



REFORMING ANSF METRICS:

Improving the CUAT System

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The new Commanders Unit Assessment Tool (CUAT) for measuring the capabilities of the ANSF represents a significant improvement over the old Capability Milestone (CM) system. The old system was too rigid, too narrowly quantitative, and measured only a handful of relatively unimportant metrics. It overstated ANSF capabilities, yet it was often used uncritically as an indicator for ANSF progress by policymakers and analysts alike.

The new CUAT system is far more flexible, incorporates better metrics, and is much more narrative-based. While clearly an improvement, the CUAT does not correct many of the fundamental problems of the old CM system, and its very flexibility may create some new problems. The CUAT system was instituted earlier this year, and no doubt assessors in the field, NTM-A, IJC and the IDC are still tailoring it and working out the kinks. This memo represents a first impression of its strengths and weaknesses, and suggests several areas for improvement.

The Good

The CUAT system is a clear improvement over the old CM system. The main factors tracked in the CUAT are Leadership, Operations, Intelligence, Logistics, Equipping, Personnel, Maintenance, Communications, Training & Education, and Partnering. The old system tracked fewer factors and did so in a far more rigid manner. The CUAT's addition of a section on Partnering, including the Partnered Strength of a unit, is a great improvement, as the CM system ignored partnering altogether.

These factors are not only tracked on an expanded 5 point scale, but are tracked through short subjective narratives that assessors may write for each factor. This feature is another significant improvement, allowing assessors to bring up issues that do not fit neatly into a quantitative scale. The "Key Issues" section also adds flexibility to the CUAT.

The flexibility and space for subjective narratives make the CUAT an excellent tool for handling the diversity of the ANSF, which varies wildly from unit to unit, and across the regions of Afghanistan. National-level metrics in general in Afghanistan can be highly misleading, as so much of the most important developments are at the local level. The subjective narratives of the CUAT allow for this diversity, and let assessors bring up key problems that would have gone unnoticed under the old system.

The Bad

Unfortunately, The CUAT does not correct many of the problems of its predecessor. The CUAT is still a new system, and its flexibility may overcome some of these problems. Nonetheless, there are a number of issues that plagued the CM system that seem likely to continue in the CUAT:

- 1. Loyalty** is one of the single most important factors in assessing any military unit. The difficulty in tracking this is only surpassed by its importance. After all, what is the point of a superbly trained, equipped, and manned unit if it ends up joining the enemy? Many Afghans have multiple loyalties, and ANA/ANP personnel are no exception. All of these loyalties need to be tracked. Almost all senior leaders in the MoD are part of one of several patronage networks, most of which are ethnically based. These networks filter down to the lower ranks and need to be assessed in terms of loyalties to tribe, power brokers, and other elements outside the ANSF. Whether a unit or senior officer is loyal to the central government, an ethnic group, a patronage network, or anyone else, this needs to be carefully tracked and is far more important than many of the other CUAT/CM metrics. While the narrative structure may allow assessors to track loyalty, this factor should be given far more emphasis. Many analysts fear that explicitly tracking loyalty will cause friction with the ANSF, as ANSF officers have access to CUAT ratings. This is a valid and important concern, but does not mean that loyalty should simply be ignored. Whether loyalty thus has to be tracked in a classified annex to the CUAT, or some other forum -- it is far too important to ignore.
- 2. The CUAT does not adequately keep track of Unit History.** While it does track the number and type of operations a unit has led or participated in, this is not a substitute for a real unit history metric. An assessor may discuss unit history in the narrative sections, but he or she may also opt not to. The importance of this metric warrants its own section on the CUAT form. As a major part of the CUAT, each unit, regardless of its specialty or size, needs a detailed historical narrative, beginning at unit generation. The best way to predict how well a unit *will* perform is to look at how well it *already has* performed.
- 3. The five-level ANSF rating system** is flawed. The old CM system used four levels, while the new CUAT uses five. This is an improvement, as it gives the new system greater depth in describing the range of capabilities in the ANSF. Unfortunately, the differences between the old and new rating systems are not being adequately briefed to assessors, and there are likely to be serious problems in switching to the CUAT's 5-level scale.

The highest CUAT level, colored green, is defined as “Independent: Unit is capable of planning, executing, and sustaining the full spectrum of its missions without assistance from Coalition Forces.” This is a completely unachievable standard in Afghanistan. Even in the unlikely event a unit was manned, staffed, and equipped enough to meet this standard, the ANSF logistics system is so incapable that no ANSF unit could possibly sustain itself without Coalition support. While the ANSF logistics system will likely improve in the coming years, it still has a long way to go. This is not a problem in and of itself, so long as assessors understand this. But it is highly likely that many units will be rated at this highest level, despite the impossibility of actually achieving it. Indeed, it is likely that many, if not most, of the units that were rated at the highest CM level (CM1) will just transition to the highest CUAT rating. Logistics metrics should be tracked, but should not be a requirement to reach the highest CUAT rating levels, as this is an impossible standard. Additionally, the CUAT rating levels should be revised downwards, to be more realistic and achievable, or else it should be understood that few, if any units will reach the highest level in the near term.

The rating system is also flawed at the other end of the spectrum. The lowest rating is “Ineffective” in which a unit cannot perform its mission even with Coalition assistance. This is slightly worse than the old CM4 rating (unit is formed but not yet capable of conducting primary operational missions). As mentioned, the CM system used 4 rating levels, while the CUAT uses five. Unfortunately, it is likely that units previously rated at CM4 will now be rated at the second lowest CUAT level (Dependent on CF for Success), leaving few, if any units rated at the lowest CUAT level. This will result in a net jump in ANSF capability ratings, which is precisely the opposite of what the CUAT should do. The old CM ratings were overinflated - if the CUAT does not result in lower capability ratings for the ANSF, it is a failure.

4. The CM system does not deal with **civil-military operations**, or measure how well a unit does in these aspects of the clear, hold, and build functions. These are critical aspects of a population-centric strategy for all elements of the ANA and especially the ANP. Tactical and security operations are only part of the mission, but the CM system is almost exclusively “kinetic” in character. The ANSF, like ISAF, is engaged in a COIN campaign, wherein winning hearts and minds is critical. Yet the CUAT gives no indication of unit’s abilities to accomplish this. A unit that is highly capable of conducting operations, yet causes needless civilian casualties must be reflected in the CUAT.

5. **Sustainability** is not adequately emphasized in the CUAT, or in its briefing materials. The CUAT system places a needed emphasis on current operations and how well/often units conduct them. While this is clearly important, the imperative to conduct operations has in some cases superseded the imperative to properly train the ANA. ANSF metrics must focus more on whether a unit is making sustainable progress towards independence. Moreover, the CUAT system should alert senior officials when units are being “used up.” Units that have conducted operations “independently,” but have a massive AWOL rate, no leave policy, low motivation, terrible equipment accountability and logistics capabilities, and low re-enlistment rates will eventually be destroyed in the process and lose any capacity to take over the security mission from ISAF. The CUAT system does seem better than the CM system in this regard, but only slightly. NTM-A and IJC’s mission is not to create units that can conduct operations *right now* and have no long-term viability, but to train units to be able to conduct successful independent operations years from now, when the US has withdrawn.
6. **Corruption** is a major problem in the ANSF, as it is in much of Afghanistan, and it needs to be dealt with head-on. While explicitly tracking corruption, like tracking loyalty, may require a classified annex, it is far too important to be ignored or bunched into the other factors tracked in the CUAT. Corruption is unavoidable, and not necessarily a bad thing within certain limits. But excessive corruption, while not necessarily affecting a unit’s immediate combat capabilities, can have a strong negative affect on a unit over time. The CUAT needs to track corruption, with an eye towards the consequences it can have on ‘winning hearts and minds’ and on the COIN campaign in general.
7. The **Impartiality** of assessors is not addressed in the CUAT system. This problem was neatly summed up by an advisor interviewed in early 2010: “When my commanding officer comes down and asks me how my Afghans are doing, I know that the guys in the next valley over are saying that their Afghans are doing great. If I’m honest about my guys, my commanders going to want to know what the hell I’m doing wrong.” This was a major problem under the old CM system (and under the ORA system in Iraq, and in assessing the ARVN in Vietnam) and the changeover to the CUAT system will do nothing to solve it. NTM-A/ISAF needs to stress brutal honesty in instituting the CUAT system. Assessors and partners need to be rewarded for honesty, not false progress. Yet the briefing materials accompanying the CUAT are slim, and nowhere in them is the importance of honesty mentioned.

NTM-A has acknowledged this problem to some extent, theoretically using VTT Regional Teams to independently assess units once they reach the “Independent” level. These teams have the potential to inject some much needed realism into the historically overly-positive ANSF assessment process. VTT Regional Teams are an excellent concept, and should be expanded to randomly assess units throughout the country, at all levels of effectiveness. This will reinforce the accuracy of the CUAT system, as well as ensuring a strong feedback loop between NTM-A, IJC, partners, and operators in the field. Yet these teams are undermanned (like so much of the ANSF development effort), and it is unlikely that they will be able to assess even the small number of “Independent” units, let alone expand to conduct other assessments. This personnel shortfall must be overcome if the CUAT system is to function properly.

8. The CUAT system does not seem **suitable for the ANP**, except possibly for paramilitary elements like the ANCOP. The old CM system, flawed as it was, recognized the differences between the Afghan police and Army, and used different (albeit fairly similar) systems to collect metrics for each force. Unfortunately, the CUAT uses one system for both, and seems much more suitable for the ANA than the ANP. Measures of “loyalty” and corruption are far more critical in police forces. No system can be useful that does not measure the number of local recruits, men given police uniforms, and the interaction between elements of the police and local militias, local government, and a functioning justice system – including courts, jails, etc. It is equally critical to assess the relative influence of the ANP and insurgents both in broad terms and in terms of who actually implements prompt justice at the local level. Like the CM rating system, the CUAT system seems largely irrelevant in dealing with the most important measures of police capability in the field. The CUAT does collect some useful information on the police, and is an improvement over the CM system. However, it needs to be drastically altered to fit the differences of the ANP mission in order to become an even remotely accurate gauge of ANP capabilities.

The Ugly

While all of these are major problems, the last two may be so serious as to call into question the entire CUAT system. The exclusively kinetic character of the CUAT assessment may be a fatal flaw in using it for the ANP. The rating of the ANP cannot be separated from its effectiveness in a functioning local justice system. The ANP are also far more vulnerable to outside pressure and the corrupting influence of power brokers, narcotraffickers, militias, factions, and organized crime. A system that does not explicitly examine how they operate in a civil military environment, deal with the overall justice system and other civil-military operations, and explicitly analyze corruption and outside influence may be little more than useless.

The impartiality issue unfortunately reveals what may be the CUAT system's biggest shortcoming: its very flexibility and subjectivity may make it even more overly-optimistic than its predecessors. The CUAT system's subjectivity is a good thing, as the old quantitative CM system was so rigid that it became irrelevant. But the subjectivity of the CUAT needs to be *structured*. Assessors need a common understanding of the ANSF assessment process on which to base their subjective comments. All CUAT assessors need to have the same concept of exactly what a unit at each level looks like. Briefing materials accompanying the new system should give concrete examples of units at all levels, and of the many issues units face in each of the categories tracked. The CUAT doesn't need assessor's opinions, it needs their *informed* opinions.

Ideally, assessors should also have a common understanding of the history of ANSF assessment problems, and perhaps even some contextual knowledge of the problems we have faced in assessing Iraqi and Vietnamese forces. CUAT briefing materials are thin, and focus on the mechanics of filling out the CUAT form. This is exactly the wrong approach to take with a subjective and narrative-based system. Without strong guidance, the flexibility of the CUAT will lead to wildly diverging opinions on unit effectiveness, degrading the accuracy of the system as a whole.

The impartiality problem is no trivial matter. The U.S. Army is a "can do" organization, and while this ethos cannot and should not change, it can be dangerous in the training of indigenous forces. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam, when the "highly capable" ARVN collapsed despite years of glowing reviews from American trainers.

Glossary:

CUAT: Commander's Unit Assessment Tool

CM: Capability Milestone

NTM-A: NATO Training Mission Afghanistan

IJC: ISAF Joint Command

ANA: Afghan National Army

ANP: Afghan National Police

VTT: Validation Transition Team

ORA: Operational Readiness Assessment (Iraqi Security Forces)

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam