Former Secretary of State John Kerry raises hands with Afghan presidential candidates Ashraf Ghani, left, and Abdullah Abdullah, right, at United Nations Mission Headquarters in Kabul, on July 12, 2014, after announcing deal to settle election dispute (U.S. Department of State)

Independent and Credible
Advising Afghan Security Forces During the 2019 Presidential Election

By Forest Pierce

The 2019 Afghan presidential election presented a unique opportunity to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Resolute Support (RS) mission. Specifically, RS leaders needed to align the coalition to support election security operations while reinforcing the independence and

Major Forest Pierce, USA, is a Functional Area 59 Strategic Plans Officer.

credibility of the Afghan-led process. Assessing this challenge required knowledge of recent Afghan history, the roles of election stakeholders, and the capabilities of the Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF).

RS supported the Afghans by advising the ANDSF at the institutional and corps levels on joint security operations to achieve unity of effort. The ANDSF delivered independent security operations on election day by way of developing a

flexible operational framework to adapt to changes in the environment. The Afghans implemented joint plans, realigned coordination centers at echelon, conducted national-level rehearsals, and executed a layered security concept to improve outcomes. ANDSF senior leaders placed highly competent principals and their staff at coordination centers and leveraged lateral communication between the services to improve decisionmaking. Ultimately, RS advising

Afghan Air Force security forces member mans base perimeter guardhouse, December 17, 2018 (U.S. Air Force/Clayton Cupit)

efforts highlighted five security force assistance (SFA) imperatives outlined in Joint Publication (JP) 3-20, *Security Cooperation*:

- understand the operational environment
- ensure unity of effort
- support legitimacy
- manage information
- emphasize sustainability.[1]

The RS experience during the 2019 Afghan election illustrates valuable lessons learned, as SFA activities continue to remain within the purview of the U.S. joint force for building partner-nation (PN) capacity.

The 2014 and 2018 Elections

An examination of the previous two Afghan elections reveals the potential challenges and opportunities presented in 2019. The 2014 presidential election generated a political crisis followed by an uneasy compromise. In Afghan elec-tions, the people select the president by absolute majority vote through a two-round system. In 2014, after failing to achieve an absolute majority, the two remaining candidates—Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah—entered a runoff election. While Abdullah achieved a significant lead over Ghani in the first-round results, Ghani won more votes during the runoff. Secretary of State John Kerry mediated a resolu-tion between the candidates after both public unrest and accusations of fraud threatened domestic stability. This com-promise produced the National Unity Government with Ghani as president and Abdullah as chief executive.[2]

Most concerns from 2014 centered on technical incompetence and public security interests. Public polling revealed a widespread sense of insecurity, distrust in the electoral process, and inadequate quantities of female officials at polling centers. Rampant voter fraud produced nearly 1.5 million invalid votes through a combination of ballot stuffing and proxy voting.[3] Also, the International Security Assistance Force assisted the ANDSF by delivering election materials to polling centers due to logistics shortcomings. The public did not perceive this election as legitimate partially due to the coali-tion's direct involvement.[4]

The Afghans implemented changes before the 2018 parliamentary election to address these critical issues. Fraud reduction measures included aligning registered voters to their local polling centers, introducing biometric voter verification devices, developing anticoun-terfeit ballots, and implementing clear election violation laws. Likewise, the security ministries issued guidance to the ANDSF to remain impartial. The NATO coalition advised the ANDSF in order to minimize perceptions of interference and to enable the first Afghan-led elec-tion in modern history. Unfortunately, most ANDSF members conducted elec-tion security operations away from their

assigned polling centers and, due to antifraud registration laws, could not vote. Nevertheless, the ANDSF maintained political neutrality, and their security operations reduced enemy attacks compared with 2014. Although not incident-free, millions of citizens turned out to vote, defying Taliban efforts to disrupt the election.[5]

Political controversy appeared again before the 2019 presidential election. Election postponements in April and July shifted the election day to September 28, 2019, while President Ghani's 5-year term officially concluded on May 22, 2019. However, Afghanistan's supreme court ruled that Ghani could remain in office and govern through the election period. Ghani's political opponents seized on this controversial ruling by painting his administration as illegitimate. Also, a possible U.S.-Taliban peace agreement loomed over the campaign season until President Donald Trump abruptly canceled peace talks on September 7, 2019, following a Taliban attack in Kabul that killed coalition members.[6] This U.S. policy change shifted Afghan and RS focus from peace talks back to election preparations.

Election Stakeholders

RS planners needed to understand the critical organizations, relationships, and influence pathways to advise Afghan planning efforts. The Election Support Group consisted of donor nations—Australia, the European Union, Germany, Italy, Japan, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—that contributed funding through the United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan (UNAMA). Under UNAMA, the UN Electoral Support Team provided technical advice to the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC)—the constitutionally mandated institution responsible for administering elections.[7] Finally, the Elections Complaints Commission worked alongside the IEC to ensure transparency, preserve voters' rights, and adjudicate complaints.[8] Other vital organizations included the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of

Women's Affairs, which disbursed election funds and recruited female officials, respectively.

The ANDSF, known as the "security pillars," provided security and logistics support. The Ministry of Interior Affairs (MOI) served as lead, directing the national police to provide election security. The Ministry of Defense (MOD) supported MOI efforts by controlling military forces and assuming responsibility to transport election materials. The National Directorate of Security provided intelligence collection through a network of agents. Last, the provincial governors, chiefs of police, and army corps commanders integrated security planning at the regional level. The security pillars needed to conduct iterative joint planning and rehearsals to guarantee unity of effort across the country.

The RS mission leveraged key individuals and organizations to advise Afghan stakeholders through touchpoints at every echelon. General Austin Miller, USA, commander of the RS mission, maintained relationships with Afghan government and security institution leaders to ascertain Afghan readiness and direct coalition efforts. Sir Nicholas Kay, the NATO senior civilian representative, communicated with Afghan government officials and the international community to align RS efforts with NATO's political goals. The Ministerial Advisory Groups for Interior (MAG-I) and Defense (MAG-D) directly mentored MOI and MOD officials. RS election support planners attended ANDSF meetings and led working groups with joint, interagency, and multinational partners. Finally, the Train Advise and Assist Commands (TAACs) maintained relationships with regional ANDSF leaders and provincial governors. RS advisors at echelon attended Afghan-led security *shura*s in the weeks before election security planning—reassuring their reliable partners at the point of need.

Planning and Preparation

The Afghan security pillars and RS advisors began planning in earnest to meet election requirements. In early July, the MOI and MOD published Joint Plan

232, which directed regional police and army commanders to develop localized security concepts.[9] On July 23, the MOD hosted key ministries, national and regional security leaders, and the IEC during a senior-level rehearsal. RS advisors observed as their Afghan counterparts articulated a combined plan focused on three distinct phases: preelection, election day, and postelection. After this rehearsal, the security pillars issued Joint Plan 2025, which provided a detailed threat assessment, codified specific tasks, outlined the joint command structure, and refined the operational timeline.[10] This joint plan directed regional ANDSF leaders to conduct local rehearsals with provincial stakeholders.

The Afghans planned to protect polling centers using the "Rings of Steel" concept that was successfully implemented during the 2018 parliamentary election. This concept encompassed three overlapping security belts centered on a polling center. The first security belt included Afghan police—with National Directorate of Security intelligence support—securing the immediate area around the polling center. The second security belt involved the army establishing an outer cordon to protect the first belt. The third security belt incorporated both Afghan army and special forces disruption patrols beyond the second belt. The security pillars scaled their assigned forces at each belt according to local threat assessments. The ANDSF planned to emplace Rings of Steel around each polling center in the week before election day.

The Afghans utilized a national command and control architecture to synchronize election security operations. As the lead ministry, the MOI's National Police Coordination Center maintained situational awareness through lateral communication from the MOD's National Military Coordination Center and reporting from regional Operations Coordination Centers. Two collocated national coordination centers, the Central Special Operations Coordination Cell (CSOCC) and Combined Situation Awareness Room (CSAR), also complemented joint coordination. The

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., meets with U.S. Army General John W. Nicholson, Jr., former commander of NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and U.S. Forces–Afghanistan, while visiting Train Advise Assist Command–North, in Mazar-i-Sharif, March 20, 2018 (DOD/Dominique A. Pineiro)

CSOCC planned special operations missions, while the CSAR coordinated ANDSF operations and directed kinetic strikes. The Afghans planned to assign competent leaders and staff to these coordination centers to ensure effective communication.

The ANDSF conducted two final national-level rehearsals in September—the national rehearsal on September 4 and the conditions check on September 21. The MOI held both rehearsals and hosted the Afghan ministries, security pillars, and international observers to participate. ANDSF senior leaders moderated each event and disseminated guidance to subordinate commanders through a video teleconference (VTC) system. The conditions check provided Afghan and RS leadership one final opportunity to assess readiness before the ANDSF deployed units according to the Rings of Steel concept on September 22. Afghan leadership used these two

rehearsals to synchronize operations, outline the command and control architecture, and identify risks prior to execution.

Election Operations Begin

Preelection day operations focused on reassuring Afghan voters by deploying thousands of Afghan security forces as well as ensuring the secure distribution of sensitive election material (SEM). The Afghans needed to transport almost 500 tons of SEM across 34 provinces in less than a month, from August 31 to September 27—a massive security and logistics effort. ANDSF leaders remained focused on securing ground SEM movements, while Taliban leaders instructed their fighters to prevent the election by any means.[11] Prior to execution, RS advisors hosted working groups with the IEC and security pillars to align Afghan air and ground assets against delivery requirements. During

execution, the ANDSF coordinated movement operations at national coordination centers and ensured that IEC representatives traveled with SEM shipments to maintain a chain of custody.

Enemy activity immediately complicated SEM distribution. In early September, enemy attacks along northern ground routes forced SEM convoys to return to Kabul. Based on this setback, the Afghan air force (AAF) began contingency planning in order to transport almost 23,000 pounds of SEM via aircraft to the northern provinces. The AAF quickly executed this additional movement without adversely affecting the delivery timeline. Meanwhile, RS advisors struggled to maintain awareness of SEM delivery due to the limited coalition footprint across the country. Advisors bridged this information gap through two approaches: First, MAG-I and MAG-D advisors reviewed reports from national coordination centers, and,

second, TAACs submitted daily status reports from regional coordination centers. RS planners merged these dual reporting chains each evening to generate a common operating picture. Armed with this understanding, RS leaders could gauge the Afghans' SEM distribution status relative to the original plan.

On September 22, the ANDSF began to establish the Rings of Steel in each province. These cordons safeguarded local SEM storage sites in addition to securing polling centers. Meanwhile, Afghan special forces and the AAF conducted shaping operations to disrupt enemy forces through targeted strikes. TAACs communicated with Afghan coordination centers, corps commanders, and provincial chiefs of police to keep them updated on the security situation. On September 27, the IEC—based on MOI threat assessments—announced the closure of roughly 8 percent of polling centers across the country to reduce the risk to voters.[12] That same night, the ANDSF completed SEM delivery to each polling center according to the planned timeline.

Election Day

As polls opened on September 28 the ANDSF held its security posture, while RS advisors maintained communication with ANDSF senior leaders. The ANDSF conducted 13 special operations and 13 airstrikes to target enemy forces preparing for attacks just beyond the security belts.[13] Afghan security cordons thwarted numerous direct attacks, and, subsequently, the enemy mainly used indirect fire to disrupt voting.[14] While the number of enemy attacks increased compared with the 2018 parliamentary election, these attacks proved less effective and resulted in fewer casualties. General Miller noted that the ANDSF took the lead in security operations and performed well due to the coordination between the security ministries and civil authorities.[15]

The Afghan army chief of the general staff, Lieutenant General Waziri, conducted a morning and evening azimuth check on election day with the national coordination centers and subordinate

commanders. Using VTC, each corps commander provided an update on local security, voting atmospherics, and areas of risk. Likewise, each coordination center described ongoing offensive operations and provided recommendations to mitigate corps commanders' concerns. ANDSF leaders also discussed the operational transition to SEM retrieval once voting concluded that evening. In fact, the Special Mission Wing commander provided his helicopter fleet to assist army units retrieving SEM that night. Advisors remotely observed the VTCs and disseminated discussion points across the RS mission to create a shared understanding and align enablers to support Afghan operations. Overall, the security pillars expressed confidence in the security situation and their ability to shift to retrieval operations that evening.

Postelection Operations

The Afghans immediately transitioned to SEM retrieval operations in the early hours of September 29. The IEC's ambitious retrieval timeline aimed to return approximately 160,000 pounds of SEM—consisting of the biometric voter verification devices and tally sheets—to the IEC headquarters in Kabul within 7 days on October 5. Similar to distribution, Afghan security forces escorted each SEM movement, while IEC representatives maintained custody during shipment. First, IEC workers prepared ballot boxes and then shipped these items to secure district centers. The next step involved moving district center shipments to the provincial storage centers. Last, the Afghans consolidated provincial shipments for air and ground movements back to Kabul. Any delay in retrieval could slow vote tallying in Kabul, affecting the date of preliminary results and a possible runoff election. The ANDSF needed to maintain tempo during ballot retrieval, especially since imminent winter weather would make roads impassable and limit helicopter flights.

Nine days later, the Afghans effectively returned all SEM to Kabul. However, the ANDSF did not meet the original October 5 timeline as harsh

winter weather delayed northern air shipments. Despite this setback, by the seventh day, the Afghans retrieved 31 of 34 provincial SEM shipments back to Kabul. This achievement alone enabled the IEC vote counters in Kabul to continue their work without interruption. Similar to distribution, RS advisors maintained awareness by merging the Afghan coordination center and TAAC reports to assess progress. Overall, the ANDSF performed admirably during retrieval—particularly the AAF, which transported 51 percent of SEM during 16 provincial-level air movements.

Themes from the 2019 Presidential Election

The ANDSF provided election security operations through planning, coordination, and senior leader emphasis. RS advising throughout this process enabled the ANDSF to deliver an Afghan-led independent election. Reviewing the 2019 Afghan presidential election reveals several themes.

First, RS personnel advised reliable Afghan partners at the point of need to enable their success. MAG-I and MAG-D advisors assisted the national coordination centers in improving reporting and developing an ANDSF common operating picture. Frequent engagements between RS and ANDSF senior leaders enabled the Afghans to refine operational guidance to subordinate forces based on changing conditions. RS planners provided white papers to Kabul-based embassies and international organizations, empowering these entities to engage UNAMA and the IEC with advisor analysis. Additionally, RS planners collaborated with ANDSF planners, ministries, and the IEC during working groups—assisting participants in identifying areas for further review. All these iterative engagements assisted Afghan planners in aligning personnel, resources, and attention toward planning priorities.

Second, the ANDSF continue to improve their ability to execute joint operations. The security pillars published joint plans and conducted three national-level rehearsals to synchronize operations. While conducting simultaneous offensive

A-10 Thunderbolt II assigned to 163rd Fighter Squadron flies mission over Afghanistan, May 28, 2018 (U.S. Air Force/Corey Hook)

operations, the ANDSF used their organic air and ground lift assets to distribute and retrieve SEM across the 34 provinces. The AAF rapidly reallocated aircraft to transport an additional 115 tons of SEM to the northern provinces without extending the distribution timeline. Moreover, the Afghans recovered all SEM within 9 days through coordinated ground and air movements. The Rings of Steel concept facilitated voter access to polling centers and prevented enemy forces from conducting high-profile attacks. Compared with the 2014 presidential election, the ANDSF displayed an improved ability to conduct election operations and secure the voting population.[16]

Third, ANDSF senior leaders reinforced joint communication and coordination. Within joint plans and rehearsals, the security pillars outlined the communication architecture and specific responsibilities of national coordination centers. The Afghans also emphasized the importance of lateral communication at the national level between the National Police Coordination Center, National Military Coordination Center, CSAR, and CSOCC. Before election day, the Afghans collocated the CSAR and CSOCC to improve joint planning and facilitate rapid decisionmaking. At every echelon, the ANDSF placed key leaders and staff at their coordination centers to bolster these organizations with competent individuals. These initiatives strengthened interaction between the security pillars and directly contributed to operational success.

Fourth, political controversy following election day overshadowed ANDSF accomplishments. International observers noted that polling center workers did not consistently follow voter verification procedures, and many returned ballots contained inconsistencies.[17] The subsequent dispute forced the IEC's decision to count only biometrically verified ballots, invalidating nearly 300,000 votes. Abdullah's campaign protested the announcement, claiming that the IEC's ruling primarily affected regions consisting of Abdullah's political base.[18] After months of delays and audits, the IEC proclaimed Ghani as the first-round victor with 50.6 percent of the vote, and Abdullah quickly declared the results fraudulent. Confusion followed when Ghani and Abdullah each held presidential inaugurations on March 9, 2020—shortly after the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement on February 29, 2020.[19] After months of negotiations, both parties signed a power-sharing agreement on May 17, 2020, whereby Ghani retained the presidency and Abdullah obtained leadership of the newly created High Council of National Reconciliation.[20] Despite ANDSF efforts to deliver a reasonably secure election, the ensuing political crisis tarnished government legitimacy and threatened Afghanistan's stability.

Lessons for Security Force Assistance

JP 3-20 outlines seven SFA imperatives that promote capable and competent partner-nation security forces.[21] The RS experience highlights five of these SFA

imperatives: Understand the operational environment, ensure unity of effort, support legitimacy, manage information, and emphasize sustainability. A joint task force that implements these imperatives during SFA operations will likely improve a PN force's ability to provide security when needed.

First, a joint task force must *understand the operational environment* by identifying all actors influencing the environment in order to define the goals and methods for developing PN security forces and their institutions.[22] RS endeavored to understand the environment by identifying the key international and PN stakeholders within the election process. RS advisors established relationships with nonmilitary organizations—such as the Election Support Group, UNAMA, and the IEC—to understand election mechanics and stakeholder concerns. These connections proved invaluable, as RS advisors worked alongside ANDSF planners as they developed the Afghan security and SEM distribution plans. Likewise, RS advisors leveraged relationships with reliable Afghan partners to gauge ANDSF capabilities, limitations, and challenges. Armed with this knowledge, advisors collaborated with nonmilitary organizations and the ANDSF to ensure the feasibility of the Afghans' election security plan. Ultimately, the joint task force should recognize that the operational environment will continually change as PN security forces, domestic organizations, international actors, and enemy forces shape it.

Second, a joint task force needs to *ensure unity of effort* during SFA operations to align efforts from multiple organizations, including those outside its control, and to avoid confusion.[23] RS leadership ensured unity of effort at national and regional levels by nesting coalition initiatives to support the Afghan-led process. At the national level, RS advisors interfaced with Afghan ministries and participated in Kabul-based working groups to align joint, interagency, and multinational efforts. At the regional level, the TAACs advised provincial governors and local ANDSF leaders as the Afghans refined their provincial security

plans. RS headquarters informed subordinate headquarters by disseminating notes from Afghan planning sessions and synchronizing advising tasks through mission orders. RS maintained unity of effort by implementing a continuous planning process at echelon and by disseminating key information rapidly across the formation. Ensuring unity of effort remains a persistent challenge during SFA activities; however, the joint task force can mitigate risk by influencing PN security forces to focus on the essential areas that will produce the greatest impact.

Third, a joint task force should *support legitimacy* by developing competent security forces that contribute to the lawful governance of the PN's population.[24] RS supported legitimacy by reinforcing the authority of the Afghan security ministries and the ANDSF to deliver election security. RS leaders affirmed Afghan ownership as the ANDSF determined their approach for allocating resources, prioritizing organic assets, and mitigating risk. For example, the ANDSF Rings of Steel concept layered the unique capabilities of each security service to facilitate voter access at polling centers. RS advisors observed as their Afghan partners led three national-level election rehearsals that incorporated the key ministries, ANDSF leaders, the IEC, and diplomatic attendees. Importantly, international observers participated in the two final rehearsals to verify that the security plan adhered to the rule of law and ensured transparency. Afghan joint plans underscored transparency by directing the ANDSF to maintain political neutrality and focus on protecting the population at polling centers. RS underpinned legitimacy by supporting the Afghan-led operation and remaining in an advisory role. The joint task force can emphasize legitimacy by encouraging the PN's security forces to take the lead whenever possible, reinforcing its competence in the eyes of its members and the PN population.

Fourth, a joint task force must *manage information* by incorporating inputs from PN security forces and multinational partners, while coordinating information themes and messages to mitigate propaganda efforts by hostile forces.[25] RS

managed information received from both Afghan coordination centers and internal coalition reports. ANDSF leaders codified the Afghan command and control structure during rehearsals to identify each coordination center's roles and responsibilities. The ANDSF underscored the critical role of the coordination centers by placing competent personnel at the national and regional centers. This initiative paid dividends as the coordination centers maintained situational awareness about SEM distribution, election day operations, and SEM retrieval. RS advisors bridged information gaps by reviewing daily Afghan reports from national and regional coordination centers to assess the Afghan SEM distribution and retrieval status. Advisors in Kabul consolidated Afghan reports to create a common operating picture for distribution across the RS enterprise, enabling the subordinate TAACs to focus their advising efforts. Additionally, advisors participated in ANDSF security briefings over a VTC system—facilitating real-time information exchange between RS and ANDSF leaders on election day. During this complex operation, RS information management empowered advisors to focus their efforts by identifying the point of need. Effective information management becomes critical for the joint task force as it must receive, assess, and leverage relevant input from both multinational sources and PN security forces.

Fifth, a joint task force should *emphasize sustainability* by managing its ability to deliver SFA activities throughout the operation and the PN security forces' ability to support their capabilities independently over time.[26] RS prioritized sustainability by providing persistent advising while emphasizing the ANDSF's capacity to continue operations. Any shortfall in Afghan operational sustainment could tarnish the legitimacy of the election, especially if RS needed to intervene to provide election security or SEM distribution. Therefore, RS advisors continually engaged their ANDSF counterparts to develop Afghan solutions to the election security challenge. This approach encouraged Afghan planners to holistically assess the situation, determine their available combat power, and allocate

personel and resources accordingly. RS placed advisors at national coordination centers to reinforce these Afghan nodes as they directed forces, distributed supplies, and identified areas of need. The Afghans demonstrated flexibility to adapt and continue operations, particularly when the AAF delivered SEM to the northern provinces after ground travel became infeasible. Emphasizing sustainability means that the joint task force must broaden its continuous advising efforts to bolster independent PN security force operations.

Conclusion

On election day, the ANDSF executed independent security operations through joint planning, effective communication, rehearsals at echelon, and fully engaged senior leadership. RS focused advising at the institutional and corps levels to align all efforts, enabling the ANDSF to develop a joint security plan that blunted many enemy attacks.[27] However, the subsequent political crisis eclipsed the ANDSF's achievements and placed future stability in doubt. Overall, RS advisors recognized that the security pillars continue to improve their ability to conduct joint operations and support Afghan institutions.

The SFA imperatives outlined in JP 3-20 capture many of the lessons learned by the RS mission during the 2019 election. A comprehensive understanding of the operational environment enables the joint task force to account for all actors that shape the environment and to develop an approach that assists PN security forces and their institutions. Ensuring unity of effort necessitates continuous engagement by the joint task force to synchronize efforts from the PN's security forces, institutions, and key interagency organizations. The joint task force must support legitimacy by influencing the PN's security forces to take the lead during operations, reinforcing its role as the population's security provider. Effective information management remains critical as the joint task force incorporates reports from both multinational sources and PN security forces. Finally, the joint task force must ensure that it can consistently

support SFA activities and that PN security forces can sustain their independent operations. The lessons learned from advising experiences will remain relevant to the U.S. joint force as it continues to build PN capacity in areas of crisis through SFA activities. **JFQ**

Notes

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