



Trust: Central to Success in Partnered Operations

Charlie Burbridge

Partnering is a trust-based relationship between equals which will seek to capitalise on the strengths of each partner and mitigate for weaknesses.¹ As part of Commander International Security Assistance Force's (COMISAF) dual mission principle, it is a tool for developing the ANSF whilst concurrently countering the insurgency by protecting the population. The central requirement of trust requires further examination. ISAF troops require a homogenous and consistent understanding of how trust can be developed and maintained between partners.

The aim of this short paper is to examine why the importance of trust is at the heart of partnering, define the concept of trust within the context of Partnering in Afghanistan and recommend methods for generating and maintaining it over successive iterations of Op HERRICK.

COMISAF directed that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will be partnered to form a combined force, which will serve a dual mission of developing ANSF capability and defeating the insurgency. Specifically he stated:

*'ISAF will partner with the ANSF at all levels – from the ministries down to squad level. An embedded partnership does not change ISAF's mission; instead, ISAF executes it better by establishing a trust based relationship between ANSF and ISAF units. This relationship is between equals, with ISAF as the supporting organisation.'*²

ISAF forces will be required to continue to conduct high intensity counter insurgency operations but will do so in partnership with a force with which it has not trained, does not necessarily understand, and with whom there is a language barrier. Furthermore, ISAF forces will roll in and out of theatre; in the UK case, every six months, whilst the ANSF will remain in location permanently. The requirement for trust to be established swiftly and to endure through successive deployments of ISAF units is central to the success of Partnering. A breach of trust may have serious implications for the cohesion of the force.

COMISAF is clear that the partnership between the ANSF and ISAF is based on equality and trust³. The two forces should live and operate together and they will benefit from each other's

¹ COMISAF Partnering Directive dated 15 Aug 09

² Ibid

³ Ibid

strengths, whilst mitigating for each other's weaknesses. Successful exposure of both strengths and weaknesses requires there to be an honest and open relationship between the forces so that each can identify ways in which strengths can be leveraged and weaknesses compensated.

Trained soldiers generally respond consistently to tactical events and orders. The lengthy preparation that most ISAF soldiers undergo before deployment to Afghanistan ensures that peers, superiors and subordinates will be familiar with their likely behaviour, and that they will benefit from a highly developed trust in one another. Such cohesive teams are then required to operate with a partner force on a 1:1 basis on a difficult and dangerous operation. This means that soldiers will have to trust their host nation partners to acquit themselves favourably and not generate excessive risk, either to the mission or to themselves.

Trust is both an emotional and logical act. Logic dictates a person will calculate whether someone's performance is predictable based on previous performance. Emotionally, trust is a measurement of whether vulnerabilities can be exposed without fear that this openness will be exploited. In practice, trust is a combination of both. There are several ways in which it can be built:

- *Be Predictable.* Human nature strives to forecast events and the behaviour of others as well as one's personal responses both physically and emotionally. Trust enables the prediction of events and behaviour resulting in confidence.
- *Trust first.* Most human interaction is based on exchanging ideas, values and space both physical and psychological. Emotional interaction, in particular the exchange of affection for loyalty is less easy to measure. The process works because each individual applies a range of values to people and things. Trust forms part of this process: when one does not know whether one's investment will result in a return of known value, it is easier to achieve if common ground is identified.
- *Be Generous in spirit.* Trust is best generated by blind or delayed reciprocity; when an investment is made without expectation of an immediate return. Trust allows for giving now with an expectation that it will be repaid, possibly in some unspecified way at some unspecified time in the future.
- *Expose Vulnerabilities.* This means enabling Partners to take advantage of vulnerabilities but expecting that they will not do so. This is likely to manifest itself in the requirement for ISAF to relinquish some control. This risky strategy is fundamental to the generation of trust and it will be counter intuitive to those, who believe the search for absolute control is fundamental to the successful execution of military operations. A dishonest picture will be generated by the partner who attempts to conceal vulnerabilities. This will impact on the willingness of the partner to invest trust.

Once established, a trust-based relationship ought to be difficult to fragment so long as each stakeholder has made a sufficient initial investment. This means that the initial investment must be enough on each side to cement the relationship so that there is more to lose by a breakdown of the relationship than by maintaining it. This principle is applicable at all levels from individual partnering to ministries.

Affection is a catalyst for trust. It helps to set the conditions for mutual trust to develop. In psychological terms, the object of respect and understanding is likely to be more receptive. This will help to form the basis for an effective working relationship within which mutual trust will develop.

- *Cultural understanding as a catalyst for affection.* Learning about and understanding Afghan culture, prior to deployment will pay dividends. The ANSF will recognise any effort to respect their culture even when the object of that understanding is not the ANSF itself. Deploying troops should develop a positive view of Afghan culture and to steep subordinates in the same view. In short, deploying troops should want to like the ANSF. This positive outlook will help to set the conditions for a respectful and affectionate working relationship.
- *Understand the Afghan concept of time.* Afghans tend not to be punctual or concerned with specific times. This means that they are often unprepared for an imminent mission and may not have conducted the necessary preparation. Commanders should learn to use these opportunities to interact and make the Afghans better soldiers and police. This should not be addressed in frustration or disgust but should be used as a vehicle to develop trust by framing your efforts as concern for their welfare and effectiveness.⁴ Persistent concern for the welfare of a partner will contribute to an image of behavioural consistency, which will garner trust.
- *Share information and intelligence.* Sharing information and intelligence is central to a trust based military relationship. Both stakeholders have valuable collection assets, each of which will provide a different perspective, which, when combined, will increase situational awareness. It will also provide a more comprehensive information base from which to generate actionable intelligence. Not only will the sharing of information and intelligence boost operational effectiveness, the process of sharing itself will increase cohesion between partners. It creates a virtuous circle.
- *Effective working relationships underpin trust.* Trust and respect are often a natural by-product of developing a personal relationship based on personality and social trust. Commanders should be prepared to exploit cultural expectations by exchanging small gifts to demonstrate friendship and cultural understanding. It also complies with reciprocal norms; the obligation to reciprocate.
- *Exchanging gifts.* Among Afghans, there is a tradition of alms-giving which sometimes manifests itself in a form of wealth redistribution. The average Afghan soldier is not as well equipped as even the lowest rank of ISAF soldier. So, Afghans feel little hesitation in asking for gifts from their international partners⁵. Recently commanders returning to theatre have brought gifts from UK, which their partner has requested. It is a physical representation of respect and return on this investment may take the form of loyalty or attention.
- *Humour.* Afghans often have a keen sense of humour. The use of appropriate self deprecating humour at an early stage is a vehicle for delayed reciprocity. It is not difficult to identify common ground amongst soldiers and warriors employed together in the same task at the same time. Effective employment of this measure contributes to social trust.

⁴ Source – Ted Calahan, Department of Anthropology, Boston University

⁵ Ibid

- *Share 'down time'*. Afghans are competitive sportsmen and sport, particularly football, is an excellent vehicle for rapport building if mixed teams are employed. Equally, Afghans are very interested in what ISAF soldiers do to relax. Meal sharing, watching films together and joint physical training are all excellent rapport building vehicles.

The ANSF maintains a continuous presence whilst ISAF forces rotate. Partnership allows for the absence of continuity by ISAF troops to be mitigated for by the continuous presence of the ANSF half of the force. Reciprocal trust must therefore be established swiftly in this unequal relationship. Failure to achieve the necessary levels of trust at an early stage of each ISAF iteration will reduce combat effectiveness whilst the relationships are being developed. Commanders should consider the following factors when taking over a partnered role:

- *Appearance and ethos*. Consistency breeds trust, so even subtle changes between successive units implemented insensitively can erode the ANSF's trust in ISAF. If a unit highlights the shortcomings of a previous unit it also infers that the ANSF's trust in the previous unit was misplaced. This means that ANSF commanders may be reluctant to trust a new unit even if the new unit feels that it's standards are higher. It will increase the time required to generate a strong personal relationship when a reduction in the tempo of operations could be exploited by enemy forces. Commanders should ensure that their units deploy with high standards of discipline and appearance and then maintain this standard until the next unit takes over. Equipment should not be personalised or modified because it communicates inconsistency between units.
- *Moral courage*. Doing what is right on a consistent basis requires morale courage, particularly in the complex circumstances of Op HERRICK. Nevertheless, without the consistency that moral courage generates partners may become uncertain about likely responses by their partner. This uncertainty will breed mistrust and affect the relationship.
- *Intra-ISAF trust and respect*. ISAF commanders must demonstrate the same levels of trust and respect between each other that they aspire to generate between themselves and their partners. The critical trust based relationship, in this regard, is between successive commanders. This creates three stakeholders in the partnership; the ANSF, the incumbent ISAF commander and the succeeding ISAF commander, who represents continuity. The incumbent ISAF commanders should make every effort to establish a trust based relationship with their successor prior to deployment and set the conditions for the same relationship between the ANSF commander and the succeeding ISAF commander. The requirement for consistency dictates that the ISAF commanders should avoid criticising their predecessor in either word or deed.
- *Respectful inquisitiveness*. Respectful inquisitiveness fosters trust, so ISAF troops should continue to develop their cultural understanding of both the ANSF and wider Afghan society during their deployment. This is an excellent vehicle for engaging with partners, developing mutual affection, identifying common ground and maintaining trust. Commanders should be mindful that asking to 'see' something of interest (or complimenting the owner) will often result in it being offered as a gift, with an attendant expectation of reciprocity. This should not prevent commanders from being interested in their partner but they should be prepared for the requirement to reciprocate.

It is very difficult to identify simple metrics which will adequately measure whether trust has been established or whether it is being maintained. Trust is one aspect of partnering and improvements in combat effectiveness can easily be attributed to more tangible initiatives. The following indicators may be used to establish the level of trust within the partnership:

- *Increased autonomy by the ANSF.* Effective and reliable ISAF trust and support will increase ANSF confidence. This will manifest itself in their willingness to provide input into joint plans on a collaborative basis. This has greater utility than the employment of liaison officers because partners will engage as equals and avoid the firewalls created by a hierarchal organisation.
- *Reduced conflicts of interest.* Increased levels of mutual trust will lead to unity of purpose because each stakeholder will understand and wish to support the endeavours of their partner.
- *Decreased rate of absence.* Stakeholders in an effective trust-based relationship will be reluctant to breach trust by failing to accomplish tasks required to support the relationship. In its most obvious form, there is likely to be a reduction in absenteeism.
- *Reduced uncertainty.* Being prepared to relinquish control is a cornerstone of a trust-based relationship. One result should be a reduction in uncertainty. Partners will begin to behave in predictable ways, and communicate their intent more effectively.
- *Mollified disputes.* Mutual trust between stakeholders will reduce the capacity for disputes to develop. Furthermore, if disputes develop, effective communication will help to mollify the effects before they erode combat effectiveness.

Without a clear understanding of the nature of trust and how it can be generated and maintained, a trust based relationship cannot be established and will not endure. Simple but consistent measures coupled with the desire to like the ANSF will bring about both the means and the mindset to generate and maintain a trust based relationship. The establishment of trust will entail some risk by both stakeholders, particularly in the exchange of information and intelligence and there are likely to be some setbacks. However, perseverance and the disciplined application of measures to maintain mutual trust will increase combat effectiveness for the combined force in the short term, whilst continuing to develop the self reliance of the ANSF for the long term.

Charlie Burbridge is a serving British Army Major. He has served in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Oman, Sierra Leone, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan in a variety of staff and command appointments. Most recently he commanded his squadron during Operation Panther's Claw in Helmand. He currently works on the staff of the British Counter Insurgency Centre.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)