
A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO STABILITY THE STRATEGIC ADVISORY TEAM IN AFGHANISTAN

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This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him . . . It requires in those situations where we must counter it . . . a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.¹

As John F. Kennedy observed of the Vietnam War in 1962, this type of warfare is again at the centre of the present and future operating environment. The Canadian Forces (CF) in Afghanistan are attempting to bring stability to the country as it suffers such an insurgency, and this environment demands new approaches and new capabilities inspired by old lessons.

With respect to 'how' Canada would engage such environments, its policy was made clear in April 2005. The government of the day stated that our approach to intervention on the international stage, and in Afghanistan in particular, would be based on a 3D + C (diplomacy + development + defence and commerce) model. This approach is one in which diplomacy, defence, and development work together to synchronize efforts, improve effectiveness, and maximize the impact of Canada's contribution. It is an approach that demands a coherent policy and integrated activities by all elements of power within the government. After a change in government in January 2006, the Conservative Party ratified this approach, albeit under a different term, usually "whole of government", but also sometimes simply "Team Canada". For the purpose of this article, however, this concept will be referred to as the whole of government approach (WGA). In Afghanistan, Canada's efforts, both in the Kandahar region and in the capital, Kabul, are one example of this WGA. More specifically, in Kabul, at the national level, the CF worked in consultation with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT) and with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to employ the Canadian Strategic Advisory Team—Afghanistan (SAT-A) since 2005. This team comprised of a small group of military members, a defence scientist and a CIDA field officer, which worked in consultation with the Canadian Embassy towards strengthening the national government of Afghanistan, and ultimately, serve as a tool on the road to success at the operational and strategic level.

This article will trace the genesis of the SAT-A, and argue its usefulness in the fight against insurgency or in support of failing and failed (FF) states. It will also suggest some changes to our mission's design in order to use this capability in present and future areas of Canadian involvement. It will show that the CF had the ways and the means to participate in nation-building in order to accomplish its ends. It will conclude that a small, adaptable and professional group of planners from DFAIT, DND, CIDA and other relevant agencies, working together to support good governance, will help the host nation, Canada and the CF achieve its aims.

The genesis of the Strategic Advisory Team—Afghanistan (SAT-A)

In 2003, General Rick Hillier served in Afghanistan as the commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Working out of Kabul, he came to realize the magnitude of the task required to ensure stability and ultimately success. The complexity of the challenges facing Afghanistan called for an integrated, long-term approach to nation-building. Part of that approach included the work done with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRA) by the members of the military planning staff in the ISAF Headquarters (HQ). This work centered on the development of a comprehensive roadmap for the strategy that Afghanistan needed in order to embark on the path of sustainable development and enduring stability.

Working with the Afghan Finance Ministry, this group of officers used military campaign planning tools to formulate a viable framework for investment in Afghanistan and proceeded with the rebuilding of the country, its infrastructure, and its institutions. After much success and cooperation this group left Afghanistan in 2004. The following year, Canada responded to a request from Hamid Karzai, the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, to provide another group of planners similar to the one that had assisted his government in 2003-2004, and in turn the Canadian government requested that DND, DFAIT, and CIDA provide volunteers for a second deployable team.

The question President Karzai had asked in the spring of 2005 triggered Gen. Hillier, now the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), to deploy the SAT-A. Colonel M.D. Capstick, an artillery officer working in the National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) at the time, received an order in mid-June 2005, which directed him to lead the deployment of the SAT-A to the capital of Afghanistan in support of the GIRA. Following that direction, Colonel Capstick met directly with the CDS. During that meeting, Gen Hillier explained to Colonel Capstick, that he was to form, deploy and command a team of a dozen people and go to Afghanistan to “help president Karzai build a democratic and stable government.”² To fulfill this ambitious mission, he was to deploy at the end of the summer for one year. As this initial direction was being given, links with DFAIT and the CIDA were being pursued in order to make this an integrated multi-agency initiative. That being said, this initiative on the CDS’ part led to some criticism as to the way in which this team was launched.

A sense of improvisation plagued this mounting phase of the mission. Nonetheless, Colonel Capstick immediately set about forming the team and preparing for a reconnaissance trip to Afghanistan in order to plan the deployment. He was able to select a group of military officers and civil servants that brought military planning skills, scientific research experience and development work background to the team. The original SAT was made up of fifteen members. Twelve were military, two were civilian public servants of DND and one was a co-operant from CIDA. The military members were a mix of land, sea and air, as well as regular and reserves. One of the public servants was an operational research scientist, whereas the other was a strategic planner from the central staff.

While putting the team together in Ottawa, there was growing concern that the DND was duplicating efforts of other governmental agencies. Initially intended as an integrated ‘whole of government’ team, Colonel Capstick faced some challenges in securing representation from CIDA and aligning efforts with DFAIT. Mounting such a team for the first time proved to be a significant test that required flexibility and patience, given the intricacies of departmental and intra-governmental politics. Ultimately, the ability of DND to field elements on short notice enabled the team to be assembled and eventually deploy as directed.

In mid-summer 2005, Colonel Capstick completed his reconnaissance of Kabul and was able to establish first contact with the head of mission (HoM) and the head of aid (HoA) for Canada, Christopher Alexander and Dr. Nipa Banerjee respectively. His team was finally assembled in July and started deploying on 22 August 2005. The initial focus of the SAT commander was to ascertain the specific areas where his group of planners could be most beneficial to the Government of Afghanistan. Greatly facilitated by the reputation and interventions of the HoM and HoA, it became clear that the SAT team could be useful in the conception of the Interim—Afghanistan National Development Strategy and eventually the actual Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS and ANDS). With the support of the Canadian Ambassador and the HoA, Col Capstick quickly developed a working relationship with Dr. Ishaq Naderi, Senior Economic Advisor to the President and ultimately responsible for the production of the ANDS.³ The ANDS is the overarching document that serves as the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and the initial step in the coordinated reconstruction of the state.⁴ This document and the process for its production were of crucial importance in the ratification of the Afghanistan Compact in 2006. The Compact was the commitment made by the international community (IC) for a long-term solution to the crisis in Afghanistan.



Figure 1: This model comes from, *The Center for Domestic and International Health Security*, Seth G. Jones et al, *Securing Health, "Lessons from Nation-Building Missions"* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006), xvii, figure RAND MG321-S.1.

In parallel to the work that was needed with the production of the ANDS, the SAT found the need to support public administration reform (PAR). As a key enabler of the ANDS, PAR faced a significant capability gap challenge and was in urgent need of support. Therefore, the CIDA co-operant in the SAT immediately headed a number of capacity-building programs in the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) which was responsible for PAR at the national level.

The team faced a number of challenges. Some parts of the IC representatives in Kabul were suspicious as to what a group of military planners could bring to the nation-building effort. Some benign rivalries with other national agencies were also felt at the mid-manager level. Thirdly, there was always the concern that someone else was already doing the same work. With the high number of technical advisors (TAs), international agencies and personnel from ISAF and the US HQ (Combined Forces

Command—Afghanistan, CFC-A) in Kabul, it was common to meet someone working on exactly the same issues as the SAT. Nonetheless, the initial work done by the team, “made the clear demonstration of the potential of military staff ‘skills transfer’ to the civil sector in a post-conflict society that has had little time to develop viable public institutions and a culture of good governance.”⁵

The HoM at the time, Christopher Alexander, recalled this initial period and remarked that the success of SAT rested on Canada’s integration of all of its elements of power. By the time SAT arrived in Kabul, Canada had showed its resolve by deploying an important military contingent, assuming command of the Multinational Brigade in Kabul (KMNB) and the ISAF mission as a whole in 2003. It had re-opened its embassy, energized its development program through CIDA and contributed to nation building efforts with assistance from the RCMP and other governmental agencies. When the group of strategic planners from the SAT arrived in 2005, all the key elements of Canada’s whole of government approach were in place in Kabul. The sheer desire to communicate with each other in order to help the legitimate government of Afghanistan made the integration of this new capability possible.⁶ Also important in this early stage was the credibility the team had because it deployed under the request of the President of the Government of Afghanistan. This endorsement opened a number of doors in the Afghan government and was instrumental in ensuring middle and top-level manager support.

Recognizing that the extremely difficult task of state building rests at the heart of the Afghanistan challenge, the SAT team was immediately put to the task of supporting the construction and reconstruction of the governance institutions capable of providing the citizens with the physical and economic security they required.⁷

During this initial phase of the operation, the bi-lateral nature of the mission constantly needed to be emphasized. The team did not fall under the command and control architecture of either NATO (ISAF) or the US (CFC-A). As the mission statement said, it answered to the HoM, the CDS, the Afghanistan President’s office and the different Afghanistan ministries with which it was involved.

As the first year went by, the mission matured and the work done with the ANDS and the IARCSC led to further expansion into the President’s office, other PAR initiatives, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and the Civil Service Gender Equity Policy.⁸ It also served as a key enabler in the alignment of provincial reconstruction team (PRT) activity at the operational level and the ANDS objectives at the strategic level. The SAT-A was able to operationalize the strategic objectives in order to facilitate the campaign design of each of the PRT commanders.

As the SAT-A progressed and completed its first rotation in the end of the summer 2006, it also expanded the scope of its work and went on to support the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of National Communications, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Transportation and Civil Aviation, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Finance.⁹ These efforts in capacity and capability building were all being done in light of the desired effects to move Canada’s intervention towards the strategic end-state articulated by the CDS as: “The development of an organic Government of Afghanistan (GOA) strategic planning capability that enables them to make effective use of their resources.”¹⁰

Impact of SAT-A

What did the Afghan people get out of this mission? What did the Canadian public get out of this operation? One partial and debatable answer can be found in journalist Christie Blatchford’s assessment, “The smallest and arguably most influential group of

Canadians [SAT-A] working in Afghanistan was born about a year ago in an informal meeting in the Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier's car."¹¹ Blatchford spent a significant amount of time with Canadian soldiers in Southern Afghanistan as an embedded journalist. While focusing on the tactical and operational side of the mission in Kandahar, she was able to witness and report on some of the achievements of SAT-A during the spring of 2006. Notwithstanding this praise, the team generated some discomfort with regards to duplication of effort, appropriateness of the military's involvement in state building, and this apparent new role DND was playing in giving advice on governance issues. Prior to discussing the inclusion of SAT in future operations, an analysis of its impact is necessary, starting with some of the opinions of key Afghan officials who worked closely with the SAT-A.

Wahid Waissi was the Senior Process Manager for the ANDS. Under his supervision, the ANDS Working Group had to produce the final version of the ANDS and develop the basis for the Afghanistan Compact that was signed at the London Conference in January 2006. This monumental task benefited from SAT-A involvement as of September 2005. From that point on, a group of four Canadian planners were embedded in the ANDS Working Group. They concentrated their efforts on capacity transfer and mentoring the production of the capstone documents. They also worked on effective communications strategies for the Office of the Senior Economic Advisor to the President of Afghanistan. The Senior Economic Advisor was ultimately responsible for the Compact and the ANDS.

In Waissi's opinion, the ANDS Working Group benefited from SAT's structured advice. It helped focus their work. Even if SAT members were not development specialists, their capacity to envision strategies, align plans with objectives and manage effectively, contributed to the overall performance of his working group.¹² In other words, the ability of the SAT to work in terms of ways-ends-means and to work as enablers had a significant impact on the preparation for the London Conference. With no subject matter experts in the field of development on the team helping in the development of the ANDS, the SAT planners had to concentrate their contribution on the integration of processes and alignment of strategies. The approach taken was therefore drastically different than what the ANDS Working Group was accustomed to seeing from highly paid technical advisors. By the mere willingness of the Canadian team members to participate in the work and not dictate what Afghanistan needed, the SAT established some credibility and increased the abilities of the working group as a whole.

In March 2006, Professor Ishaq Naderi, Senior Economic Advisor to the President and the supervisor of Wahid Waissi, was quoted praising the work of SAT-A. ". . . The team has done invaluable work, particularly in organizing the country's economic development plan, which was recently approved at the London Conference on Afghanistan's future."¹³ He added, "We are counting on their contribution. As a member of this government I want to express my appreciation for this help. It will not be forgotten."¹⁴

Near the halfway mark of the first rotation of SAT, an opportunity to help the President's office offered itself. By that point the contribution of SAT to the ANDS and IARCSC was well established and the perception that the team had some key abilities was recognized in the capital. SAT was asked in early 2006 to take a look at the organisation and structure of the Office of the President. The Office of the President is a crucial part of the center of government in Afghanistan, and was undergoing significant change.

Ershad Ahmadi, Deputy Chief of Presidential Programs, admitted that SAT helped energize the path to change and gave momentum to the implementation of some badly needed reforms in the Office of the President.¹⁵ The team's particular ability to talk in terms of strategy, vision and mission were of particular use in the restructure of Afghanistan's executive branch. When time came to work in the Office of the President, SAT's experiences in the ANDS Working Group and the IARCSC were of particular use in lending some coherence to the changes required in the Office of the President. The team's ability to work with the government in pursuing Afghanistan's goals put them in sharp contrast to some of the expert advice TAs were giving. It became clear during the first rotation that Kabul was replete with well-intentioned advisors, who were usually very highly paid. This advice was sometimes given from a position of unequal partnership. SAT, on the other hand, had adopted a sense of reciprocity and suggestion versus an attitude of experts giving solutions to novices. This attitude was important to the success of the team and their ability to get some of the recommendations for change accepted. "TAs come to Afghanistan for two months, three months, six months, produce a report and then leave. That does not make a lasting impact."¹⁶ SAT's presence and long-term commitment made for a completely different dynamic. It inspired confidence in the dedication of Canada's contribution and facilitated the establishment of the trust that was needed in order to embark on such important state building tasks.

The Chairman of the IARCSC, Dr. A. Mushahed, supported the use of military planners in an advisory role for purely civilian governance issues. In his view, ". . . concentration on security operations is not the only way to defeat the terrorists. Service delivery of the government, when it is efficient, is another way."¹⁷ Military campaigns and the personnel waging them need to be as concerned with security as they are with the strengthening of the country in which they are deployed. Military skills enabled the SAT to do that. Col Capstick, who had experienced stability and peacekeeping operations as a commander in Cyprus and Bosnia, reinforced this idea in an interview he gave on the 27th of March 2006. "Planning Afghanistan's national economic development strategy or civil service is not a heck of a lot different than planning General Fraser's campaign in terms of the skills needed and the steps."¹⁸ While military planners are not expected to know the answer to a governance problem, they can act as enablers in the weak national institutions of the host nation. By facilitating the developments of strategies, ensuring capacity transfer and the adherence to rigorous processes, the skills brought to bear by military planners can play a role in creating the conditions for success.

One of the directors of the IARCSC, Homayoun Seddiq, observed that one of the key qualities of the members of the SAT was their willingness to adapt to HN constraints and work within that environment. The fact that the team was not being directly paid by the IARCSC also made a significant difference. Without the monetary connotation, the support given by team members took a whole different nature. The sense that SAT was not working to any other agenda than the one of supporting PAR and Afghanistan's objectives also facilitated the labour. As far as using military personnel in tackling civil service problems, he did not see an issue. There were enough development and governance experts willing to give you 'how to' advice, but what the SAT brought was the ability to use critical thinking, set up strategies, but more importantly pass on that knowledge to the young public servants they were working with.¹⁹ The work done by the SAT was in part possible because the team had no funds to manage and distribute to the host nation. It was also different than all other technical advice in as much as it was a bi-lateral agreement between Afghanistan and Canada without any need for payment. Lastly, Canada bears little or no negative historical links with Afghanistan.

Towards mid-2006, and more significantly in the later portion of that year, the SAT became heavily involved in the improvement of strategies in the Ministry of Rural

Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). They were specifically concerned with transferring the skills needed to plan strategically. The MRRD oversaw the National Solidarity Program (NSP), one of the most important poverty reduction initiatives in the country. The NSP received \$13M from Canada in 2006, which brought CIDA's contribution to Afghanistan to \$109.5M.²⁰ This contribution made Afghanistan Canada's largest recipient of aid.

Seen from an American perspective, the team also made a contribution in building governance, legitimizing the government and ultimately countering the insurgents in the eyes of the people. Colonel Fred Solis (US) was the Team Chief for Governance in the Civil Military Affairs Division (CJ-9) of the American HQ CFC-A. He was in Kabul when the team arrived and was instrumental in the expansion of the work into the IARCSC. In his view, the team was effective because of the way it was embedded. By working alongside their Afghan counterparts, emphasizing capacity transfer and indirect mentoring, the team had a strategic effect.²¹ By building up good governance, the team was working towards achieving the end-state of a legitimate and functioning nation.

However there was one constant danger with such work; the possibility of becoming involved in the internal politics of the organisation you are assisting. In a recent piece aired by the CBC on the SAT team, in March 2007, the journalist raised the point that the Canadian military's involvement at such a political level had caused some suspicions amongst other intervening countries and agencies.²² This suspicion was quickly quelled by clarifications from Afghanistan's government officials as to the usefulness and pertinence of such a Canadian team. Still, the relationships that are built when conducting mentorship or capacity transfer can be easily politicized, and therein lies some of the more pertinent criticism of the SAT. How does it avoid being identified with the administration or ruling body of the host nation? In its first year, while being involved in the IARCSC, the team came to be closely linked to some of the key personnel in the structure. This, in turn, resulted in the team being dragged into internal bickering and factional rivalries. Ultimately, such tensions were partly responsible for the SAT reducing its involvement in the IARCSC and expanding their work with the MRRD.

This research suggests that the team increased Canada's influence in the Afghan capital. While it was unable to make a profound difference outside of Kabul, the team contributed to the development of some key capabilities in the government. It raised Canada's visibility in the Government of Afghanistan, helped shape the intelligence picture of the conflict and participated in elevating the status of Canada in the region. Furthermore, it can objectively be stated that capacity transfer took place, processes and strategy development were facilitated, and lastly some critical steps and documents required on the road towards stability were influenced by SAT's work. Despite the fact that it generated some criticism from other contributing nations, and that it brought to the forefront some inter-governmental intricacies, SAT contributed to the nation building efforts in the host nation.

Strategic Advisory Teams: A New Capability in Nation Building for the Government of Canada

If the international community fails to secure and rebuild the country, Afghanistan will slide back down the path towards failed status. The constant possibility of Afghanistan reverting to a neo-Taliban fundamentalist regime remains grave. This would threaten regional stability and Canada's own national interests.²³ Therefore, Canada has been actively involved in the efforts to support the Government of Afghanistan as it stabilizes and rebuilds Afghanistan. For this to be successful, Canada's strategy in Afghanistan, and in any other fragile state, needs to ". . . build trust, engage in development and reconstruction, and ensure the rule of law. . ." ²⁴ This demands that

Canada adopt an integrated counter-insurgency strategy that focuses on innovative local interactions.

The SAT-A, together with the PRTs and the Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLTs), are all elements of this innovative interaction with the locals. Such teams might not have been envisioned in the 1990s. Today, these new capabilities are helping to strengthen Afghan capacity to deliver quality governance, both centrally and locally. The SAT-A is working in conjunction with the Government of Afghanistan to develop the human capacity critical to achieving the objectives of the ANDS and moving towards a stable and secure Afghanistan.²⁵ (See figure 1. for a model in nation building)

Inclusion of a Strategic Advisory Team Capability in Future Operations

Canada's Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005 remarked that a capability such as SAT would be duplicable in future interventions if the following conditions exist: a host nation that is in desperate need of capacity building; Canada making a significant contribution in that country; Canada having no negative historical ties with the host nation and lastly, strong links with the legitimate government of that country. Furthermore, this type of intervention could be possible only if the host nation requested Canada's contribution in this fashion and the involvement had an important development piece.²⁶

The most useful set of criteria for replicating this capability were gleaned from the interviews conducted with Dr. Elizabeth Speed, the Canadian DND scientist working in SAT-A at the time, , and Colonel Andre Corbould, the Deputy Commander Civil Military Affairs Division CJ9 (US HQ, CFC-A). They both made the case that there has to be a willingness to reform on the part of the host nation, there has to be a clear lack of capability, a legitimate government that Canada is trying to help, high level support that generates mid-level buy-in, and lastly, key stake holders in the Government of Canada must be willing to integrate inter-departmental efforts.²⁷

Without a request from the host nation for Canada to be involved at this level of nation building, a SAT is a non-starter. But one more condition, in addition to the five mentioned above, needs to exist for this type of intervention to succeed. There has to be a minimum level of stability in the area of operation for this type of work to take place. While it has been argued that nation building needs to take place in a quasi-simultaneous manner as all other stability operations, an advisory team cannot operate in chaos or in a condition of all-out war. Without a certain level of stability, no capacity building efforts would take root. Canada's intervention would be in vain.

Critics might see the concept of SAT as nothing more than an anomaly that was only possible in Afghanistan because of the personal relationship between President Karzai and Gen Hillier, an anomaly that was only possible because of Canada's political landscape at the time. But even if the case can be made that the political realities of 2005—a minority Liberal government, a strong CDS, the US ongoing Global War on Terror and a host of other factors—will never be aligned again, the logic behind a strategic planning team that is dedicated to transferring capability to a weak state cannot be dismissed. Even if the political conditions are never the same again, the Government of Canada now has a new capability with which it can intervene.

There is therefore an urgent need for the clarification of lead agencies in these types of interventions, as well as the appointment of a single Government of Canada integrating authority in the country of operation. Depending on the level of instability and Canada's involvement in the host nation, that responsibility could be held by the Canadian Ambassador to that country, a politician, an appointed senior civil

administrator, or a senior military commander. This person should in turn be made to answer to Ottawa, through a central mechanism that reports to the Privy Council or a National Security Council-type group, in order for the government to exercise a real whole of government approach. Accordingly, General Rupert Smith proposed that: "The directing set of hands may be one man or a few, but they must be of one mind and have the authority to act to achieve the desired result."²⁸ Without a lead agency, a single authority in theatre, and a central reporting mechanism, the promise of an effective whole of government intervention in fragile states will remain only a promise.

If the literature on the history of counter-insurgency is to be believed, the need for such an approach is not new. Therefore, significant effort from every department will be required for this shift to occur, a shift that has to address some of the deep cultural and institutional differences between each department. General Smith recognized this challenge.

Presently our institutions are structured like stovepipes . . . We need to have the ability to bring them together, at least at the theatre level and probably lower, so that their actions are directed by one set of hands and their actions are coherent. This applies to all ministries and military staffs: to persist with institutional thought patterns . . . is folly.²⁹

For the, CF this has to start with some changes to the way troop contribution to missions is planned. Senior planning staffs in the Strategic Joint Staff and the Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command have to consider the value that a team of strategic advisors can add to an operation. At the moment, these senior planning staffs, with the inputs from the Army, Navy and Air Force, devise force structures that respond to political and strategic guidance. By including different elements of Canada's government and working directly at improving the capacity of the host nation to govern itself, a strategic advisory team has the potential to reap huge rewards for a small investment.

Conclusion

The genesis of SAT-A, and the analysis of its immediate results shows the positive impact such a team can have. In the future, a SAT-like team could be deployed in conjunction with other Government of Canada activities and make a critical contribution to our success in intervening in weak states that require Canada's assistance. The Canadian Forces, with a strategic advisory team, have the ways and the means to participate in nation building in order to accomplish the government's ends. In the future, a small, adaptable and professional group of planners from DFAIT, DND, CIDA and other relevant agencies, working together in moving a host country towards good governance, will help Canada and the Canadian Forces achieve success.

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