



Clearing the Road Ahead: The Future of Engineer Partnership in Afghanistan

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Ten years ago, no one believed that the Afghan National Army (ANA) would possess the capability to conduct route clearance patrols, build roads, or construct buildings. Today, Soldiers of Task Force Sword have the opportunity to work with Afghan engineers who are determined to establish security for the Afghan people and prepared to meet the challenge of rebuilding their country.

As the time remaining for U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan dwindles, more resources are being devoted to partnership with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). With the drawdown of forces already being felt throughout the Combined/Joint Operations Area–Afghanistan and with more cutbacks planned, one thing is clear: the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will have to do more with less. With the future of Afghanistan hanging in the balance,

a dire need exists for tactically and technically competent Afghan engineers to build infrastructure, ensure freedom of movement along vital roads for transportation and commerce, and secure the developing government. According to the ISAF Partnering Directive, the Afghan government must protect the Afghan population and defeat the insurgency that challenges its sovereignty. The ISAF mission is to use embedded partnering—a trust-based, habitual, and enduring relationship with the ANSF—as the method to help the government accomplish these goals.

Serving as a theater level asset, Task Force Sword is charged with synchronizing all combat and construction engineering effects through the Northern Engineer Region of Afghanistan. This region includes Regional Command (RC)–East, –North, and –Capital and spans more than 100,000

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square miles. Task Force Sword is the only U.S. Army engineer brigade in theater and is composed of the following units:

- 18th Engineer Brigade, Schwetzingen, Germany.
- 54th Engineer Battalion (Task Force Dolch), Bamberg, Germany.
- 111th Engineer Battalion (Task Force Roughneck), Texas Army National Guard.
- 1249th Engineer Battalion (Task Force Gridley), Oregon Army National Guard.

The Southern Engineer Region contains RC–West, –Southwest, and –South. It is currently controlled by the 30th Naval Construction Regiment.

Significance of Partnership

“Partnership is an essential aspect of our counterinsurgency strategy. It is also an indispensable element of the transition of responsibility to Afghans.”

—General David Petraeus (Retired)
Former ISAF commander

Before deploying, Task Force Sword leaders recognized the importance of partnering with ANA engineers and placed partnership as a main line of effort alongside construction and combat effects. The desired outcome for the engineer partnership line of effort, when U.S. forces depart Afghanistan in 2014, is for ANA engineer units to be able to provide combat and construction effects independent of ISAF assistance. The end state for partnership is for the ANSF to shoulder additional security tasks and conduct and sustain coordinated operations with its own operational support and sustainment capabilities and with less assistance from the coalition.

Once deployed, Task Force Sword quickly established its partnership cell as part of the operations section. Consisting of a captain and a staff sergeant on the brigade staff, the aims of the partnership cell are to—

- Increase ANSF capability and capacity.
- Help the ANSF and its leaders reach a level where they can shoulder additional security tasks and conduct coordinated operations with less ISAF assistance.
- Promote ANSF professionalism.

The partnership cell regularly hosts a working group to synchronize Task Force Sword partnership efforts with the ANA engineers in RC–East, –North, and –Capital to help the ANA engineers conduct full spectrum engineer operations independent of ISAF assistance. The working group consists of the brigade operations officer, partnership officers from the brigade and each battalion, the brigade public affairs officer, and a representative from the intelligence staff. The working group uses input from the intelligence section, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Training Mission–Afghanistan fielding plan of future ANA

Commander’s Update and Assessment Tool

Independent

Personnel and equipment are more than 75 percent present, and the unit can meet basic logistics needs without help from coalition forces. The unit is able to—

- Plan and execute missions.
- Maintain mission command of subordinate elements.
- Summon and control the quick-reaction force and medical evacuation assets.
- Call for and integrate joint effects from coalition forces.
- Exploit intelligence.

Effective With Advisors

Personnel and equipment are no more than 75 percent present. The unit members, leaders, and staff adhere to the ANSF code of conduct and are loyal to the Afghan government. The unit is able to—

- Plan, synchronize, direct, and report on operations and status.
- Coordinate and communicate with higher, lower, adjacent, and combined/joint units.

Effective With Assistance

Personnel and equipment are no more than 65 percent present. The leaders, staff, and most of the unit members usually adhere to the ANSF code of conduct and are loyal to the Afghan government. The unit requires routine mentoring to—

- Plan, synchronize, direct, and report on operations and status.
- Coordinate and communicate with higher, lower, adjacent, and combined/joint units.
- Maintain effective readiness reports.

Developing

Personnel and equipment are less than 65 percent present. Unit leaders and most of the staff usually adhere to the ANSF code of conduct and are loyal to the Afghan government. The unit requires partner unit presence to—

- Plan, synchronize, direct, and report on operations and status.
- Coordinate and communicate with higher, lower, adjacent, and combined/joint units.

Establishing

Personnel and equipment are less than 50 percent present. Unit leaders and staff may not adhere to the ANSF code of conduct or may not be loyal to the Afghan government. The unit is at the beginning of organization and is barely able to—

- Plan, synchronize, direct, and report on operations and status, even with the presence and assistance of a partner unit.
- Coordinate and communicate with higher, lower, adjacent, and combined/joint units.

Not Assessed

Insufficient data is available for complete assessment.

engineer units, any requests from ANSF or the Afghan government, and current partnerships. The working group also examines units that have no partnership in order to close the gap. Often, the reason units lack a partnership is because ANA engineer units are still in the process of being created. One critical element of ensuring a solid partnership is sending U.S. Soldiers to the ANA engineer school in Mazar-E-Sharif while their future Afghan partnership unit is still being formed. This way, relationships and bonds can be formed even before an ANA unit graduates and joins the fight.

The partnership working group reviews key leader engagements with ANA units, analyzes the map overlay of U.S. units that have partnerships, and revises the commander's update and assessment tool as needed. The tool measures ANA units based on leadership, training, overall material, and shoot-move-communicate skills and then places them into one of the categories in the table. The working group also analyzes the security objectives for each RC while determining if partnership efforts are having the desired impact on the security objective areas.

Updated partnership priorities and planned key leader engagements with ANA units and installations are produced as outputs from the partnership working groups. After each group meeting, slides and outputs are disseminated to the strategic communications and targeting working groups so that the knowledge can be shared throughout the brigade staff and incorporated into different working groups.

ANA engineer units include—

- *Kandaks*, or battalions, which are corps level assets containing horizontal, vertical, and combat engineers.
- *Coys*, or engineer companies, that have sapper and construction assets to provide combat and force protection abilities.
- Route clearance companies (RCCs), which have less manpower than a *coy*, but include organic route clearance and explosive ordnance disposal platoons.
- Garrison support units, which are part of brigade headquarters. Similar to the department of public works on a U.S. forward operating base, they provide engineer support to facilities and process recurring work requests.



A U.S. heavy equipment operator (right) uses his translator to mentor an ANA engineer (left) during a partnership construction project.



A Task Force Roughneck engineer supervises Afghan engineer training in Balkh Province.

Partnership Success

“Our military is working hand in hand with our civilian partners to secure the gains we have made by strengthening the Afghan government and by advancing economic opportunity. We’re committed to working with and strengthening our Afghan partners because we know that only they can ensure the security of their country.”

*—General John R. Allen
ISAF commander*

Task Force Sword is involved in mentoring several ANA engineer units, including route clearance, facility, and combat engineer units. These partnerships range from basic classes in driver training to combined action route clearance operations. Regardless of the intended mission, the key to making these partnerships yield successful results is using realistic expectations and developing goals that will enable the ANA to conduct independent operations.

Great achievements have already been made through partnership. ANA combat engineers are securing main roads needed for commerce in Afghanistan. ANA construction engineers are busy repairing highways, building infrastructure, and making improvements to the quality of life.

An example of a successful partnership is that of the 2d Brigade, 203d Corps ANA Route Clearance Company with the U.S. Army 370th Engineer Company in the vicinity of Forward Operating Base Sharana. According to the 370th Engineer Company commander, the partnership is going

well, with the ANA unit fully capable of conducting route clearance operations. The Afghan engineers have discovered improvised explosive devices while conducting joint missions with U.S. units, validating their route clearance skills.

The colocation of the partnered units, strong ANA leadership, and trust between Afghan and American Soldiers are key ingredients for the success of the partnership. The Afghan route clearance Soldiers volunteered to accompany critical supplies to the 370th Engineer Company, which had suffered multiple improvised explosive device strikes during an operation and was stuck at another base awaiting repair parts. One U.S. partnership officer described the “brotherhood and relationship” that had been forged by shared combat experience.

Partnership Challenges

Unfortunately, not all partnerships are flourishing. Leadership—or the lack thereof—plays a pivotal role in overall success. However, logistics, equipment, and fielding are bigger challenges than training, leadership, or competency in the ANA. Currently, some U.S. Army engineer units are not partnered with the ANA because the Afghan units have yet to be stood up, properly trained, and fielded. Additionally, not all of the newly formed ANA engineer units are collocated with their American counterparts. This significantly detracts from the partnership experience and hinders the growth of relationships. Likewise, the ANA logistics and supply systems have yet to catch up with the



Soldiers from Task Force Gridley and an ANA route clearance company work together to clear a route in Paktika Province.

influx of new units being created. The slow progress makes it tempting to give the ANA a handout, but U.S. and Afghan leaders are seeking long-term solutions.

“Our hope is that the U.S. forces develop and build the ANA and Afghan National Police so that we can defend our own country. I don’t want the U.S. and coalition forces to solve our problems for us. I want the U.S. to solve the bureaucracy and logistics issues so [we] can help ourselves,” said an ANA officer. He added that the lack of education makes Afghans susceptible to influence from insurgents and that the first step in ANA training should be education and literacy.

The Way Ahead


Three lines of effort—engineer partnership, construction effects, and combat effects—continue to develop ANA engineers toward independent operations. Task Force Sword spent the first 60 days of its deployment focusing on key leader engagements with all currently fielded ANA engineer units, training facilities, and units in training. By building relationships from platoon to brigade level, Task Force Sword developed or grew established partnerships.

After 90 days in theater, Task Force Sword assessed all training facility programs of instruction and the engineer units undergoing training. This step validated the timeline for partnered operations to ensure that task force goals and milestones were feasible. The next step was to conduct commander updates and assessments of all partnered ANA engineer units to determine each unit’s leadership, readiness

posture, and ability to conduct missions. The next ongoing step will be to ensure that all ANA engineer units are fielded and partnered with a NATO unit. If possible, the NATO units will embed with their partnered ANA unit. Partnered NATO and ANA units are colocated when feasible.

After training and mentorship with partnered units, Task Force Sword began to conduct combined action with the ANA engineers. Certain ANA units require more time and training before they are ready for combined action. Additionally, as new ANA units are formed, engagements and training must occur before conducting combined action. Currently, Task Force Sword is in the process of improving the operational readiness of all partnered ANA units so that they are capable of combined action. Ultimately, the goal is to build the ANA through combined action until

they can conduct independent operations. Before conducting independent operations, ANA engineers will be assessed and validated by their U.S. or NATO partners.

It is impossible to plan a partnership with the ANA in a sterilized environment. Afghans depend on personal contact, which develops relationships and yields great rewards. Liaison or partnership officers who take the time to know their Afghan counterparts set themselves up for success. U.S. Soldiers must look for commonalities with the Afghan people and respect the differences between the two cultures. To build rapport, U.S. Soldiers must trust their Afghan counterparts. The future of engineering partnership is for the U.S. Army and the ANA to work *shohna ba shohna*, or “shoulder to shoulder,” in pursuit of common mission success. 

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First Lieutenant Nasir is the commander of the explosive ordnance disposal unit attached to the 2d Brigade, 203d ANA Route Clearance Company. He has attended the Afghan Military School and the Military University in Kabul.