

THE PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAM PLAN IN AFGHANISTAN A NEW DIRECTION?

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INTRODUCTION

The concerns and recommendations listed in the conclusion of my background paper on the (then) Joint Regional Teams for the British Agencies Afghanistan Group in London, remain as relevant as when they were written. This is because ISAF's mandate has not been expanded beyond Kabul, no other effective mechanism has been identified to address the root causes of insecurity in Afghanistan and the security situation has continued to deteriorate. PRTs are now largely viewed as a minor component in this overall security context which is delaying and undermining the reforms fundamental to the success of the Bonn process. The Minister of Finance, Ashraf Ghani issued a bleak warning during the Afghan Development Forum in Kabul (March 2003) that should the Bonn process collapse, Afghanistan will become a narcomafia state. As the security situation continues to drift downwards, it is a warning that bears repetition.

This paper, is not written on behalf of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) and does not represent the overall position of its NGO members on PRTs. The paper does, however, reflect some of the agencies' diverse views on PRT developments. This paper is written in a private capacity and the shortcomings are all mine. It is intended as a contribution to the overall analysis currently taking place in academic and other fora on the the challenging and complex situation in Afghanistan today. The paper examines the PRT plan from the perspective of the overall context of security, which remains the Gordian knot preventing real progress in the development of the national institutions that would form a basis for future stability in Afghanistan.

A number of factors have driven the main development in the PRT concept which entails a possible shift in direction away from assistance type activities towards enabling and supporting security sector reform (SSR) and the implementation of projects focusing on civic and economic development¹. Whether this shift, which has been led and encouraged by UNAMA with the support of a number of NGOs, will become a reality on the ground, only time will tell. The official presentations of the British PRT plan indicate that this proposed shift of focus has informed their strategic approach to the whole PRT concept and they are therefore seen as being in the vanguard of change. However, there are a number of constraints preventing this shift

¹ Principles Guiding PRT Working Relations with UNAMA, NGOs and Local Governments, Ambassador Bill Taylor's office, US Embassy, Kabul

occurring rapidly, not least, lack of resources and lack of communication between the different chains of command within the Coalition and/or between the different actors involved, including the government, which adversely affects a coordinated strategic approach which would enable PRTs to meet their stated key objective: expanding the legitimacy of the central government in support of the Bonn process.

Before bringing you up to date with these developments, there is one obvious clarification to be made. The earlier name for the plan to expand the Coalition's existing civil-military activities regionally, Joint Regional Teams, was altered at the Afghan government's request to: Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)². The inclusion of 'reconstruction' in the title was unfortunate in that actual reconstruction of any significance continues to play a "relatively minor role" in PRT activities³. For the sake of simplicity I will refer to the teams as PRTs throughout this paper.

The three pilot PRTs, (ranging from fifty to one hundred personnel), stood up in Gardez, Bamiyan and Konduz over the last five months, are now joined by the first PRT led by a Coalition partner, Britain, in Mazar. The British PRT will be operational by the end of June. Further PRTs will be set up during the course of the summer.

BACKGROUND TO THE SECURITY CONTEXT

Following the Coalition's intervention, promises were made by Western leaders to the Afghan people, most notably spelt out by Tony Blair, that the international community would "not walk away" this time from its responsibilities regarding the country's rehabilitation and future stability. The Bonn Agreement laid out an ambitious agenda for change and the reform process it outlined was intended to provide the foundation for the establishment and maintenance of peace and stability. A tight time-table was set for national elections to be held by June 2004 at the latest.

Contrary to the expectations of the Afghan people and the repeated requests of the transitional government's leaders, early moves to expand the British-led ISAF I beyond Kabul failed to materialise. Regional commanders and other local power holders were able to restore and strengthen their positions effectively unopposed and this process was facilitated by the strategy employed by the Coalition in prosecuting the ongoing war against terrorism on the ground. To the dismay of many Afghans, some very unpleasant characters were placed in official positions of power, both regionally and within the central government. This outcome may have been driven by *realpolitik* but it did little to establish public confidence in the Bonn process. As the *status quo ante* to the Taliban was restored, everyone began to play the waiting game and significantly, many Afghan professionals in the diaspora, chose not to return.

The underlying reasons for the decision by the UN's Security Council not to expand the mandate of ISAF I (or that of subsequent ISAFs) revolves only partly around the commitment of stretched resources, human and financial. The failure to address security primarily amounts to a question of political will. And here one must ask whether the core interests of the two central agendas operating in Afghanistan: the war

² This title takes effect following the May 6 lessons learned exercise which followed the establishment of the pilot Provisional Reconstruction Teams.

³ Provincial Reconstruction Teams: First Lessons Learned In Initial Implementation, Coalition/Joint Civil-Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF), May 2003)

against terrorism and the nation building project are not fatally opposed? If, and one can only speculate here, the military objectives of the Coalition's war against terrorism rendered the proposed presence of peace-keeping forces *regionally* as an obstacle in the prosecution of the war, then the Afghan peoples' interests did not, despite the rhetoric, come uppermost. What is certain is that the Afghan people know they need stability first and foremost and that they are not getting it. This has led to a crisis in public confidence in Karzai's government, particularly in the Pashtun south and east of the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that expanding the legitimacy of the central government and building public confidence in overall support of the Bonn process, remain key objectives of the PRT plan. As security deteriorates virtually on a daily basis⁴, the hope is, that PRTs, in the absence of feasible alternatives, will become involved in meaningfully addressing the widening security gap by virtue of their presence.

THE CAUSES OF INSECURITY

The question of whether PRTs can become a contributory factor in supporting the Bonn process should be viewed against a definition of the interlinked causes of insecurity, which in turn, are threatening the continuing existence of the Bonn process:

- (i) Lawlessness, banditry, inter-tribal ethnic conflicts.
- (ii) Inter-factional/Inter-governmental conflicts which differ from (i) and are more complex in terms of political objectives and the struggle for control over resources, namely opium production.
- (iii) Hard-core terrorism from "neo-Taliban" groups linked to former Taliban and Al Quaida both within Afghanistan and in Pakistan. These new radicalized groups are emerging from refugee camps in Baluchistan and the NWFP in Pakistan.
- (iv) Narcotics – total narcotics revenue is now estimated as being as high as five billion dollars a year.⁵

This potent cocktail is manifest in the downward spiral in security, now particularly visible in the south and the east of the country. By common agreement between the Coalition, UNAMA and the NGO community, it is recognised that PRTs, as currently constructed, cannot solve this critical situation.

A CONFUSED STATE OF AFFAIRS

From the outset it has been stressed by the Coalition and subsequently also by UNAMA, that the PRT plan is an evolutionary one. This has not prevented sustained criticism of the plan by many NGOs since PRTs were officially launched in Kabul on 21 November 2002. From the NGO perspective, the relationship was destined to be highly problematic given the PRTs inextricable links to the Coalition rather than to a UN

⁴ See news websites that collate daily international media reports on Afghanistan eg. www.mobycapital.com or Afghan Online Press.

⁵ According to the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Kabul, accurate estimates of total narcotics revenue within Afghanistan do not exist. The use of satellite imagery provides imperfect results. In conjunction with the use of satellite imagery the UNODC is currently conducting a nation-wide poppy survey with the government. This will be published in September 2003. What is known is that new areas are coming under cultivation and farmers are being trained in poppy cultivation methods.

mandated peacekeeping force. NGO criticism has continued to focus on the failure of the Coalition clearly to define PRTs' mandate or terms of reference or to address the security situation and its choice of focus i.e. assistance type activities. Limited US government funding (US\$12-18million for this year) is also criticized as being a mere drop in the ocean given Afghanistan's overall needs and "cannot have a significant impact on reconstruction."⁶ This has led to attempts by NGOs to pin down the purpose of PRTs as well as stimulating continuing speculation over PRTs' real goals and purpose/s⁷.

At the same time, debate on PRTs was fuelled internationally by the possibility that this civil-military plan may be a blue print for the provision of humanitarian relief as a political tool in the management of future interventions. And as the likelihood of a war in Iraq grew, speculation increased on the possible use of the PRT model in Iraq. The concept was discussed as intensively in Washington DC at one point as it was in Kabul. This produced more confusion, as a political head of steam gathered behind a plan largely developed in Bagram as policy makers in Washington DC made claims for PRT objectives, which were subsequently not endorsed by policy makers based in Afghanistan.

In addition, the timing of the launch of the PRT plan raised suspicions that the plan was not only a "second-best" option to the expansion of ISAF but also amounted to a relatively cheap means of keeping a lid on the situation in Afghanistan, while Coalition focus and resources moved to Iraq. Some critics now view the PRT plan as exemplifying the maxim that "something must be seen to be done but not much", in effect, the argument runs, the existence of PRTs acts to obscure the critical state of affairs in the country to the outside world.

The deployment of the initial PRT teams was officially linked to the Coalition's simultaneous announcement that it was moving into Phase IV or reconstruction,⁸ which enabled military resources to be diverted from the war against terrorism to reconstruction. This move was never formally confirmed, although Donald Rumsfeld again alluded to the Coalition having moved into a reconstruction phase in his recent visit to Afghanistan⁹.

The overall objective of the plan was to expand the legitimacy of the central government regionally, by supporting and facilitating reconstruction, thereby contributing to the establishment of security via facilitating the delivery of tangible benefits from the Bonn process to the population at large.

Instability was defined at the time of the plan's inception as an outcome of (i) terrorist activity, (ii) tensions between regional leaders and the central authorities, (iii) poor economic conditions, (iv) dilapidated infrastructure, and (v) limited central government capacity.

⁶ Paul O'Brien, CARE, quoted in Reuters article May 11 2003

⁷ See ACBAR policy briefs on civil-military relations and the PRTs, December 2002 and January 2003 and NGOs concerns with respect to PRTs a paper submitted to the UNAMA and CJCMOTF lessons learned process.

⁸ Phase III applied to the stabilization of Afghanistan

⁹ April 2003

The Coalition now acknowledges that early presentations of the plan were mishandled and that “confusing or conflicting messages” on the scope and role of PRTs were delivered by Coalition representatives.¹⁰ Funding resources for PRTs, as mentioned, remained limited and attempts to alter US Department of Defense funding guidelines within OHDACA (Overseas Humanitarian Disaster & Civic Aid) to enable a shift of focus away from the implementation of assistance type projects such as digging wells, rebuilding schools and clinics etc, to rebuilding courthouses and police-stations, failed.

THE ASSISTANCE COMMUNITY’S RESPONSE/UNAMA’S ROLE

The assistance community, in the main, has not condemned the PRT plan outright, as anything that promised to shore up the increasingly fragile Bonn process and facilitated reconstruction was not to be rejected out of hand. The plan was also a welcome demonstration of the international community’s continuing engagement, at a time when many, Afghans and expatriates alike, feared that attention and resources were being directed elsewhere. However, both the UN and the NGOs did have immediate concerns: the UN, mandated by the Bonn Agreement to coordinate the international assistance effort in Afghanistan, did not accept PRTs forming a parallel coordinating structure. The core concern of international NGOs was that Afghan perceptions of their impartiality and neutrality would be eroded by their direct contact with Coalition civil-military units with potentially adverse effects on future operational capacity and a belief that a PRT presence may further increase their security problems¹¹. Afghan NGO staff voiced concerns to international partners that in an uncertain future, any involvement with the Coalition-led PRTs would expose them as targets. All NGOs agreed that as PRTs were being conducted under the aegis of the Coalition, their presence and the activities they engaged in, further confused an already highly complex situation.

In support of the positive contribution PRTs could make in the absence of other mechanisms capable of addressing the security gap and with the increasingly urgent need to facilitate reconstruction and create jobs to boost confidence in the Bonn process, the UNAMA carved out a mediating role between the NGOs and the Coalition and developed a number of mechanisms at the sub-national and national level to facilitate, monitor and guide the activities of the pilot PRTs in Gardez, Bamiyan and Konduz. UNAMA also sought to prevent any duplication of activities already being carried out by NGOs. Concurrently, the assistance community continued to voice concerns regarding PRT involvement in humanitarian-type activities, including the conducting of needs assessments. UNAMA, in ongoing consultations with the Coalition and NGOs, identified “priority areas where the PRTs could maximize their comparative advantage” namely in areas where NGOs could not tread:

- the rehabilitation or provision of key administrative structures at both the provincial and district level, for example, local government administrative buildings, Governors offices, and revenue collection offices

¹⁰ CJCMTF paper May 6, lessons learned review.

¹¹ The increase in direct attacks on international and national NGOs over the last 2 months illustrates that NGOs are an easy target for those with a political agenda to overthrow the government and end the Bonn process. Arguably, a position of closeness or distance from coalition forces has not ultimately determined this outcome, being in support of the Bonn process has.

- Heavy infrastructure projects where the assistance community lacks the capacity or funds eg. Bridges, culverts, dams and roads
- Fire and police stations
- Law courts and other judicial buildings
- Communications installation eg. national radio network
- Military barracks for the new Afghan National Army units¹²

Some of these new areas were also included in the ‘Principles Guiding PRT Working Relations with UNAMA, NGOs, and Local Governments’¹³ indicating that a possible shift of focus was indeed underway within the Coalition, in which PRTs would build the capacity of the provincial and district administration by restoring the physical infrastructure of local government. This would serve a number of purposes, it would raise the central government’s profile while strengthening its ability to function locally and to the extent that this shift was carried out in the field, would decrease the grounds for confusion emanating from PRT involvement in assistance type projects.

At the same time, given the constraints confronting the largely stalled security sector reform process, calls were coming from a number of quarters, including NGOs, for PRTs to involve themselves in supporting security sector reform (SSR) and in particular disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The provision of “an enabling environment for SSR” became a phrase increasingly linked to discussions with donors, the UN and other actors concerning the evolving PRT plan. Indications that this linkage could become a reality were also strengthened by reports that the Coalition was actively considering this change of focus and that the British-led PRT in Mazar would lead the way in implementing this shift.

On the back of this development further questions arise however. Will the continuing constraint of limited resources prevent PRTs making this shift in practice¹⁴? Will existing and future PRTs follow the British lead should they succeed? And even if the British-led PRT does establish an enabling environment, what real progress can be made in security sector reform given an overall security situation which is effectively neutering the SSR process?

SOME LESSONS LEARNED – THE PILOT PRTs

Despite continuing concerns surrounding the implementation of the PRT plan, the inclusive approach taken by the Coalition with regard to the development of some aspects of the PRT plan has been welcomed by the assistance community. The Coalition continues to invite the “concerns, criticisms, and recommendations” of “all actors involved in assistance and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan” in the interests of “improving PRT operations.”¹⁵ This invitation of “constructive engagement” has not been taken up by all NGOs. However, it has allowed NGOs to feed in their concerns, either directly or via the UN and to have an impact on outcomes, in a process that was going to go ahead, with or without them.

¹² Discussion Paper on PRTs (May 2003) contributing to the PRT review process currently underway that will ultimately lead to the production of a UNAMA endorsed Lessons Learned Document.

¹³ Finalised by Ambassador Bill Taylor’s office at the US Embassy, Kabul in February 2003 in consultation with NGO representatives.

¹⁴ DfID initial funding for projects under the British PRT is one and half million pounds sterling.

¹⁵ CJCMOTF Lessons Learned, p.3

A series of meetings on PRTs was organized by UNAMA, and attended (separately) by the Coalition, UN agencies and representatives from the international NGO community on 6 May. The purpose of the deliberations was to assess PRT activities to date and to assess future directions. In a summary of these meetings produced by UNAMA the following points were generally agreed by the assistance community:

1. That it is too early to judge whether PRTs will prove to be a contributory factor in support of the Bonn process or not.
2. That the greatest value of the PRTs came from their potential involvement in supporting government administrative capacity at the District and Provincial levels, as well as supporting the deployment and civic-action activities of the Afghan National Army and the national police.
3. That given the overriding objective of PRTs – to expand the central government’s legitimacy - the continuing absence of the government in the PRT process was counter-productive.
4. That in view of the security situation PRTs should support the establishment of greater security in Afghanistan and the Coalition was specifically encouraged to consider developing the PRTs role in support of DDR in this regard.

More controversially, the UNAMA summary also includes the statement that, “the PRTs ability to undertake traditional assistance activities in areas too insecure for non-military actors to operate” was “welcomed by the UN participants”. This statement is challenged by many NGOs who succeed in working in insecure areas in many parts of the world. The failure by the international community to address the level of violence arising from the interlinked factors outlined earlier in the paper, is the key factor in denying increasing numbers of Afghan children, women and men the help they were promised and urgently need.

Despite being early days, the type of projects implemented by the pilot PRTs in Gardez, Bamiyan and Konduz do not, as yet, indicate a shift in direction. The majority of PRT projects continue to focus on relatively small-scale assistance/reconstruction projects, averaging fifty to one hundred and fifty thousand dollars per project. In the Afghan context ‘reconstruction’ would appear to be defined by the US Department of Defense as drilling wells, rebuilding schools and clinics and some limited road work. This amounts to the ‘hearts and minds’ approach employed by the ongoing Coalition civil affairs teams (CAT As) that pre-date PRTs. A similar approach was used in Vietnam and the Soviets also seeded military-political units throughout Afghanistan during their ten years occupation. One can question whether it is actually in the Coalition’s interests, (with regard to the objectives of the war against terrorism), to shift the PRT focus away from the quick impact assistance type projects typical of the ‘hearts and minds’ approach, which is designed to win friends quickly, establish ‘force protection’, and garner valuable information about “the bad guys” as a result. Conversely, Coalition interest in advancing security sector reform and security in general is reportedly increasingly focusing minds in the Coalition and this may yet lead to links developing between PRTs and SSR.

THE MAZAR PRT – A CHANGE OF DIRECTION?

The British Ministry of Defence (MoD) has had the benefit of observing the experiences of the three US-led pilot PRTs in developing their PRT strategy, which in a number of regards addresses outstanding NGO concerns. From the outset the MoD has emphasized it will be avoiding any duplication of effort with the assistance community outside of minimal measures to establish force protection and initiate local confidence. The MOD has also placed the shift towards restoring local government infrastructure and supporting SSR at the top of its PRT agenda. These intentions have yet to be anchored in specific projects and activities but early indications are encouraging, with the first two projects requested for DfID funding being the reconstruction of a court house and a fire-station. The involvement of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (via British embassy officials including the Ambassador) and the Department for International Development (DfID) who will have representatives implanted in the Mazar PRT is also central to the British approach, in which the military hope to facilitate a largely diplomatic and developmental-led approach.

Hopes that the British PRT will make a qualitative difference are also encouraged by the fact that British military training differs from the US military in a key regard: policing and peacekeeping are included alongside combat training. Their peacekeeping experiences which include Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Kosovo are also considered an asset.

Once the Mazar PRT is up and running successfully the intention is to roll out the British PRT model throughout the five northern provinces. This will require extra resources both human and financial, which are not presently available. These constraints, it is hoped, may be solved by the arrival of NATO as a long-term player on the scene. NATO may identify PRTs as an obvious mechanism to expand in support of SSR, for example.

In a presentation of the UK's PRT to the assistance community on 20 May the "intent" of the PRT was stated along the following lines:

- to support the Bonn process
- this objective to be achieved principally through dialogue and liaison with Central and local political, religious and secular leaders, UNAMA and coalition partners
- this dialogue will be reinforced by the monitoring and assessment of local conditions and progress across all pillars of the Security Sector Review *sic* (SSR)
- active engagement with international and non-governmental agencies will assist in stimulating the reconstruction process

In common with other PRTs the evolutionary nature of the plan which is to be "subject to regular review and adjustment" was emphasized. In a revealing diagram illustrating where the focus of effort would be made, namely, three intersecting circles of diminishing size, the biggest circle was named "Influence" followed by "Monitoring and Reporting" and the smallest circle was reserved for "Reconstruction".

Discussions with Afghan representatives have been prioritized in the lead up period and a number of issues have been raised including:

- Continuing Afghan-on-Afghan violence in Northern provinces

- Pace of disarmament
- Maturity of ANA
- Assistance in developing close working relationships with Regional police forces, Regional business forums, Utility providers (Water, Gas, Electricity)

In the second phase of standing up the Mazar PRT defined as “Initial Capability” activity will focus on:

- developing contacts and relationships
- scoping the contribution to regional government
- scoping the potential contribution to SSR
- the achievement of tangible progress through [diplomatic] liaison, and stimulation of the reconstruction process

The final phase of the operation, termed “Steady State”, is achieved when the PRT’s reach has been extended to all possible areas within the northern provinces and the military footprint of the team is reduced by further employment of Afghans.

While security per se is not mentioned in the plan, involvement in the softer side of security is: i.e., monitoring, reporting, influence, knowledge, training of police etc. These are all components that could be utilized in security sector reform and the DDR process in particular, as the assistance community is encouraging. The possible impact of any involvement of a limited number of PRTs begs the question though of the actual state of affairs pertaining to SSR. This was recently summed up (April 3) by Congressman Lantos:

“Recruitment and training of the Afghan Nation Army is seriously behind schedule. Police training is almost non-existent. Disarmament and reintegration of militias has not begun”.

To this depressing, if accurate picture, one must also add the fact that progress in judicial reform remains at zero and consequently justice, one of the most important components in post-conflict scenarios, remains unattainable for the Afghan people. And yet another question: how can ‘free and fair’ elections take place in a year’s time in the faction-riven, militarised climate throughout Afghanistan today?

THE NATO FACTOR

The confirmation in April that NATO’s Allied Forces North Europe section is to be tasked with leading ISAF IV from the beginning of August is widely seen as a positive development. It will end the six month change of lead nation and allow for continuity for the first time since ISAF was established¹⁶. Yet beyond this point it is unclear what NATO involvement will deliver.

NATO’s involvement has led to renewed debate on the question of the expansion of ISAF. Congressman Lantos’ Amendment to the US State

¹⁶ A two to five year time-frame is envisaged at this stage.

Department Authorization Act Promoting a Secure and Democratic Afghanistan (April 3) indicates mounting support in the US Congress for expanding a NATO-led ISAF beyond Kabul and increased awareness of the seriousness of the security situation. A similar debate is occurring in a number of countries and was on the agenda at the G8 meeting in Paris in May attended by the UN Envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi.

While NATO's long-term involvement will allow major issues to be addressed in a more sustained manner, NATO cannot change anything overnight. Even if a decision is taken to expand ISAF, this will not happen until ISAF III expires and it will also take time to translate political decisions (which would probably requiring a UN Security Council Resolution) into military objectives¹⁷. Essentially though, the decision to expand ISAF beyond Kabul will depend on whether the political will is there to commit the sufficient financial and human resources over time.

CONCLUSION

"We are running out of time. Afghanistan will be an example to the rest of the world: either one of a democratic, peaceful and prosperous new democracy, or confirmation in the minds of many that the United States' talk of its commitment to democracy in the Muslim world is little more than empty rhetoric."

Congressman Lantos, April 3.

The question of whether the focus of Provincial Reconstruction Teams will or will not change, or whether PRTs will or will not meet their evolving objectives, is not the fundamental question. The major constraint now is time. In a situation rife with paradox the new PRT direction requires time¹⁸ if it is to succeed in building public confidence in a political process that is struggling for legitimacy and from a reformist perspective, its very survival. The timetable of the Bonn Agreement militates against this gradualist approach. Afghanistan requires and deserves far more. To break the vicious circle that has developed, there must be a coherent, effective and joined-up approach in which political, security and economic reform is linked. One without the other, most evidently, does not work.

¹⁷ One military expert estimates if a decision was taken immediately to expand ISAF it would take six months to translate the decision into action.

¹⁸ "Years" in the view of a British officer involved with the Mazar PRT