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Session 2: Best practices of CPA by international actors

Presentation on Afghanistan

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I first arrived in Kabul in October 2002 to research rumours of an upcoming expansion in civil military affairs which became known as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). As PRTs have remained the paradigm for relations between the military and NGOs my comments will revolve around them.

The debates around the issues thrown up by this expansion in civil military activities in Afghanistan which, most controversially, increased the involvement of the military in humanitarian-type activities, will continue. Some brief observations about the inception of the PRT plan and the way in which it was resourced illustrate the background to the mistrust and/or indifference towards PRTs, which, for a number of reasons, still colours the attitudes of many NGOs in the field.

Firstly, the timing of the coalition's launch of the PRT initiative. This occurred in November, 2002 on the heels of calls by President Karzai and Lakhdar Brahimi for the expansion of UN mandated peacekeeping forces (International Security Assistance Force, ISAF) beyond Kabul. These calls were repeatedly made with increasing urgency during 2002. Many NGOs, but not all, had supported calls for ISAF's expansion regionally on lines similar to its deployment in Kabul. Secondly, the PRT plan was initially oversold by coalition spokesmen – a reality acknowledged by the coalition in the UN's report on the one and only evaluation of the PRTs, undertaken by UNAMA in May 2003. The long shopping list presented by the coalition of all the skills and resources that PRTs would bring into Afghanistan, mostly never materialized.

By mid 2003, a coalition General had summed up the PRTs at a meeting with NGO representatives held at ACBAR as “an empty vessel”.¹ The PRT "vessel" was progressively filled from the end of 2003, however. General Barno (then commander of coalition forces) and US Ambassador Khalilzad, identified the PRTs as a mechanism that could contribute towards the fulfillment of the short-term political objectives punctuating the Bonn Agreement, in particular, the holding of Presidential elections in 2004.

While critics berated the international community for a lack of political will over the failure to dedicate the appropriate resources which might have checked the widening security gap in

¹ Only four of the envisaged eight PRTs were functioning at this point and funding was both limited and involved lengthy procedures resulting in delays of months for funding for minor reconstruction projects.

Afghanistan, others upheld the PRT plan as a component in a new way of approaching the problems of so called 'failed states' emerging out of conflict.

NGOs being a highly diverse bunch, responded in different ways to an expanded civil-military presence in Afghanistan. This can be summarized as a blanket refusal to engage with the military publicly in any form whatsoever, at one end of the NGO spectrum to what has been described as a position of principled pragmatism at the other end. The latter approach revolved around the fact that PRTs were going to go ahead with or without the NGOs and that NGOs should seek to change or limit effects perceived as potentially harmful to operational capacity and NGO security. In between, attitudes ranged from complete indifference to degrees of support for engaging with policy makers over the PRT question, or not.

It is important to emphasise, that in my two and a half years of working with leading international and national NGOs in Afghanistan, the question of 'turf wars' did not arise as a factor influencing NGO attitudes towards PRTs, although NGO concerns were frequently dismissed by policy makers and the military on those very grounds. NGOs who engaged in policy discussions on PRTs primarily viewed them against a deteriorating security situation and the absence of any other response by the international community to address the overarching question of security during the *transitional* period, before Afghanistan had built up adequate security forces of its own.

The NGO position of engagement was, to some extent, vindicated by the PRT approach taken by the British government who stood up a PRT in Mazar e Sharif in mid-2003. NGO perspectives and concerns were listened to by the British Ministry of Defence and promises made to NGOs not to duplicate, in any way, the work of NGOs, were largely kept. Moreover, as those NGOs contributing to the PRT debate had urged, the British PRT focused primarily on improving security in their Northern watch, particularly by assisting the Afghan government in the provision of more effective, professional policing. Projects were selected to strengthen the central government provincially – the rebuilding of court houses, police stations and so forth, in contradistinction to the quick impact projects of schools, clinics and wells that continued to be part of the PRT approach elsewhere. That said, the Mazar PRT in common with all other PRTs past and present, was neither mandated nor resourced directly to address security challenges and was incapable of altering the power realities which obstructed the state building process and security sector reform.²

UNAMA, with some NGO support, lobbied for the British model to be universal for all PRTs during 2003. Though a partial shift in focus towards facilitating security sector reform occurred in coalition-led PRTs, it did not turn into the total shift argued for. The US-led PRTs continued with the quick impact projects that were a fundamental part of the coalition's counter-insurgency strategy on the one hand, while national caveats resulted in varying PRT approaches in the North of the country where PRTs came under NATO/ISAF command in the first phase of NATO's expansion.

² The five pillars of SSR are: Justice, Police, Army, Counter-Narcotics and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration.

The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) has continued to stay on board PRT developments and ACBAR's members approved support for the establishment of a NGO civil military working group by UNAMA in 2004. This was designed to facilitate a swifter resolution of operational problems that arose in the field and to provide an entry point for NGO concerns and perspectives to policy makers via the PRT Working Group which prepares the agenda for the PRT Executive Steering Committee (headed by the commanders of ISAF and the coalition). UNAMA's lead in establishing the NGO civil military working group also indicated an exit strategy on UNAMA's part. UNAMA has played *the* mediating role between the military and the assistance community and alternatives to this, given the Afghan government's current capacity constraints, are difficult to envisage in practice.

Meanwhile, the recent failure of a PRT again visibly to respond to the plight of NGO staff caught up in riots in Badakshan, (on this occasion on 8 May apparently triggered by reports that the Qu'ran had been treated with disrespect in Guantanamo), again led NGOs to question the mixed messages received on the nature of the PRT contribution to security and whether a PRT presence in fact helped or hindered the ability to access populations in insecure areas of the country. The latter argument is still not conclusively resolved, but it is worth noting in this regard a recent report on PRTs³ which was written in a highly authoritative style. The claim is repeatedly made that the establishment of a PRT in Kunduz facilitated the return of NGOs to the area. This is nonsense. NGOs never left, what in military terms is considered, a "relatively benign" area.

ACBAR continues regularly to provide presentations to ISAF and coalition forces explaining what NGOs are and what they are not, what we are doing in Afghanistan, our concerns about the military's role in humanitarian and development efforts as well as any specific operational concerns. We hope this contributes to an improved understanding of the respective professional strengths, constraints and operating requirements of the military and assistance sectors.

The following points however need to be acted upon if greater synergy between our respective outputs in Afghanistan is to be achieved:

- PRTs should focus (outside of initial force protection requirements) on meaningful measures to improve human security and facilitate security sector reform. The extent to which NATO PRTs succeed in doing so will largely determine the nature of the relationship between the NGO and military sectors
- The need for the military to institutionalize lessons learned by outgoing PRTs to ensure continuity
- The need for a detailed mandate spelling out exactly how PRTs will reach the broadly stated objectives of expanding the government's legitimacy and authority and improving security to facilitate reconstruction. Only clarity can replace ongoing confusion and suspicion surrounding the actual purpose/s of PRTs

³ Jakobsen, Peter Viggio (2005) PRTs In Afghanistan: Successful But Not Sufficient: Danish Institute For International Studies

- Lengthening the tours of duty of PRT commanders, at the least, to offset the shortcomings derived from the brevity of PRT rotations (6-9 months)
- Establishing a tracking mechanism to monitor the sustainability of PRT projects – this has been discussed since the inception of PRTs but still has not materialized
- Conducting regular, independent evaluations of PRT outcomes to help ensure best practice
- Information is the primary means of protection for NGOs. Improving the sharing of information with NGOs, particularly on security, is vital. The attempt to develop an NGO safety protocol was galvanized by the mistaken targeting of an NGO (thought to be insurgents) by the coalition in 2004. This process has been conducted under the auspices of the NGO civil-military working group, but it has taken over six months to reach the point where ISAF and coalition forces are in a position to sign off a Protocol designed to formalize information channels to ANSO (Afghanistan NGO Security Office) to ensure that the military passes on at least imminent threat warnings against NGOs. The Protocol also creates a mechanism allowing NGOs voluntarily to pass on their GPS coordinates to the military via ANSO. Recent progress on the protocol was delayed due to a change over of personnel on both the ISAF and coalition sides
- Avoiding the damaging mistake the coalition repeatedly made in claiming that NGOs and the military share objectives in Afghanistan

Both NGOs and the military recognize that forward movement in terms of creating greater synergy in our respective efforts lies in building a relationship of trust and confidence. In the Afghan context NGOs need to be able to rely on:

- Continuity of practice in the field

This is of paramount concern given that rotations are only of 6 - 9 months duration. Relationships build on personal promises are not sufficient guarantee. A written mandate or equivalent mechanism is required to ensure the maintenance of any mutually agreed acceptable practice. In today's Afghanistan, where the political future is looking increasingly uncertain, NGOs cannot risk any further erosion of Afghan perceptions of NGO neutrality and impartiality.

- Lines of command

The PRT mandate should also detail the operation of lines of command especially for in extremis situations. As NATO gradually takes over authority from the coalition, and given mounting political pressures associated with the holding of Parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, there will be more emergency situations involving NGO staff. In this regard, NGOs have already witnessed two examples of a failure to respond from the German-led PRT in the North. Given the multi-national makeup of PRTs, who has ultimate authority in crisis situations? We do not know, but the answer has important implications for NGOs as different nations take different PRT approaches to in extremis situations. And we anticipate that the utilization and scope of national caveats will only intensify with Phase 3 of NATO's expansion to the South.

To take another scenario NGOs could be confronted by the following situation:

An NGO may have a good working relationship in the field with a national component from country X within a PRT. The government and the military from country X both understands and respects the need to keep any military profile to an absolute minimum in connection with PRT oversight of the PRT project the NGO is implementing- possibly in partnership with local NGOs. But the lead nation of the same PRT may take another approach altogether - such as insisting on publicly claiming ownership of projects and regarding the NGO simply as a contracting partner. In the event that an incident of fraud occurs with potential for embarrassing publicity (and despite ACBAR's best efforts and those of the professional and committed NGOs that support us we cannot prevent the possibility of such occurrences) the NGO could face an outcome in which country X abandons its earlier policy based on verbal agreements with the NGO and adopts the direct oversight regime of the PRT lead nation.

In short, NGOs have nothing in writing, no proper detailed mandate or guidelines with teeth. Until personality-based relationships in the field are augmented by a detailed mandate NGOs cannot trust that practices agreed today may not change tomorrow.

As NATO expands issues of:

- Force protection
- Rules of Engagement
- Military operations
- Type of assistance provided in in extremis situations

will all differ from NATO member state to member state. Moreover, different approaches to civil military relations are visible between changing ISAF lead nations, between the Turks and the British for example. Has NATO clearly defined what it wants to achieve in Afghanistan and by what means it seeks to achieve goals set? At present, despite what you may hear to the contrary, Afghanistan is not on a trajectory towards accountable, democratic government. And the 'strategic guidance' agreed by the PRT Executive Steering Committee in early 2005, which sets “milestones” towards an ultimate exit strategy only exemplifies "wishful thinking of the dreamiest variety".

The involvement of NGOs in Coordinated Planning and Action (CPA) does not appear to have featured much in Afghanistan so far. Outside of the development of the British PRT approach which included a series of consultations with representatives from the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group which benefited from field-led perspectives via ACBAR and the subsequent establishment of a NGO – military working group in the UK, I was unable - prior to my departure - to identify other examples of sustained discussion between NATO member states and their national NGOs over CPA related issues.

A final comment on CPA is that extensive experience in the field over time has made NGOs aware of the lack of horizontal lines of communication between existing military structures. With Phases 3 and 4 of NATO expansion looming, what steps are being taken to ensure improved synergy within and between the variety of military structures on the ground which is compounded by the issue of national caveats?

In the aforementioned PRT report, PRTs were summed up by the author as a holding mechanism allowing other actors to push the state building process and security sector

reform (SSR) in particular, forward. But poorly analysed SSR outcomes are very patchy. The limited results in what constitutes the building blocks of a sustainable stability continues to be the major concern of the Afghan people who want the stability provided by effective law and order - which will enable development to occur - above all else. Yet no coordinated, integrated approach by the donors to drive the interrelated processes of SSR forward exists. Meanwhile, the state building process is gravely hampered by the Afghan government's lack of implementing capacity and the weak outcomes of civil service reform to date. Provincial government is either ineffective or captured by criminalized networks. Even where PRTs are most robust in tackling security and focusing on support for the police, as in Mazar e Sharif, reconstruction efforts have not gone forward significantly due to an absence of private investment and the absence of effective administrative reform.

In recent meetings with policy makers in the US government, the perception appears prevalent – shared also by policy makers in European capitals – that PRTs, in partnership with Afghan communities, local government representatives, international organizations and NGOs, all of whom are included in the proposed 'Provincial Development Committees', will be able positively to affect development directions at district and provincial levels. To be effective, this would require PRTs being resourced to tackle head-on the growing problem of corruption and to be mandated to protect neutral political space for nascent civil society to develop into. At a conference at NATO head quarters in December 2004, the NATO Secretary General was asked whether the NATO-led PRTs would be in a position to act in these regards. His response was that on both counts this would be beyond the PRT remit. Gaps between official rhetoric on PRT contributions to security and good governance and starkly contrasting Afghan realities are likely to provide continuing grounds for cynicism. In Afghanistan, it increasingly looks as though relative stability in the short term may have been won at the cost of security and development in the long-term.

