The Spaces in Between: Operating on the Afghan Border (or Not)

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“It must be remembered that Afghanistan has for centuries been rather a geographical expression than a country”

--G.A. Henty, For Name and Fame (1900), p. 248

Henty’s formulation, captured here from the Boys’ Own Adventure genre of fiction popular among empires past, may be cliché and contradictory; but clichés and contradictions can be found in abundance around the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak. Along a jagged, ominous spine of rock in the center of town, a centuries-old fortress looms above the modern blue-roofed, pre-fabricated structures which house private contractors hired to train the border police manning the crumbling fortifications. Narrow, dust-blown alleys and acres of scrap-metal shops are punctuated by walled compounds stuffed to overflowing with gleaming, modern vehicles shipped duty free across the border from Pakistan, before ultimately returning – again duty free – to Pakistani markets in a kind of massive, international game of three-card Monte. The local commander of the Afghan Border Police is at once a demonstrably staunch ally against Taliban insurgents, and the subject of countless accusations of corruption, narcotics smuggling and arms dealing.

Nothing is quite what it seems – not even the border itself. A few kilometres from Spin Boldak, there is clearly a point where the color and style of the uniforms changes, as does the language on official documents. But beyond that, things become much less clear. Is this point the Durand Line, the international border, or merely a convenient location to shift from using Rupees to Afghanis? The truth literally depends upon whom you ask.

It is precisely this indeterminacy which drives the title of this article. As Regional Command-South, we have been tasked to undertake a variety of operations at this particular place. These initiatives do not fall squarely within the responsibilities of the operations division, the support division, or the plans division, but rather within some space in between. They require competencies exclusive to neither the military nor civilians, but rather to some space in between. Authority to address these issues within the Government of Afghanistan does not belong entirely to the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Finance or any of a half-dozen others. The requisite authority does not even belong entirely to the Government of Afghanistan, nor to the Government of Pakistan (and a similarly numerous menagerie of ministries and bureaus on that side). It lies within some space in between. A space which may
be a colonial map line, reproduced by the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency; it may be a more-or-less random point on the ground; it may even actually be the border (or not).
The specific circumstances we encountered in the vicinity of Spin Boldak from Fall 2009 to Spring 2010 may be unique – indeed one of our fundamental premises is that border related problem sets are inherently idiosyncratic – but many of the thematic issues, and our approach to addressing these, may well have broader relevance. In a global security environment marked by failing or fragile states, problems of sovereignty – of which borders are a paramount example – will routinely emerge. And in the face of hybrid threats, a hybrid response – which ours most assuredly has been – may acquire growing utility.

Bridging the Gaps

As noted above, border problems are not simply about the seams between states; but also about the seams between organizations, agencies and staff sections. Faced with similar inter-agency, multi-lateral challenges in other contexts, a familiar bureaucratic response is to form a working group or operational planning team, define membership and terms of reference, identify tasks and milestones, and proceed to work. Indeed, from our seat in Kandahar, we have enjoyed a surfeit of riches in this regard through our interactions with other headquarters and agencies. We have dealt, variously, with: the Borders Issues Working Group, the Borders Action Team (extra points for a cool acronym), the Ground Line of Communications Working Group, the Cross-Border Logistics Intelligence Working Group, the Border Program Management Review Team, the Border Management Task Force, and a group that is not-quite-the Border Management Task Force (it shares most of the same members, but not the same name, for obscure political reasons).

Regional Command-South, by way of contrast, hasn’t a single border-related acronym to show for its many troubles taken in this regard. This may be a symptom of laziness or sheer obstinacy, or perhaps as evidence of a distinct approach to this more general problem set. In our view, the formal organizational approach (e.g. operational planning groups, etc.) is handicapped by two critical presumptions. First, it presumes the organizer has a reasonably comprehensive view of which particular agencies and entities need to be represented; but in complex interdisciplinary realms like borders issues, such a comprehensive view is rarely available at the outset, and is more commonly arrived at through a protracted process of trial and error. Unrecognized issues and actors appear on the scene and turn out to be vital, while many of those which at first blush appeared pivotal turn out to be nearly irrelevant. Second, even should the appropriate organizations or positions appear immediately self-evident, the appropriate individuals with the requisite skills, authorities – or even interests – are more rarely so obvious. All bureaucracies struggle with the divergence between the formal hierarchy – reflected in ranks, titles and organizational charts – and the real hierarchy of power and personal relationships which actually shape decisions. Figuring out who at the next level of formal authority in your own organization can address some routine issue is generally a straightforward affair. Calculating who at that level can address a complex and ill-defined issue is a slightly more troublesome prospect. Successfully identifying who would fit such a description in another organization with completely different structures, institutional biases, and even nationalities is a dubious prospect at best.
Consequently, we didn’t even try – or at least, we didn’t try very hard. What we did was talk with, visit, call, meet or e-mail just about anyone we could think of that might be remotely connected to our issues of interest, regardless of rank, position or organization. The number of useless meetings and wasted hours this generated probably doesn’t bear much thinking about, and the “network” this created was unmanageable at best, and counter-productive at worst. Like slime mold expanding through its surroundings until it discovers a food source, however, this approach serendipitously made contact with the productive resources scattered throughout the environment – a scatter which might be random in fact, or at least random in appearance to an observer unfamiliar with the organizations at play (and in either case inaccessible to a priori determination). Subsequent iterative communication caused the links between productive nodes which shared information to grow stronger and more clearly delineated, while those which did not eventually atrophied (in less tortured language, whether you replied to e-mails or not was more important than your duty position). While the resulting array of connections would certainly fail the test of PowerPoint legibility, it worked.

Included in this array were: uniformed mentors, logistics, intelligence, engineering and signals specialists organic to the regional command; civilians at the regional platform, AMEMBASSY Kabul and Islamabad, HQ ISAF and HQ IJC, the Afghan National Army and Border Police, the Pakistan Army and the Pakistan Frontier Corps. Absent a formal organizational structure, this array was able to self-organize as required in order to address emerging and diverging issues well beyond what any single director might have envisioned. The success of that approach created a positive feed-back loop, whereby issues or actors originally external to the array would be drawn to participation by its growing reach, subsequently extending that reach even further. Transactional criteria for inclusion were self-selecting, so that the value of any particular node was determined by other nodes through the amount of information contributed or passed, requiring minimal supervision or external direction. This absence of direction or supervision, of course, constitutes something of a liability in a military enterprise; but in a realm where a single clear authority is inherently absent (and attempts to identify one are likely counter-productive) this quality constitutes a positive asset.

Building the Bridges

A similarly empiricist method shaped our approach to marshalling tangible resources, e.g. people, materials and funds. That is to say, we relied more upon experiment than upon structures. The time horizons of large bureaucracies are not well-suited to internally respond in a formal way to emerging requirements on the ground, and an ISAF Regional Command does not enjoy the authorities required to task the many other entities which might have access to the resources necessary for border-related initiatives. Consequently, we would repeatedly seek alternative routes to resources, and exploit those that worked. A suitable example can be found in the Border Coordination Center (BCC) we established at Spin Boldak.

The formal origins of the BCC concept are murky at best. In principle, the establishment of these centers was agreed to during the course of high-level Tri-Partite talks between senior military leaders in Afghanistan, Pakistan and ISAF to enhance cross-border cooperation (although a good dose of OEF, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotic interest was thrown in as well). Also in principle, these centers were to be staffed, constructed and supported through US
Forces -Afghanistan (USFOR-A). As is so often the case, however, what appears clear in principle is frequently much less so in practice – and the multiplicity of actors and interests involved in border affairs ensured this phenomenon would apply to the BCCs.

At the very outset, a manning approach which relied on the Request For Forces (RFF) mechanism was vulnerable to challenges of timing, availability and priorities. The initial RFF for the BCC, Spin Boldak was generated for sixteen personnel in June 2009, with a latest arrival date of Sep 2009. As of writing, in late January 2010, only one of those sixteen has arrived in country. Additionally, a resourcing strategy reliant upon US sources pre-determines a US-heavy solution, not necessarily the ideal for a facility with aspirations to multi-national cooperation. So much for coalition force participation, but what of our Afghan and Pakistani partners? Within those counter-part organizations, both the resourcing and bureaucratic problems which we confront apply, but with even greater virulence. Awaiting a structural, process-oriented solution would almost guarantee failure.

Consequently, our approach to staffing has been a hybrid one. The Director of the BCC is a U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO), technically assigned to HQ Regional Command – South as the deputy chief of engineering (the outcome of a completely unrelated bit of bureaucratic legerdemain). The Chief of Operations is a Canadian officer supplied through an adjustment to the HQ staffing tables through the NATO manning process. The core of the operating staff are on secondment from the battle-space owner (a U.S. Stryker brigade). Liaison officers from the Pakistan Army and Frontier Corps have been assigned largely on handshake agreements. The Afghan National Army has provided representatives more-or-less as a show of goodwill; and the Afghan Uniformed Police and Afghan Border Police are represented by officers who essentially drop-in as a part of their daily beat in the local neighbourhood.

The same challenges which have bedevilled our people have plagued the place where they work. As with the RFF mechanism, the contracting process for infrastructure can be a prolonged one; and in the midst of a steadily and significantly expanding coalition presence within the regional command, the associated resources are stretched exceptionally thin. As with our staffing approach, one possibility would have been to simply wait on the proper process to work itself out (the initial operating facility for the BCC, begun in June 2009, is now likely to be completed by March or April 2010). Another possibility was simply to find a way that worked, and this is the path we took. Having identified existing buildings left vacant by another activity, the first seeds of the BCC took root in a crumbling brick building surrounded by medieval-style towers erected by the French Foreign Legion. As delays continued to plague our more deliberate construction efforts, we began to install communications and IT systems at this interim facility – sometimes relying upon USFOR-A assets, sometimes upon Regional Command-South resources, and sometimes upon murky contracting mechanisms left over from prior Canadian activities in the area.

In near perfect symmetry with the mutable nature of our resourcing challenges, the purpose of the BCC has also been the subject of some turmoil. Originally designed in principle to facilitate cross-border general cooperation, the function of a BCC – as realized in the first facility established near Torkham Gate - was refined to focus on information sharing and operational coordination, and conflict resolution in the course of disputed border area activities. The BCC at
Spin Boldak was consequently envisioned in a similar way. However, the force array within Regional Command-South (focused on population centers rather than remote, lightly populated border regions) and evolving strategy at the HQ ISAF and ISAF Joint Command (focused on the economic aspects of borders, rather than the kinetic ones), placed the utility of such a vision in doubt. Once again, rather than wait upon structural elements to catch up with practical ones, we decided to experiment with the BCC’s activities, trying a variety of different initiatives. Those which produced results useful to our command group were nurtured, while those that did not were pruned away. Consequently, our Operations officer at the BCC spends comparatively little time tracking or coordinating tactical operations; he is, however, fully occupied in untangling the web of customs activities associated with traffic crossing the border, calculating how traffic can be better managed, and developing an accurate understanding of how private contract truckers interact with government authorities on both sides of the border.

The places and people which constitute that web are near perfect examples of the indeterminacy broached at the outset. The actual border (or crossing site, zero line or however one chooses to describe this contested point on the ground – in any event, the place where someone in uniform will stop you from proceeding further in one direction or another) is marked by a large concrete dual-arched structure, the “Friendship Gate.” Despite the name, this is not a particularly friendly place, and the space within the two arch spans is gated and chain-locked, forcing all vehicle traffic into a narrow bypass lane immediately to one side. Depending upon whom you ask, this gate is located on the international border line, Pakistani territory or Afghan territory; and has been locked – again, in various combinations – from time to time, only within the last year, or since the Gate was built. In one of the more imaginative accounts, it was originally built by Pakistanis on Pakistani territory, only to be disassembled by Afghans, moved westward onto Afghan soil and erected anew, and then locked by Afghan authorities in order to prove a point. This telling defies logic and common sense on a number of counts, but that’s really beside the point, when we find ourselves partnering with individuals of a similarly ambiguous nature. The border police colonel (or general, depending on your point of view) we mentioned earlier is represented at the BCC by a sergeant. Not surprisingly, the sergeant is related to the colonel; but perhaps more unexpected is his background, which includes medical studies in St. Petersburg sponsored by the post-Soviet/pre-Taliban government and a degree acquired in Quetta, Pakistan. The educated power-broker behind the scenes (the colonel is illiterate), our sergeant is able to successfully manage many of the border related schemes to which so many accusations of corruption attach, yet maintains his lowly rank principally because he was unwilling to pay the $1,000 bribe required for a colonelcy. Politics writ large may make for strange bedfellows, but those associated with a border can make for exceptionally peculiar ones.

The activities detailed above could accurately, if unflatteringly, be described as ad hoc in the extreme. While we would not dispute that description, we would dispute the negative connotations. Ad hoc approaches are a routine feature of actual operations – where results almost always trump process – tolerated until more appropriate formal solutions can be arranged. In the sphere of border operations, however, where authorities, responsibilities and interests are so fundamentally heterogeneous, the formal arrangement may never arrive. The Durand Line was established in 1893, and has yet to be adopted as a formal arrangement more than a century later – a time horizon unacceptable to even the most incremental military approach. But if the ultimate solution remains out of reach, and inaction remains unacceptable, what we are left with...
is to pursue the art of the possible (perhaps a more graceful way of describing an ad hoc approach). Looking then beyond our specific experience at Spin Boldak, this art of the possible may be taken as a defining approach to border problems, rather than as a necessary evil.

**Finding the Engineers**

As suggested above, the activities associated with border operations rarely fit within orderly, recognized organizations and processes. So too, the skill-sets required of officers tasked with these missions rarely fall within orderly, recognized professional departments or career branches. Sometimes the challenge is appropriate for an engineer, at other times for a tactical operator; a logistician may be the best resource in one case, and intelligence analyst in another. In short, the whole spectrum of staff competencies will be required at one point or another. However, for a divisional staff focused on population-centric counter-insurgency (as Regional Command-South has been during the period under discussion), borders are of necessity an economy of force arena. Consequently, recognizing this balance of effort, our approach has been to out-source the staffing requirements (calling on particular assets when required), rather than attempting to devote scarce full-time cross-functional resources to this issue. To manage this approach, as well as coordinating the asset array discussed earlier, we have applied serendipitous resources. As with other aspects of our experience, this serendipity may have broader, more deliberate applicability.

As the U.S. military’s approach to counter-insurgency and hybrid threats has grown more nuanced over nearly a decade of persistent conflict, the requirement for officers with language skills, inter-agency experience and cultural competency has gained steadily rising prominence. This phenomenon is reflected most recently in the Afghan-Pakistan Hands program, designed to select and train a cadre of officers in South Asia specific languages and culture, repeatedly assigning them to the region to build on that expertise and a network of personal relationships with their host nation counter-parts. Receiving comparatively little note in the discussion of this issue, the U.S. military – and the Army in particular – already has a cadre of such language and cultural experts in the Foreign Area Officer (FAO) community, nurtured over decades. Ironically, while in principle such expertise has gained greater recognition, in practice our institution continues to struggle with identifying the best way of employing our current corps of experts (rather than training an entirely new corps). In theater, FAOs routinely perform jobs similar to those they fulfil in more peaceful areas (e.g. defense attaché, security assistance / cooperation officer, etc.); however, this routine pattern, and the personnel assignment structure which supports it, does not extend beyond the walls of embassy compounds. Nominally, FAOs remain strategic scouts, and thus serve at the strategic level; however, the demands for the FAO skill set at the operational and tactical level extend far beyond those walls. Despite these many demands, in practice, FAOs are deployed in the field only as the creativity of their branch managers and the perseverance of the individual officers involved allows – a process of ingenuity rather than design.

The authors are the product of such a process. One was deployed on generic TDY orders, specifying only “special mission to Afghanistan, duty not in Kabul;” while the other was assigned as the deputy chief of engineering at Headquarters, Regional Command - South (despite lack of any technical engineering background). Regardless of the documents in hand, both of us
deployed with the understanding that we would be working “border issues” writ large. Subsequently, one adopted the position of “Chief, Border Operations and Plans” at the Regional HQ (a position wholly unsubstantiated in any formal document), while the second became the Director of the Border Coordination Center (an RFF position as yet unfilled 5 months after the Latest Arrival Date in the authorization document). Neither of these positions were designed with FAOs in mind (insofar as they were designed at all); but both turned out to possess requirements for which FAOs are ideally – if not uniquely – suited.

At the most obvious level, these positions required close cooperation and coordination with non-US/non-NATO partners, a core element of the FAO mission. While language is frequently a challenge in these types of circumstances, differences in institutional culture are equally daunting. Like our peers engaged in partnering and mentoring efforts, we were compelled to manage different approaches to time and protocol, different bureaucratic practices and even different perceptions of truth. For example, the local commander described in the introduction is addressed as “general” by his men, as well as most of the district’s residents – a rank which well describes the power and influence he holds. However, due to his illiteracy, he has never been technically promoted above the rank of colonel, and remains such on the formal records maintained in Kabul and Kandahar. Pressed to answer definitively by senior U.S. officers regarding his correct rank, we have – perhaps unwisely, but in typical FAO fashion – replied that he is both. The truth really does depend upon the context. Choosing one answer over the other may be more convenient for a chart, but does injury to the reality on the ground.

This comfort with ambiguity – or at least a willingness to live with it – is a critical FAO trait. Whether native to the individual or acquired through maddening experience, this capacity is not one habitually nurtured among our professional uniformed colleagues; but it is as vital to success as any linguistic talent when dealing with issues as sensitive and purposefully elusive as a sensitive border area. An institutional culture, such as the military, which prides itself on directness, clarity and defined responsibilities can find its objectives entirely confounded in an environment literally defined by the tangential, the obscure and the evasive. Moreover, the ambiguity which characterizes cross-cultural communications and operations between partner nations is also a key feature of inter-agency activities. No matter how many joint documents senior leaders sign, or manuals are published on both sides of the Potomac, at the granular level the differences are substantive and require experience and skill, as much as good intentions, to negotiate. Indeed, we have both found through years of FAO assignments that the frustrations of working with our host nation military counter-parts frequently pales in comparison to the frustrations of working with our peers in other organizations, despite shared language, culture, and quite frequently even zip codes. Without being overly melodramatic, there really is something to the idea of the comradeship of arms which trumps language, faith or any of the more obvious marks of cultural distinction. The capacity, and patience, required for overcoming these distinctions – with our host nation partners and the interagency – probably trumps any other specific prerequisite for success in environments like those found at Spin Boldak. Developing that patience and capacity is not part of the FAO training curriculum, nor is it fully captured in our officer evaluation system – but no officer will successfully survive multiple FAO assignments without possessing or acquiring these assets. Consequently, the FAO career path is uniquely suited to informally selecting the idiosyncratic talent sets required for assignments of the border variety.
While purely serendipitous for us, the point is worth more general consideration regarding the employment of FAOs in active operations. In principle, an Embassy may seem the appropriate roost for a “strategic scout;” but in the mundane world of bureaucratic practice – surrounded by PowerPoint’s and planning teams, multiple correspondence drafts and byzantine clearance procedures – the safety net is actually quite extensive. At a disputed border crossing, by way of contrast, however tactical the day-to-day details may appear in laying gravel, installing lights, or counting trucks, it really and truly is strategic level work all the time, and the smallest error on the ground can have almost instant international impact. We have sought to illustrate how FAO skills are critical for success in such an environment; but perhaps more importantly, they are vital for avoiding failure in a game with such dramatic penalties.

Too Far, or Not Far Enough

This brief summary of our experience along the Afghan border is sadly lacking in dramatic achievements, or even much in the way of Boys’ Own derring-do. It is rather a story of incremental progress, of negotiation between complex actors and making do with scarce, elusive resources. But in the end, perhaps that’s not entirely a bad thing. Sensitive, disputed borders with strategic implications are not the ideal place to generate drama and excitement – whether in Afghanistan or a host of similarly nebulous locales where we, or our peers, may find ourselves operating. Our approach may not have been ideal, but it may also be suggestive of how best to tackle the kind of places described by Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India in his Romanes lecture of 1907:

“Frontiers are indeed the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations.”

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