



Combat Advising: Three Challenges We Must Overcome to Succeed in Afghanistan

Christopher Bluestein

Combat advising is central to successful counterinsurgency operations in existing U.S. conflicts around the world. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed, “The most important component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern their own countries.”¹ Similarly, in 2006 the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, identified the most critical task required to conduct effective counterinsurgency operations as, “...developing an effective host-nation security force.”² The importance of combat advising is not a new realization. In fact, major U.S. efforts in this area began in the early 1950s when U.S. forces provided training and assistance to Greece, the Philippines, China (Taiwan), Iran, and Japan. Since that time, protracted combat advising operations have occurred in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador.³ Perhaps because U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been primarily responsible for the conduct of this mission, the United States has never implemented permanent solutions to enable the general purpose force to execute combat advising operations. However, it is now critical to identify and implement these permanent solutions since the need for combat advisors is likely to exceed the limited capacity of SOF in current and future U.S. conflicts.

Combat operations in Afghanistan represent the most recent example of the less-than-optimal results that are obtained by implementing temporary solutions to the permanent challenge of enabling the general purpose force to conduct effective combat advising operations. However, recent language from senior leadership indicates a renewed emphasis upon combat advising and may serve as a stimulus to enable the development of long-term solutions that address this challenge. President Obama recently outlined a new vision for U.S. strategy in Afghanistan focused on shifting “...the emphasis of our mission to training and increasing the size of the Afghan security forces, so that they can eventually take the lead in securing their country.”⁴ Similarly, General David Petraeus called for more embedded training teams (ETTs), operational mentoring teams, and police mentor teams in Afghanistan, noting that these elements are

¹ Robert M. Gates (remarks as delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates), *Meeting of the Association of the United States Army*, October 10, 2007.

² U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 6-1.

³ Ramsey III, Robert D., “Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador,” *Occasional Paper 18*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: *Combat Studies Institute Press*, 2006.

⁴ Barack Obama (remarks as delivered by President Barack Obama), *National Press Conference*, March 27, 2009.

“...essential to building the all important capability of the Afghan National Security Forces.”⁵ Although recognition of the need for an increased focus on the combat advisory mission is a necessary condition for success in Afghanistan, it is also insufficient. To fully capitalize on the recent emphasis senior leaders have placed upon combat advising the United States must address three critical challenges:

- Inadequate techniques currently employed to train and organize U.S. combat advisors.
- Unsynchronized employment of U.S. combat advisor teams.
- Inability to effectively measure the success (or failure) of advising and other counterinsurgency operations.

Training and Organizing U.S. Combat Advisors

Since 2006, the Army, Navy, and Air Force select combat advisors from the Active, Reserve, and National Guard components for training at a centralized location in Fort Riley, Kansas. The training plan consists of cultural awareness, language familiarity, combat lifesaver (CLS) certification, and generalized combat skill development and sustainment.⁶ At first glance, it may appear that this program represents an acceptable long-term solution for the training of U.S. combat advisor teams. However, the teams formed at Ft. Riley serve together as integral units only during the pre-deployment training process. Once deployed to Afghanistan, each team falls under the operational control of a regional advisory commander, and as a general rule, they are split into individual or two-man groups to fill gaps on existing teams.⁷ This outcome is wholly inconsistent with the “train as you will fight” principle identified within FM 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*.⁸ Within the existing model, team cohesion is severely hampered and trust must be built in the midst of ongoing operations. In addition, training cannot be tailored to address unique attributes of the specific region in Afghanistan where teams will ultimately operate because final assignment is not determined until after arrival in the operational theater. In addition to these factors, there is a lack of emphasis placed upon the identification and assignment of leaders with critical skills for key positions within combat advisor teams.⁹ MG (Ret.) Geoffrey C. Lambert specifically identified leader selection as one of the most critical components of effective operations designed to build partnership capacity, “Of particular importance is commander selection and preparation... Depth among staff members is critical, with an emphasis on experience with counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, psychological operations, civil-military operations, security assistance, and logistics. Country-specific experience is vital as well.”¹⁰ Currently, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan

⁵ David Petraeus (remarks as delivered by General David Petraeus), *Munich Security Conference*, February 8, 2009.

⁶ The Fort Riley, 1st Infantry Division, 1st Brigade Training Team 60-day schedule: [http://www.riley.army.mil/%7Bdyn.file%7D/0dd74a87ead34578aae4ec256cb5ce0b/Standard%20\(60%20Day\)%20Training%20Model%20-%202024%20Jan%2008.pdf](http://www.riley.army.mil/%7Bdyn.file%7D/0dd74a87ead34578aae4ec256cb5ce0b/Standard%20(60%20Day)%20Training%20Model%20-%202024%20Jan%2008.pdf).

⁷ Daniel Helmer, “Twelve Urgent Steps for the Advisor Mission in Afghanistan,” *Military Review*, July-August, 2008, 75.

⁸ U.S. Army Field Manual 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2008), 2-2.

⁹ Helmer, 75.

¹⁰ Geoffrey C. Lambert, “Group Dynamics: How U.S. Military Groups Can Support the War on Terrorism,” *C4ISR Journal of Net-Centric Warfare*, Volume 5, Number 8, September 2006, 39.

(CSTC-A) often assigns combat advisor team leaders based upon individual vacancies that may (or may not) exist upon arrival in Afghanistan vice leveraging forward planning to account for incoming or outgoing key personnel.¹¹ As a result, under-qualified leaders are assigned to key advisory positions further damaging team cohesion and mitigating the overall effectiveness of combat advisor operations.

As proposed by Dr. John Nagl, the development of a permanent combat advisor command is necessary to address the training and organizational challenges that currently inhibit the general purpose force from conducting effective combat advising operations.¹² This approach represents a critical shift from temporary, fleeting emphasis toward long-term, sustained dedication to maintaining the capacity to build host-nation forces. A combat advisor command would be responsible for both training and employing combat advisor teams. Within this construct, combat advisor units would conduct mission-focused training and deploy as integral units with a consistent command structure, staff, and pool of advisors. Competitive key leader selection that offers incentives for advisor team leaders (such as perceived value-added at promotion board reviews) is a key enabler to ensure advisor units are properly manned. Although this level of selective manning may place some strain upon the broader force, the United States must overcome these obstacles to institute true, long-term approaches that address the current and future requirement for combat advisors. Such emphasis is entirely consistent with the June 2008 National Defense Strategy which includes strengthening and expanding alliances and partnerships as one of the key ways to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

Employing U.S. Combat Advisor Teams

Apart from disjointed team structure and lack of emphasis upon key leader selection, combat advisors in Afghanistan suffer from desynchronized strategic and tactical employment. The lack of cohesive interaction between U.S. forces and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has strong negative impact upon combat advisor teams. Advising operations are highly complex and must consider both political and military factors. The need for interagency and international cooperation is essential to ensure that coalition forces present a unified front to Afghan forces. Unfortunately, ISAF operates under different rules of engagement (ROE) than U.S. forces and many NATO nations that participate in ISAF are further restricted by specific national caveats that prevent the use of military force under certain conditions. Since ISAF forces control much of the battle space in Afghanistan, U.S. combat advisors often rely upon ISAF to provide the necessary intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, air support, medical evacuation, logistic support, and most importantly, ground quick reaction forces. However, due to different ROE and national caveats, securing ISAF support for U.S. operations is extremely difficult and generally unreliable.¹³ This lack of cohesion critically impacts the ability of U.S.

¹¹ Personal experience based upon service in CSTC-A from as a District and Provincial Lead Mentor from May 2008 through February 2009.

¹² John A. Nagl, "Let's Win the War's We're In," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 52, 1st Quarter 2009, 25; John A. Nagl, "Institutionalizing Adaption, it's Time for an Army Advisor Command," *Military Review*, September-October 2008.

¹³ Anthony H. Cordsmen, "Winning in Afghanistan: Creating Effective Afghan Security Forces," March 11, 2008, 39: http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/090311_ansf.pdf.

advisor teams to function effectively when embedded with Afghan forces and breeds confusion and mistrust within the Afghan military and police. To compound this problem, ISAF employs operational mentoring and liaison teams (OMLTs) and police mentor teams (PMTs) differently from U.S. forces. Each NATO nation in ISAF institutes a varying level of restriction and limitation upon the type of advising that OMLTs and PMTs can conduct due to the ROE and national caveats. In some cases, ISAF OMLT, PMT and U.S. combat advisors may be collocated with the same Afghan unit.¹⁴ Amid this confusion, Afghan leaders often “play” one nation against the other; corruption is increased and unity of effort is lost.

The solution to this problem lies in a clear distinction between training and advising operations. Training consists of organized and structured institutionalized programs to instruct host-nation forces on proper tactics, ethics, rule of law, and general military/police operations. Training programs do not require embedded forces and generally entail limited combat exposure. ISAF is best postured to assume this training mission due to the ROE and national caveats that restrict most NATO nations within ISAF. On-the-other-hand, advising operations consist of living, training, and fighting with Afghan forces to gain influence and reinforce tactics learned during previous training programs. In places where security is not yet established, advising is largely a kinetic mission since host-nation forces are focused mostly upon conducting aggressive military/policing operations. As a result, U.S. forces should conduct combat advising operations throughout Afghanistan only in conjunction with fully willing coalition partners able to operate under compatible ROE and unencumbered by restrictive national caveats. This clear distinction between training and advising missions, and an equally clear differentiation between the chain of command responsible for executing these operations, will significantly improve the effectiveness and synchronization of U.S. combat advising efforts.

Measuring Success

U.S. military culture and organizational structure breeds absolute dominance in very specific areas but does not support broad competence across the spectrum of possible forms modern warfare may assume. Currently, the U.S. military is unsurpassed at traditional land combat and establishing air and naval superiority. Few other militaries in the world can integrate and orchestrate the movement of forces and project power around the world in a manner that compares to the United States. The highly centralized and hierarchal nature of the U.S. military is one of the driving factors that ensure this dominance is maintained. Unfortunately, highly centralized and hierarchal organizations are generally unable to adapt to emerging challenges and conflicts that fall outside of a predictable and traditional pattern.¹⁵ The current inability to effectively judge success in existing conflicts is an example of this failure to adapt.

During conventional operations, key metrics provide rapid and relatively accurate insight into the situational environment. Values such as the number of enemy vehicles destroyed, number of friendly forces remaining, and the amount of ammunition on-hand become critical factors in key assessments at all levels of command. However, the rigidity of our military culture has led to

¹⁴ Personal experience in Uruzgan, Afghanistan from MAY 2008 through FEB 2009; French and Dutch OMLT, Dutch PMT, and U.S. PMT advisors all operated within the same battle space.

¹⁵ Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, Penguin Books Ltd, London, England, 2006, 1-27.

assessments that follow this same model for decentralized operations and counterinsurgency. For this form of warfare, numeric measures frequently prove to be significantly misleading, and often tactical commanders are forced to “translate” qualitative judgments and observations into numerical and quantitative metrics for senior commanders. Traditional military culture is focused on the “quick solution,” the “one-slide briefing,” and the “snapshot view” of the battlefield. This appetite blurs reality into binary, black-and-white assessments that disguise the real world complexities of counterinsurgency. Over the last eight years, the military has not sufficiently adjusted its analytic processes or moved beyond reliance upon numeric measures despite evidence that such approaches have minimal success in capturing current on-the-ground realities.

The solution to this problem includes increased focus on written and oral reports that emphasize judgments predicated on pertinent observations rather than specific facts or numbers. Tactical commanders, and especially combat advisors, interact with local forces and populations on a daily basis. Generally, these local leaders have an excellent perspective on how to proceed and the means to generate desirable effects on the local battlefield. However, because senior leaders rely on misleading measures and metrics and insist upon numeric and binary reporting, reality is lost before such perceptions can reach strategic planners and senior commanders. Instead of utilizing the existing structure, report formats must move from rolled-up, summarized display charts toward written narratives and descriptive observations. In cases where metrics must be employed, they should be dynamic and regionally oriented instead of statically constant across the entire country. This approach will require increased analytic manpower and support at all levels of command; however, such emphasis is necessary to synthesize accurate and insightful information from the complex battlefield. Today’s suboptimal assessment processes are based on the hierarchal structure and centralized control that effectively ensure U.S. dominance in traditional warfare but critically inhibit success in counterinsurgency operations. The U.S. must adapt these processes rapidly to ensure the value and insights gained by combat advisors and other counterinsurgents reaches key leaders in a timely, complete, and accurate manner.

Summary

The U.S. can win in Afghanistan; however significant transformation beyond funding and increased troop levels is necessary to ensure success. Developing long-term solutions for the training and organization, employment, and methods to measure success (or failure) of combat advisor operations represent some of the initial steps required to achieve victory.

Christopher Bluesteen is a former U.S. Army Armor Captain who recently served as a District and Provincial Lead Mentor embedded with host-nation security forces in Uruzgan, Afghanistan from May 2008 through February 2009. Mr. Bluesteen currently works as a Deputy Program Manager at Systems Planning and Analysis, Inc. in the field of risk and decision analysis as it relates to national policy and counterinsurgency. He is currently pursuing an advanced degree in Operations Research and Decision Theory from George Mason University.

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