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May
2009

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Contracting in Afghanistan—From Strategic Vision to Tactical Implementation

LTC D. Edward Keller Jr., USAF

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SPC W. Eric Mraz, 3rd Platoon, 527th Military Police Co., visits ANP members at Nishagam, Konar Province, Afghanistan, March 18, 2009. Mraz is part of a 3-person team tasked with mentoring ANP officers. (U.S. Army photo by SGT Matthew C. Moeller.)

In Afghanistan, the challenges confronting the United States, international partners, and the nascent Afghan government loom large and imposing. However, amid all the turmoil, infinite complexity, and seemingly innumerable difficulties, a strategic consensus has emerged: it will take more than kinetic means to achieve the objective of a stable, democratic Afghanistan. The country must achieve a degree of economic independence to emerge from decades of strife. Therefore, perhaps more than at any time in history, contracting has emerged as a force multiplier, front and center in achieving strategic economic development goals in addition to the tactical objectives of acquiring supplies, services, and construction in support of U.S. and Afghan forces.

Like all strategic objectives, success depends on effective operational and tactical implementation. Last year, the Joint Contracting Command-Iraq/Afghanistan (JCC-I/A) awarded more than \$1 billion in contracts to local Afghan firms and is projected to approach \$2 billion in obligations during FY09. The strategic impact of these funds on Afghanistan's economy cannot be overstated, particularly when one considers that the legal gross domestic product of Afghanistan was just \$12.85 billion in 2008. The JCC-I/A's implementation of the *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) Section 886*, allowing set-asides to manufacturing, construction, and service contractors who employ Afghans, focuses these funds where they have the most potential to spur significant, lasting economic growth and, by extension, a peaceful future. At the Kabul Regional Contracting Center (KRCC), the largest RCC in Afghanistan, tactical implementation consists of key partnerships, sustained outreach, and tailored local policy.

KRCC's collaboration with the Afghan business community depends on a well-executed outreach program to identify and develop capable and reliable contractors. However, current security conditions in Afghanistan limit opportunities for contingency contracting officers to conduct effective vendor outreach and networking. Partnerships with less constrained, more locally accessible organizations vastly increase the effectiveness and range of outreach and networking efforts. KRCC currently enjoys a key partnership with the Canadian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Peace Dividend Trust (PDT). PDT's mission to "improve the economic footprint and operational efficiency of peacekeeping missions" translates into a myriad of services that provide KRCC with invaluable inroads into the emerging Afghan business community. These services include training resources, vendor validation, capability assessments, and, perhaps most importantly, access to the longstanding relationships so critical to business conduct in this cultural environment. JCC-I/A's future plans include adding an Afghan Business Development Consultant to interface with PDT and other partners to further enhance the organization's understanding and collaboration with the local business community.

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KRCC's recent outreach efforts, through its partnership with PDT, include an Afghan Female Business Leaders' Conference held Nov. 20, 2008, in Kabul, Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo.)

KRCC's recent outreach efforts, through its partnership with PDT, include an Afghan Vendor Conference, Afghan Female Business Leaders' Conference, and periodic business forums focused on educating businesses from specific economic sectors. The Afghan Vendor and Female Business Leaders' Conferences, each attended by approximately 200 local vendors, included speakers from the U.S. military, local business community, NGOs, and the Afghan government. The conferences also included training workshops, conducted by both PDT (in the local language) and KRCC personnel to familiarize local businesses with western business practices and educate them on contracting with the U.S. government.

Following the Female Business Leaders' Conference, KRCC hosted Female Business Forums in advance of emerging requirements. The first forum focused on construction and the second on locally manufactured occupational clothing requirements for the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). Early indications are that these forums, with smaller audiences than the conferences, provide the one-on-one training more conducive to success.

Strategic vision, key partnerships, and outreach efforts produce measurable outcomes and benefits only when effectively implemented at the RCC level.

Strategic vision, key partnerships, and outreach efforts produce measurable outcomes and benefits only when effectively implemented at the RCC level. KRCC's local policy, soon to be approved theaterwide, maximizes the sweeping authority of the NDAA 886 program, augmenting it to incentivize and encourage Afghan prime and subcontractor relationships. This includes woman-owned business participation goals in the evaluation criteria for larger acquisitions and specific woman-owned business set-asides, within the NDAA 886 authority, for smaller ones.

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The largest NDAA 886 award in the Afghan theater of operations to date will provide locally produced footwear for the ANA and ANP over the next 5 years. Shown here is the production line of a local ANA/ANP footwear manufacturer in Kabul. (U.S. Army photo.)

The construction forums mentioned above directly resulted in the award of four construction contracts to Afghan woman-owned businesses. The goal is that proficiency developed on these relatively small efforts will eventually result in success in larger, more complex projects, providing sustained business and employment opportunities.

Another key success includes the largest NDAA 886 award in the Afghan theater of operations to date, providing locally produced footwear for the ANA and ANP over the next 5 years. This effort, potentially valued at \$78.3 million, will provide quality footwear at competitive prices while employing 600 Afghans, including 200 women. This serves as a prime example of meeting a tangible, operational need while achieving the strategic objective of building the Afghan

economy through employment, skills training, and, perhaps in the future, exportable products, which fosters long-term, sustained economic growth.

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