



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

[smallwarsjournal.com](http://smallwarsjournal.com)

## **Afghan Advise and Assist Group**

**Julian Dale Alford and Daniel Zappa**

Successful International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan necessitate a strategic paradigm shift for the future of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). ISAF strategy should move away from wide-ranging, asset intensive counterinsurgency and towards a security cooperation paradigm, reorganizing and down-sizing its structure to create cadres of capable professionals and enduring enablers, specifically manned, trained and equipped to advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This change in method and structure provides not only an appropriate and sustainable way to continue the gains made over the last several years, but also represents a viable exit strategy.

A realistic exit strategy is at the core of the discussion over the future of the military mission in support of OEF. The debate must focus on what is really required to end the insurgency and what defines an acceptable and sustainable security situation in Afghanistan. To that end, the ANSF must truly become the main effort. Afghan security forces are increasingly ready to take the central role in the security of their country - a role which will only increase the legitimacy of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) in the eyes of its population. Building the capability of friendly networks is a basic tenet of COIN doctrine. The Afghans understand best how to address their needs and the threat. Enduring success will be achieved when the GIRoA has the capacity to provide for Afghans' basic needs, especially security.

Many factors suggest a new design is necessary to resolve the Afghanistan War. The Afghanistan mission continues to progress along the counterinsurgency continuum. As the mission succeeds, ISAF must reposition its forces to best support the end state. This further allows the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to better face the unstable global security environment and remain ready to respond in other theaters of operations.

Allied populations are fatigued by ever rising costs, in blood and treasure, of the Afghan War. Their will is additionally influenced by reporting on progress, which is often disconnected from strategic objectives. Overall, allied and global support is waning, as is host nation patience. The recent elimination of Osama Bin Laden will only increase pressure on allied policy makers to chart a definitive exit strategy from Afghanistan. Additionally, conventional wisdom says the Afghans are largely unwilling to fight or finance their own counterinsurgency. The argument holds that perhaps they shouldn't, if NATO is willing and able to do so for them.



Boldly redesigning the ISAF force to advise and assist the ANSF is sustainable and supports effectively the end state of OEF. It also supports America and our allies' national goals and interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Designing a cadre of experienced professionals to advise and assist the ANSF also helps prevent such undesired and ignoble outcomes as those that occurred in 1975 (Vietnam) and 1989 (Afghanistan) when the subsequent armies collapsed after a complete US disengagement.

COIN operations have progressed to a critical point of transition, where large numbers of visible, foreign forces are becoming counterproductive to larger strategic goals. Necessary anti-terrorism and force protection measures, both active and passive, start to have a negative effect on the local population. The local people slowly start to resent the visible presence of foreign troops, and begin to show antipathy towards some of the tactics that are militarily necessary, including checkpoints, roadblocks, detention of suspects, and patrols. In time, the people may begin to support the insurgency actively or passively.

Tactical commanders must determine when the posture of forces must change, and when overt forces become a liability rather than an asset. A critical transition period begins where the counterinsurgency fight is won or lost. This transition period requires a shift in force posture and tactics, where foreign forces become less visible and provide less restriction to the population. At this point the host nation military and police forces must provide the primary elements of security and the foreign forces move out of the battlespace.

From this transition point forward, a small cadre of capable, professional and experienced military advisors will make the difference. In the late 1960s and early 1970s such teams advised the South Vietnamese Army and Marine Corps, and were composed of some of our military's very best combat hardened officers and Staff Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCO). As the transition is made from conventional ISAF forces in battlespace to ANSF forces owning battlespace, quality advisors with the ANSF must become the main effort for ISAF. Advisors must be career officers and SNCO's with combat knowledge and experience, and regional and cultural smarts that can immerse themselves within the ranks of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and provide key advice to commanders at the corps, brigade, kandak and company levels. We must also immerse quality advisors into the Afghan National Police (ANP) forces at the District and Provincial level.

A paradigm change must occur. ISAF brigades, regiments and battalions must be transformed, and in the wake, ANA units, advised and assisted by capable ISAF professionals, must take their place. The Afghan Advise and Assist Group (AAAG) would center on the ANA Corps. The senior Corps Advisor would be a Colonel and the senior SNCO would be a Sergeant Major or Master Gunnery Sergeant. The senior ANA Brigade Advisor would be a Lieutenant Colonel and the senior SNCO would be a First Sergeant or Master Sergeant. A Major and Sergeant First Class or Gunnery Sergeant would become senior advisors to the ANA Kandaks, while the junior officers and SNCOs and NCO's work closely with the ANA companies and platoons in their advisor duties. ISAF staff officers and SNCOs ideally with extensive combat and planning experience would be strung across the staff sections of the ANA Brigades and Kandaks to advise and assist the unit on all the warfighting functions - maneuver, intelligence, logistics, command and control, force protection, and fires. Each one of these AAAG's would have a small cadre of



soldiers or Marines as a security force that would train and deploy with each group. These men would live, eat, work and fight with their Afghan counterparts, continuously working to become immersed in the life of an Afghan infantry unit. These AAAG's would work with the same units for extended periods of time (12 months tour of duty) to ensure continuity, increase familiarization and the development of trust between the advisors and the ANA officers and soldiers. Dari and Pashtu language training and significant regional, and cultural and religious immersion would be required in the pre-deployment curriculum. Additional AAAG's would be required to advise, assist and train the Provincial and its District police stations. US reserve soldiers and Marines would be better suited for this task because of the consistent number of law enforcement professionals in the reserve units, although NATO active duty officers and SNCO's with a military police background could perform this task as well. The senior ANP Provincial Advisor would be a Lieutenant Colonel and the senior SNCO would be a First Sergeant or Master Sergeant. A Major and Sergeant First Class or Gunnery Sergeant would become senior advisors to the ANP District.

The AAAG would provide the ANA and ANP with a cadre of military professionals for continuous education and guidance on the principles of warfare, small unit tactics, force integration, counterinsurgency activities, leadership development and police activities. More importantly, the AAAG would give backbone to the ANA/ANP providing access to joint and coalition fires, logistics, intelligence, medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) and a quick reaction force (QRF). Equipped with the best communications, command and control (C3) equipment available to the military, these soldiers and Marines would have the ability to immediately call upon ground forces and airpower tucked away in remote locations such as Forward Operating Bases (FOB) Camp Leatherneck, Kandahar Air Field, Bagram Air Field, and Salerno. These AAAG would be connected to the US and NATO intelligence community with the capability to access real-world feed from intelligence platforms in support of the ANA/ANP. The AAAG would also help the ANSF to link to the international aid community and other organizations conducting civil actions throughout the country.

The AAAG would require a robust QRF that could be scaled to the realities of each Regional Command (RC). Given current threat levels, a US Army or Marine infantry battalion would suffice as a QRF provided that the AAAG capability and manning is adequate. The QRF could deploy to the Afghan Theater of Operations in 12 to 7-month tours. Aside from the primary responsibility as the regional QRF, the infantry battalion would train and assume the base security mission for air support and logistics units supporting the ANA/ANP through the AAAG. This would further reduce the number of troops in the AO, since these security tasks are currently assigned to non-combat arms forces. Essentially in each one of the regional FOB's the battalion would be organized with one company reinforced on QRF duty, one company reinforced on guard duty and one company reinforced training/rest and refit ideally in a three day rotation.

The AAAG is clearly a job for our most combat experienced, best and brightest military professionals. Through a strengthened, enduring relationship the AAAG would continue to build the capacity of the ANSF and professionalize it over time. In the 1970s and 80s, the United States provided advisor assistance to the El Salvador Armed Forces in the face of a violent



insurgency. Unlike the proposed AAAG, the American advisors were prevented from joining in combat operations, and also limited in number by Congress.

The American advisors helped their partnered forces understand the need to gain the trust of the population. No “Hearts and Minds” for America, but for their own government. Also, they helped establish a corps of officers and non-commissioned officers that will over time professionalize the force. Over time, they successfully helped the El Salvador Armed Forces defeat a communist insurgency and provide one more example of a successful model to succeeding in a long term counterinsurgency.

The mission in Afghanistan would become a robust, long-term security cooperation one rather than one of counterinsurgency. The combination of an advisor capability, suitable reaction forces, logistical and medical support and robust air power would accomplish three central objectives: (1) it would continue to support the GIROA and the population of Afghanistan; (2) it would focus on strengthening and building enduring capabilities for the ANSF; (3) it would properly posture forces in an effective, sustainable and long-term manner, significantly decreasing force requirements.

To make this shift several challenges must be addressed. The first lies in the capacity, professionalism and legitimacy of the ANSF. The capacity and professionalism of the ANSF is steadily increasing: shifting to an AAAG paradigm will actually help to support and even accelerate this trend. The legitimacy of the ANSF is the more difficult problem to tackle because the current ANSF demographics do not appropriately represent the population it is charged with protecting. The Pashtun dominated parts of the country are most resistant to GIROA. The population of southern and eastern Afghanistan is not adequately represented in the ANSF. Indeed, they view the ANSF, with Tajik, Uzbeks and Hazarans soldiers requiring interpreters to speak to locals in Helmand Province, as akin to foreigners in their land. History indicates that the Pashtuns will not accept or side with foreigners in the long term. Unlike the situation in Iraq with the Sunni population, there is no incentive for the Pashtun to choose ANSF (and by proxy ISAF). They don't want to join the current government, but would rather bring it down because they do not feel vested in it. To address this, special efforts must be put forth to recruit Pashtuns into the ANSF. Only in joining the ANSF in some form will the Pashtuns begin to see GIROA as legitimate.

The enemy in Afghanistan is unable to militarily defeat the ANSF and provides no real services to the people or an alternative to GIROA. A full withdraw of ground forces and support after Transition to ANSF lead is a losing strategy. This would be problematic, and would reinvigorate the insurgency's confidence that it has a chance to win the population and eventually defeat the ANSF militarily. Supporting and preparing the ANSF for the long term insurgent onslaught requires our best effort.

The COIN objectives have been met to drive this new strategy. The utility of a large foreign conventional force is ending and the ANSF is growing in numbers and professionalism. Their professionalism and legitimacy should be the top priority of our effort at this point. The Afghan population is ready for their own security forces to blossom into the security providers. GIROA must find its own way, not the way dictated by ISAF.



The ability of the international aid community to help foster a better way of life for the Afghans continues, but their ability to work in the districts will remain tied to security. These civilian administrators must be linked at the district and provincial level with the ANSF with the help from the AAAG. This would help ensure that the ANSF is participating in civil actions to continue to support the population. A strong ANSF capability endorses government legitimacy, and offers opportunities for Afghan government to improve administration, justice and overall government effectiveness.

Another challenge to this strategy is reengineering current manpower, training, and equipping pipelines to support a new paradigm. Advisors in the AAAG must be career officers and SNCO's with the combat knowledge and experience, as well as regional and cultural smarts, that allow them to immerse themselves within the ranks of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and provide key advice to commanders at the corps, brigade, kandak and company levels. These same quality leaders would be needed in the Afghan National Police (ANP) forces at the District and Provincial level. Leaders serving in these AAAG billets must be rewarded the same as a conventional commander following a successful combat tour with his unit. All things being equal, the soldier or Marine serving as a military advisor must be seen as performing a unusually demanding, independent and geo-strategically important billet.

It is much easier to continue to rotate brigades and battalions into Afghanistan for 7 to 12 months. Presumably, this would continue until reaching some COIN tipping point, as in Iraq, when violence levels precipitously drop and the population rises up to take on the insurgents themselves. This would accompany a strengthening of the Afghanistan Government, particularly the ministries controlling the police and army and those district governments would receive the overwhelming support of the population. Charismatic local leaders would rally to our side and drive the remaining insurgents and criminals from their villages and the surrounding countryside as US soldiers and Marines watched and waited. US officers and SNCOs would continue to lead conventionally trained and equipped units to Afghanistan to conduct COIN, adapting to situations on the ground as necessary. However there is no way to predict the arrival of such a tipping point, or cascading favorable events. It is not decisive to await some unknown factor to enter the equation and tip the war in our favor. It is wrong to assume that OEF will end as OIF did for the differences far outweigh the similarities in the two military operations. Key to consolidating the objective is continually evaluating our approach and understanding of the situation.

It is not feasible to continue to rotate infantry brigades and battalions for 7 to 12 month deployments to Afghanistan. Future conflicts are on the horizon. Soaring costs of the Afghanistan War are inconsistent with the country's economic outlook and budget constraints. It is not acceptable to the American people or the Afghanistan populace to continue to rotate combat forces into Afghanistan in the current manner. It is not appropriate to continue to approach the COIN fight in Afghanistan without considering our friendly force structure and possible ways to improve it to best achieve our strategic goals.

The new AAAG paradigm successfully maintains support to GIROA and the population of Afghanistan. It also significantly reduces the overall number of friendly forces yet puts our best



effort against the advising and assisting mission and professionalizing of the ANSF. Strengthening the military will make the most visible part of the Afghan government legitimate in the eyes of the population.

A reduction in ISAF strategic goals, resources and force posture is a foregone conclusion. The question becomes how to do it in a manner that best suits the interests and perceptions of all parties involved. Current IASF force-levels and structure which support wide-spread counterinsurgency operations are manpower intensive, financially expensive and take a long time to show results. Complete disengagement is also not appropriate. Transitioning to a security cooperation mission using the AAAG approach in Afghanistan is feasible, acceptable, and sustainable. It can be done with the resources we currently possess, will support the gains already made and will be a viable and expectable solution to all parties.

*Colonel Julian Dale Alford commanded 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Marines from March 2004 to May 2006 and deployed in support of both OEF and OIF. He subsequently served as the Director, Joint Advanced Warfighting Program, Institute for Defense Analysis. Colonel Alford is currently the Commanding Officer of The Basic School, Quantico, VA.*

*Major Daniel Zappa served as the Executive Officer of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Marines in Iraq. He has 15 years experience as a Marine Corps infantry officer, in combat and peace. Major Zappa is currently an Operations Analyst with the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA.*

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](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

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