



Prepared Remarks of
John F. Sopko
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

***“Divided Responsibility: The U.S. Approach to
Security Sector Assistance in Afghanistan”***

Center for Strategic and International Studies
Washington, D.C.
July 29, 2019

Thank you very much. I want to thank my good friend John Hamre and Melissa Dalton for today’s invitation to discuss SIGAR’s sixth lessons learned report, which looks at the divided responsibility for security sector assistance efforts in Afghanistan. SIGAR has been privileged to enjoy a strong relationship with CSIS. I have spoken here six times since I became the SIGAR, and I look forward to our continued collaboration.

SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program

SIGAR began our lessons learned program at the urging of former ISAF Commanding General John Allen, former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and other senior government officials who noted that our agency was the only government agency with the mandate to look at the “whole of government” and “whole of governments” approaches to Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

Our prior lessons learned reports have examined U.S. anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan; the reconstruction of the Afghan security forces; private sector development initiatives; stabilization activities; and counternarcotics. Forthcoming reports include an evaluation of past reintegration efforts in Afghanistan, which will be issued in September; an examination of programs designed to improve the status of Afghan women; and a review of monitoring and evaluation in Afghanistan; among others.

Divided Responsibility Report

Today’s report expands upon SIGAR’s 2017 lessons learned report, which we released here at CSIS, that looked at U.S. efforts to rebuild the Afghan national security forces. At the suggestion of General Joseph Dunford and others, we initiated today’s

study to examine the patchwork of security sector assistance programs undertaken by dozens of entities and international partners to develop the Afghan security forces, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Interior. The report identifies the areas where this amalgamation of partners and programs worked well and where it fell short.

To do so, SIGAR interviewed over 100 former and current government officials and conducted field work in Afghanistan, the United States, and Europe. The report was reviewed by the Departments of Defense and State, and the various military services. It was peer reviewed by 13 experts including, among others, CSIS's own Melissa Dalton and Tommy Ross.

Like the five other Lessons Learned reports, today's report is available in both traditional and interactive formats on our website at www.sigar.mil. The report is organized into five discrete chapters focused on field advising, ministerial advising, equipping the Afghan security forces, U.S.-based training of Afghan forces, and NATO's role in the security sector assistance effort. While these chapters can be read as standalone products, taken together, they illustrate the disjointed and complex matrix of activities the United States undertook to develop the Afghan security forces and the related ministries.

The importance of this report is highlighted by the fact that NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller asked us to discuss the "By, With, and Through NATO" chapter before a large NATO audience in Brussels.

Overall Findings

In total, the report includes 39 findings, identifies 10 lessons, and makes 32 recommendations.

Our overarching findings set the scene for the environment in which the U.S. and NATO partners trained, advised, assisted, and equipped the Afghan forces and associated ministries. The findings highlight the difficulty of conducting security sector assistance in the midst of active combat and the challenges of coordinating the efforts of an international coalition.

We found that there was no single person, agency, military service, or country responsible for the oversight of all U.S. and international activities to develop the Afghan security forces. Even within the U.S. government, no organization or military service was assigned ownership of developing key components of the mission. For example, no one tasked the U.S. Army with the responsibility to develop the Afghan Army's combat capabilities.

Rather, the U.S. military services and executive branch agencies were instructed

to deploy personnel to assume responsibility of security-assistance activities for the duration of individual deployments which normally lasted a year or less. Without the guidance of a comprehensive, expert-designed, and enduring multi-year plan to guide all security-sector activities, the U.S.'s approach often changed with each personnel rotation.

These divisions often created strains on both unity of command and unity of effort. For example, while the dual-hatted U.S./NATO commander in Afghanistan is largely responsible for reconstructing the Afghan security forces, as with all NATO operations, the commander lacks absolute authority to dictate the exact methods and activities each NATO country must use when training, advising, or assisting the Afghan security forces and the Afghan ministries of defense and interior. These issues impeded the standardization of security assistance programs and failed to optimize the international community's significant contribution.

Additionally, the commander has no direct authority over civilian actors operating within embassies, the European Union, and other international organizations that are also part of the effort.

Due to the breadth of the report and limitations on time, this morning I will focus my remarks on our findings regarding U.S. field advising and equipping efforts – because they are perhaps the two most critical issues that must be addressed to create a viable Afghan security presence, which will be necessary to achieve both Afghan and U.S. national security objectives whether there is a peace agreement or not.

Field Advising

It is hardly a secret that after nearly 18 years, the American public and its elected leaders are weary of the war in Afghanistan. But as I noted when we released our High-Risk List here in March, Afghan security forces cannot survive without external donor support. Over the course of the conflict, about 63% of the \$133 billion the United States has provided for reconstruction has supported the Afghan security forces. Without continued support, senior U.S. officials have warned that those forces would not be able to sustain themselves.

The report examines the U.S. Army's various approaches to advising Afghan combat capabilities, and found that while improvements have been made, many of the same challenges the Army faced in the early years continue to this day.

For example, we note that the most recent advising approach, unveiled by the Army in February 2017, was the creation of six Security Force Assistance Brigades, or SFABs.

In Afghanistan, SFABs were initially designed to partner with the Afghan security forces at the corps-level and below; accompany Afghan units on operations, and coordinate access to coalition enablers such as intelligence assets, sustainment, close air support, and medical evacuation.

Staffing for the SFABs is based on recruiting active-duty Army and National Guard volunteers, but while advisory experience is preferred, about 20 percent of the 1st SFAB had never previously deployed. And even though the Army offered a number of incentives for volunteers, the 1st SFAB was filling billets right up until its deployment. Advisor roles continue to be seen as not career enhancing, which contributes to high attrition rates – up to 70% -- limiting continuity and institutional memory.

On a positive note, at their after-action review, 1st SFAB's leadership noted their presence had provided an increasingly rare firsthand window into how the Afghans were performing on the battlefield. They also noted a two-to-threefold increase in Afghan National Army-led offensive operations in areas where SFAB teams were advising.

However, the review also identified many of the same challenges identified by advisors who served in Afghanistan in previous years, such as delayed team formations; the assignment of non-advisor tasks; and mid-deployment assignment changes. Additionally, the 1st SFAB advisors noted limited assets and a risk-averse leadership as factors that inhibited their advisory mission. Drive-to-advise and fly-to-advise missions as short as five minutes distance often required a lengthy approval process.

While we found pre-deployment training for SFAB units has improved, training still fails to provide instruction tailored specifically to the SFABs mission in Afghanistan. For example, many advisors were unaware that the Afghan security forces prioritize the evacuation of deceased personnel over critically wounded based on religious customs. Additionally, U.S. Army advisors were not exposed to U.S.-imposed flight hour restrictions on U.S.-provided aircraft that was being managed by the U.S. Air Force in Kabul. This issue is critical since air assets fall under the command of the Afghan Army officer during operations and therefore within the purview of SFABs advisory mission at the tactical and operational level. Knowledge of these critical command and control relationships and important aspects of Afghan military culture are important for U.S. advisors to be successful from day one of their deployment.

Despite the 2015 transition that prioritized the train, advise, and assist mission, the SFABs do not operate under the Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan, otherwise known as CSTC-A, but rather under the U.S. commander for operations. As a result, some advisors were tasked with non-advisory tasks. One SFAB

battalion was tasked with running an airfield and another was tasked with helping coordinate air attacks. SFAB advisors also noted that they received little direction from the U.S. advisory mission in Kabul.

It is also difficult to judge the true impact of the SFAB's deployment because the units lack a monitoring and assessment tool to assess their Afghan counterparts and mid-deployment reassignments such as having to switch from advising an Afghan army unit to an Afghan police unit.

Force Equipping

If advising is one side of the coin, equipping the force is the other. The United States taxpayer has expended more than \$18 billion to equip the Afghan security forces, providing over 600,000 weapons; 70,000 vehicles; and more than 200 aircraft.

The United States typically provides defense articles and assistance to partner nations through either the Foreign Military Sales (FMS), program, or the Foreign Military Financing program, which are run under the direction of the State Department.

But, in 2005, the Defense Department began using what is known as the pseudo FMS mechanism to acquire equipment for partner nations like Afghanistan that lacked the financial resources and the institutional capability to define their own requirements. Pseudo FMS refers to foreign military sales funded with U.S. appropriations rather than partner-nation funding and are initiated by the United States without a formal request from the partner nation.

While the pseudo FMS process allowed the United States to rapidly equip the Afghan security forces, we found that the United States was unprepared to take on the responsibility of equipping a force at the scale required in Afghanistan.

In addition, frequent personnel rotations and the lack of a comprehensive plan meant that equipping decisions were often ad hoc and inconsistent from year to year. One procurement official had three different directors in a four-month period, each of whom attempted to take the program in a "different direction." Lt. Gen. David Bolger compared looking at the Afghan security forces to a "cross section of sedimentary rock [with] each year's U.S. budget priorities and 'good ideas' layered across the older ones." Under pressure to "turn the corner now," commanders equipped Afghan forces with little regard for past decisions or future expenses.

Negative battlefield implications resulted. For example, the U.S. military did not begin transitioning the Afghan National Police to NATO standard weapons until 2016, eight years after the Afghan National Army. As a result, during a Taliban attack on Ghazni Province last year, the Afghan Army was unable to resupply their besieged

police colleagues because their ammunition was not compatible.

SIGAR also found conflicting reports concerning the extent of Afghan involvement in equipping decisions. The Security Assistance Office in Afghanistan told SIGAR that Afghan input has been and is currently considered at multiple levels.

However, those interviewed for this report – many of which used to work for CSTC-A – questioned the extent to which Afghan input was considered. One retired officer who spent four years in Afghanistan told us that Afghan involvement and input simply meant “acquiring a signature.” A former commander told SIGAR that “the Afghans were informed and directed, not asked or consulted” and that “Afghan leaders made reasonable requests and were told ‘it’s not part of the plan.’” Because of this, the “U.S. lost critical buy-in and our most valuable stakeholder.” Defense Department officials also told SIGAR that the rapid turnover of U.S. personnel often resulted in efforts to include the Afghans – such as assigning Afghan liaison officers to the Security Assistance Office – being discontinued whenever personnel rotated out of Afghanistan.

If and when the U.S. military transitions to a more traditional security cooperation mission in Afghanistan, the Afghans will need to be able to play a larger role in the direction, execution, and tracking of their own equipment procurement, training contracts, and sustainment.

The Senate Appropriations Committee likewise wrote that it was “concerned about reports that...procurements made on behalf of the [Afghan security forces] may be exceeding Afghan needs and not meeting other requirements identified by the Afghans.”

SIGAR also found that the Defense Department missed opportunities to provide the Afghan security forces with more appropriate or cost-effective equipment.

For example, the U.S. continues to provide Humvees to the Afghans without upgrades to protect the primary gunner that have been available for U.S. forces in Afghanistan for over a decade. Without these, the Afghans have been forced to improvise by using parts of destroyed Humvees and have likely suffered unnecessary casualties.

The provision of armored ambulances provides another absurd example. While routinely used by U.S. forces, the Afghan security forces have just 38 armored ambulances for 352,000 authorized personnel.

The Afghan Ministry of Defense has requested that the U.S. provide additional armored ambulances. But while the U.S. Army has a surplus of them and while Congress has legislatively supported the transfer of unneeded armored ambulances to

U.S. partners, the U.S. Army sent 287 surplus armored ambulances to be destroyed in 2017 alone, rather than provide them to the Afghan military.

SIGAR also found that U.S. personnel at various organizations lacked technical expertise, acquisition experience, and necessary training. Defense Department officials told us that at one point, three consecutive directors of the Security Assistance Office had no prior FMS experience. These staffing concerns were highlighted in one of our 2017 audits, when DOD and coalition officials told us that CSTC-A personnel do not understand the pseudo FMS process, U.S. procurement law and regulations, or best-practices for acquisition. Without the relevant experience, personnel involved in equipping decisions are generally unaware of the alternative options available to them that would save both time and taxpayer funds.

Despite this lack of experience, advisors failed to fully leverage the expertise housed within the military services and Defense Department. CSTC-A's \$468 million purchase of 20 G-222 medium-lift cargo planes for the Afghan Air Force exemplifies this lack of coordination. The program ended in March 2013 because critical parts were expensive and difficult to obtain. Ironically, the U.S. Air Force had identified these same problems when they were operating the aircraft from 1990 to 1999, deciding to retire the aircraft because parts were – you guessed it – expensive and difficult to obtain.

Conclusion

Our recommendations aim to improve personnel selection and pre-deployment training, improve long-term planning to better align U.S. and international efforts, increase Afghan ownership and involvement of key decisions, increase advisors awareness of complementary activities, centralize command and control, and improve coordination to optimize the security sector assistance mission.

We are not naïve. We know there is no “silver bullet” that will fix all of these challenges and we also recognize after 17 years of U.S. security sector assistance, that transformative changes are unlikely. But we do hope the common-sense reforms this report proposes will lead to improvements.

To conclude, I would be remiss if I did not thank program director Joe Windrem, project lead James Cunningham – who is here today with me, Zachary Martin, Brittany Gates, Samantha Hay, Ashley Schortz, Brian Tarpley, Nikolai Condee-Padunov, Tracy Content, and Vong Lim for their excellent work on this report.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.