Advising Foreign Security Force Engineers

By Major Jared S. Baldwin

In 2019, the 2d Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), Fort Bragg, North Carolina, deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Resolute Support. Engineer Advisor Team 2511 was comprised of a post command team leader, a senior combat engineer sergeant, a combat engineer advisor, and a construction advisor. The team was assigned to the Train Advise Assist Command (TAAC)–Capital, Kabul, and later moved to TAAC–North, Mazar-i-Sharif. Team 2511 advised SFAB maneuver commanders, local Afghan National Defense personnel, and security forces in the areas of combat engineering and horizontal- and vertical-construction tasks. Team members learned some lessons that may benefit other engineer advisor teams on future advising missions.

Advising With NATO

An integral part of Operation Resolute Support mission success consisted of the contributions of the many North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO) countries that had operational control over select TAACs. Team 2511 had the unique opportunity to work alongside Turkish and Macedonian engineers at TAAC–Capital and German engineers at TAAC–North. The team supported their advising efforts below the Afghan National Army (ANA) corps level.

Team 2511 spent roughly half of its time in TAAC–North in expeditionary deployment conditions on small bases, assisting maneuver advisor teams that were colocated with ANA units from the 209th and 217th Corps, based across northern Afghanistan. TAAC headquarters staff sections did not have the capacity to train and advise below the ANA corps level, leaving the TAAC–North senior engineer advisor to focus his efforts solely on the ANA corps engineer. The TAAC–North senior engineer advisor relied heavily upon information provided by the ANA corps engineer to assist in parallel planning and advising efforts. Unfortunately, the corps engineer was unable to validate personnel numbers or equipment readiness or confirm if operational information was reaching company level leadership. Through integration with the TAAC–North senior engineer, Team 2511 obtained information while also providing training to the engineer, route clearance, and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) companies. By acting as the connective tissue, the team assisted in synchronizing engineer efforts across ANA echelons.

A key part of integrating with the TAAC senior engineer advisor was the ability to avoid mission failure. The team learned through the senior engineer advisor that the ANA corps commander wanted to conduct a clearance operation along a particular stretch of enemy-held Highway 1. The plan called for ANA maneuver elements to clear the route and then use ANA engineers to construct a few platoon size

Soldiers integrating with a maneuver advisor team in Kabul

A Soldier instructs ANA engineers on route clearance.

battle positions to secure and hold the terrain. After a few advising engagements, it was discovered that ANA engineers did not have the capability or resources to construct the battle positions. This was a setback to the clear, hold, and build concept. Team 2511 informed the TAAC–North senior engineer advisor of the shortfall and advised the ANA corps engineer to search elsewhere for the construction capability.

Advising Under Decentralized Conditions

The mission set sometimes does not allow for the task force, company, or team to be colocated on the same operating base. In such circumstances, the entity must exercise mission command to decentralize advising efforts across the operational area and accomplish the mission.

The initial mission of the Team 2511 higher headquarters was to advise the Afghan National Police units responsible for operating the Kabul City gates and the ANA *kandaks* (battalions) tasked to defend the capital of Kabul. The mission focused on enhancement of the Kabul City gates; force protection posture; and mobility, countermobility, and survivability training for the ANA. Kabul City gate personnel and ANA *kandaks* were advised by different maneuver advising teams. In order to provide the required engineer capability, Team 2511 separated, aligned, and integrated with the maneuver advising teams. Synchronization was key before and after separate missions to gain situational awareness of gate force protection construction progress and any training required by the ANA *kandaks*. As much as the team wished to operate as one, covering separate areas and advising at the point of need were mission-essential.

Advising Foreign Security Force Partners

Some ANA commanders see the SFAB advisor as someone who can accomplish what they could not or someone who will solve all of the unit issues based on preconceived notions or previous interactions with U.S. counterparts. During engagements, the advisor must be forthright, with the purpose centering firmly on the principles of training, advising, and assisting.

Team 2511 had the opportunity to meet numerous ANA maneuver and engineer commanders in Kabul and across TAAC–North. Most of the ANA commanders had little or no experience in working with U.S. advisors or had previously worked with U.S. advisors who provided their units with ample supplies and resources. Based on previous experiences, some ANA commanders expected Team 2511 to provide fuel, sandbags, and air support. In an attempt to manage expectations, the team began informing ANA commanders that support would be provided in the form of training on the equipment, advising the commander and staff on operations, and leveraging logistical support through the advisor network. Some commanders were disappointed; they wanted immediate material and operational support—not a commitment to follow through with supply requests or discuss training plans. As team members continued to travel across the country, they believed it best to lay out expectations in advance to set the tone for current and future engagements. Although the reactions were unchanged, this approach gave the team a chance to get ahead of the curve and focus on unit readiness and training. Over time, questions regarding sustainment led to questions regarding upcoming missions. These discussions inevitably led to opportunities for the team to share thoughts and appropriately advise the commanders about partner force plans. The ANA commanders grew to understand that the team, which was trained differently than previous advisors, was a team with which they could build rapport through training and honest advising rather than through dependency.

Managing Advising Expectations

Foreign security force counterparts may operate vastly differently than SFAB or other NATO advisors. The advisor must then shift from a doctrinal mindset to one that supports the ANA initiative—and that's okay.

The ANA mission was to construct a small, platoon size battle position to secure key terrain around Highway 1. During planning, the discussion focused on the battle position location, size, and layout and the bill of materials on hand. Referencing the map of the operational environment, the TAAC–North senior engineer advisor and Team 2511 identified key terrain that would be easily defendable and had clear fields of fire and suitable access routes for construction. After considering the proposed location, the ANA corps engineer insisted on using an alternate location that had a high ridgeline on one side, a river on the other side, and poor access roads for the construction of entrance/exit roads. The decision of the ANA corps engineer not to use the proposed location caused confusion and frustration among the team members. The senior engineer advisor and the team wanted the construction to succeed, giving the ANA soldiers tactical advantages over the enemy. After several discussions, the ANA corps engineer and the TAAC–North senior engineer managed to agree on a location that provided better fields of fire. As expected, ANA engineers encountered issues with bringing in heavy equipment to berm and fill the force protection bastions. They were forced to use less-capable and less-effective equipment, which resulted in a final product that was less than perfect by Team 2511 standards. However, the ANA took the initiative to plan, resource, and build the battle position with little help, which was the ultimate desired goal of advising.

Team 2511 was also required to manage expectations when it came to route clearance operations. The team met with an ANA EOD company and observed its route clearance tactics to establish a baseline and identify strengths and shortfalls. This particular unit demonstrated that it was very familiar with some of the U.S. Army reporting procedures, but it used nondoctrinal methods for detection. Team members explained and demonstrated some U.S. Army doctrinal methods for early detection in the hopes that the EOD unit would adopt them; however, the EOD commander was skeptical and reluctant to incorporate them. The team stressed how the doctrinal methods would be beneficial to the ANA during clearance operations. Team members informed the EOD commander that training his unit on early detection methods would have significant benefits during operations and that training on these tactics would continue during every engagement. Although the team would not be able to verify whether its efforts paid off, it had trained to standard and planted the seed with the EOD company. In the end, it was up to the brave ANA soldiers of the EOD company to clear the stretch of Highway 1. Success was up to them.

A Soldier inspects equipment before training.

Handling Technology Challenges

In an established forward environment, the reliability of the communications network to provide the ability to communicate between echelons is often taken for granted. The people of Afghanistan, including those in the ANA, have become accustomed to reliable mobile telephone and Internet networks that allow the real-time exchange of information at a moment's notice. However, due to technology, communication during deployment was difficult at times.

At TAAC–North, Team 2511 advised ANA units that were geographically separated from the team by a rotary wing flight of an hour or more. The team saw each unit for a period of 1 week once a month and called for visits in between to build rapport, gather information, and set training conditions. The operational area was so vast that the mission required the use of different mobile subscriber identity mobile cards for each location. A setback occurred in one area when the local mobile telephone tower was turned off, eliminating telephone and message communication with the ANA partners; it would be a few days before Team 2511 could get back to its location, and gathering information was essential to synchronizing efforts with TAAC. With the help of some NATO partners in the area, messages were able to be sent and received over secure platforms—without a break in advising—until the functionality of the cellular telephone tower was restored.

Major Baldwin is the division engineer operations officer for the 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, Texas. He holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, and a master's degree in geological engineering from Missouri University of Science and Technology at Rolla.