

The Importance of Airpower in Supporting Irregular Warfare in Afghanistan

Col Bernie Willi, USAF

There's no doubt that this is the most difficult terrain that I've ever seen in 33 years, to actually walk across, operate in or to fight in, or, for that matter, to actually help the people in. Helicopters are just more than part and parcel of what we do each and every day. They are critical to almost every operation that we execute here in Afghanistan.

—Maj Gen Jeffrey Schloesser
Commander, Combined Joint Task Force 101–Afghanistan, 2009

Recently, the Department of Defense increased its emphasis on irregular warfare (IW), a concept difficult to define although most military professionals know it when they see it. Identifying IW as one of the department's core mission areas, the *Quadrennial Roles and Missions Review Report* of 2009 then defines it as “operations in which the joint force conducts protracted regional and global campaigns against state and non-state adversaries to subvert, coerce, attrite, and exhaust adversaries rather than defeat them through direct conventional military confrontation. Irregular warfare emphasizes winning the support of the relevant populations, promoting friendly political authority, and eroding adversary control, influence, and support.”¹ Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, more succinctly characterizes IW as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”²

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In the context of Operation Enduring Freedom, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is helping Afghanistan organize, train, and equip its forces to the benefit of the nascent Afghan military, the Afghan government, and, ultimately, the civilian populace. By conducting successful IW operations, the Afghan military gains self-confidence and encouragement from the NATO community. Moreover, by supporting these missions, the Afghan government demonstrates its legitimacy as the ruling power against the Taliban insurgency. Such operations highlight the insurgents' inability to provide significant benefits on par with those of the Afghan government that would tangibly improve the livelihood, security, and well-being of the predominantly rural Afghan masses.

As part of the Combined Air Power Transition Force and now the NATO Air Training Command–Afghanistan (NATC-A) from December 2009 to November 2010, I served as an air advisor to the Afghan air force (AAF). According to the Air Advisor Academy's charter, air advisors serve to “apply aviation expertise to assess, train, advise, assist, and equip foreign personnel in the development and application of their aviation resources to meet their national needs in support of U.S. interests.”³ Specifically, I helped AAF personnel understand the utility and importance of airpower—in particular, the employment of their Mi-17 helicopter force in support of Afghanistan's national objectives. During that year, I observed and participated in numerous missions with AAF crews that had a direct and beneficial effect on the lives of average Afghans. I also witnessed and engaged in numerous direct-action missions against Taliban forces. (This article does not address those operations, focusing instead on building partnerships and IW aspects of the NATC-A mission.)

The AAF is a highly visible representation of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—an administration that is struggling to establish its legitimacy among a far-flung and fiercely self-reliant population. Airpower in the form of the AAF's Mi-17s lets the government reach the people, no matter how remote their location, and assist them with their basic and humanitarian needs. This use of air-

power demonstrates government responsiveness and commitment that Afghans will not likely forget. More importantly, from a US perspective, facilitating this kind of unmistakable connectivity between the government and its population lies at the very center of NATO's strategy in Afghanistan. According to former secretary of defense Robert Gates, "Where possible, U.S. strategy is to employ indirect approaches—primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces—to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military intervention. 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."⁴

Although the US Air Force must use its finite financial resources primarily against a high-end, near-peer opponent, it should not consign IW to the history books. Our policy makers and planners must consider that future warfare will require long-term stability operations which include rebuilding the airpower capacity and capability of partner nations, as occurred in Germany, Japan, Korea, and Iraq. Remembering and implementing the IW lessons learned from previous conflicts could produce significant strategic success by eliminating the safe havens of our nation's adversaries and instigators of global conflicts in the future. Consequently, this article highlights the mission of the NATC-A and AAF as an example of how building our partner nation's airpower capacity supported strategic-level objectives defined by the Afghan government and NATO. Toward that end, it briefly examines the geographical nature of Afghanistan and its effect on aviation operations, the supporting organizational structure behind these efforts, and the ways in which the AAF has furthered national objectives by conducting IW operations.

Afghanistan's Geographical Challenges

A geographically unique area of the world, Afghanistan has some of the highest and most treacherous terrain anywhere (fig. 1).⁵ Tempera-

tures range from -50°F to 120°F in the most extreme locations. According to the *CIA World Factbook*, the country includes more than 250,000 square miles of desert, mountainous, and forested terrain. The north-eastern Wakhan Corridor boasts the highest mountains and the highest peak (Nowshak, at 24,557 feet). Generally in poor condition, the underdeveloped road system lacks high-quality land transportation routes; good airfields are sparse; and most remote locations have a very limited number of large airfields. The air transportation system includes 19 paved runways, 34 unpaved runways, and 11 certified heliports.⁶ The lack of infrastructure, a rural population (about half of which lives in areas physically inaccessible much of the year), and the gradually developing civil aviation system make helicopters vital to the transportation of goods and services throughout the country. For these same reasons, rotary-wing aircraft have proven a substantial asset in supporting IW operations in Afghanistan.

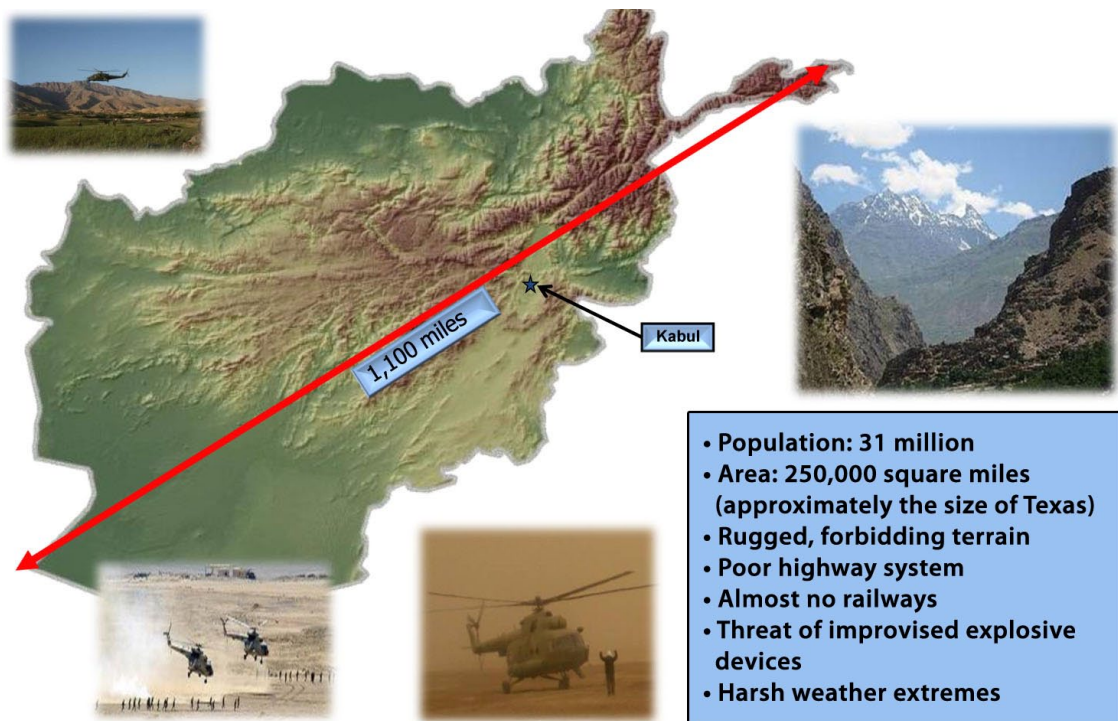


Figure 1. Characteristics of Afghanistan

Organization and Structure of the NATO Air Training Command–Afghanistan / Afghan Air Force

Part of the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, the NATC-A plays an important role in the current mission of building a partnership with the Afghan government. Officially, the NATC-A—headquartered at Camp Eggers in Kabul, Afghanistan, and organized similarly to a US Air Force wing as the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing—seeks to “set the conditions for a professional, fully independent and operationally capable Afghan ‘air force’ that meets the security requirements of Afghanistan today . . . and tomorrow.”⁷

Located at the Kabul International Airport, the wing includes three air expeditionary advisory groups at the airport, Kandahar Air Base, and Shin-dand Air Base, equipped with Alenia C-27, Mil Mi-17, and Mil Mi-35 aircraft. About 700 members strong, the NATC-A is home to members of the US Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force, as well as personnel from the Belgian, British, Canadian, Croatian, Czech Republic, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Jordanian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mongolian, and Portuguese militaries, together with Afghan interpreters, all supporting the NATC-A mission.⁸

According to the Afghan Ministry of Defense’s *Guidance for Operational Planning*, insurgent efforts to control the populace by means of intimidation and coercion remain the greatest threat to the authority of the government and the general public’s faith in democratic institutions.⁹ Given the present political and economic issues and the harsh operational environment of Afghanistan, the unique capabilities of the AAF’s rotary-wing aircraft figure prominently in executing IW operations. Efforts of the NATC-A abet the development of a sustainable training, maintenance, and operations program for the AAF and will help facilitate the orderly departure of US and coalition forces in the near future.

The mission of the AAF entails “provid[ing] trained and ready airmen and soldiers to execute critical tasks from the air in support of the Afghan National Army and when directed by the [Ministry of Defense] and General Staff, to support by air the civil authorities of Afghanistan

at all levels.”¹⁰ That mission includes transportation of the president and distinguished visitors, casualty evacuation, air mobility, training, and close air attack in support of the Afghan National Security Forces.¹¹ In reality, the AAF must be ready to assist with a myriad of tasks as directed by the Ministry of Defense.

Organizationally, the AAF functions as a distinct subdivision of the Afghan National Army, currently divided into six geographically assigned infantry corps and one capital division, supported by the single air force.¹² As of January 2011, the AAF had approximately 50 aircraft and 4,000 airmen (fig. 2). The air force remains on track to grow to a planned full strength of 146 aircraft and about 8,000 airmen. Its future inventory will consist of both rotary- and fixed-wing training aircraft as well as cargo and light attack platforms, an appropriate composition considering the fact that the US Department of Defense characterizes most of the AAF’s missions as IW. The AAF’s developing capabilities give it a significant asymmetrical advantage unmatched by Taliban forces, further bolstering the Afghan government’s claim of legitimacy.

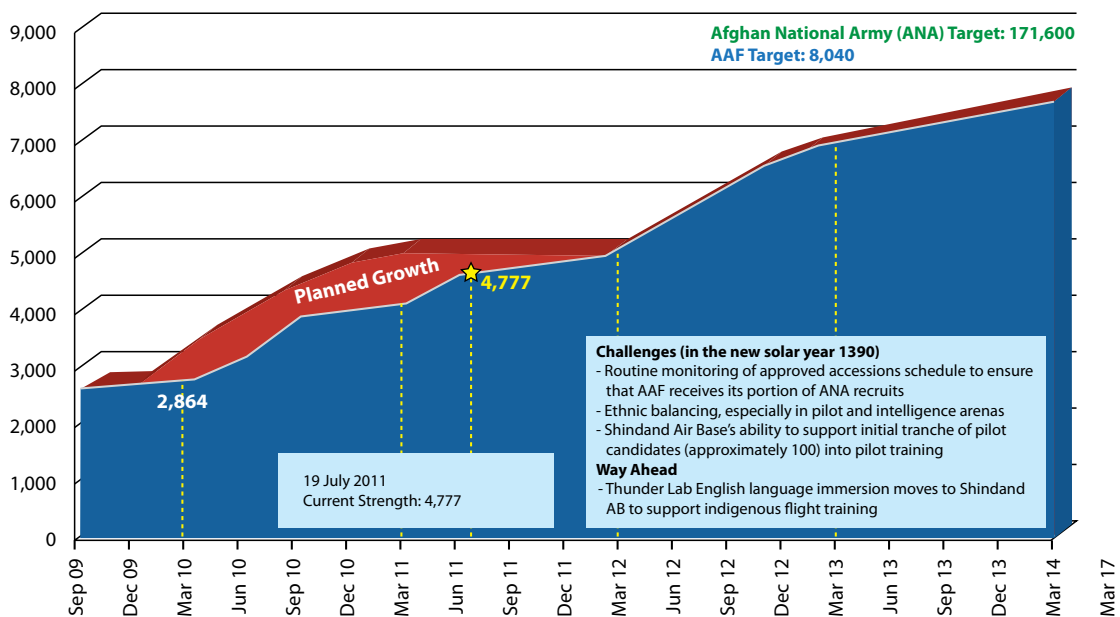


Figure 2. Strength of Afghanistan’s air force

Recent Irregular Warfare Operations by the Afghan Air Force

Disaster Relief

The Afghan government's *Guidance for Operational Planning* cites the importance of its successfully responding to natural disasters as a major factor in reducing vulnerability to internal and external threats.¹³ The Afghan Ministry of Defense also includes this capability among its strategic priorities. At no other time does the AAF's rotary-wing force shine brighter than when it conducts disaster relief operations.

In February 2010, heavy snows triggered deadly avalanches that killed some 150 people in the Salang Pass in north-central Afghanistan.¹⁴ Once notified of the tragedy, the AAF and NATO air advisors sprang into action using Mi-17s to fly soldiers and recovery equipment to the disaster location (at an elevation of 11,000 feet) (fig. 3). These quick actions rescued scores of Afghan civilians.



Figure 3. Salang rescue

The mission also recovered many people killed in the calamity, a noteworthy achievement in light of Muslims' sensitivity to the quick recovery and burial of their dead. The AAF fulfills a requirement of the Afghan National Security Forces to move soldiers killed in action from the battlefield to their final ancestral burial site within 48 hours of notification. It does so by using a combination of rotary- and fixed-

wing aircraft to ensure timeliness while retaining maximum capability for battlefield support. Further, the AAF has an obligation to recover and evacuate injured Afghan National Security Forces personnel, beginning mission execution within one hour of notification and delivering any wounded Afghan National Army soldier to a level-two (comprehensive trauma care) medical facility within five hours of notification. The AAF's transfer of patients throughout the country elicited an immensely favorable reaction from both those individuals and their families.

On 28 and 29 July 2010, severe flooding hit the northwest corner of Afghanistan and the surrounding area.¹⁵ Again, the AAF and NATC-A offered vital humanitarian assistance, making use of new Mi-17V5 aircraft—part of the US government's assistance to the Afghan military. To the credit of the Afghan leadership, it placed an Afghan public affairs cameraman on board one of the recovery platforms to document the rescue operations. On 28 July, the crews performed rescues in the eastern Laghman and Nangarhar provinces, saving 200 local nationals from the floodwaters. After completing the rescues for that day, the crews intended to return to Kabul, but poor weather forced them to spend the evening at the nearby air base in Jalalabad. At first light of the next day, the crews resumed rescue operations in Nangarhar Province. After recovering 40 more people, they returned to Jalalabad to refuel for the return trip to Kabul.

At that time, the governor of Kunar requested that the AAF rescue more people from the floodwaters in the Kunar Valley, a location notorious for routine attacks from Taliban small arms and rocket propelled grenades against AAF helicopters. Nevertheless, the combined Afghan/US crews began recovering those in need of lifesaving assistance. Notably, during these missions a large Taliban flag could be seen to the east of the recovery zone where the crews off-loaded the recovered personnel. Afghan civilians on scene informed the crews that this flag served as an unambiguous signal that the Taliban was observing the recovery operations in the area. Despite their unmistakably close proximity, Taliban forces opted not to attack the aircraft and crews that

day because of the essential assistance provided by the AAF to them and their families.

Moreover, during these missions Afghan civilians took pictures of the event with their cell phone cameras. Despite the extremely poor weather and high-threat environment, the crews received credit from NATO's International Security Assistance Force for rescuing almost 2,100 Afghan civilians from the flood and minimizing loss of life.¹⁶ The fact that nearby Taliban foot soldiers stood down while AAF helicopters conducted rescue operations reflects the impact of the missions.

These same floods resulted in thousands perishing in nearby Pakistan. Flush with confidence gained by completing the formidable operation in Afghanistan, the AAF deployed to Pakistan the following month to help with the multinational flood-relief efforts there, adding support to the Afghan government's claim of legitimacy with both the Afghan populace and neighboring states (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in Pakistan

Humanitarian Support

With the help of the NATC-A, AAF helicopters also lent extensive support to several humanitarian missions. NATC-A members and AAF leadership developed a working relationship with two humanitarian organizations—Global Roots and the Central Asian Institute (made famous by the book *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson).¹⁷ This team began planning helicopter airlift missions to expedite construction of

an orphanage in the remote Badakhshan Province and delivered school supplies, typically donated by US and international civilian groups, to the towns of Bamiyan, Kabul, and Panjshir.

During these missions, members of both the NATC-A and the AAF interacted with local men, women, and children, who saw that the Afghan military could operate freely in most areas of the country (fig 5). Perhaps more importantly, the operations demonstrated that the Afghan government and coalition partners could act as agents of beneficial change. Personal contact with the Afghans offered tangible proof of the altruistic motives of the government and AAF, further discrediting Taliban propaganda describing the government and coalition partners as “monsters” and adding credibility to the central government’s claim of legitimacy. Further, these humanitarian missions gave the participating NATC-A mentors and AAF aircrews a sense of personal fulfillment.



Figure 5. Supporting humanitarian missions in Afghanistan

Election Support

AAF helicopters also assisted in ballot distribution and collection for Afghanistan in the Wolesi Jirga (Afghan Parliament) election in September 2010, delivering ballots to select, relatively secure locations throughout Afghanistan (fig. 6).¹⁸ Although a few locations had too much enemy

activity to visit, most areas did receive election ballots. In one instance, in the vicinity of the village of Dawlat Shah, Taliban forces attacked AAF aircraft with small arms and rocket propelled grenades as they attempted to deliver ballots to the village. After the successful delivery, the Taliban warned the AAF not to return to retrieve the ballots.



Figure 6. Election support

Undaunted by the threats, NATC-A mentors formulated a plan to execute the mission and recover the ballots under cover of darkness. (Only a few AAF aircrews had qualified to fly the Mi-17 using night vision goggles, and they were assigned exclusively to the Presidential Airlift Squadron.) After hearing a briefing on the potentially dangerous mission, the AAF crew members eagerly volunteered and became part of the planning cell. Despite poor weather and the Taliban threats, two AAF Mi-17s, escorted by two US Army AH-64s, recovered the ballots successfully.

Lt Col Qudratullah Hotaki, one of the AAF pilots who flew on the mission, remarked that in his 30 years of experience with helicopters (which included flying with the Russians and Northern Alliance), he had neither seen nor participated in anything of this magnitude or complexity. The mission showcased the rapidly escalating operational capabilities of the AAF, thanks to the NATC-A's training, support, and mentorship. Similarly, according to Brig Gen Asadullah Hashimi, commander of the Kabul Wing Operations Group, despite the difficulty of the mission and the presence of national controversy (with respect to the fairness of the elections), it was good for the Afghan people to see the AAF executing such a complicated operation. He also observed

that as Afghanistan gained more experience holding elections, the process would become more transparent and less challenging. Overall, the AAF's support of these elections had a major strategic impact on the Afghan populace insofar as it illustrated the growing competence and proficiency of the Afghan military and government.

Banking

In September 2010, the government of Afghanistan turned to the AAF's helicopter force to assist with a problem affecting the country's economic structure. Nervous Afghan depositors had withdrawn the equivalent of \$180 million from the Kabul Bank over the course of two days.¹⁹ Some individuals predicted a collapse of the country's financial system unless the Afghan government and the United States moved quickly to stabilize the bank. Should the depositors continue to withdraw their money at that rate, the Kabul Bank almost certainly would fail, undermining confidence in the basic financial system the Afghans had been trying to build with American help.

The Afghan government determined that cash deliveries to banks throughout Afghanistan would solve the problem. Because security concerns made land transportation untenable, the government tasked the AAF to make the deliveries. Most of the destinations did not have access to a nearby runway; therefore, AAF helicopters were pressed into service. Admittedly, the strategic effect of a Kabul Bank collapse is hard to estimate since most Afghans do not use banks in the same way as the citizens of industrialized nations, but keeping the bank solvent certainly maintained the Afghan government's legitimacy. Its failure would have served as additional propaganda for the Taliban insurgency—a sign of the government's inability to care for its people's basic needs.

Conclusion

The unique environmental, political, and topographical nature of Afghanistan lends itself to extensive use of rotary-wing aircraft in sup-

port of numerous IW missions. Current US strategy depends upon a strong, effective central government (which Afghanistan has never had) that is visible and relevant to a population scattered across a huge area and therefore difficult to reach. Development of Afghan airpower—a rotary-wing capability in particular—provides a direct, uniquely powerful illustration of such a government in Afghanistan. Specifically, as noted in Field Manual 3-24 / Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, “the government [must secure] its citizens continuously, [sustain] and [build] legitimacy through effective governance, . . . effectively [isolate] the insurgency, and . . . manage and meet the expectations of the nation’s entire population.”²⁰ In the case of NATC-A/AAF rotary-wing operations, successful mission execution helped set the conditions to win popular support of the citizens through security, address the root causes of discontent, and favorably influence the local populace, thereby attaining legitimacy.

The rescue of a few thousand Afghans certainly might incline those individuals less committed to the insurgency to shift their allegiance to the Afghan government. The video taken by the Afghan public affairs officer, the cell phone pictures taken by civilians, and the school supplies delivered by AAF helicopters might also influence a tribal chief to realign his tribe’s loyalty.

Clearly, building the Afghan government’s airpower capacity lies well within our national security interests. It is equally clear that the AAF represents a requisite component of IW operations in Afghanistan. The NATC-A mentorship program that abetted missions supporting strategic-level goals, described in this article, deserves nurturing and maintaining. As noted by President Obama in 2009, “a campaign against extremism will not succeed with bullets or bombs alone.”²¹ This partnership capacity holds the key to the ultimate strategic objective—a smooth and peaceful transfer of security duties to the Afghan military as planned for 2014. ★

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