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## **The Combined Team: Partnered Operations in Afghanistan**

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**Edited by Ed Ledford**



**Lieutenant Generals Karimi and Rodriguez receive a combined briefing at the Afghan National Military Command Center. Present are senior leaders from the Ministry of Interior, Afghan National Police, Afghan Border Police, and the National Directorate of Security (photo by LTC Ed Ledford).**

### **Introduction**

The Combined Team of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is about protecting the Afghan people – helping replace fear and uncertainty with a sense of trust and confidence in their security forces and their national, provincial, and district government. The combined team interdependent partnership –

integrated, coordinated, and synchronized – represents the coalition’s renewed commitment to Afghanistan, and the Afghan National Security Force’s commitment to the people who populate this remarkable, beautiful, diverse, and incomprehensibly complex nation. Together, we bring to bear the sum of our strengths and bridge the gaps of our limitations.

Building a true combined team is a tremendously challenging proposition for any two nations. Imagine the unmitigated commitment necessary to successfully build a combined team between a forty-three nation coalition and its Afghan National Security Force partners and, then, achieve unity of command and effort. However, this commitment is exactly what we see among the Afghan security forces, exactly the commitment we see across the International Security Assistance Forces to Afghanistan, and exactly the commitment that has to exist, and continues to grow stronger, between the Afghan forces and the coalition forces.

The benefits far outweigh any difficulties – that is clear to everyone.

As a Combined Team, Afghan and Coalition forces plan, brief, rehearse, and fight together as embedded partners, constantly building operational effectiveness and security capacity. It is the underlying premise of the combined team that our operations will enable the Afghan government, fully supported by the international community, to achieve stability and progress for the people of Afghanistan. So as ISAF and the Afghan Security Forces conduct integrated operations, we collectively appreciate that our efforts are part of a broader civil, government-led effort to meet the myriad requirements of the Afghan people at district level and below. We embrace and are completely dedicated to the notion that the Afghan people, led by a responsive government that meets their needs and places their welfare first, will decide this contest in favor of long-term peace and the opportunity for prosperity and hope for today’s and future generations.

That is our asymmetric advantage over the enemy of the Afghan people.

Simply, the enemy cannot build and sustain civil institutions, infrastructure, and guarantee opportunities for the future generations of Afghanistan. Nor do they have the fundamental capacity to build a sovereign nation that will stand with the international community of nations as a productive partner. The enemy has had their chance, and that outcome is well documented in the pain, suffering, and devastation they have unabashedly brought to this ancient nation.

The Combined Team was established simultaneously with the ISAF Joint Command, an intermediate, operational- level, joint command. Our Combined Operations Plan OMID (Hope) codifies that partnership under a broad operational framework. While the Afghan National Army and ISAF are signatories to this order and operating construct, so are the other critical partners providing protection and security to the people of Afghanistan – the Afghan Ministry of Interior and the Afghan National Directorate of Security. We hold each other accountable, we work through decisions together, and together we help the Afghan people succeed.

We are confident that the Combined Team approach to operations offers the best chance of success we have seen since establishment of the International Security Assistance Force in 2002.

We are executing our missions as a loyal, competent, responsible and accountable combined team, committed to achieving the conditions for a better future in Afghanistan.

In June of 2009, recognizing the direction in which we were about to step off, Afghan Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak observed, “Victory is within our grasp, provided we recommit ourselves based on lessons learned and provided that we fulfill the requirements needed to make success inevitable.” The following article well-illustrates the steps we have taken in building the Combined Team Minister Wardak predicted, changing the calculus of this counterinsurgency.

In August 2009, NATO approved the ISAF Joint Command (IJC). Two months later the IJC achieved initial operational capability, and, on 12 November, full operational capability. The IJC commands day-to-day operations, integrates and synchronizes all ISAF capabilities and efforts, and brings all Regional Commands – the battlespace owners – under one operational-level headquarters. Under the command of Lieutenant General David Rodriguez, the IJC established the Combined Team approach to operations.

Today, integration of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) represents a foundational standard against which we measure all our formations. The depth and breadth of embedded partnering at every level of command, from headquarter staffs to line units, is unprecedented in the coalition’s history.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, embedded partnering and genuine combined operations are changing the nature of security operations even as we respond to the complex threat.

**“How we do it is more important than what we do.”**

*--International Security Assistance Force Soldier*

For nearly a decade, generally independent operations in Afghanistan were separate from the Afghan National Security Forces and unconscious of or irresponsible to the Afghan people’s perception of both their own Afghan security forces and the coalition. The coalition hoped to grow capacity of the Afghan forces from more distance than would prove productive. Embedded partnering and true integration through Combined Team operations were two of the missing links in earlier ISAF operations in Afghanistan.

ISAF had approached a notion of embedded partnership with Afghan Security Forces as a matter of practice for the last four years in its Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams (OMLTs), Police Operational Liaison Teams (POMLTs), and Embedded Training Teams (ETTs). However, as the terms indicate, these were not true partnerships but, instead, hierarchical relationships that

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<sup>1</sup> Partnering as a method of ISAF-Afghan security operations is not new, but they have not been partnered and integrated in the manner expressed in the current ISAF approach. Combined team operations integrate all security partners and expand the partnering through combined basing, integrated staff operations and command and coordination nodes. For a review of the regional command level partnering concepts that the combined team approach are based on, see Edward C. Ledford, “Inception and Early Evolution of a Partnership Doctrine: Building Afghan Army Capacity While Fighting a Counterinsurgency,” *Small Wars Journal* <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/281-ledford.pdf> (13 August 2009). Regional Command East expanded partnering, but this example was restricted to the Regional Command Level and was not fully inclusive or synchronized across all security partners.

put the training teams at implicit distance from those they mentored – a word that, in itself, acknowledges a senior-subordinate relationship.

Embedded partnering that we now execute represents an extension of that early concept – embedded partners are co-located command headquarters of Afghan police, Afghan army and ISAF command nodes leveraging common information networks for collaboration and information sharing. Together, we execute a combined planning, briefing, rehearsing, executing, assessing and retraining cycle.

*Combined Team* is the term of reference that describes integration of the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police and National Border Police, and National Directorate of Security with ISAF formations in the ISAF Joint Command. Combined Team operations overcome self-imposed limitations and, to a great extent, strengthen unity of effort along the security line of operations that, for nine years, never really achieved the degree of efficiency and effectiveness necessary to succeed.

While some might argue that this rather ambitious and difficult step is “too little too late,” the practical application of a combined team approach is paying significant dividends already in Regional Command - South provinces like Helmand and Kandahar, in Regional Command East provinces such as Nangahar, Khost, and Laghman, and in Kabul City where Regional Command Capital Turkish military forces combine with Afghan security forces. And with nearly 40,000 additional troops inbound over the next twelve months, the extent of embedded partnering and combined team operations will continue to increase significantly.

The ISAF-ANSF partnering philosophy and practice are undeniably and fundamentally novel. Today, every major operation – of both line units and special operations forces – is a product of partnering. Combined planning and execution at company and above is the rule, not the exception. The embedded partnering and Combined Team approach, coupled with the counterinsurgency strategy we are executing that prioritizes security of the people over and above pursuit of insurgents, necessitates combined basing at Combat Outposts (COPs) and Forward Operation Bases (FOBs) across the Area of Operations.

Staff integration with Afghan partners and institution of permanent exchange officers across the Combined Team headquarters is equally unprecedented. Partners’ shared access to situation reports, collective planning efforts, and participation in senior-level decision making as a matter of routine vastly expands the common operating picture and increases shared understanding across the force – both Afghan and coalition.

OPERATION OMID is the first product of the Combined Team. For about fifty days, Afghan National Army, National Police, Border Police, National Directorate of Security, and ISAF Joint Command planners essentially sequestered themselves to the Kabul-based National Military Coordination Center and, together, planned a framework operations order nested in ISAF Headquarters’ Campaign Plan. This intensive effort operationalized the strategy and developed and refined the key concepts and tasks for Combined Team operations.

The population-centric comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy represents the superstructure of OPERATION OMID's five lines of operation and eighteen month plan and measureable objectives and conditions. A break from past efforts, OPERATION OMID clearly establishes and defines critical areas for coordinating and synchronizing combined team operations with civil and non-governmental initiatives in order to achieve growth in governance and development capacity and, ultimately, a durable stability.

Do not be fooled – the Combined Team approach is no panacea for the campaign's ills; however, the Combined Team approach to comprehensive counterinsurgency operations represents an essential element of success and has generated a fresh sense of ownership, purpose, teamwork, and urgency across the forty-four nation coalition and the Afghan National Security Forces. This approach is the keystone to a mutually accountable, professional and effective security force that is gaining the support and respect of the Afghan people.

Just as the United States and allied nations learned that combined arms and integrated joint force structures created synergy and compensated shared vulnerabilities, we are witnessing and participating in what is becoming a productive and successful experiment providing positive operational effects and extending the asymmetric advantage over our shared enemies.

### **Concept to Execution: The Combined Approach to Partnering**

OPERATION OMID served as catalyst and collaborative vehicle fundamental to growing the Combined Team here in Afghanistan. While extensive preparations set the scene for establishment of the ISAF Joint Command Headquarters, OP OMID's concept was purely the product of a combined effort. Conference and engagement among senior military leadership in Afghanistan – from Afghan National Army, Police, Border Police, National Directorate of Security, and ISAF – guided planning executed by the combined staffs at action-officer level. The perspectives offered and sought by mission partners – as teammates and with the view that the mission in Afghanistan requires fully integrated operations to counter the destabilizing factors – vastly enriched the discourse, achieving nuance in the order that simply would have been impossible without the combined effort and contributions of both parties.

Our Afghan mission partners informed cultural context throughout the planning process, something we only really guessed at in previous, non-combined, ISAF operations orders. Afghan experience on their ground, among their people, facing their enemy that they know better than anyone else shaped the design, the key tasks and identification of truly key terrain in the operation. Within the Information Preparation of the Operational Environment (IPOE) for OPERATION OMID, the Combined Team grew a fundamental appreciation for the Afghanistan's geography and human terrain and how enemy and friendly operations affected Afghan perceptions at the local level – where every day the people see their government, see development, and see security.

The exchange of information and mission reports, intelligence, and analysis developed keen situational understanding that, previously, simply did not exist – it did not exist for us; it did not exist for the Afghan security forces.

The information sharing represented a solid and fundamentally correct basis of understanding about friendly and enemy strengths and vulnerabilities. Perhaps most importantly, this common operating picture revealed, most importantly, the Afghan people's motivation to support the government or support the insurgents. To be sure, combined perspective is invaluable to any unvarnished, accurate, functional, and comprehensive insight into the complexities of the conflict and the instability in Afghanistan. Gathering, analyzing, evaluating, and responding to the merits of these perspectives is the heart and muscle of combined team operations.

Approved and signed by the Chief of Staff of the Afghan National Army, the Deputy Minister of Interior for Police and Security Affairs, the Deputy Director of the National Directorate of Security, and the Commander of the ISAF Joint Command, OPERATION OMID was composed in both Dari and in English. Naturally, then, for OPERATION OMID, our Afghan mission partner staff planners briefed all subordinate commands – to include our own. Each ISAF Regional Command, Afghan Corps Command and Afghan National Police Regional Command attended the OPOD briefing, either on-site or through the technology of the Video Teleconference (VTC).

The Combined Team's order is the first example of a codified operational-level directive in Afghanistan, and that same process is repeated now again and again in subordinate commands. It is repeated in all fragmentary orders. It is repeated in major regional operations. It is the expectation. It is the standard.

Following the combined operations order brief and distribution of the order, each of the combined team's regionally affiliated partners prepared subordinate level combined orders and conducted combined backbriefs to the ISAF Joint Command-level senior Afghan and coalition leadership. Backbriefs continued through December, with ANA Corps Commanders, ANP Regional Commanders, and ISAF Regional Commanders presenting combined, coordinated plans to execute OP OMID and associated tasks to achieve operational objectives specific to their regional area of operations.

Senior leaders from the ANA, ANP, NDS, security ministry leadership, and IJC leadership attended the backbriefs, providing immediate feedback and clarification. In some cases, seniors took regional issues and requests for assistance and support back to the operational level staffs for further refinement and synchronization. This process continues today as the Combined Team operates with a common vision, direction, purpose and unity of effort to achieve stability across Afghanistan through population centric counterinsurgency operations.

Routine, perhaps, is this process for NATO military formations; however, the backbriefs were a significant step in cementing the ANSF-ISAF commitment to and ownership of Combined Team comprehensive operations and OP OMID.

Now, mission partners rely on and include capabilities of ANA, ANP, intelligence and integration of NDS support, along with ISAF capabilities – they augment one another. Combined Team command nodes are being established across every region, producing combined decisions and approaches at the tactical level. Regional and provincial level coordination centers



are increasingly gaining capacity to share information and coordinate missions specific to tactical units and emergency service providers.

Combined Team operations represent an enduring commitment to the mission framework and comprehensive counterinsurgency operations taking place every day. Dari and English combined operations orders at the tactical level are fairly quickly becoming the standard method of tasking and synchronizing combined team operations. Regional operations, like those in central Helmand river valley, are developed and synchronized through the combined orders process – an accountable and inclusive process for creating and assigning tasks, resourcing, and executing partnered operations.



**Combined Team briefing of OPERATION OMID.** All combined team partners presented their part of the operations order. Note the Video Teleconference Box in the center. Each of the ISAF Regional Commands, Afghan Army Corps, and Afghan Regional Police and Border Zone Commands attended these sessions through virtual means (photo by LTC Ed Ledford).

## **Integrating the Capabilities of the Combined Team**

As the forces expand by some 40,000 across Afghanistan, ISAF's ability to partner will correspondingly increase. As the expansion occurs in key terrain,<sup>2</sup> the Combined Team will

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<sup>2</sup> The Combined Team defines key terrain as population centers, commerce routes, and production centers. Collaboratively, the Combined Team identified 80 Key Districts and 41 Districts of Interest across 17 provinces that represent main security efforts of OP OMID, while international development initiatives continue across other provinces in Afghanistan.

establish additional combined basing and operating areas, many of which will represent new, enduring areas of presence offering a greater ability to hold and build in broader areas.

The ISAF expansion over the next twelve months is closely synchronized and coordinated with the expansion and growth of the Afghan security forces. Pay reform, localized recruiting and literacy programs assist in attracting additional Afghan recruits and enhance the quality of the force. The Afghan National Army currently consists of 94,000 troops, and will expand to 134,000 in 2010 and 240,000 by end of 2013. The Afghan National Police will grow 69,000 policemen to an operating strength of 160,000 by 2013. The expansion of ANSF also includes capacity building and partnered support to the Afghan Border Police and National Directorate of Security formations. However, the numbers, while important, are not as important as the operational capacity of these forces. These population centric operations will remain focused on the key terrain.

ISAF offers tremendous enabling capability to the Combined Team that enhances advances tactical capability. ISAF embedded teams bring key enablers such as MEDEVAC, Close Air Support, enhanced communications, and mobility support. Not as tangible, but no less important and, in the long-term, perhaps even more important, Afghan security forces vastly increase ISAF's understanding of local populations and circumstances with an intimacy never before achieved.

In short, the tactical experiences of Combined Team operations exponentially increase leadership, teambuilding, procedural competencies and staff processes – for both partners. Trust-based and mutually accountable partnered operations are more disciplined, better observe and respect cultural traditions while operating among the Afghan people.

Soldiers in the field report that ANSF units with ISAF embedded teams or operating as partnered tactical units have greater situational understanding, have stronger leadership, greater tactical confidence, and are demonstrably less likely to be engaged with direct fire.



## Combined Team Partnership

- **Build relationships**
  - Replace fear and uncertainty with trust and confidence
- **Strengthen shared accountability**
  - Support from beside, behind, and below
- **Build Afghan capacity**
  - Help the government take care of its people
- **Execute the Mission**
  - Accomplish tasks





## Enabling and Supporting the Full Team

**“Our problem with achieving sustainment and growth is that we must coordinate and synchronize governance and development with security. This is the only solution that meets the needs of the Afghan people.”**

*--Director Jelani Popal, Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Governance*

The Afghan National Security Forces and the International Security Assistance Force are the Combined Team. But they are not the whole team. While security operations are an obvious necessity, security alone will not achieve a durable stability in Afghanistan. The Combined Team is a fundamental component acting in support of other mission partners – the civil component.

As everywhere else, it seems, politics in Afghanistan are local. The Afghan Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) plays a key role in the effectiveness, responsiveness, and accountability of local governance structures. The IDLG is instrumental in growing competent local political leadership and delivering governmental resources, training, and administration. As well, the IDLG, while orchestrating the efforts of essential development ministries, guides the international community’s development efforts at the provincial, district, and community levels. The IDLG holds local political officials accountable, reviews district level programs, and interacts with local community in leadership forums, whether local *shuras*, community development councils, or Afghan social outreach programs. Coordinated with the OPERATION OMID concept of operations, IDLG leadership will reinforce governance, development, and capacity building in the same areas Combined Team security operations set conditions.

The international community continues to provide high quality Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) across Afghanistan. Over 14 nations contribute combined military-civilian PRTs. These small but high quality, dedicated organizations extend Afghanistan’s political and national resources to increase the stability of provincial, district and local environments. Collaborating with the Combined Team Battle Space Owners and coordinating with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), their own embassies, and the Afghan Ministries, the PRTs provide another measure of resources and capacity building through infrastructure development, support to Afghan governance, and aid to the local communities. The combination of good governance, responsive development, and population-centric security that achieves durable stability.

The concept and quality of national service in Afghanistan is evolving to meet the needs of the people. We know that to grow a strong army, we have to help train soldiers. Likewise, to grow a strong, responsive bureaucratic system, the Afghan Civil Service Institute is training civil servants across Afghanistan who will administrate, manage, and establish the professional institutional capacity and extend government to the local level. The efforts of the Civil Service Institute will expand over the coming year as they recruit, train and employ over 19,000 new civil service workers.

These Afghan led efforts, coupled with other Afghan initiatives such as literacy programs, revised civil pay-scales, and deliberate integration with International community initiatives such as judicial mentorship and medical program expansion, offer the Afghans the best opportunities to productively serve their community, earn a living, increase their own skills, and establish an institutionally supported civil service sector that can professionalize services to local communities.

The district and below is the most important level of Afghan stability – politically and socially – that can generate a meaningful and trusting relationship between the Afghan government and the people: consider – most Afghans do not see Kabul as their government; they see the District Governor, the District Chief of Police as the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). The IDLG coordinates allocation of the U.S. sponsored District Delivery Packages (DDP). These packages, tailored for discreet requirements and serving key districts, work with Afghan leaders to identify administrative shortfalls and capacity gaps inside those districts, and provide support to local hiring efforts, training, and education that for district level programs and governmental offices. The DDP is an accelerant to competent local governance and capacity to run responsible governance at the district level – executive, fiscal and judicial. The contributions of the Combined Team and efforts of the full team – as currently postured and committed to comprehensive operations in Afghanistan – offer the best opportunities to date to protect and serve the people of Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

***Train.*** Inbound Brigade Combat Teams and Division Headquarters should understand the operational environment and prepare now for combined team embedded partnership operations. Both U.S. and coalition partner Division and Brigade commanders should request Afghan officers from ANA, ANP and NDS to attend unit-based training in preparation for missions in Afghanistan. Pre-deployment combat training centers in the U.S. and NATO sponsored mission preparatory exercises are well-suited to provide context and current operational frameworks to refine processes and procedures for integrating staffs with combined team approaches towards the mission.

***Communicate.*** Plan for extensive use of translators and transcription of operations orders and FRAGOs in Dari. Your translators and your ability to transcribe large volumes of mission information, as a means of exchange and to create common understanding, will become a core element to success in the tactical and operational environment. Combined operations demand it. By mid-summer 2010, the ISAF command will be on a common network – the Afghan Mission Network. All rotational units, regardless of national sponsorship, will operate on this network as a primary means of communication, command, and control.

***Appreciate .*** Learn from Afghan partners and what their combined perspective adds to the coalition's situational understanding. Fundamentally, this war is about local communities and local perspectives. Learn from the partners about the challenges the Afghan people face and how the Combined Team's operations change the equation for, or against, Afghan support. At the end of the day, Afghan capacity must endure to preserve gains.

**Leverage.** Combined strengths are the asymmetric advantage over the enemy in the short term, including the entire civil-military international efforts supporting the Government and people of Afghanistan. Financial support, civil capacity building, reconstruction and development, or security operations: the combined team with civil partnership have unmatched capabilities to secure a productive and prosperous future for the people of Afghanistan. Know how to support these efforts and put the right effects in the right place at every level.

**Understand .** Seek common cultural understanding from mission partners and increase the speed of the cultural acclimation through trust-based relationship in which units live and operate together. The enhanced cultural awareness and partnership will increase operational effectiveness and reduce casualties associated with security operations. Gaining the support of the population and denying the ability of the enemy to exploit cultural grievances is a critical element of the combined team approach. Holding each other accountable and ensuring the operations are culturally acceptable will improve overall operating conditions in Afghanistan. This statistic is a fact.

**Gain.** Gain ground in key terrain in Afghanistan; it is the essential measure of achieving the combined mission in Afghanistan. The Afghan people are the key terrain in population-centric operations. Every day, we remember that we are engaged in an argument for the support of the Afghan people. We make the argument at the local community and family level, as the combined team and other mission partners across the Afghan and International Community impact the lives of the people we serve.

OPERATION OMID directs the whole Combined Team. Mission partnership across Afghanistan works to create unity of effort, synchronized operations and focused effects on key population centers that can achieve lasting results over the next 18 months. It is the Combined Team and the virtues of partnership and acknowledged interdependence that strengthen not only the capability of the team, but the resolve and commitment to help the Afghan people succeed.

**“This is the plan that can win the war.”**

*--Afghan National Army planner after the OPERATION OMID orders briefing*



**10 December 2009, spontaneous Combined Team discussion of OPERATION OMID at the North Kabul International Airport terminal. Shortly after this photo, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates arrived and participated in the discussion. Pictured in the foreground from left to right are LTG Sher Mohammad Karimi, LTG David Rodriguez, and BG(P) Mike Linnington. Across the table are Director of IDLG Jelani Popal (hands folded), ANA Chief of General Staff Bismullah Mohammadi, and Deputy Minister of Interior Munir Mangal (grey shirt). (photo by LTC Ed Ledford).**

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