

COMBAT POWER & CONFIDENCE WITHIN THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY

This is the first paper in a series on Afghan National Army development and transition.

The success of transitioning security responsibility to the Afghans is contingent upon their willingness and ability to receive the handoff.

Fortunately, the Afghans and NATO began a program of accelerated growth in 2009. Even so, the fact is that the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA) into a sufficiently large, capable, and confident force is years away. Three essential tasks describe ISAF's post-2014 security force development mission: first, to improve the ANA's combat power and confidence; second, to provide direct combat support and combat service support in narrowly defined areas; and third, to conduct a planned withdrawal of the development forces over time.

Combat Power

Combat power is a relative concept, a function of a military being able to fight better and longer than its opponents. The seven main elements of combat power consist of the following capacities: to know the enemy and the situation (intelligence), to translate knowledge into timely and coordinated action (echelons of command and control), to gain positional advantage over the enemy (maneuver, air and land), to place direct and indirect fire on the enemy (fires, land and air-based), to prevent the enemy from attacking friendly forces (protection), to maintain the momentum against the enemy (size and sustainment), and to create cohesive teams that can perform these functions (leadership). The capacities and deficiencies of the ANA are measurable, and they will define the key tasks for the post-2014 development mission.

Confidence

Confidence in a fighting unit is based upon the individual soldier (airman, Marine, or sailor). The probability increases that an individual and unit will fight, and fight well, when soldiers are confident in themselves, their training and equipment, their buddies and leaders, and the systems that support them in combat. Most observers

acknowledge the first five elements of confidence, but they overlook the last. Support systems—the very same systems that produce combat power—are an essential element of a soldier's and a unit's confidence. Soldier confidence suffers when they cannot track the enemy, lack the means to maneuver to a position of advantage against that enemy, have little indirect fire with which to engage that enemy, will not receive adequate medical attention if wounded, will not receive timely resupply of food or ammunition, receive incoherent directions from their headquarters, or lack adequate leaders. The more the ANA suffers these insecurities, the more its combat performance will diminish. Again, this is all relative to their enemy. In order to be successful, the ANA need only be more confident in itself than are its enemies.

So where do we stand now?

The ANA is partially developed in each of the seven elements of combat power. Its human intelligence capacity to sense near-term threats is high; however, its technical capacity to detect horizon threats is low. On the ground, it can maneuver well, but the ANA lacks the air and ground mobility to shift force around the country in order to mass against the enemy. Lack of mobility and still-developing staffs reduce the ANA's ability to apply timely and coordinated force. The ANA can place accurate enough direct fire against the enemy once engaged, but it has only limited land-based indirect fire ability. It does not have adequate air-delivered fires that are important in the mountains and remote areas of Afghanistan. Insufficient size and pending medical, supply, maintenance, and transport capacity means that the ANA has limited ability to maintain momentum against the enemy once engaged. And leadership quality varies.

None of this should be a surprise.

In 2009, the Afghans and NATO began accelerating the growth of the ANA, targeting growth in size, competence, and confidence. Part of this acceleration plan placed primary emphasis, only temporarily, upon fielding and developing fighting units and secondarily emphasized “systems capacity.” The choice to begin building systems capacity early was wise, for it takes much longer than creating fighting units. While their own systems were being developed and fielded, ANA fighting units could receive the support they needed from their partner ISAF units. As Afghan systems emerged, NATO support could be “thinned out” and ultimately cut all together. To do otherwise would have been to grow the ANA at the pace of its slowest element, an overly inefficient and unsatisfactory approach that did not match the Afghan “surge” strategy. In an underdeveloped country that has suffered from over 30 years of war, growing a sufficient set of support systems—supply, medical, transport, analytic, staff, communications, air and land-based indirect support—is going to take longer even than it did in Iraq.

With respect to current ANA confidence levels, the reality is again mixed. Growing confidence begins in the training camps that the ANA and the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) now operate—training that includes individual and unit skill development as well as leader and staff development. But growing confidence continues after graduation from training. In many ways, what happens on the battlefield makes or breaks the confidence developed in training.

Since 2009, the Afghans and ISAF have used two inter-related approaches to offset the ANA’s shortcomings in the elements of combat power and to accelerate its confidence. First, ANA units partner with ISAF units. Second, NATO trainers and advisors are embedded into selected ANA units. Both provide continued training and development of the ANA “on the job” and reliable ANA access to support systems. Sufficient numbers of ISAF units were only available after 2009, so both programs are a little over three years old. Certainly, the development effort has not been without setbacks; equally certain, however, is that the overall approach has been working. The results are positive and apparent. More ANA units are leading and participating in combat operations, and their performance is improved. “Better” and “improving” connote the goals expressed by the Afghan Minister of Defense and ISAF in 2009. ANA development is not “done,” but through the combined efforts of the Afghans and ISAF, the ANA is essentially on track as envisioned in 2009. One of the

ways to understand the “insider attacks” in Afghanistan is as the enemy’s way to acknowledge the success of the partnering and embedded programs and an attempt to decelerate ANA growth by separating ISAF from Afghans.

The question becomes, how to sustain this improvement in the ANA beyond 2014? First, NATO must continue its support to the ANA training and education system. Second, the partnership and embedded trainer and advisor programs must continue, at least in selected ANA units. Third, NATO must continue providing support for selected systems associated with both combat power and confidence. Finally, NATO and the Afghans must work out a planned withdrawal of the development, partner and embed programs, and support forces over time.

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