent operations.<sup>36</sup> Advisor teams maintain the integrity of the FSF unit and force it to utilize their own processes, systems, and resources to be effective units. Advisor teams mentor their FSF counterparts in making their own decisions based on their own strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities in order to meet the requirements of the battlespace in which they are responsible for. FSF units supported by advisor teams are successful because they ultimately progress to independent operational status through their own means.

#### CLOSING THE GAP BY 2014

One of the major problems in Afghanistan is that “the development of the Afghan State—to include a national military—was approached as somewhat of an afterthought given that the primary purpose [was] for international intervention in the country.”<sup>37</sup> The difficulty for SFA in Afghanistan is that NATO has been trying to build a military force starting from ground zero. US SOF was initially given the mission of building, training, and mentoring ANSF because SOF units had significant experience in training and mentoring FSF as part of their foreign internal defense mission. The problem in Afghanistan was that there was no existing

military structure in place as there had been in Columbia where SOF units had been successful in supporting Columbian security forces in fighting the FARC. In the case of Afghanistan, the US and NATO have had to build the organizational infrastructure, while recruiting, training, mentoring, and advising. This is often referred to as the principle of simultaneity. NATO was essentially trying to drive the car while still assembling the engine. This was unfamiliar territory for both US SOF and NATO as a whole. When SOF turned the SFA mission over to US GPF in 2003, an over reliance on partnering exacerbated the problem.

Partnering was a viable SFA solution when initially standing up the ANSF. Due to the lack of resources and advisors, partnering made sense early for maneuver commanders. Partnering allowed for NATO to grow the Afghan infrastructure, organization, and manpower force structure while maintaining security throughout Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> NATO forces could maintain security and actively hunt Taliban forces while ANSF were built up and distributed throughout the country into areas of operation already under NATO control. ANSF could then filter into NATO controlled areas allowing partnering to take hold long enough in order to transition into advising as quickly as reasonably possible.

This method for transition never completely came to fruition. Many maneuver commanders continued using partnering as the preferred method of SFA without being able to make the transition to advising. It is easy to understand why. Making the transition to advising is a big step. Many commanders still do not believe that their Afghan counterparts are prepared to face the Taliban threat on their own. Additionally, the longer a US unit partners, the more difficult it becomes to decouple.<sup>39</sup> It becomes increasingly difficult to accept that a much less capable ANSF unit supported by advisors may indeed do a better job at taking the fight to the

Taliban as they are in fact Afghan and have a better understanding of the enemy than non Afghan forces do.<sup>40</sup>

President Obama and NATO came to an agreement on the 2014 exit strategy at the Chicago NATO Summit in May of 2012.<sup>41</sup> This was the optimal time to create and implement a timeline to transition prior to the 2014 deadline.<sup>42</sup> The way in which the 2014 deadline was agreed upon is irrelevant to the manner since the timeline for transition was not addressed. The result is that 2014 was designated as the end date, and a timeline should have been established at that point to optimize the transition of ANSF for independent operations prior to the deadline. As it is, there is still no universal schedule for decoupling ANSF from all GPF<sup>43</sup> and many units are still partnering. A gap in ANSF operational capacity now exists between the 2014 end state of independent ANSF and the current situation of NATO led operations. NATO will never gain an understanding of Afghanistan's full potential without decoupling now and allowing the ANSF to conduct independent operations while under the international safety net.

Brigadier General Eric Smith was the commanding officer for Regimental Combat Team-8 and was responsible for area of operation (AO) Tripoli from 2011 to 2012. While he partnered with the 2nd Brigade of the 215th Corps (2/215) of the ANA, much of that brigade was uncoupled and operated only with the support of advisor teams. He has a pertinent analogy which he often used to describe US partnering and advising of the ANA.<sup>44</sup>

He equates the US and ANA relationship to that of an instructor teaching someone to ride a bike. In the analogy, when teaching someone to ride a bike, the instructor holds on to the back of the seat and runs along with the rider as the rider pedals. In this case, the instructor knows how long he has to teach the rider. He knows when 2014 is. The instructor can see the end of the street. The rider is on the sidewalk and there is grass on

each side with a couple of trees ahead. The rider is not quite to the point of being able to ride on his own yet, so the instructor continues to hang on to the seat. What the instructor does not know is what is at the end of the street. There could be a four lane highway with semi tractor trailers or a parking lot that is full of cars, concrete, and other obstacles. If the instructor lets the rider go right now, at least he knows the fall is going to take place right in front of his eyes where the rider will fall on the grass and the instructor can pick him back up. What the instructor cannot do is hold on until the absolute last moment when he does not know what the environment will look like when he releases the rider. In that case the rider may run into a four lane highway without the instructor's support.<sup>45</sup>

This analogy is pertinent because many maneuver commanders are still partnering and holding on to the bicycle seat of their counterpart unit. There is apprehension to let go and allow the transition to advising. The problem with this mentality is that the ANA will never reach their potential until they can begin making their own decisions based on their own understanding of the situation within the scope of their capacity supplemented with advisor support. Most battle spaces are still under the control of US commanders with Afghan units operating as a part of a coalition force. This still leaves Afghans with a false sense of security as they still operate under the umbrella of US control. US commanders still do not know what is important to Afghan Commanders in many cases. Battle space must be ceded to Afghan command. Force the Afghans, with advisor support, to go through the planning process and make the decisions based on their limited resources and come to a decision on how to arrange their battle space according to what they feel is important. Pull back major maneuver units to a location where they can provide support to

independently operating Afghan units as more of a reaction force. This needs to be accomplished while there is still time to advise and support prior to the 2014 deadline.

It is imperative that the complete transition to advising be accomplished now so that there is still time help refine and improve ANSF operations and processes through advising under independent operating conditions while preventing catastrophic failure. NATO needs to let go of the seat, decouple all GSF, and allow ANSF to operate strictly with advisors while the end of the sidewalk is still in sight. This will allow ANSF to make mistakes and fall while NATO is still in a position to put ANSF back on the bike. Waiting until 2014 to completely decouple can only lead to possible ANSF failure without a NATO safety net potentially resulting in catastrophic failure. "If it's gonna come apart, let it come apart early when we are there to fix it. Pick them up off of the curb where you can still see them. Don't let them get all the way to the freeway before you let them go, where you can't see them."<sup>46</sup>

The gap in ANSF operational capacity needs to be addressed so that the ANSF can progress and the gap can be closed. ANSF operational capacity is not the same as US military operational capacity. By continuing to prop the ANSF up with manpower, fire support, and advanced technology, the US is essentially retarding ANSF progression. Currently Afghanistan is split into multiple contiguous regional, divisional, regimental, and battalion battle spaces. These areas have been drawn by NATO decision makers. These areas are going to shrink, expand, and move based on what Afghan leadership feels are important. General Smith sees the areas of operation regressing back to the provincial capitals and major population centers.<sup>47</sup> This means that the regional areas of operation in Afghanistan would look a lot like a group of non-contiguous bubbles surrounding the areas which are most important to Afghan security as

designated by Afghan leadership. If this is the case, then the regression of battle space needs to happen prior to 2014 with advisor teams in place supporting independent operations. The regression needs to happen while NATO GPF are still in Afghanistan and in a position to support ANSF in the case of a Taliban offensive.

A worst case scenario would be for a regression of battle space to take place with a simultaneous Taliban offensive after the 2014 deadline when the US will not be in a position to support.<sup>48</sup> A Taliban offensive after the 2014 deadline may very well happen, but the Afghan Forces need to be in a position of power in a clearly delineated defensive posture. A natural realignment of battle space is going to take place once ANSF is in complete control of Afghanistan. If a regression of battle space is going to happen, it needs to happen while the US is in a position to support. Advisors need to be in a position to give appropriate guidance with regard to positioning and the allocation of resources and NATO GPF need to be in a position to reinforce in a Taliban offensive takes place. This is only possible if a complete decoupling of NATO GPF takes place now allowing for the natural battle space realignment according to Afghan priorities. This realignment in conjunction with appropriate tactical and operational advisement will place the ANSF in a reinforced position of strength prior to a possible Taliban offensive.

## CONCLUSION

The President of the United States has stated that the end of 2014 will conclude the transition of security from the International Security Assistance Force to Afghan National Security Forces<sup>49</sup> and NATO echoed President Obama's words by endorsing the President's 2014 exit strategy.<sup>50</sup> In order to meet the mandated deadline, the capability gap that currently exists needs to be closed. The gap is between the goal of a self sufficient ANSF capable of

independent operations and the current state of a US reliant ANSF. This gap is largely a result of NATO forces which have been heavily reliant on partnering as the predominant method for SFA. Partnering was a viable SFA solution when initially standing up the ANSF. Due to the lack of resources and advisors, partnering made sense early for maneuver commanders. Partnering allowed for NATO to grow the Afghan infrastructure, organization, and manpower force structure while maintaining security throughout Afghanistan. Unfortunately, when NATO became overly reliant on partnering it began to stem growth and ultimately retarded ANSF progression. The longer a NATO unit partners, the more difficult it becomes to decouple and it becomes increasingly difficult to accept that a much less capable ANSF unit supported by advisors may indeed do a better job at taking the fight to the Taliban. Only by completely decoupling and transitioning to advising will NATO realize the true capability and operating capacity of ANSF. Like an instructor teaching a student to ride a bike, NATO must decouple and let go of the bicycle seat while the immediate future is still in sight. NATO must transition to advising under independent conditions now and allow for potential failures while it is still in a providing a security cushion. Waiting until the end of the sidewalk in 2014 to decouple will leave only the potential for catastrophic failure.

## GLOSSARY

ANA	Afghanistan National Army
ANSF	Afghanistan National Security Forces
AO	Area of Operation
AT	Advisor Team
CSTC-A	Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan
ETT	Embedded Training Team
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
FSF	Foreign Security Force
GPF	General Purpose Force
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
LOE	Lines of Effort
LOO	Lines of Operation
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MTT	Mobile Transition Team
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NATO-ISAF	North Atlantic Treaty Organization International Security Assistance Force
NTM-A	NATO Training Mission Afghanistan
OMC-A	Office of Military Cooperation Afghanistan
OTERA	Organize, Train, Equip, Rebuild/Build and Advise
RIP	Relief in Place
SF	Special Forces
SFA	Security Force Assistance

SFAAT	Security Force Assistance Advisor Team
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TF	Task Force
US	United States
US SOF	United States Special Operations Forces

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at ISAF Meeting on Afghanistan*. (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 21 May 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/21/remarks-president-isaf-meeting-afghanistan> (accessed December 20, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, *Fact Sheet: Chicago Summit – Afghanistan Transition Interim Milestone*. (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 21 May 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/21/fact-sheet-chicago-summit-afghanistan-transition-interim-milestone> (accessed December 20, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance Office, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*. (JCISFA, June 2012), 8, <https://jcisfa.jcs.mil/Members/Portal/SupportingDocument.aspx?docId=1318> (accessed January 12, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance Office, *Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) Advisor Guide*. (JCISFA, June 2012), 2-6, <https://jcisfa.jcs.mil/Members/Portal/SupportingDocument.aspx?docId=1254> (accessed January 12, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Nora Bensahal, Terrence K. Kelly, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), 79, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a549078.pdf> (accessed December 20, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Bensahal, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Donald P Wright, *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM October 2001 – September 2005*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combined Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2010), 30, <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/CSI/docs/DifferentKindofWar.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> Wright, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Bensahal, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Bensahal, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Security: Efforts to Establish Army and Police Have Made Progress, but Future Plans Need to Be Better Defined*. (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, June 2005), 6, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05575.Pdf> (accessed March 2, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Bensahal, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Troy D. Lewis, *Training the Afghan National Army*. (SAMS Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 19 May 2011), 21, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a545579.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Bensahal, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance Office, *Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) Advisor Guide*. (JCISFA, June 2012), 1-9, <https://jcisfa.jcs.mil/Members/Portal/SupportingDocument.aspx?docId=1254> (accessed January 12, 2013).

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<sup>18</sup> JCISFA ANSF Advisor Guide, 1-9.

<sup>19</sup> Barack Obama, *Remarks by the president in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 1 December 2009). <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan> (accessed January 21, 2013)

<sup>20</sup> Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Security: Efforts to Establish Army and Police Have Made Progress, but Future Plans Need to Be Better Defined*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan: United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces*. (Washington, DC: April 2012), 39, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a560366.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army. *The Infantry Battalion*. FM 3-21.20. (Washington DC: US Department of the Army, December 2006), 8-10, [http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR\\_pubs/dr\\_a/pdf/fm3\\_21x20.pdf](http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/fm3_21x20.pdf) (accessed March 2, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Security: Efforts to Establish Army and Police Have Made Progress, but Future Plans Need to Be Better Defined*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Security: Efforts to Establish Army and Police Have Made Progress, but Future Plans Need to Be Better Defined*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Bensahal, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Barack Obama, *Remarks by the president in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

<sup>30</sup> Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance Office, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, V-1.

<sup>31</sup> Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance Office, *Security Force Assistance Handbook*, V-1.

<sup>32</sup> US Army Training and Doctrine Command, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Navy Warfare Development Command, Curtis E. Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education. *Advising*. FM 3-07.10, MCRP 3-33.8A, NTP 3-07.5, AFTTP 3-2.76. (Fort Montore, VA: HQ TRADOC; Quantico VA: HQ MCCDC; Norfolk, VA: NWDC; Maxwell AFB, AL: LeMay Center; September 2009), 21.

<sup>33</sup> US Army. *Advising*, 21-22.

<sup>34</sup> US Army. *Advising*, 112-113.

<sup>35</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Security: Long-standing Challenges May Affect Progress and Sustainment of Afghan National Security Forces*. (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 24 July, 2012), 5, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA565077&Location=U2&doc=>

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GetTRDoc.pdf (accessed October 20, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> US Army. *Advising*, 6-11.

<sup>37</sup> Gardner, David T, Lessons from the Past: *Vital Factors Influencing Military Advisors in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan*. (Master's Thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, March 2012), 39, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a560642.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at ISAF Meeting on Afghanistan*.

<sup>42</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> This is apparent by the multitude of Congressional and GAO reports that are still being conducted and reviewed with regard to ANSF progress. Five such reports are included in the bibliography.

<sup>44</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Brigadier General Eric Smith, face to face interview with author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at ISAF Meeting on Afghanistan*.

<sup>50</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, *Fact Sheet: Chicago Summit – Afghanistan Transition Interim Milestone*.

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