



On the Ground

Advisor Lessons Learned

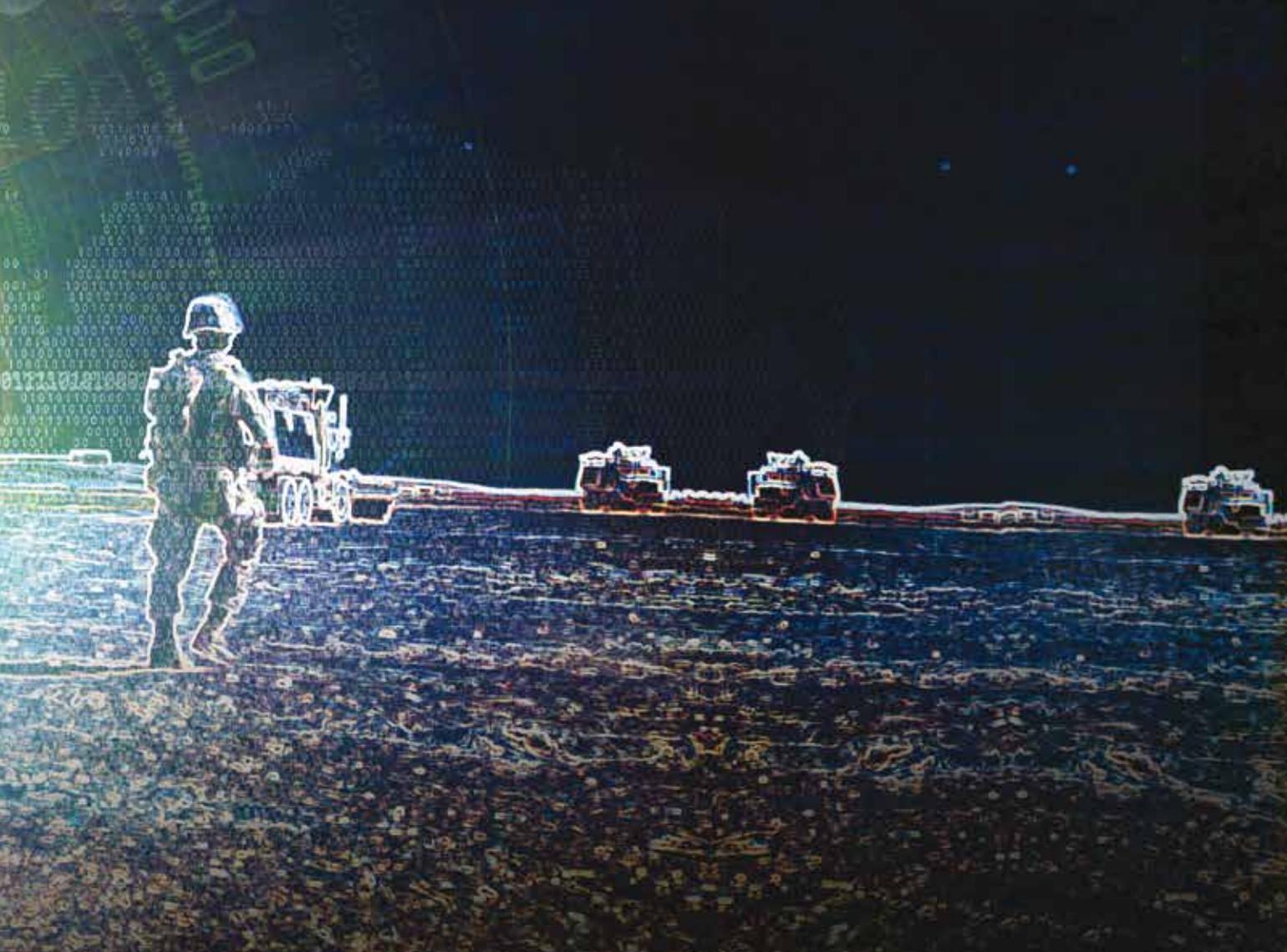
Stephen A. Mackey

As the United States enters its 12th year in Afghanistan, the focus has moved from putting pins on maps and kinetic action to an applied logistics problem.

The U.S. national interest is for a stable Afghanistan that will not be made a hostage state for terror. Achieving this end now is up to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In the forefront are the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF—Ministry of Defense [MoD], Ministry of Interior [MoI], and National Defense Service). These forces have made great progress over the past decade and now are managing the battle space of the vast majority of Afghanistan. Under the tutelage of the United States and its coalition partners, the fighting prowess of the ANSF at the tactical level matured greatly over the past decade. Largely neglected until just recently has been the development of the capacities and structures required to sustain this force in the field. Ministerial development of both the MoD and MoI has drawn increased senior coalition leadership attention. This renewed interest provides an unprecedented opportunity to financial, logistical and acquisition professionals.

The MoD Advisory (MoDA) program allows selected DoD professionals to serve within the security ministries as advisors. Managed by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the MoDA program provides

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formal classroom and field training and then sends successful graduates to Afghanistan to serve as advisors. Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Ashton Carter emphasized the importance of the advisory effort in Afghanistan in an April 27 memo. Carter prodded Commands to encourage qualified candidates to apply for positions in Afghanistan and then went further to describe now as a critical time in the fight in Afghanistan. Having just spent a year on the ground in Afghanistan, I heartily agree with Carter's assessment—now is a critical time.

On arrival in Afghanistan, advisors are immersed in the security ministries and have daily contact with their Afghan counterparts. This provides the opportunity to coach and mentor Afghan leaders at all levels. Duty as an advisor is a rare opportunity and one from which an individual will emerge as a more technically skilled professional, leader and person. Below is a short summary of the learning and growth opportunities of my year as

the senior advisor to the First Deputy Minister of Defense in Afghanistan.

Education on National Security

The insurgency in Afghanistan is caused by many factors. Some are domestic, but the Afghans assert the real driver of the insurgency is interference by Afghanistan's neighbors, some of them allied with the United States. Spending a year in the office of the senior civilian in the Afghan MoD allowed me to learn, and then contribute to the development of Afghan National Security strategy. After a brief orientation to the facts and assumptions, I was called upon to participate and in some cases lead senior leader discussions about threats and opportunities as they relate to Afghan national interests. This allowed me to apply my formal training from the National War College and the 6 years I spent in the Pentagon's E-Ring in a real-life setting—an opportunity history seldom presents. Compounding the difficulty of this analysis was that in some cases Afghan national

interest runs counter to that of the United States. As such, I was required to do national security analysis from both the Afghan and U.S. perspectives and educate my Afghan mentee on the common ground between the two. This impacts mid- to long-term decisions of how the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police forces are equipped and operate. A sterile strategic assessment of regional threats would lead to a one-force composition; the reality of what the United States will pay for is another.

Education on the Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution (PPBE) Process

The MoD's planning systems are modeled on those of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). For the first 9 years of the MoD's existence, the planning system was largely dormant; the United States and the coalition provided all feeding, equipping and sustaining of the growing force. Only in the past

logistics delivery system. The Afghans' self-interest makes them very receptive to coaching in all areas. No better arena exists for an acquisition professional to gain a deeper understanding of acquisition craft than a year serving as an advisor in Afghanistan.

Budget

Afghan senior leaders are hungry for solutions in budget planning and execution. Current MoD budget efforts are stovepiped and lack transparency. This is caused by training shortfalls, petty squabbles among senior leaders and a tacit acceptance of a certain level of corruption. Senior Afghan leadership recognizes lack of transparency may stop the continued stream of coalition funding and has felt it necessary therefore to address financial management head on. This budget year (Fiscal Year [FY] 1392 [Islamic Calendar vs. AD 2013]) they installed simple but effective tools to measure



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year have the Afghans been forced by necessity to analyze the threats and derive required capabilities to address them. This has forced their programming and budgeting processes, as well the procurement and acquisition systems, to work at breakneck pace. Additionally, the planning cycle is severely truncated in time and the force is relatively small. This allows advisors to track a concept from idea to budgeting to actual capability delivery in a way impossible in the DoD due to its large size and long planning horizons. This has given me insight and understanding of the PPBE planning process not obtainable in the DoD.

Immature Acquisition System

Only recently has the Afghan MoD been required to provide a wide array of goods and services to the force. As such, the system is very immature. Additionally, the system we created for them lacks many of the flexibilities we enjoy in the U.S. system. Concepts like Indefinite Quantity Indefinite Delivery (IDIQ) and Blanket Purchase Agreements are new to the Afghans. Serving as an advisor in the acquisition community provides real opportunities to shape an evolving system. And the small size of the organization allows an advisor in the acquisition community to be exposed to and help shape many portions of the process. From pricing to source selection to contract award, advisors have ample chances to provide meaningful input into the process. The Afghans recognize the United States no longer will manage the end-to-end acquisition and

budget execution and used the data to make decisions informed by data. Specifically, they coordinated and executed a midyear reprogram action of more than 11 percent (\$126 million) of the FY 1392 budget. This reprogram was spurred on by advisors and senior coalitional leaders forcing the Afghans to grasp the reality that endless streams of money and material support were things of the past.

Reacting to this reality, the Afghan MoD now compiles a very basic unfunded requirements (UFR) list, a forward planning concept foreign to them until just recently. Armed with this UFR list, they can more intelligently solicit aid during bilateral discussions and now have a systematic way to spend end-of-year funds that may become available due to spasmodic funding from across the coalition. Finally, they have begun to look hard at the structural model we provided for planning and spending to determine if it is appropriate for a force their size. Financial management has drawn significant senior command interest and provides a financial professional the opportunity to expand and challenge their financial capabilities.

Leadership

Advisors work alongside Afghan counterparts daily. In many cases, the advisor is significantly junior in rank to those advised. This requires a very different sort of leadership. Specifically, the advisor needs to slowly and methodically advance the argument for the proposed way ahead and elicit their mentees'



Above: Newly arrived vehicles awaiting inspection and delivery to Afghan end users. Photo taken at the MoI Material Command, Kabul.



Left: Warehouse at the National Logistics Center in Afghanistan.

for money to buy a pool at a training facility, I would steer the discussion to the Unfunded Requirement list. In this way, they got what they thought they needed and developed staff capacity along the way.

Conclusion

Serving as an advisor in a joint-combined-coalition-interagency combat environment is a rare opportunity from which one cannot help but draw lessons. The days are long, the conditions far from opulent, but the sense of accomplishment and the camaraderie at the end of the day make the sacrifices well worth it. The stated pillars of MoDA training are humility, compassion and respect. Working with senior leaders of the Afghan MoD gave me ample opportunity to refine these traits.

Loss of an employee for more than a year is a bitter pill for organizations to swallow. However, a year spent in a complex, challenging environment working on time-pressing matters within their respective disciplines provides organizations a matured person with a host of new skills. I strongly recommend that organizations support the MoDA program and encourage their best and brightest leaders to volunteer for the assignment. The end state the United States seeks is an Afghan National Security Force with the capacity to support a 350,000-person military engaged in an active counter insurgency campaign. Failure of this mission could allow Afghanistan to again become the haven of terrorism from which were launched attacks on London, Madrid, New York and other targets. Clearly, this is a fight the United States can't afford to lose. &

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support. This “managing up” leadership has utility in environments other than Afghanistan. Additionally, I was assigned to the Ministry of Defense Advisor Group. This group of more than 200 coalition military, government civilians, contractors and local hires provided ample opportunities to hone leadership skills. Finally, working in uncomfortable, close quarters with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures inevitably results in friction and conflict. One of my takeaways was an improved ability to cut through the superficial issues, keep the parties talking and focus all on common goals and objectives. I have been in leadership roles for the past 28 years. My skills as a leader have grown more in this year than in any other period.

Communication and Negotiation Skills

In Afghanistan, decisions are the product of a complex calculus that includes tribal and political ties, past history of conflict, and most of all, the flow of illicit money. Perhaps the greatest takeaway from my tour has been to look past what people are saying and understand the issue from the basis of what motivates them. This understanding allows one to drive the decision to meet both Afghan and coalition needs. The Afghans have been conditioned to solicit tactical, logistical, and financial victories from the coalition over the past decade. Recognizing this, I developed key themes and messages that allowed me to redirect questions into one of several strategic storylines. Simply put, if the Afghans asked