



News From The Front



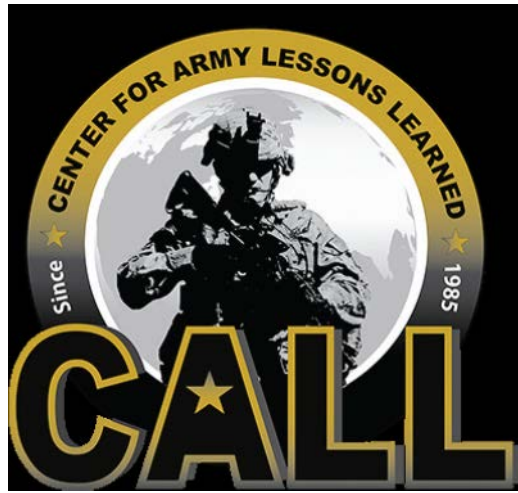
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Advising at the Ministerial Level in Afghanistan: Insights from Major General Willard M. Burleson III

Mr. Michael Hartmayer and Mr. Neil Buthorne
Senior Strategic Analysts
Center for Army Lessons Learned

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Purpose

The purpose of this News From the Front (NFTF) is to quickly share some poignant advising insights from CALL's interview with MG Burleson. CALL's Strategic Analysis Branch conducted an interview on 9 July 2018, with MG Burleson, 7th Infantry Division Commander, to collect insights into his activities while he was serving as the Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Defense, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL (Resolute Support), during May 2016 – June 2017. The purpose of the interview was to get MG Burleson's perspectives on what is required for successful advising at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and institutional levels for potential use in a Senior Advisor Reference Guide that CALL is developing in coordination with the Ministry of Defense Advisor (MoDA) Program and the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance. MG Burleson emphasized continuous contact with the Minister of Defense (MinDef) and that understanding the context of the MinDef's priorities equates to greater appreciation of the MinDef's overall institutional and operational goals which promotes trust. Among the key advising insights MG Burleson provided, was that contact builds context which in turn builds trust; and, the Partner Nation (PN) Minister's priorities should be the center of gravity in terms of building unity of effort for advising activities.

Background

The advising model in Afghanistan was established with GEN John W. Nicholson, Jr as the actual "Senior Advisor" to the MinDef – Afghanistan. MG Burleson was his Deputy. Given GEN Nicholson's other duties, MG Burleson performed the duties as the primary advisor and given direct authority to advise the MinDef – Afghanistan in the absence of GEN Nicholson. In this capacity, MG Burleson provided purpose and direction to a multinational staff that comprised the advising effort. As part of his duties, he coordinated with the staff at Resolute Support Headquarters in order to foster unity of effort.

Preparation

MG Burleson received no formal training for this assignment. He received 8 weeks' notice of his assignment during his attendance at the Army Senior Leader Development Program (ASLDP). As part of the ASLDP, he was able to utilize resources to assist in his preparation. MG Burleson's previous three assignments to Afghanistan (wherein he became familiar with Dari) and his assignment as the Commander, Operations Group, Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, LA assisted him in preparing for the advisor mission. While at the Army War College (AWC) attending ASLDP, MG Burleson

also spent considerable time with a former Iranian hostage and an American-Afghanistan expert. As part of the course, he went to Washington D.C. and spent time with former Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAC) Hands personnel. He also spoke with the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Central Asia. These interactions provided MG Burleson with insight into “who was doing what to whom” in the area of responsibility. Finally, MG Burleson, through resident instruction at the Defense Language Institute and distributive learning, enhanced his Dari language proficiency.

Insights

Frequent contact with your counterpart is most important. Quantity has its own quality in this regard. Contact allows you to build context and understand your counterpart’s point of view.

Familiarity with the language is critical. Become familiar with the language and spend as much time as possible with the PN’s senior officials and staff. By doing so, you gain clarity and understanding and together you get the context of what is being said and why. Attending multiple briefings on different subjects is important. This allows you to get a holistic picture of what’s going on in the MOD.

Combat training center (CTC) observer, coach, trainer (OCT) personnel have a knack for advising. OCTs from the CTCs seem to do exceptionally well in the advisor role. They are uniquely trained to observe and understand, then coach and mentor. Experience as an OCT and also as Commander, Operations Group, JRTC gave MG Burleson the experience to astutely advise PN senior officials in resolving a myriad of simple and complex issues.

You must know systems. A systems approach is necessary to gain an appreciation and understanding for all the dynamics involved to determine where the MinDef, his staff, and organizations require assistance. The key is to promote only those methods that they can accomplish themselves.

Advising Vignette

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) advisors struggled with how to better integrate women into the Afghan Armed Forces. A plan was created and implemented to train these women in Turkey, a country with a similar culture, and prepare them for entry into the Afghan National Army. Everything went well, until it was time to actually integrate females into units. Flaws in the plan became apparent immediately. The plan had not been staffed with the MinDef and the positions these women would occupy had not been identified. Further, the rank (officer or noncommissioned officer) of these women was not clearly identified and it was not certain what would happen to their families. Working with their counterparts, making this an Afghan plan, and staffing it with the advisor team could have fostered workable solutions prior to the actual female integration.

Unity of effort is difficult in the environment but not impossible. Seek shared understanding and use this understanding to build unity of effort. The center of gravity in advising is the counterpart's priorities; use these priorities to focus the advisor team. Focusing on the counterpart's priorities prevents advisor fratricide. Identify common goals and objectives and use this to prevent stove piping. Always ask yourself, "**Who else needs to know?**"

Advisor training and education are force multipliers. The NATO advisor course does a great job educating future advisers to understand the institution. The MoDA Program, now expanded to include military, after MG Burleson departed, has helped greatly to prepare advisors for their duties in Afghanistan as well. Attendance at the AWC and commanding a brigade provided background and experience, however did not provide or exercise the skills needed to effectively advise. MG Burleson's experience at JRTC assisted him greatly and enhanced his capacity to observe and provide feedback to others which ultimately provided a foundation to enable his senior advising mission.

Language is critical. MG Burleson was assigned a cultural advisor who was fluent in English, Dari, and Pashto, and their exceptional personal and working relationship facilitated advising. This cultural advisor had 16 years of experience working with the MOD. Even though he was provided an advisor with expert language capabilities, MG Burleson found that a senior advisor must have a certain level of precision of the language at the MOD level. Getting it wrong will frustrate the system. Advisors must be precise and get it right. Knowledge and a thorough understanding are necessary to get to the heart of issues at the strategic level. This proved itself when hosting senior officials (i.e., the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and the U.S. Secretary of

Defense). The cultural advisors played a key role during these visits and greatly assisted MG Burleson in the discussions that ensued. Importantly, MG Burleson's Dari familiarity aided him in catching the subtle language differences and the context of what was said.

Relationships count. Real capacity building occurs when you build a meaningful relationship and then engage in contextual and deep discussions wherein new concepts, methods, and ideas are discussed, analyzed, and synthesized. The goal, in the end, is that the PN senior official adopts the idea of change. MG Burleson commented that he had several senior advisors that had this unique capability. This is critical because only the counterparts, not advisors, can be agents for change within the foreign security force.

Understand you will not be able to know everything. There are hidden idiosyncrasies, likes, dislikes, and different agendas where ever you go. Westerners' values are different than PN counterparts, who have an indirect approach in this region. You must have a significant amount of contact time. The higher the level, the harder it becomes to provide solutions. Even though MG Burleson was in constant contact, built trust, and was well informed, he was still challenged to understand all of his counterpart's issues and problems.

Map your counterpart's department and understand who influences him or her. Develop a frame of reference on how the defense institution runs (the same is true for any ministry). Understand exactly what your counterpart is responsible for and what his priorities are. Understand what other influences are working on him. Afghanistan has a great MinDef, but it was important to understand that he does not have service staffs, a forces command, a joint staff, and combatant commands – they have him. The MinDef is the go to person for institutional as well as operational functions. The MinDef is ultimately responsible.

Praise in public, counsel in private. It is important to advise senior officials privately. Seek to understand the purpose of their actions, ask them, "Why do you want to do it this way." As an example, there was an individual that was not getting paid. MG Burleson's team tried to help and he did receive some money. The issue was that his salary was much higher than the average. The MinDef did not want to fire him. He wanted him to quit. The issue was not obvious. The key here is trust and it took time and effort to fully understand the issue and the MinDef's actions.

Make a "contract." It is vital to coordinate with the PN senior official (i.e., MinDef) early and often. Capture his priorities in a simple PowerPoint document written in Dari. Show

it to the PN senior official and ask if you understood his priorities correctly. If the answer is yes, then use this to influence other PN senior officials and achieve unity of effort in the advisor community. Make everyone aware that these are the MinDef's priorities and they are now your priorities.

Continuity is key. Create a handover process and maintain a continuity book or folder. Advisors cannot all be reassigned at the same time or be absent (i.e., leave, health, other duties) at same time. Cultural advisors are key and worth their weight in gold in terms of continuity. MG Burleson conducted weekly meetings with his team of advisors and included in discussions the current week's activities and the following two weeks.

Contact time equals context. The more contact you have with the PN senior official, the more context you will achieve. Contextual understanding is everything. Contact and context directly correspond to the level of understanding and the trust you will achieve with your PN senior official.

Context and understanding are the keys to unity of effort. Unity of effort and shared understanding is key. There must be shared understanding among the senior advisor, the advisor team, the respective supporting headquarters command and staff, and PN senior officials and staff. Understanding along with common lines of effort will prevent advisor fratricide that can unhinge the advisor team's accomplishments.

Conclusion

This NFTF's purpose was to share some advising insights from MG Burleson's activities while he was serving as the Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Defense, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL (Resolute Support), during May 2016 – June 2017. While it is clear that advising at that level is difficult, MG Burleson's perspectives on what is required for successful advising at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and institutional levels provide some insights into the challenging mission.



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