Handcuffed: The Burden of Institutional, Management and Leadership Problems on the AFPAK Hands Program

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“I would certainly have applied for it—and had a broken heart if I couldn’t be in it…”[i]

—General Allen on the AFPAK Hands Program

America has faced a pernicious, asymmetric conflict in Afghanistan for over a decade. In response, the US Department of Defense (DoD) has fielded several low-tech approaches in an attempt to tip the balance in their favor. Human Terrain Teams, Female Engagement Teams and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program (APH) are all DoD adaptations which sought to bridge the socio-cultural gap between the US and its technologically mismatched partner, Afghanistan. These efforts have stumbled into being, met with controversy and critique and, as is often the case with new initiatives, yielded limited tangible results and been fraught with failure.

The APH program was founded in Sept of 2009 in an attempt to meet demands for greater continuity, expertise and a more persistent presence in Afghanistan. Today there are roughly 230 APH billets in Afghanistan and a handful in Pakistan which are collectively manned at approximately 85%. Since its inception, the program has involved almost 700 officers and civilians from across the DoD who now possess a wealth of experience which is quite different than their peers.[ii] [iii]

The DoD’s Conundrum

There would have never been a need to develop regional and cultural experts sought by commanders in Afghanistan had the DoD properly resourced and emphasized its various service level Foreign Area Officer (FAO) programs prior to 2001. A decade into the war, the DoD still lacks a cadre of field grade officers who are proficient in both the languages and cultures of Central Asia.[iv] The APH program is an attempt to bridge this capacity gap. While Hands have language and culture skills far beyond the DoD average they are by no means proficient. The APH program is a temporary bridging strategy that will not produce the programmatic and institutional changes required to solve this shortfall.
Many of the critiques of the APH initiative identified in early after action reports have been resolved, but a troubling number remain. The problems facing Hands today are not logistical or administrative; the program has figured out how to receive, train, deploy and field forces. Rather, Hands now face institutional, management and leadership problems which are a serious burden on the program’s effectiveness. The DoD has already committed to the APH initiative by programming for it beyond the end of the ISAF mandate. If this effort is to be successful the DoD would be well advised to address several key issues before any consideration is given to expanding it to the Pacific or into other government agencies as some have suggested.

As the focus in Afghanistan shifts to a full-fledged advisory role, efforts like the APH program will become even more critical if the gains of the last decade are to be cemented. When there were 100,000 US military personnel in Afghanistan, 230 Hands represented a drop in the manpower bucket. When ISAF’s mandate expires and there are only 10,000[8] (or whatever that number ends up being) troops left, the tooth-to-tail ratio of support to operational personnel will significantly limit the coalition’s ability to field advisors. A conservative estimate suggests it may take three personnel to field, support, feed, secure and administer a single advisor.[8] This means that if there are 10,000 US forces in Afghanistan after 2014, a maximum of 2,500 would be doing actual advising work with Afghans. Of that 2,500, nearly 10%, will be AFPAK Hands. This makes the selection, assignment and management of those in the program even more critical.

An Unanswered Call for Volunteers

While the APH program is a DoD initiative endorsed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, there is no funding associated with it and its manpower requirements are levied across all services. Selection of personnel for the program is viewed by the services as “paying taxes” and extinguishes any institutional inclination to recruit, screen and select the most qualified volunteers. The program has categorically failed to recruit qualified volunteers, relying instead on individuals offered up by their services non-voluntarily.[9] This is an acknowledgement that the program is not properly endorsed or incentivized by the DoD, nor is it supported by the services. The result has been sadly predictable; hard-to-fill billets attract professional outliers, the hard-to-manage, and those whose careers have already significantly diverged from traditional paths.

Management Shortfalls

Hands are assigned to designated billets through the AFPAK Hands Optimization Board (AHOB). The AHOB reviews the profiles of inbound Hands and attempts to match them with validated billets based on training, education, experience and language skills. This process has been significantly improved over the last two years, underwent another evolution in the spring of 2013 and should yield improved placement of Hands starting with the cohorts arriving in the fall of 2013.

Despite improvements in the placement processes, the proper alignment of personnel and billets has been affected by the steady reduction in forces. The force structure at all levels of the ISAF mission is, and will remain, fluid until the ISAF mandate expires in 2014. Reorganization has resulted in some Hands performing functions which are no longer in alignment with COMISAF’s priorities or in compliance with APH billet validation criteria. Failure to address this situation will result in the continued misalignment of a low-density, high-demand resource as ISAF draws down and transitions to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM).

Leadership Challenges

Directorates and subordinate commands are reluctant to end tasks and even more hesitant to voluntarily
release manpower. In the face of constant reductions in their forces they revert to a classic bureaucratic survival behavior—the hoarding of personnel. Instead of returning under-utilized Hands to the AFPAK Hands Management Element (AME) for reassignment into validated billets, some Hands are redirected into strictly staff and administrative functions which may meet the mission set of the directorate but fail to meet validation criteria for APH billets, and result in a specialized resource being wasted.

These leadership challenges are known and persistent. Every ISAF commander since General Petraeus has issued clear written guidance on how to employ APHs. These memoranda outline the proper employment of Hands but they lack guidance which directs commanders to release Hands which they cannot, or in some instances, will not properly employ. The memoranda assume a level of compliance from subordinate directorates and commands which simply does not always exist.

Because the AME does not retain operational or tactical control over Hands in theater they are unable to recall and reassign Hands without first gaining the leadership’s approval. The process to reassign Hands is protracted, inefficient and subject to undue command influence; requiring the very leaders who are hoarding manpower to agree to release Hands who are not employed in accordance with COMISAF’s written guidance. With limited political capital and no General Officer backing, the AME is often unwilling to fight to reassign Hands, or selective in their engagement with senior leaders based on the perceived probability of a positive outcome. The end-state is the same for the Hands in question; they linger in positions that do not meet COMISAF’s intent for APH placement or the billet validation requirements outlined by the program.

Lack of Institutional Memory

The Hands have created a persistent presence, but their knowledge is held individually. Because they are not represented by a single division or organization within the ISAF architecture there is little institutional memory about what APHs bring to the fight or how to employ them. Instead, Hands take their experiences back with them while new leadership rotates into theater and must be educated on the program, its capabilities, requirements and limitations. Compounding the lack of institutional memory is the inability of the AME to properly manage cohort rotation to ensure that Hands go back into the same billet or at least the same institutions on their second rotation through Afghanistan. This prevents Hands from becoming true subject matter experts and fails to fully leverage the relationships and networks that were built during their first deployment. This process is arguably complicated by the rapidly changing mission, declining manpower environment and constant reorganization that ISAF endures, but Hands face the same challenges when they return for their Out of Theater (OOT) assignments as well.

OOT billets are intended to continue the development of the Hand as a subject matter expert by ensuring that they are “assigned key duties within organizations that are associated with Afghanistan and/or Pakistan.” The inconsistency in deployed billets follows Hands back to their OOT assignments where their skills are not consistently matched with their deployed experiences and OOT requirements. The services, unhappy with releasing officers for four consecutive years, often infringe on the intent of the program by forcing Hands to serve in non-APH aligned billets during their OOT assignments or by competing Hands for command assignments and initiating their early return to core career fields. The manipulation of manpower assigned by the services to the APH program blatantly disregards the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff directive and degrades both the value of the program and the quality of Hands produced.

What Must be Done

The APH program must individually screen, interview and select candidates. The only new accessions at this point should be replacement Hands for those who have left the program early or completed their tours
and perhaps one more cohort. A strict “volunteers only” policy must be implemented and the DoD should properly incentivize the program, through assignment preferences, special pay, bonuses, or other policies that will attract the right volunteers and help retain the ones it has. With a population of around five-hundred Hands to manage, the DoD can demonstrate its commitment to the program and its participants with minimal effort or cost.

Services should honor their commitment to the Chairman’s initiative and to the officers they release by allowing Hands to complete their tours without interference. The Chairman should allow the program to purge itself by immediately releasing officers who no longer wish to participate to their respective services. Finally, to mitigate these losses, those who desire to remain for a third tour should be allowed to do so. These three actions alone will improve the effectiveness of the program and the experience of deployed commanders who will receive committed volunteers who are dedicated to the mission.

The AHOB assignment process must be codified and strictly enforced. Billets must be evaluated and prioritized with an eye towards RSM requirements and then filled from most to least critical. This “troop to task” assessment is a time-consuming but critical element in identifying and validating billets. Once Hands are assigned, monthly APH reports must be closely monitored to ensure that Hands are being employed in accordance with COMISAF’s priorities and the APH billet validation criteria. COMISAF’s written guidance should be reissued so that it directs subordinate entities to release Hands to the AME for reassignment when a mission set containing APH billets is no longer required. Furthermore, it should empower the AME to realign Hands in accordance with the prioritized billet list without consent of the owning agency or directorate if required.

Conclusion

If the DoD continues to ignore the management and leadership issues facing the APH program it can expect more of the same: a comment stream a mile long and a program which oversells and underperforms due to mismanagement. Hands, volunteers and non-volunteers alike, have been asked to do strategic work often at great personal and professional risk. Overwhelmingly they support and believe in the program and work diligently to achieve the tasks assigned by COMISAF. The least that their leadership and the DoD can do is ensure that they are properly employed. Just as importantly, in an era of fiscal restriction the DoD should be equally concerned with ensuring that the time and money invested in training individuals for specialized tasks are responsibly leveraged downrange.

One needs to look no further than individual service programs to see what can be done when services decide to recruit, screen and select their best and brightest for specific programs. The Air Force has no difficulty recruiting pilots and the Army does not draft people into Special Forces. The question remains: why is the DoD unable to find 500 volunteers for the APH program? The answer is simply because the DoD does not care enough about the program to properly incentivize and support it. While the DoD has learned to pay lip service to the value of “human capital” and “relationships,” it categorically refuses to realign itself in support of programs that do not field a weapon system, secure funding or deliver kinetic effects. This is the tragedy of the AFPAK Hands Program.

References


[ii] Miles, “‘AfPak Hands’ Program Pays Dividends in Afghanistan, Pakistan,” 2.

[iii] The APH Program has generated over 700 Hands, of which only 21 were enlisted members as of January 2012.


[vii] Neither ISAF nor the US have released numbers to indicate the size of the post 2014 footprint. However, 10,000 is a commonly referred to estimate of the size of the US footprint for post 2014. A final number could vary widely.


General Joseph F. Dunford issued his Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Implementation Directive in the Fall of 2013.


About the Author
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Major Tyrell Mayfield is a volunteer for the AFPAK Hands program and recently returned from his first deployment as a Hand where he served for eight months as ISAF’s advisor to the Minister of Information and Culture. He finished his tour as ISAF’s Director of Online and Social Media. He has previously served as a military advisor with the 6th Special Operations Squadron (AFSOC) in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.


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