The Role of the Combined Air Power Transition Force (CAPTF) in Building Partner Capacity for Afghanistan

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One of the US Air Force’s ongoing showcase Building Partner Capacity (BPC) efforts is the mission to build security-enhancing air power institutions in Afghanistan. This paper outlines the national command directives underpinning that effort, and explains how actions of the Combined Air Power Transition Force (CAPTF) serve to advance that goal.

Cascading Directives

The mandate to build effective BPC starts with the US National Security Strategy. President Obama’s introductory letter says, “[W]e will build new and deeper partnerships in every region, and strengthen international standards and institutions.” Echoing this theme, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates contributed this epigraph in a widely-read article.

Where possible, US strategy is to employ indirect approaches—primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces... In this kind of effort, the capabilities of the United States’ allies and partners may be as important as its own, and building their capacity is arguably as important as, if not more so than, the fighting the United States does itself. —SecDef, Foreign Affairs, January/February 2009

Building partner capacity (BPC) is also of top importance to the US Air Force. According the USAF Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz, “partnering with joint and coalition teams” is the second highest of five broad priorities that will shape the force’s road map in coming years. General Schwartz wants to see better international cooperation, including the creation of an air adviser academy to train airmen to help build other countries’ air forces and access to bases where the service's presence is light.

Figure 1. Cascading directives that drive USAF Building Partnership Capacity efforts
The Secretary of the Air Force’s International Affairs (SAF/IA) office is the steward of this vision. It serves as the USAF’s executive agent for building global partnership, providing integrated portfolio management that garnered Secretary Gates’ praise as an “integrated and consolidated approach [that] makes better sense for the Department [of Defense], and for the government as a whole.”

**USAF Concept of Employment**

Reflecting the USAF priority, General Schwartz signed a USAF Concept of Employment (CONEMP) entitled “Institutionalizing Building Partnerships Into Contingency Response Forces.” The CONEMP aspires to define how contingency response forces will support the US government in achieving Building Partnership (BP) objectives.

Three key definitions found in the CONEMP inform CAPTF’s mission statement. First, Building Partnership is an “ability to set the conditions for interaction with partner…leaders, military forces, or relevant populations…” Next is a definition of Building Partner Capacity (BPC): “The ability to assist…foreign partners and institutions with the development of their capabilities and capacities…” Finally, the CONEMP defines an Air Advisor: “An Airman specially trained and educated to apply Air Force expertise to assess, train, advise, assist, and equip foreign personnel in the development and application of their aviation resources to meet their national needs…”

**CAPTF Concept of Employment**

With these definitions in mind, and cognizant of the fact that CAPTF’s manning includes Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and civilian contractors in addition to Airmen, the foundations of the CAPTF mission statement become clear:

*Set the conditions* for a **professional, fully independent and operationally capable** Afghan Air Force that meets the security requirements of Afghanistan today...and tomorrow.

This is how CAPTF takes the framework set forth in the USAF CONEMP and uses it to structure a method for engaging in effective BPC in Afghanistan. With the mission statement results as its end goal, CAPTF pursues four lines of operations to build air power institutions—both for the Afghan Ministry of Defense and the Afghan Ministry of the Interior.

By training, assisting, and mentoring the Afghan Air Force (under the Ministry of Defense) and the Air Interdiction Unit (subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior), CAPTF seeks to create sustainable capacity in four areas. Our efforts 1) build the size of the Afghan air fleets (“Aircraft Build”), 2) create a trained, motivated, and talented group of airmen (“Airmen Build”), 3) build and improve airfields and aviation facilities throughout Afghanistan (“Infrastructure Build”), and 4) increase the amount, types, and scope of air operations that Afghan air power institutions can perform (“Operational Capability”).

An ongoing effort transcends these four focus areas. In building the tangible capacity of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and Air Interdiction Unit (AIU), we seek to embed improved institutional processes, C2 functions, and a culture of training throughout Afghan air power institutions, interweaving them into Afghan military culture across the four mission areas upon which we focus. This “Institutional Development” pervades all of CAPTF’s efforts, and is the mechanism by which increased capacity in the Afghan air forces will remain enduring after Coalition forces go home.
The plan for building up Afghanistan’s air power institutions extends through 2016. Though this has been the case since the stand-up of CAPTF in 2005, this vision is of a longer term than most other development plans for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The CAPTF vision reflects the CONEMP’s statements that the BPC concept “takes time,” and that “build[ing] habitual relationships” is a critical part of enabling a partner nation to develop effective air power.

**Getting the Inputs Right**

It isn’t enough to have a long time horizon and pursue lines of operation. The inputs must also be balanced, and continually refined. As academic evidence suggests it should, airlift capabilities have dominated Afghanistan’s aircraft build thus far. The country’s terrain and the need to support ground forces engaged in a Counterinsurgency (COIN) fight justify this concentration. The current workhorses of the AAF fleet are the Mi-17 and C-27, with the AIU using the Mi-17 exclusively. The Mi-17 is a medium-lift utility helicopter ideally suited to high-altitude operations in Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain, and the C-27 is a fixed-wing airlifter capable of short-field takeoffs and landings on unimproved surfaces. Daily operations for these aircraft include personnel movement, medical transport, and cargo delivery. Some capabilities we tend to take for granted in the West—such as all-weather instrument-assisted flight, airdrop, helicopter-borne air assault, and close air support (CAS)—have recently sprung to life in Afghanistan, and will become a bedrock foundation for the further development of a professional Afghan military.
While the build-up of the fledgling C-27 is the most important aircraft build component introduced in the past 12 months, the development of the rotary-wing fleet is also dynamic. The Mi-17 fleet grows monthly, and Mi-35 attack helicopters have conducted successful live-fire missions at ranges and in operations throughout Afghanistan. The Mi-17 fleet is critical to battlefield mobility and medical transport missions, and is a reliable mode of transport for government officials. The fleet is slated to double in size by 2013. The Mi-17 was specifically designed for use in Afghanistan. Its reliability, high-altitude capability, interoperability with neighboring nations, low cost, ready availability of maintenance assets, and familiarity to experienced Afghan Mi-17 maintainers and aircrew combine to make the Mi-17 the right helicopter for Afghanistan during the current critical phase of ANSF aviation development. Building a robust rotary-wing fleet for Afghanistan is a path to sustainable AAF and AIU capability, because helicopters will always be essential for movement in the nation’s rugged terrain.
Providing aircraft is not enough. An effective force requires skilled and motivated airmen. This is the most difficult and rewarding effort in which CAPTF engages, and it will have the most enduring impact. Efforts span all levels of the AAF and AIU organizations, with Afghans and embedded NATO partners collaborating on everything from command and control (C2) decision-making processes to the best way to load cargo on a C-27. CAPTF’s mentors offer advice adapted to the Afghan way of doing business while focusing on professionalism and mission accomplishment. For any function you can name at an air base, there are subject matter experts in Afghanistan providing training, advice, and mentoring. They never accept compromise when it comes to flight or ground safety. The more that coalition partners become involved with this mission, the easier it will be to show Afghan airmen that these values are common in the world’s modern, successful air forces.

Infrastructure and facilities, CAPTF’s third focus area, complement the aircraft buildup and training of AAF and AIU personnel. Trained aircrew, support personnel, and aircraft are effective only with a robust airfield structure. The largest amount of development has happened in Kabul, but as the Kabul Air Wing becomes more self-sufficient, the need for mentors will grow at Kandahar, Shindand, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Jalalabad—sites that will all benefit from construction facilitated by CAPTF. The Kandahar Air Wing celebrated its official establishment on 5 October 2009. Located in the same area of responsibility as the Afghan National Army’s 205th Corps, Kandahar is the second wing established in the nation since 2001. The latest watershed event in CAPTF’s history occurred in August 2010, when approximately 50 Afghan airmen joined CAPTF advisors to assist in the stand-up of the future Shindand Air Wing and Training Center.

Operational Capability constitutes CAPTF’s fourth and final area of mission concentration. Flight operations have never stopped for war; the expression “building the airplane while flying it” is an apt description of the CAPTF and Afghan aviation team effort. Our desire to increase training and institute new means of C2 are in constant tension with a limited fleet of aircraft, a never-ending list of urgent missions, and a combat operations tempo that can never stand down for a “reset.”

The Air Power Requirements (APR) review conducted in February 2010 and approved by the Commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) identifies five critical mission sets for the Afghan Air Force: 1) Presidential airlift, 2) casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), 3) air mobility, 4) training, and 5) close air support (CAS). By way of clarification, the report groups medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), battlefield mobility, and airlift together as “air mobility,” based on similarity of mission, a limited number of platforms, a limited number of pilots and the need to maximize utilization of scarce AAF resources. The report further identified CAS as an appropriate support mission for the AAF to provide the Afghan National Army (ANA), given the defensive nature of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) National Security Policy and Afghanistan’s National Military Strategy.
Figure 5. Selected Afghan air mission sets (clockwise from left): battlefield mobility, airdrop, MEDEVAC, and close air support

Follow on missions for the AAF include reconnaissance and air defense. The APR review cited positive identification (PID) of targets as driving a need for synchronous development of a reconnaissance and C2 capability for employment of CAS. The APR review deemed air defense as a follow-on capability for development once the foundational requirements supporting the five primary COIN air missions have matured.

Upon this strategic guidance, CAPTF has assisted Afghanistan’s air power institutions in building and refining their ability to execute these mission sets. Since September 2009, the types of missions Afghans are able to execute have grown substantially. At that time, the then-“Afghan National Army Air Corps” provided basic battlefield mobility airlift, Presidential rotary-wing airlift, rotary-wing close air support (CAS) with Mi-35 attack helicopters, and a rudimentary casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) capability.

Since then, battlefield mobility and airlift capabilities have expanded to include the capability offered by the addition of the C-27, a modern Western airlifter, to the Afghan fleet. The aircraft allows
night and all-weather flight. It also adds an airdrop capability that the Russian Antonov airlift aircraft did not have. On the rotary-wing front, the Mi-17 fleet has added an air assault capability, complete with the capacity to haul equipment via sling load procedures, as well as a hoist capability which may prove invaluable during Personnel Recovery efforts.

The Presidential airlift capacity of the AAF had been limited to Mi-17 helicopters only. With the arrival of Afghanistan’s sixth C-27, specially equipped for VIP transport, the potential to offer Presidential and governmental transport via a fixed-wing platform is in reach. The remaining steps to make this viable for Presidential transport include the vetting of suitable Afghan pilots certified to carry the President of Afghanistan.

The rotary-wing CAS capability, previously only available via the Mi-35, has expanded with the arming of Mi-17 helicopters with rockets and guns. This will allow Afghanistan to transition away from the Mi-35 in the next few years while still retaining a CAS capability. More importantly, trained Afghan forward observers (FO) are able to direct air-to-ground fires and mitigate collateral damage. The FOs form a stepping stone to a Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) capability for Afghanistan, which can direct both Afghan, and potentially, NATO coalition air assets.

While there is as yet no in-country flight training capacity in Afghanistan, the foundations of that capability came into view with the movement of approximately 50 Afghan Air Force members to Shindand Air Base in August 2010. These airmen will work to build up the infrastructure of what will become Afghanistan’s third air wing as well as a training center, which will provide in-country pilot training as well as training and education in air base management for all of Afghanistan’s air power institutions.

Finally, significant advances in medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) capacity are apparent. As late as 2009, wounded soldiers and police would be put on aircraft for transport without anyone to care for injuries. Since then, significant progress in training flight medics and flight surgeons provides the capacity to provide a legitimate MEDEVAC capability on both rotary- and fixed-wing platforms. Afghan medical personnel have risen to the calling of caring for the wounded, and are already able to provide life-sustaining treatment for Afghan security forces wounded in the line of duty. Overall, the increased operational capacity that CAPTF has helped the AAF and AIU build over the past year is quite remarkable, and all of it is directly applicable to the ongoing COIN fight.

**Partnering with Operational Units for BPC**

CAPTF has taken to heart the CONEMP’s instruction to find synergies among the general purpose forces conducting operations in Afghanistan and involve them in BPC for Afghan air power. Finding partnerships between the ISAF Coalition combat units in country and Afghanistan’s air power institutions has been particularly successful. Many of the operational advances described above have resulted from this type of partnering.

In 2009 – 2010, CAPTF’s partnering efforts spanned Coalition bases throughout Afghanistan. Some of the most striking successes came from a partnership with the Third Combat Aviation Brigade (3 CAB) at Bagram Air Base. On 4 March 2010, the first five Kabul Air Wing crew chiefs graduated from the Crew Chief Academy at Bagram. The course is jointly run by the 3 CAB and the 438 Air Expeditionary Advisory Group (438 AEAG) to help institutionalize Afghan training. The three-week training course has

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been a total success, equipping Mi-17 crew members to fly as a “crew” instead of separate individuals. The crew chiefs’ final two weeks consists of additional ground training, but, more importantly, five flights in the UH-60 Blackhawk, two of which were in the crew chief seat. Colonel Don Galli, the 3 CAB Commander, said it well, "They have flown together, they have learned together, and they have become a team together."

The course was a pre-requisite for the Air Assault training that CAPTF also partnered with the 3 CAB to provide the AAF. Air Assault training between the Kabul Air Wing, the 3 CAB, ODA 3330 at AOB Morehead, and the 438 AEAG began on 6 March 2010. The training included 2 Mi-17s, 4 pilots, 4 flight engineers, 5 crew chiefs, and 21 Afghan Kommandos. The program of instruction executed six practice air assaults to five landing zones in the vicinity of Bagram Air Base. It led directly to the ongoing combined air assault lifts in RC East/203 Corps area of operations.

The AAF teamed with Coalition partners for more than just combat missions. Afghan Air Force, CAPTF, 3 CAB, and ANA Commandos teamed to conduct two Humanitarian Assistance Missions in conjunction with the Air Assault course. The Humanitarian Assistance missions were conducted near Bagram Airfield. Using Mi-17s, the AAF carried personnel and supplies, including radios, to Afghan citizens. The missions were the first "full mission profiles" conducted by the inaugural class of the Air Assault Academy.

On 11 March 2010, the Afghan Air Force, along with CAPTF advisors, moved two patients in a "reverse MEDEVAC" from Bagram's hospital to Ghazni City in Ghazni Province. One of the patients was a young boy, approximately six years old, who had been seriously injured in an accident. The movement was coordinated between coalition and Afghan care facilities through a 'partnered' effort between the AAF, 3 CAB, 455 AEW, and CAPTF. The program opens beds at Bagram, and shows Afghan communities their government’s efforts to support their citizens.

Medical partnering also occurred at the Kandahar Air Field (KAF), with Coalition units assisting the AAF’s Kandahar Air Wing. 7 March 2010 marked the graduation of the Kandahar Air Wing and 205th Corps’ first Preventative Medicine course. The course, taught by a Canadian Health Medical Unit, was designed improve ANSF health care standards. Over a three week period, AAF personnel learned basic techniques and guidance concerning waste removal, personal cleanliness, barracks and kitchen operations, including academics and hands-on inspections of KAW barrack and dining facilities. The Kandahar Air Wing has also begun assisting with reverse MEDEVAC from the KAF hospital.

Other examples of partnering among Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) aviation units and Coalition operational units include US Marine Corps special operations training of ANA Kommando kandaks in air assault operations. The AIU, working in conjunction with the 173d Infantry Brigade, has mentored Afghan border police in air assault operations. CAPTF continues to expand and look for new partnered operations opportunities to expand the palette of available training opportunities beyond what it can accomplish using internal manning.
Figure 6. Partnered operations throughout Afghanistan (clockwise from top left): moving a mortar and Italian troops in RC-West with US Marine Corps special forces, Air Assault Academy at Bagram with the 3rd CAB, Kommando delivery in RC-East with ODA 3336, flight medic course with DUSTOFF unit at Bagram’s Craig Hospital

**Air Advisor Training**

The role of the Air Advisor Course (AAC) gives each CAPTF member the mandate that comes with being “specially trained and educated” to carry on assessment, training, advising, assisting, and equipping the Afghan air forces. AAC offers specialized language, culture, combat skills, and advisor-specific training to each Air Advisor slated for CAPTF duty. The Expeditionary Airmen Center works diligently to conduct feedback for each class and make course improvements from that feedback, and this effort is evident in the improving readiness of each successive group of Air Advisors.

Certain areas of preparation simply cannot happen to a sufficient degree in the time allowed for the average Air Advisor’s pre-deployment training. As Brigadier General Boera noted in his end of tour report, “If there is one single area required in the way of training for the CAPTF CG/438 AEW CC position it would be cultural/language training, and that takes time.” Although not all Air Advisors will be fluent in Dari or Pashto when they arrive in Afghanistan, CAPTF has been fortunate to benefit from service by the early tranche of AF/PAK Hands personnel. The level of trust and influence these Airmen bring to our Afghan partners after just a few days of interaction is remarkable, and validates the vision behind the establishment of this program. In general, we will never have enough language- and culture-savvy Air Advisors. This should be clear direction to all future Air Advisors in training to go the extra mile to pick up all they can in the way of pre-deployment language and culture instruction.
Tension between Operations and Training

The reality for the ANSF is that it faces the daunting challenge of building itself while still fighting a war. As previously mentioned, “flying the airplane while building it” is an apt analogy. A tension between allocating scarce resources for training is in constant conflict with Afghan commanders’ desire to put maximum effort toward operational missions. In this area lies one of CAPTF’s most important roles. CAPTF personnel must maintain sufficient strategic vision to resist the tyranny of the urgent, realizing that only a trained, professional force will be able to sustain itself over the long term. Thus, while Air Advisors never make demands of AAF leaders or direct the force to accomplish missions, they are constantly there to give counsel that keeps a long-term vision in mind. In the event that Afghan decisions become detrimental to the safe operation of aircraft or endanger Coalition forces, CAPTF uses all of the leverage it has—in the form of money, resources, and advisory personnel—to identify the root cause of and correct deficiencies. In no case does CAPTF tolerate or allow Afghan decisions to affect the safety of Air Advisors.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 7. Students and cadre at the "Thunder Lab" English language immersion environment at the AAF's Kabul Air Wing; Thunder Lab is a facility where CAPTF advisors live with Afghan pilot candidates awaiting training, imparting English proficiency, military professionalism, and aviation indoctrination**

Transition to Western Aircraft

Part of the effort to make BPC in Afghanistan sustainable and habitual involves helping it transition to Western aircraft, and this transition has already begun. The C-27, a turboprop airlifter manufactured by Alenia, is becoming the backbone of the Afghan fixed-wing airlift fleet, and will replace the six Russian-built Antonov An-32 and An-26 platforms currently in use. The first Afghan C-27s arrived in November 2009. There are 6 in the fleet now, and the planned acquisition is 20 by 2012. At least 18 US states contribute to the manufacture of C-27 components. Six basic rotary-wing trainer aircraft and up to 32 fixed-wing aircraft to conduct pilot training and “light airlift” should be delivered prior to 2013. Finally, up to 20 CAS platforms are currently planned to be acquired, and have the potential to be Western aircraft.
The Mi-17 Fleet: The airframe most often in the spotlight is the Mi-17 “Hip,” a Russian-built, medium-lift helicopter originally designed for Afghanistan’s high, rugged terrain. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) now has 27 Mi-17s. An additional 8 are in the United Arab Emirates for cockpit modifications, and will continue to arrive throughout 2010. The planned Mi-17 build calls for 56 by 2016. Of these, 17 Mi-17s are expected to leave the fleet, either through battlefield loss or mechanical time-out, during fiscal years (FY) 2012 through 2016. At this time, no decisions have been made on how to proceed with the replacement of the Mi-17 fleet as they leave the fleet. OSD is conducting a study that will inform this decision.

To create an opportunity for Western airframes to enter the Afghan inventory, CAPTF has included in the FY 2012-2016 POM a request to fund comparable Western-made medium-lift replacement helicopters. Aircraft that perform like the Mi-17 would cost more than $1 billion. Changing airframes would also most likely extend the NATO “boots on ground” training commitment by at least two years, and may require many more Afghans to attend specialized training outside Afghanistan.

Coalition Operations: Taking a Broad View

Incorporating many nations into a cooperative approach to air power development adds strategic weight to efforts in Afghanistan. The BPC CONEMP promotes efforts to “develop and enhance partnership capabilities to ensure interoperability, integration, and interdependence.” The effort to rebuild Afghanistan is fundamentally international, resting on pillars of governance, security, and socio-economic development. Since ISAF is a NATO undertaking, the standard of interoperability with regard to security and military matters is a NATO standard.

Afghan air power institutions will play a pivotal role in Afghanistan’s fight to provide security for its citizens. Without a broad base of participation, however, grand words on paper can ring hollow. International agreements identify the United States as the lead nation for instituting security forces reform. If this lead designation couples with perceptions that just a few nations participate in the effort with any meaningful effort, security force development risks becoming viewed in the international community as a US-only project, robbing the coalition of legitimacy.

In contrast, historical scholarship teaches that an effective COIN strategy must be comprehensive—it should allocate diplomatic, political, military, and economic resources to achieve a political goal. CAPTF is positioned for success in that respect, because its advisory role touches every element of a linked grand strategy. Our mentoring relationships with Afghanistan’s government and military leaders give insight into political and social challenges here. We channel resources from the international community to increase military capability, and have a hand in ensuring good stewardship of those resources. Any resulting increase in military capability bolsters the legitimacy of the Afghan government by enabling it to provide better security for the population. When an AAF Mi-17 lifts hundreds of Afghan flood victims to safety, those villagers see the Afghan national government’s ability to provide assistance to them—assistance that neither a tribal elder nor insurgent forces can offer.
The building of Afghan air power capacity that CAPTF facilitates thus reaches across strategic areas of interest and furthers the political goal at the heart of COIN success. Increased direct participation in CAPTF by more countries will strengthen Afghan legitimacy even as it provides a means for those countries to claim a direct contribution to developing Afghanistan’s security forces. National provision of a discrete capability is an excellent way to contribute. A much-needed example is provision of a complete air base services mentorship team such as the one required at the Shindand Training Center. Countries like Italy, who has pledged support to join CAPTF and provide mentorship for the airbase services mission at Shindand, will be joined by other NATO nations to fill similar mentorship requirements in a cooperative effort. The most pressing need CAPTF has for international cooperation is in the area of operational flight training, and we continue to make this need known in international forums.

Moving beyond the realm of international relations, CAPTF also borrows from geopolitical theory in shaping its mission. Afghanistan’s land-locked position in Southwest Asia and its isolated geographic regions make it a “natural” air power. The harsh terrain and ground-based threats discussed earlier in this article hinder efforts to rebuild infrastructure. Our NATO partners have realized that tactical airlift and helicopters are necessary to support the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that do most of the infrastructure rebuilding in Afghanistan. CAPTF has increased Afghanistan elected leaders’ access to tactical airlift, affording these officials an opportunity to forge meaningful cooperation and
trust in the federal government throughout the country’s disparate regions. Afghanistan is a natural air power, because it cannot function as a modern state without mobility that air power alone can provide.

Another lesson CAPTF takes to heart is that “aerial campaigns that target insurgents and terrorists located in or very near population centers are generally counterproductive.” They are doubly so when the enemy’s most effective information operations tactic is to draw attention to the national government’s reliance on “occupiers and infidels.” Even with NATO’s so-called “surgical strike” capability, the best-intentioned commanders have exhibited an ability to anger civilian populations and give insurgents public relations victories. An example of this conundrum happened in northern Afghanistan’s Kunduz province on 4 September 2009. When Taliban insurgents hijacked two petroleum tanker trucks, a ground commander’s call for airstrikes to protect a nearby base led to allegations that NATO air power had caused widespread civilian casualties, mostly among locals who had gathered to siphon fuel from the trucks. A solution to this problem is to provide Afghanistan with an organic air power capability. The AAF will be able to deliver its own Afghan soldiers or close air support fires to the fight, which will reduce demand for air strikes conducted by outside air forces. In turn, this reduces insurgents’ ability to claim that the government is a puppet of the West even as the ANA undermines the ability of the Taliban, al Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and other groups to conduct attacks.

Even with excellent battlefield mobility, the kinetic strike capability provided by air power retains a role in battling insurgency. In the Afghan COIN arena, however, the politics of the struggle make an indigenous capability more valuable than the capabilities of any outside nation. On this front, the AAF is working to train Forward Observers who, from positions on the ground, can clear and coordinate airborne fires. They now act as observers for the Mi–35 attack helicopter crews trained by the combined Czech Republic-Hungary Air Mentor Team (AMT), directing fires throughout Afghanistan. CAPTF assists with the challenges of instituting close coordination procedures for the Afghan battlefield, including fixed-wing attack platforms. Most NATO nations possess CAS integration expertise, and CAPTF welcomes their participation. For the same reason that indigenous security forces are better than foreign troops, an AAF enabled to conduct its own COIN battles from the air will bring stability of a kind that does not come with outside military involvement.

CAPTF has a unique perspective to observe another academic lesson gleaned from previous COIN efforts: a “low-tech” approach to airpower can have dramatic positive effects. Western air forces favor high-tech military solutions, but this approach will not work in Afghanistan. As the school-building mountaineer Greg Mortenson learned in his personal efforts to advance peace, the patience of Afghan culture is staggering by US standards. Sometimes one must “listen to the mountains,” and accept that modest capability built with patience is the most effective way to leave Afghanistan with enduring air power capability. As trained air advisors, CAPTF personnel must keep this though in the front of their minds as they fulfill the CONEMP mandate to help Afghans “in the development and application of their aviation resources to meet their national needs” (emphasis added).

Some of our coalition partners distinguish their cultures against stereotypical US impatience—CAPTF can benefit from these perspectives, and can also use their expertise in operating AAF airframes. Current operations and training use airframes familiar and well suited to Afghanistan, and many of these are familiar to our NATO allies. The current Afghan inventory includes Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters,
along with the fixed-wing An-32 airlifter. The first two C–27s, flown direct from their refurbishment in Italy, officially joined the air fleet on 15 November 2009. The C-27 will become the backbone of Afghanistan’s airlift capability. It offers increased airlift, battlefield mobility, and instrument flight capabilities, but is similar to the An-32 in its simplicity and ruggedness, and our Afghan partners are comfortable operating it. In building up capability to employ these airframes, CAPTF and the AAF are pursuing ends that will be sustainable after outside advisors depart, a mission that any coalition country can support with pride.

To round out a discussion of the academic and historical lessons that inform CAPTF’s approach in Afghanistan, it is evident that air power “provides the flexibility and initiative” that insurgents normally enjoy in the COIN battle. While the need for ground troop involvement in COIN will never go away, certain functions of air power—airlift, battlefield mobility, and light attack—are force multipliers in that fight. With responsive air power, force requirements for 20 to 25 soldiers for every 1,000 indigenous residents, the gold standard for COIN, may shrink, allowing smaller forces to conduct effective operations against insurgents. The development of effective air power alongside ground troops ensures that they will have an effect greater than the measure of their numbers.

“Tough Love” - The Value of Letting Failure Happen

CAPTF appreciates that in order to effect transition to effective Afghan control of its air power institutions, there is a certain amount of art involved in determining when to remain involved and when to let our partners spread their wings. A government, military organization, or other large hierarchy is in some ways like a chain: if there is dysfunction at some level, the whole structure is “broken.” Effects may be minor or catastrophic for a given situation, but a benefit is that the problem is usually easily evident. If it’s severe enough, the problem in turn highlights and justifies a need for expending resources for a fix.

In contrast, the GIROA-ISAF combination is more like a parallel “ladder” structure. A “break” in one link of the functioning system (corruption, incompetence, or other dysfunction) might not become immediately obvious, because there is a parallel structure side by side (i.e., Shohna ba Shohna in the Dari phrase the NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan uses to remind its members of their roles) to pick up the weight and ensure success. The net outcome of a relationship like these has several deleterious effects: 1) progress attributed to host nation advancement may be ephemeral or not as solid as reported by the supporting advisors; 2) a culture of co-dependence develops - the supported host nation becomes unwilling to test the weigh-bearing capacity of its own structures, resulting in their corrosion or atrophy; 3) serious leadership problems at all levels receive “cover” from a supporting mentor who has no incentive to let any part of the system fail; 4) because leadership failures do not get the attention that only visible failure brings, there is no effective mechanism to identify poor leaders, and consequently there is no real move to remove them, because in the eyes of those adjacent in the system “there is no problem;” 5) the entire system lends itself to stasis via co-dependence, with leaders who had the competence and energy to be effective for a few years staying in the same jobs too long. They lose energy and enthusiasm, replacing it with comfortable mediocrity and an ever-greater temptation to engage in self-centered corruption.
The real problem CAPTF has noted over recent months is that the poor leadership not only remains in place, it blocks the effort and progress that better leadership at lower levels may be able to provide. Programs and processes that could gain traction and become self-sustaining languish or go dormant because of the impediments built in at higher levels. Most damning to our cause is when the ISAF support structure begins to adapt to the broken Afghan structure, placing short-term mission accomplishment over the medium- and long-term goal of building institutions. It is truly better to let a system fail now and help the GIROA apply appropriate fixes rather than support a rotten ladder.

Conclusion

BPC is a complex and rewarding mission. Building air power in Afghanistan spans the tactical, operational, and strategic spectrum every day. The CAPTF commander fills roles analogous to a squadron, group, wing, numbered air force, major command commander, or air force chief, often in the course of a single day. The range of emotions encountered is likewise broad. Building up aircraft, airmen, and infrastructure is satisfying visible progress. Seeing Afghanistan made capable of an increasingly varied set of aviation missions is also gratifying. Seeing evidence of corruption or entrenched negative command practices that are the detritus of war and outdated Soviet practices is a source of frustration. The two dynamics often interact to limit progress, but the theme of CAPTF for the past year has been one of steady progress. The progress is analogous to that of driving a car with the emergency brake engaged — going forward, but with a lot of resistance along the way. In spite of the challenges, it is encouraging to be at the forefront of a critical mission that has been defined by US, Defense Department, and US Air Force strategic guidance. CAPTF personnel are privileged to serve in such an important role in Afghanistan—all of us have the best Airmen’s jobs in the country.