

Task Group Afghanistan 2018: a commander's perspective

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The commander of Australia's task group in Afghanistan from November 2017 to September 2018, Brigadier Peter Connor, describes the geostrategic context in which the task group operated, the functions it performed, and some of the more significant events and operations undertaken. He concludes with his observations on the experience.

Key words: Australia; Afghanistan; Australia's Task Group Afghanistan; Operation Resolute Support; Operation Freedom's Sentinel; Operation Highroad; train-advise-assist; South Asia Policy.

From November 2017 to September 2018, I deployed to Kabul as Commander Task Group Afghanistan, a personally and professionally rewarding experience. In this time, there were glimpses of progress towards peace; a cautious optimism. This was a time of the implementation of the American South Asia Policy, an increase in Australia's commitment to the train-advise-assist (TAA) mission in support of two training institutions, and an increase in violence.

In this paper, I will look at the geo-political, threat and mission environment, the missions – Resolute Support and Freedom's Sentinel, Australia's commitment, the events of 2018, observations and thoughts for the future. I note that I left seven months ago, on the day a new American Commander of United States Forces-Afghanistan, General Scott Miller, took command of Resolute Support (NATO² Train-Advise-Assist Mission) and Freedom's Sentinel (American Counter-Terrorism Mission).

The Strategic context

Afghanistan is a country of about 35 million people, made up of many ethnic and tribal groups, with the majority Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara. The diversity of these groups is significant as to the conduct of affairs in the country which is 99 per cent Muslim, the majority Sunni.

Afghanistan borders Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. It is a mountainous country of extremes, with plains to the north and southwest. In 2018, a visiting Afghan officer said that Australia as an island was very fortunate in that it had no countries directly on its borders – reflecting the impact of Afghanistan's neighbours and their influence on the internal politics, economy and conflict, and the impact of proxy wars being conducted in Afghanistan through history by state and non-state actors.

To provide a perspective – on 25 April 2018, in Kabul we commemorated the 100th anniversary of the battle of Villers Bretonneux and ANZAC Day with the Germans,

Turks, English, New Zealanders, Danes and many other nations. Three days later in Kabul it marked 40 years of constant conflict – following the Saur Revolution and the *coup d'état* against the Afghan President in 1978. I suggest that this has a generational impact when the norm is fighting, friction and conflict.

Recent conflict in Afghanistan is complex, having moved from major conflict initially with the Russian invasion of 1979, civil war, Taliban rule and then the overthrow of the Taliban, and now as suggested by a senior British Officer who had deployed to Afghanistan on multiple occasions, rather than a country at war, it is a country with an insurgency with the vast majority of the population seeking to get on and live in a stable community. This suggests progress as does the wider spread of electricity, education, infrastructure and even national flags, but does not necessarily lead to reconciliation. Another lens is that of rather than a country at war, it is a country undergoing a narco-insurgency where the blend of criminals and fighters is blurred in the largest opium producer in the world. This also then feeds into what resolution will work.

The main threat groups are the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, ISIS³ Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP) and al-Qaeda. They each have different aims, methods, boundaries or lack of boundaries – there is not a uniform adversary.

In August 2017, President Trump announced the South Asia Strategy – a strategy that deployed 3500 additional troops to Afghanistan; and provided United States forces greater flexibility to attack the Taliban, the ISIS-KP, and other extremist groups. In addition, the strategy placed greater emphasis on efforts to build the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces, supported with the deployment of a new advisor brigade – the Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB). The strategy also called for regional actors, particularly Pakistan, to increase pressure on the Taliban to enter a reconciliation process. This was a conditions-based strategy – not set to a finite withdrawal timetable.

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²North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

³Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

Australia's Commitment

Since November 2001 Australia has deployed forces to Afghanistan. The current Australian commitment aligns to the Strategic Defence Objective from the 2016 Defence White Paper to "Contribute military capabilities to coalition operations that support Australia's interests in a rules-based global order" (Defence 2016). Australia is working with the international community towards a secure and stable Afghanistan that is no longer a safe haven for international terrorism.

Operation Highroad

Operation Highroad is Australia's military commitment in support of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). This is through the capacity building that supports the NATO Resolute Support mission. This train-advise-assist (TAA) mission was established following the transition from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) on 1 January 2015 – a transformation from over 100,000 troops engaged in combat operations to about 16,000 troops engaged in TAA. The purpose is to help the Afghan Security Forces and institutions develop the capacity to defend Afghanistan and protect its citizens in a sustainable manner. TAA is provided to security-related ministries, within the country's institutions and among the senior ranks of the army and police. This involves operational planning, force generation processes, management and development of personnel, budgetary processes, logistical sustainment and civilian oversight.

Operation Resolute Support has about 16,000 personnel from 39 nations. Australia has about 300 troops deployed with the main contributing nations being America, Germany, Georgia, United Kingdom, Romania, Turkey and Italy. Australia is the eighth largest troop-contributing nation and the second largest non-NATO contributor.

Operation Freedom's Sentinel is the United States Counter Terrorism mission in Afghanistan. It seeks to ensure that Afghanistan will never again be a haven for terrorist groups. It targets ISIS-KP and al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban. Commander U.S. Forces Afghanistan is lead for the NATO-led Operation Resolute Support and Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

Task Group Afghanistan

The current TAA mission differs from the ISAF mission where Australia's commitment was centred on Uruzgan Province in southern Afghanistan. The ISAF commands transitioned to TAA commands supporting the regional Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) corps. The task group is made up of men and women from the Airforce, Navy, Defence Public Servants and predominantly Army – both full-time and part-time (reservists). Tasks include:

- supporting the Afghan National Army Officer Academy in Kabul where initial officer training is conducted;
- supporting the German-led Command and Staff Academy advisers;
- leading the Sergeant Majors Academy advisers;
- leading the Kabul Garrison Command Adviser Team, an Australian and Turkish team that supports

an ANDSF headquarters responsible for the security of Kabul and developing a sustainable joint headquarters;

- TAA Command-Air – supporting the Afghan Air Force in operations, logistics, ground attack controllers, communicators, life-support maintenance and UH60 helicopter trainers;
- TAA Command-South – supporting the planning and conduct of contemporary counter insurgency operations;
- the Special Operations Advisory Group – providing TAA to the headquarters of General Command of Police Special Units in Kabul, including a small force protection element for advisers;
- embedding staff across roles in operations, plans (including support to election planning), security, co-ordination of the funding of the Afghan National Army trust fund, the Gender Adviser, adviser to senior civilian staff for the Counter IED⁴ Task Force and REDWING (a force protection system to counter IED), and military police;
- providing medical and dental staff at the Role 2 Hospital; and
- a headquarters to command the task group and provide personnel, operational, intelligence and logistic support to the task group.

Underpinning the task group is the Force Protection Company. While I was deployed, that was based on B, then C Company, 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (RAR), and then D Company, 6th Battalion RAR. They are a sought-after resource – professional, confident, well-equipped (contemporary weapons, combat equipment, and the very-effective 'Bushmaster' protected mobility vehicles). They provide a clear standard and were the force protection of choice. They supported the advisers with an appropriate tone, presence and capacity to project themselves to escalate or de-escalate situations, gaining mutual respect with the advisers. They enable the mission.

2018 "Campaign"

I will cover some key events across late 2017 and 2018, providing an insight as to the evolving environment, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) involvement and considerations for the future of Afghanistan.

Winter. The winter was relatively mild which provided in the short-term an opportunity to continue to fight and in the medium-term limited water supply due to the lack of snow melting. This subsequently impacted on the sustainment of the rural population.

New Adviser Teams. In late December 2017, the Sergeant Major Academy (SMA) team commenced advising at the SMA in western Kabul at the Marshal Fahim National Defence University and in January 2018 the Command and Staff Academy Team commenced supporting the German-led TAA team. Both tasks required astute application of engagement, resilience and energy and both teams formed strong and effective relationships with their NATO peers and Afghan colleagues.

⁴Improvised explosive device

Kabul Security. In late January 2018, ISIS-KP attacked the Save the Children compound in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province which was then followed by significant attacks in Kabul with an attack on the Intercontinental Hotel targeting foreign nationals, killing 43 people and, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in central Kabul that killed over 100 people. This was concealed in an ambulance and detonated in the vicinity of the Jamhuriat hospital. Following this was a further ISIS-KP attack in western Kabul. This focused NATO and the ANDSF on the security of Kabul and the Kabul Garrison Command and its Australian Adviser Team.

Ceasefire. On the 28 February, the President of Afghanistan, at the Kabul Peace Conference, offered the Taliban peace talks without preconditions. Over the 15 to 17 June Eid Al Fitr holiday, the Afghan Government and the Taliban honoured an historic bilateral cease-fire. It marked the first cessation of fighting since 2001. Across many regions, Taliban entered population centres and celebrated Eid. This demonstrated a potential alternative to the ongoing conflict and sparked communication between provincial leaders and the Taliban. ISIS-KP did not accept the ceasefire. In August, the President offered a three-month cease fire until 20 November 2018 that was not accepted by the Taliban.

Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs). In February and March, surveillance and strike assets transitioned in support of United States Forces-Afghanistan – concurrent with the commencement of operations of the United States SFABs. These TAA units were staffed with volunteers who had prior combat experience in Afghanistan and with the enhanced assets became very successful in operating with the Afghan forces at an operational/tactical level.

ISIS-KP. Throughout late 2017 and 2018, ISIS-KP maintained a disruptive and deadly presence in northern Jowzjan Province and in Nangarhar Province, mounting attacks in these areas and Kabul. They focused on the Afghan forces and Shia institutions, such as education centres, a wrestling club and a voter registration centre. Fighting between the Taliban and ISIS-KP increased. It resulted in 200 ISIS-KP fighters and family surrendering in Jowzjan Province and to the degrading of ISIS-KP elements in eastern Afghanistan.

Elections. Through 2018, we prepared for district and provincial elections to be held in October 2018. This involved planning, infrastructure development, election conduct and security. Military operations focused on achieving security to allow the population to register and then vote; and reflected the relative dominance of key stakeholders. This was shown in the Taliban attack on provincial capitals: in May on Farah; and subsequently in August in Ghazni over a five-day period. The Afghan forces successfully expelled the Taliban fighters but both sides incurred heavy losses. Afghan Special Forces responded initially and subsequent Afghan elements were supported by a SFAB.

NATO Commitment. At the July 2018 NATO summit in Brussels, NATO members and Resolute Support operational partners agreed to extend their financial support for the Afghan forces through to 2024 and many also increased their personnel commitment. This was

consistent with the longer term aims of the South Asia policy. Australia committed UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter advisers to help develop critical Afghan Air Force capabilities.

Inherent Law. In 2018, Inherent Law was implemented. This sought to forcibly retire over 3600 older officers from the Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Defence. The aim was to make the Defence and Security Force structure contemporary and sustainable; promote greater transparency and accountability; and progress a new generation of better educated contemporary officers.

Observations

Command

The task group is geographically dislocated: in three sites in Kabul, and in Bagram and Kandahar. About half of the elements are under different command and control status, allocated to other elements of Resolute Support. The threat is constant but dynamic. Some adviser teams and the force protection company deploy as formed groups with the remainder as individuals, so there is a degree of 'churn'. Movement in Kabul is by road or rotary-wing aircraft and to further locations by fixed-wing aircraft provided by American, British or New Zealand elements.

The Command 'function' has an internal aspect and strong external engagement with the Australian Ambassador and her staff and other nations. This engagement was supported by the policy adviser and the Defence Attaché.

This 'context' required constant identification and application of lessons – there is always room to question and improve what we do. I adopted the Army's values of courage, initiative, respect and teamwork regardless of the service of the task group members. This reinforced my regimental sergeant major's experience that many events occur on operations that are not expected, and we must be ready and resilient to respond. A tenet of my command was the motto of the 17th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force: *Facta Probat* (deeds prove) – in that we take positive action with an outcome against which we judge ourselves and are judged.

Doctrine

Australia's commitment to advising and peacekeeping has been ongoing since 1962 in South Vietnam and well-refined doctrine has resulted. My father served in 1970 in the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam and in 2018 we were performing a like role. There is a constant to this role as evidenced in our near region in the Philippines through the ongoing Operation Augury.

Adviser

From observing and engaging with the Australian and NATO Advisers, the following skills seem necessary for success: creating a genuine rapport; a cultural understanding; and an ability to listen, develop trust and determine where true value can be added. While these appear straightforward, the key is in the professionalism of their implementation by the adviser teams.

The mission was not centred on resourcing – development and then sustainment was key; and shaping

towards a solution that would work in the future Afghan context was imperative – regardless of how we may approach it. A consideration was ‘adviser fatigue’, where some advisees had experienced a new adviser each year for up to 17 years. It was apparent where the adviser had achieved the sweet spot and could offer an alternative and skills. It was also apparent that it was a long game and that the impact they had was incremental and maybe realised by the next adviser. The success of our advisers is evidence of the strength of our training system as it equipped them with appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude to perform these roles.

Integration

Integration of individuals into the Task Group and the mission was relatively seamless. I found that people knew and did their job – their background, gender or service was irrelevant. They were accepted. I am a part-time (Army Reserve) officer, having had different experiences to many soldiers – this did not matter. It was not a differentiator. This was brought to bear for me on Christmas Day when an officer approached me and shook my hand and quietly admitted he was also an Army Reserve Officer! I was not sensitive to this and it did not matter with part-time members across many elements, including adviser teams and force protection. This also was evidenced in the successful application of the ‘force generation cycle’ with members of the Reserve Battle Group deploying with the elements of their partnered Combat Brigade.

I see my experience of the Task Group as a very positive reflection on the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Defence’s ‘total workforce model’. This provides for changing nature of service across seven categories (SERCATs.) The SERCAT of personnel did not define their performance and allows great agility in using our personnel to deliver capability when it is required. This reflects positively the ADF’s selection processes, individual and collective training as the majority of the Task Group had not deployed previously, yet applied themselves to, and achieved, our mission.

Commitment

In late 2018, following the assassination of the Kandahar Police Chief, General Raziq and the wounding of the American brigadier-general commanding TAAC-South, Australian Brigadier John Shanahan was ‘parachuted’ into the command, a week out from the elections. “I saw the Afghan people, the Afghan security forces and the soldiers of TAAC-S rise up against the Taliban, resilient among sadness and chaos, to execute peaceful elections in Uruzgan and Zabul on schedule and Kandahar only a week later,” he said. “Helping Afghanistan to develop as a country, helping it to avoid descending into chaos and brutality, developing the Afghan security forces to defend the country and its people – and these are wonderful people – has been hugely rewarding. To our Afghan partners, we have planned, trained and fought together. We call you our partners and we have learned so much from you militarily and as a nation.”

Future

The current politico-military situation in Afghanistan is

well summarised in Asia Foundation (2018), Inspector-General (2019) and SIGAR (2019). Looking forward, the following issues are raised:

- the need to continue development of the Afghan Air Force through TAA Command-Air;
- the need to continue development of military leaders through the three academies that we support and the leadership structure refreshed through Inherent Law;
- resolution of the military stalemate is being progressed through a politically-negotiated settlement with the Taliban by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation – it must become part of a wider political diplomatic, economic, social and religious strategy; and
- a Presidential Election is to be conducted on 28 September 2019.

Conclusion

The Task Group is improving the capacity and sustainability of the security institutions of Afghanistan. This also upskills our service personnel through practice, develops relationships with our strategic partners, and demonstrates our ability as a capable, contemporary force. This aligns with the Chief of Army’s vision of ‘accelerated warfare’ as we operate against different threats, in a joint (*i.e.* tri-service) space with other partner nations, and have the agility to thrive in an accelerating environment.

The Author: Brigadier Peter J. Connor AM, is Director-General Reserves – Army. He enlisted in the Australian Army in 1985 and, following commissioning into the Royal Australian Infantry Corps in 1988, saw regimental service in 4th Battalion, Royal Green Jackets, and 2nd/17th Battalion, Royal New South Wales Regiment (2/17RNSWR), rising to command the battalion (2005-2006). He later served in a range of senior command and staff appointments, including as Commander, Combined Task Force 635 (CTF 635) – Rotation 12, in the Solomon Islands (2007); Commander, 9th Brigade, in 2014; Commander, 8th Brigade, from 2015 to 2016; and Commander, Task Group Afghanistan, from November 2017 to September 2018. He was appointed a Member in the Military Division of the Order of Australia in 2008 for his command and leadership of 2/17 RNSWR and CTF 635.

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