

A MEANS TO WHAT END? WHY PRTS ARE PERIPHERAL TO THE BIGGER POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

The civil-military relationship in the political context of Afghanistan since the overthrow of the Taliban has fulfilled a number of functions, not all of them formally acknowledged. From 2002, it was heavily promoted by the international community within and beyond Afghanistan as a key means of facilitating tangible results in reconstruction and development and in so doing, improving the security situation.¹ Moreover, the phased expansion of NATO forces throughout the country from 2003 onwards was primarily conducted via 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams' (PRTs), which came to epitomize the civil military approach in Afghanistan. The first PRT was operational in Gardez, in the east, by January 2003; over four years later, twenty-five PRTs, led by thirteen different nations, were located in provinces throughout the country.

The central assumptions informing the 2002 PRT plan were that reconstruction and development would be a primary means of expanding the central government's authority beyond Kabul and would provide a security dividend. There was no detailed strategic plan for PRTs via which the PRTs were to reach their broadly stated

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¹ Barbara J. Stapleton, "BAAG Briefing Paper on the development of Joint Regional Teams", January 2003, www.baag.org.uk/publications/reports.htm

objectives. In examining aspects of the evolution of PRTs in the political context of Afghanistan from 2002 to the present, the author contends that though the PRT plan was premised and sold on its ability to impact, albeit indirectly, security and reconstruction, the PRT contribution was essentially a political one. As the numbers of PRTs increased from the end of 2003, they played an increasing role at provincial levels in helping maintain the momentum of the political transition² that followed the overthrow of the Taliban. Following the end of the Bonn Process in 2005, with Parliamentary and Provincial Council elections, the PRTs have continued to attempt to bridge the gaps that frequently exist at provincial and district levels of government. The bigger question posed in the paper is whether post-Bonn, the state building process will prove to be of lasting substance. Arguably, PRT activities enabled the promotion of an appearance of progress, which distracted from the dire state of governance in many provinces, but about which there was little if any political will, either nationally or internationally, to take more effective action.

The civil military relationship has meant different things to different actors. Assumptions and expectations on the part of the international community informed the central objective of forging greater cooperation at best, or improved coordination at worst, between PRTs and other development actors in Afghanistan in the interests of shoring up Afghanistan's fragile trajectory of recovery. But misunderstandings and tensions between PRTs and other development actors, including the government, have remained.

² The political transition is commonly referred to as the Bonn Agreement or Bonn Process, which was decided at an international conference in the German city of Bonn in December 2001.

The goal of a closer relationship between civilian and military actors, both within the structure of the PRT itself and between PRTs and other civilian development actors, was intended to amplify 'effect' on the ground in the ongoing effort to win wider political support for the government. The integration of civil and military activities was also a key component of counter insurgency strategies.³ At the same time, the "paradox of development, that actual outcomes and existing behaviour continually contradict the expected scheme of things"⁴, very much applied to Afghanistan, where knowledge based on first hand experience of its localised and complex socio-political landscape was in very short supply⁵. This situation was compounded by a failure both by the Afghan Interim and Transitional Authorities, supported by the international community, to set a clear moral tone by delivering on leading Afghan concerns, which included the absence of the rule of law and the re-establishment of impunity, increasing corruption and deteriorating levels of human security.

International efforts to bridge the widening security gap via the delivery of reconstruction and development were not only undermined by the worsening security situation but also by the establishment of a vicious rather than a virtuous cycle (via the rule of law and better governance) in the early years of the Bonn Process. As forces and actors opposed to the establishment of law, order and stability prospered and the rule of impunity was restored in the wake of the Taliban's authoritarian rule, the government became mired in a deepening legitimacy crisis, the causes of which lay well beyond the limited capacity and resources of the PRTs meaningfully to address.

³ *The U.S. Army * Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2007, 53-77.*

⁴ Mark Duffield, *Global Governance And The New Wars*, (Zed Books, London & New York, 2001),161.

⁵ This was also a significant constraint for the central government, whose ranks were filled with individuals many of whom were returning technocrats who had grown up abroad.

The lack of clarity which has surrounded PRTs from the outset has been fostered by the focus on PRT inputs rather than PRT outputs, which so far have not been consistently monitored or evaluated. Neither has the cost effectiveness of PRTs, to date, been measured against comparative transaction costs by other development actors, which includes the government, NGOs and private contractors. The absence of any cost/benefit analysis left the question of whether PRT outcomes matched the improvements in security, reconstruction and governance claimed for them, unanswerable. But by mid-2007, discussions between the Afghan Ministry of Finance and donors over the need for PRTs to coordinate more effectively with the government's national development strategy, a sense that PRTs had been oversold in terms of overall effect and quality of outcomes and that the civil military approach towards development was increasingly geared towards an expanding insurgency rather than towards the long-term development agendas also being supported by donors, were all on the rise.

Background

The obstacles to building a viable polity in Afghanistan, to which international exit strategies were linked, were historic and formidable. Throughout the history of the modern Afghan state the writ of central government has been both weak and limited in terms of scope, with continuing tension between the central power and regional tribal autonomy. As rulers attempted modernizing reforms in the twentieth century tensions increased between the Ulema and the educated elite. As the 1990s progressed these tensions became more pronounced. Splits between the Ulema saw "Islamists largely renounce their modernizing project and toughen their attitude on social issues, at the

same time traditionalist movements such as the Taliban became more radical as a result of their contact with transnational movements such as Al-Qa'ida,"⁶ leading to the setting up of a fundamentalist state.

Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) known as the "Iron Amir" is remembered as the most effective centralizer. He spent much of his reign forcibly incorporating tribes and regions into the state. Though he succeeded in forging unity, Abdur Rahman did not dare tackle development, unlike King Amanullah (1919-1929), whose attempt to rapidly modernize the country was perceived by the tribes as eroding their autonomy and consequently violently resisted.⁷ The subsequent reigns of Nadir Shah (1929-1933) and Zahir Shah (1933-1973) saw a slower pace of modernization.⁸ The last significant move towards democratic process was the Constitutional Period (1963-1973). The 1964 Constitution, which guaranteed free elections and a free press, ended with the coup against Zahir Shah by his cousin Sardar Daud, in 1973. This ended the experiment with constitutional monarchy and was followed by a marked increase in Soviet influence, particularly over the army. The series of conflicts that resulted in the wake of the 1978 Saur Revolution led by Marxist influenced army officers ended the status quo ante in which a Pashtun Durrani elite had dominated other tribal and ethnic groups since 1747.

The devastating conflicts that raged intermittently from 1978 radically altered the mechanisms through which relations between the centre and the periphery had been

⁶Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending* (Hurst & Company, London, 2005), 354.

⁷ Leon B. Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1929: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernise a Tribal Society* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1973), 269-270; Bijan Omrani, "Afghanistan And The Search For Unity," *The Royal Society for Asian Affairs*, vol.XXXVIII, no.11, July 2007.

⁸ UNDP, "Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2004", 165.

conducted in ways which are still not fully understood.⁹ Community leaders were weakened, which increased the vulnerability of local communities. The collapse of the Afghan central government in 1992 saw military commanders on all sides increasing their power and autonomy and after a long period of preparation, “the age of the warlords had finally begun.”¹⁰ Whether the Afghan wars had ended with the collapse of Taliban rule was open to question. At the same time, the persistence of a strong fundamentalist strain demonstrated in any case “the resistance of a substantial section of Afghan society to the liberal model presented under the auspices of international assistance.”¹¹

Nevertheless, the majority of Afghans appeared to view the Taliban as a dead end in terms of the need for jobs, better health and education that they craved. The need for political change in Afghanistan to enable development and a better future was widely accepted at the start of the Bonn Agreement in December 2001. Public expectations however were badly managed. These had already been heightened due to Afghan exposure to the role and scope of government, particularly with regard to the provision of healthcare, education, jobs and infrastructure witnessed often for the first time by the millions of rural Afghans who had fled to Iran and Pakistan in the face of years of Soviet destruction. Expectations had been further raised by international media reports on financial commitments by the international community of what sounded like vast sums of money for Afghanistan’s development. This fuelled perceptions that the

⁹ The security situation has militated against the conduct of field research by social anthropologists and contemporary analysis of power relations at community levels remains limited.

¹⁰ Antonio Giustozzi, “Respectable Warlords? The Politics of Statebuilding in Post-Taleban Afghanistan”, *Crisis States Programme*, Working Paper No:33 (series 1) London School of Economics, September 2003, www.crisisstates.com/publications/phase1.htm; Niamatullah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, (Palgrave, 2002).

¹¹ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, (Hurst & Company, London, 2005), 355.

country would be transformed virtually overnight. Above all else, public support for the establishment of a strong central government was rooted in the belief that this would prevent renewed conflict. Thus the establishment of government control over the means of violence to end the fragmentation of power and facilitate development was an objective supported by the vast majority of Afghans at the outset. Many Afghans hoped that under a leader free of a tainted past, Hamid Karzai, and with the active support of the most powerful countries in the world, the predatory behaviour and short-termism that had characterized past administrations and security forces would finally end. Instead it was to reach new heights.

The 2001 Bonn Agreement was forged at a conference hosted by the German government in late November. A range of Afghan political actors (excluding the Taliban), representatives of the UN, US and European governments and experts on Afghanistan, attended. It was not a peace agreement but constituted “a road map for the re-establishment of rudimentary state structures”¹² laying out a path for political transition in Afghanistan, which formally culminated in the holding of elections in 2004 and 2005. Under the auspices of the Bonn Process, stability over the long-term was to be achieved through a number of concurrent approaches “premised on the recognition that the re-establishment of state capacity would be a slow and laborious process.”¹³ These included: (re)construction of the country’s war-shattered infrastructure; economic development led by the private sector; reform of the public administration and most crucially, security sector reform (SSR) in which disarmament and demobilization and reintegration (DDR), the creation of a new Afghan army, a reformed police force, judicial

¹² William Maley, *The Afghan Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

¹³ William Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan* (Hurst & Company, London, 2006) 32.

reform and counter-narcotics were all of pivotal importance. But whether these stepping stones would lead to the 'end state' that informed international exit strategy rationales depended also on the Afghan administration's commitment and ability to deliver real changes to the very grim lives led by the majority of Afghans.¹⁴

The absence of Afghan national security forces capable of securing the state's control over the means of violence meant that stabilization depended on the ability of the international community to react swiftly to the security challenges that emerged in the transitional period. Potential responses to the threat that a widening security gap posed to the Bonn process, such as a regional expansion of the UN mandated peacekeeping forces in Kabul, were constrained by a number of factors, however. Paramount amongst these was the perceived interests of the US-led coalition in its prosecution of the 'war on terror' in southern Afghanistan. But wider international support for the increased levels and types of resources identified by a range of experts as fundamental for building a sustainable stability was not forthcoming.¹⁵

As the security gap widened, Afghan power realities rapidly moved in directions that fundamentally undermined the democratic processes and structures the Bonn process was supposed to establish. Resistance to the political reforms on which meaningful progress in SSR depended, subjected urgently needed reform processes to long delays.¹⁶ The DDR process, for example, did not start until October 2003, after long awaited reforms to the Ministry of Defence. Hence, political reforms that were a

¹⁴ On the global Human Development Index, Afghanistan is ranked 174 out of 178 countries. The Human Poverty Index views the country as one of the worst in the world. "Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007", Centre for Policy and Human Development, Kabul University, 27 September, emphasizes the links between human development and the rule of law.

¹⁵ Ray Jennings, "The Road Ahead, Lessons in Nation Building from Japan, Germany and Afghanistan for Postwar Iraq", *United States Institute of Peace*, Washington DC, 2003, www.usip.org/pubs/index.html.

¹⁶ Thorough political reform of the Ministry of Interior, on which police reform depends, is still pending.

pre-requisite to the holding of free and fair elections were only partially underway with less than a year to go before the 2004 Presidential elections.

Insecurity also slowed the pace of reconstruction while significantly increasing its cost both in the field and in Kabul, where the presence of private security companies was ever more visible. The foreign investors needed to develop the private sector and provide jobs were frightened off.¹⁷ Most damaging of all, as the trade in opium was re-established, it fuelled corruption at district, provincial and central levels of government, allowing increasingly organized criminal syndicates to co-opt the administration where it counted, in the interests of facilitating opium cultivation and trafficking. Finally, regional commanders and other local power holders that had been weakened or had disappeared under the Taliban regime were able to restore and strengthen their positions effectively unopposed. The resurgence of 'warlordism' was also facilitated by the coalition's strategy of using Afghan militias in the prosecution of the 'war on terror'.¹⁸ To the growing disillusionment of the Afghan people, individuals strongly suspected of being involved in the drugs trade and to have been involved in serious human rights violations in the past and/or present were placed in official positions of power provincially and within the central government. Significantly, many Afghan professionals in the Diaspora chose not to return. The sharp surges in poppy cultivation from 2002 onwards continued to reflect the absence of law and order.

¹⁷ A civil society expert cited one Afghan businessman as stating that "he loved his country but he loved his money more." By 2006, advertisements on Afghan TV stations regularly featured property for sale in Dubai as those profiting from the black economy increasingly invested abroad.

¹⁸ Author's interview in Kabul, July 2003, with Professor Kenji Izesaki, Japan's Special Representative on DDR 2003-2004.

The political context to the launch of the PRT plan

The international community's difficulty in reconciling its key agendas in Afghanistan – the 'war on terror' and the state building process – was apparent in the UN Security Council's decision not to amend the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mandate which limited the force to Kabul and its immediate surrounds. Urgent calls for an increase in ISAF numbers and its expansion regionally were repeatedly made in 2002 by the head of the UN mission, Lakhdar Brahimi, and the interim President, Hamid Karzai. Early US opposition to ISAF's expansion was determinant however, as the US alone possessed the air resources, in-country, on which any European-manned expansion would rely.¹⁹ Possible causes underlying the US position were thought at the time to derive from US fears that a regional presence of peace-keeping forces could obstruct coalition operations against Al Qaeda and what the coalition referred to as "the remnants of the Taliban" and could increase chances of 'friendly fire' incidents. In the event, the US Administration's attention had already moved elsewhere, and important US military assets had been moved out of Afghanistan by the latter half of 2002 in preparation for the decision, apparently made shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks, to invade Iraq.²⁰

By mid-2002, concern that the state building process was already slipping out of the control of the main donors who sponsored it was growing. This drove the development of an alternative plan to expand the coalition's civil-military affairs strategy (hitherto a component in the coalition's counter-insurgency strategy in the South), to the

¹⁹ Reliance by NATO on US airlift capacity in Afghanistan was still apparent in the run up to the 2005 Parliamentary elections. On 25 April the NATO Secretary General stated that any increase in NATO troops to boost security for the elections would depend on the availability of US airlift.

²⁰ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, (New York: Free Press, 2004), 241.

rest of the country via 'Joint Regional Teams', the forerunners to PRTs. The plan's objectives were broadly stated: to extend the legitimacy and authority of the central government beyond Kabul and to facilitate reconstruction, thereby improving the overall security situation. The plan's architects included British as well as US coalition representatives in Kabul. The PRTs, which merged security and development, were intended to provide temporary support to the Afghan authorities – to buy time in which government capacity could be developed and in which attempts to get meaningful progress in the reform process as a whole (prior to the presidential elections scheduled for June 2004) could be renewed.

The PRTs were composed of joint civil-military teams initially numbering fifty to one hundred military personnel geared to the provision of 'force protection' and the protection of the civil military reservists who provided the reconstruction and development expertise. From 2003 onwards, civilian development and political experts from the US and European governments were embedded in PRTs in what became standard practice. Though it was claimed that security in the PRT area of operation would improve by virtue of the PRTs' presence, PRTs were never mandated, constructed or intended to afford direct protection to Afghan civilians or, for that matter, other development actors.²¹ In extremis, PRTs could rely on the ability to 'reach-back' to coalition air power.

That the PRT plan had been initially oversold by coalition spokesmen was acknowledged by the coalition in its report to UNAMA in the only evaluation of PRTs conducted.²² The long shopping list of skills and resources that PRTs would bring into Afghanistan mostly never materialized. Instead, the PRT approach continued to revolve

²¹ Foreign aid workers had assumed that PRTs would provide support in extremis but in cases of civil disturbance in Faizabad in the north-east the PRT on both occasions withdrew into its compound.

²² The UN facilitated evaluation of the initial three PRTs took place in Kabul in May 2003.

around quick impact projects (QIPs), which focused on the visible, minor reconstruction activities intended to win friends quickly and garner valuable information, in line with counter insurgency strategy. In that some of the QIPs resembled the humanitarian projects undertaken by NGOs, the expansion of the military's involvement in humanitarian-type activities was bound to be highly controversial amongst the assistance sector. To the surprise of incoming military rotations, the expansion in civil military affairs proved far more controversial in Afghanistan with the assistance community than the military's earlier involvement in humanitarian crises in Iraqi Kurdistan and Kosovo. The role of the military in providing resources in the short-term to relieve humanitarian crises and/or provide security allowing humanitarian agencies to act was relatively straightforward. The highly complex operating environment of Afghanistan, where US-led coalition forces were also on a war footing, was another matter.

As PRTs were going to go ahead with or without them, some NGOs decided to engage in policy discussions over PRT approaches. This process was led in Kabul by the NGO umbrella organisation ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief), which had been established in Peshawar in 1988 when NGOs were the gateway to the provision of assistance to the Afghan people. ACBAR sought to limit effects perceived as potentially harmful to NGO security and to the future operational capacity of NGOs, given the uncertainty of the political future. Some NGOs, such as Medecins sans Frontieres, did not publicly engage in these discussions due to a policy of keeping a strict separation from anything connected to the military in an effort to preserve 'humanitarian space'. Other NGOs, along with UNAMA and UN agencies, viewed PRTs more pragmatically against a security situation that was already reducing access to increasing

areas of the south, while in the north competing warlords periodically engaged in clashes. NGO and UN support for the plan at the time was largely predicated on the absence of any other response by the international community to address the widening security gap during the transitional period when the Afghan government lacked sufficient security forces.

Against this background, the announcement of the PRT plan was welcomed by the Afghan Transitional Authority and UNAMA as a sign at least of continuing engagement by the international community as Afghanistan's problems intensified.²³ But this announcement effectively closed the door on any timely expansion of UN mandated peacekeeping forces to regional urban centres. This had been expected by the Afghan people following ISAF's stabilization of Kabul in early 2002. The calls made for ISAF's expansion in 2002 had been actively supported by the UN, some international NGOs and academics, as expediting reconstruction depended on sufficient levels of security being established as soon as possible. Instead, the expansion of a civil military approach was presented as a means to help facilitate the delivery of reconstruction and development, which in turn would confer stability. As critics dismissed the poorly resourced PRTs as an attempt to provide the ISAF effect on the cheap,²⁴ the plan's defenders in UNAMA and the coalition saw the PRTs as a matter of doing something with the available resources, given that nothing else was on offer.²⁵ The underlying hope expressed privately by one senior UN representative at the time was that PRTs might prove to be a means to draw

²³ The extent of the problems confronted by the international community in rebuilding the Afghan state was becoming clearer. Initial assessments conducted prior to the first international donors conference in Tokyo, January 2003, had been very superficially conducted as there was little time available.

²⁴ Statement of Nancy Lindborg, Executive Vice President, Mercy Corps, Senate Foreign Relations Committee *Hearing on: "Afghanistan: In Pursuit of Security and Democracy"*, October 23, 2003.

²⁵ Stapleton, *BAAG*, 27.

in, albeit gradually, greater numbers of international forces which would help to stabilize the country.

The Absence of a PRT mandate

While PRT activities “evolved”, the absence of a detailed mandate spelling out exactly how the PRT’s key objective, the expansion of the central government’s legitimacy and authority, would be achieved, remained. Any critique of this state of affairs was countered by the coalition and later ISAF on the basis that PRTs needed flexibility in order to be effective in the diverse operating environments they functioned in. A detailed mandate, it was argued, would act as a constraint. The rejection of a “one size fits all” approach for PRTs in this regard was understandable. But it also obviated the need to define a strategic and coherent PRT-specific response to the actual challenges to the state building project, which were all too apparent in the uncoordinated and slow progress being made in security sector reform. Confusion over the purpose of PRTs could only continue under these circumstances, while PRT approaches were essentially reactive and ad hoc. In addition, PRT operations were also subject to the whims of successive military commanders who conducted PRT operations as they saw fit. At best, PRTs amounted to a form of crisis management but one that allowed the political implications of the crisis confronted to be avoided.

The rationale for the PRTs’ central role: the extension of the central government’s authority was based on a simplistic categorization of the actors involved and an underestimation of the sophistication of the political challenges confronted. Kabul-based line ministries were perceived as the “good guys”; their provincial counterparts required

training, and non-state actors were labeled the “bad guys”. Thus, the deployment of the PRTs into the provinces to capacity build the local administration in theory would link the provinces to the centre. But the situation was far more complex than that, especially in the socio-political sphere where distinctions and allegiances were notoriously fluid. The central government was in many respects as dysfunctional as the provinces and progress in the provinces, especially with respect to good governance, was very often blocked by ministries within the central government itself.

Though critics of the PRTs highlighted the absence of a detailed mandate in obscuring their purpose and actual achievements, others interpreted this situation as a welcome state of “constructive ambiguity.”²⁶ Conceivably, the advantages of ambiguity were related to the coalition and US government’s active encouragement to hesitant NATO member states to take over or stand up PRTs.²⁷ In any event, PRT activities could be cited by coalition spokesmen in the management of perceptions (both internally and externally) as increasingly negative media reports surfaced about the slow progress of reconstruction and worsening security in Afghanistan.

The Attempt to establish a Unified PRT approach

The political constraints responsible for the largely stalled security sector reform (SSR) process had led to increasing calls by mid-2003 from donors for PRTs to be more actively involved in supporting security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament and demobilisation in particular. A shift in PRT focus was also under consideration by the US

²⁶Author’s interview with UNAMA official, December 2004, during a period when UNAMA, with NGO support, had failed to get specific guidelines for the civil military relationship in Afghanistan on to the agenda of the PRT Executive Steering Committee.

²⁷ From 2003 onwards a shift in the US government position on ISAF’s expansion occurred due to the need to get more non-US boots on the ground in Afghanistan as the situation in Iraq took up increasing resources.

embassy, which had issued civil military guidelines in this period that emphasised projects for local government as well as PRT involvement in heavy infrastructure projects.²⁸ This encouraged hopes that efforts then being led by UNAMA to get a unified PRT approach would succeed in diverting PRTs away from minor reconstruction projects towards security sector reform.

In consultations with the coalition and a few international NGOs, UNAMA identified priority areas where the PRTs could maximize their comparative advantage, namely in areas where NGOs could not operate, such as the rebuilding of customs houses, courthouses and police and other local administrative buildings. To the degree that this strategy was implemented, it was argued, this would also bring PRTs closer to the key objective of expanding the central government's authority. A number of other interests would be met by this shift: the prevention of duplication of activities already being carried out by NGOs; raising the central government's profile while strengthening its ability to function provincially; contributing to an enabling security environment in which professional development actors could access communities; and to the extent that this shift was implemented, it would decrease the grounds for blurring of the boundaries between the military and humanitarian sectors.

The British PRT set up in Mazar e Sharif in July 2003 was expected to lead the way, with New Zealand following suit via its PRT in Bamyan. In preparing its PRT approach, the British Ministry of Defense had consulted widely with UN Agencies and NGOs. Promises made not to duplicate in any way the work of NGOs were largely kept. Most importantly in the eyes of many observers, the focus was to be on improving

²⁸ The US shift in focus was reflected in guidelines ("Principles Guiding PRT Working Relations with UNAMA, NGOs and Local Government") by Ambassador Bill Taylor's office at the US embassy in 2003.

security. This was manifested in regular patrolling of the hinterland well off the beaten track as well as focusing resources on raising levels of professional policing. Projects were selected that strengthened the infrastructure of government provincially, in contrast to the building of schools, wells and clinics, which continued to characterize PRT approaches elsewhere. But despite the PRT's contribution to the success of UN-led mediation efforts between clashing northern commanders in 2003,²⁹ PRT activities in the region ultimately amounted to crisis management. Since the British PRT was not mandated or resourced to address security challenges directly, it could not fundamentally alter the power realities that had re-emerged following the collapse of the Taliban, which were obstructing the state building process and security sector reform. Though a partial shift in focus towards SSR occurred in coalition led PRTs, it did not turn into the total shift argued for by the UN.

Afghan NGOs did not contribute significantly to the debate on coordinating civilian and military approaches to the development challenges confronted in Afghanistan in the early years of the Bonn process. Concepts such as 'humanitarian space' were not then a leading concern. A more pressing urgency was the fact that the funding environment had become much tougher for NGOs, as donors stopped directly funding them and instead channeled development funding through the central government and UN agencies. For Afghan NGOs, many of which bore more resemblance to private contractors, PRTs represented a potential source of funding. Beyond these considerations, concrete results were what counted most. As an Afghan colleague who had spent thirty years working in

²⁹ The commanders in question were the Uzbek General, Dostum (Junbesh), and the Tajik General, Atta (Jamiat), the latter became governor of Balkh province.

development put it, “the Afghans want the apple and they don’t care if it comes from the apple or the willow tree.”

The Evolution of the PRT plan

The deployment of the initial PRTs in early 2003, was officially linked to the coalition’s simultaneous announcement that it was moving from Phase III (stabilization of Afghanistan) into Phase IV (reconstruction), which enabled military resources to be diverted from the ‘war on terror’ to reconstruction and development. From this period on, the coalition tended to refer to the situation in the south as a counter insurgency rather than as a part of the ‘war on terror’.

From the outset, PRTs had been officially linked to keeping the ambitious Bonn process on track, particularly with regard to the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2004 and 2005 respectively. At the launch of the PRT plan in November 2002, PRTs were heralded as a means to “build the Afghan Transitional Authority’s legitimacy and authority as we move towards the elections”.³⁰ But by mid-2003, only four PRTs were in existence and these were restricted by minimal and slow moving funding lines.

At a meeting with NGOs in mid-2003, in Kabul, a coalition General, Karl Eikenberry, had described the PRTs as “an empty vessel.” However, a few months later this situation was transformed with the arrival of General Barno (who took over command of coalition forces) and Zalmay Khalilzad (the new US Ambassador) in Kabul. Hitherto, the US had been detached from the state building process, but with the inception of the ‘Accelerate Success’ Programme, run from the US embassy under Ambassador

³⁰ Stapleton, *BAAG*, 19.

Khalilzad, US attitudes sharply reversed.³¹ Barno particularly focused on PRTs, and numbers and funding lines were rapidly increased. By December 2003, a PRT was operational in Kandahar in the south. In the first quarter of 2004 the US military had stood up PRTs in Jalalabad, Assadabad, Ghazni, Khost, and Qalat, the provincial capitals of provinces in the south-east and east, neighbouring Pakistan.

As indicated, the evolution of the PRT plan took place against a security situation that was the subject of conflicting claims. International media reports repeatedly emphasized the US Administration's need for a foreign policy success story in Afghanistan to offset the unraveling disaster in Iraq as the Bush Administration prepared for re-election in 2004. Concurrently, Taliban successes in the south were continually dismissed at press briefings by the coalition and US officials visiting Afghanistan as signs that the insurgency was in its death throes. At press briefings during 2004 General Barno often referred to the PRTs, explicitly linking them to the establishment of what he termed the achievement of "enduring security" in Afghanistan - though the measures that would bring about this end state were never described. Senior officers of non-US military interviewed by the author at the time, however, viewed the civil military approach of the PRTs as standard military practice dating back to counter insurgency strategies developed by the British army in Borneo and Malaya in the 1950s and 1960s.

As PRTs, along with all other available assets, were utilized in preparing the ground for the Presidential elections in Afghanistan, due a few months prior to the US elections, the US Ambassador led the international community in a determined push to maintain the Bonn momentum and hold Afghan elections on schedule, despite the

³¹ In early 2004, senior UNAMA representatives linked the increased engagement in state building by the US with the need for an exit strategy due to increasing security demands in Iraq. However, the massive new US embassy then under construction and commitment of substantial assets to the main US bases in Bagram and Kandahar indicated longer term plans.

security risks involved.³² Ultimately, the increased security measures taken by NATO, the coalition and Afghan security forces helped ensure that though flawed in terms of process, the elections had a positive outcome. The Afghan people showed great bravery in overcoming the fear and intimidation liberally spread beforehand by political opponents of the electoral process and turned out in large numbers at the polling booths. In the wake of a majority vote for Hamid Karzai and the Taliban's failure to disrupt the electoral process as they had publicly sworn to do, the US government was able to legitimise its earlier claims that the coalition's intervention in Afghanistan was a democratic success story and that Afghanistan represented "the good war".

As PRTs increased in number, the structure of the teams changed. The numbers of civil affairs personnel decreased and the embedding of USAID and US State Department representatives to advise on development and local politics became the norm. Concurrently, the numbers of infantry protecting civilian advisers increased. After months of delay, the Afghan Ministry of Interior began to send civilian representatives to join the teams. The previously "empty" PRT vessel was also filled in terms of financial resources. The US Congress had approved an effective doubling of the US budget for Afghanistan for the US funding year 2004, which totaled over two billion dollars. Half of the budget was designated for the improvement of security; the funding priorities being the development of the Afghan National Army and the Ministry of Defense. Smaller sums were directed at equipping and training police and counter narcotics activities. Fifty-two million dollars were allocated for the PRTs, the majority of which was designated for their projects.

³² Andrew Wilder, "Afghan Elections: The Great Gamble", *Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit* (Kabul November, 2003).

Increased funding was channeled via three budget lines now available to the coalition. The existing Overseas Humanitarian Disaster and Civic Assistance (OHDACA) line under the US Department of Defense was joined by the US State Department's Emergency Support Funds. A totally new budget line, the Commanders Emergency Reconstruction Programme (CERP) allowed PRT commanders to draw on one hundred thousand dollars a month for projects, virtually at their discretion. This development in particular dismayed UNAMA, which was then attempting to divert PRT focus towards security sector reform processes as mentioned earlier in the paper.

The Art of the Possible

The comparatively large amounts of funding at the disposal of US PRT commanders and the additional funding controlled by embedded USAID representatives distinguished PRTs based in the south from the British and New Zealand led PRTs in the north and centre. The British government, for example, made approximately just one million pounds available to its development adviser in the Mazar-e-Sharif PRT in 2004. But approaches that had focused on extensive patrols of the northern hinterland, professionalisation of the police and reconstruction projects linked to the restoration of the administrative infrastructure that had proved viable in the north, did not survive the subsequent British PRT transfer to the south, where more complex socio-political conditions obtained.

The British departure from Mazar to take over the PRT in Helmand in April 2006, a province then largely under the control of anti government forces, saw a marked increase

in funding through the PRT, for development and quick impact projects.³³ The British Ministry of Defence (MoD) also introduced a 'CERPs equivalent' fund for the military, which was controlled by the lead military representative in the PRT amounting to £40,000 a month to be spent monthly or forfeited. In practice, this mechanism, internal to the MoD, was where the 'hearts and minds' projects were funded from. Such funding arrangements (employed on a much larger scale by the US Department of Defense³⁴), had been viewed as inappropriate by the British MoD for its PRT in the north in the past. Reconstruction and development projects, apart from an initial phase linked to the establishment of force protection, had been discarded there. The funding changes that followed the British PRT move to Helmand in the south reflected the perceived exigencies of the insurgency, in which the delivery of QIPs was central to 'force protection' considerations. But these new funding arrangements were at odds with the establishment by the British of a civilian lead for the Helmand PRT and the recognition of the overriding need for long term approaches if development was to be meaningful and sustainable.

The increase in PRT funding had allowed the US-led PRTs in the south to widen their range of projects. By 2005, these included increased support to the police and basic management training for local government, as well as workshops on narcotics. However, the rolling CERP funds ensured the continued provision of quick impact projects (QIPs). Apart from counter insurgency considerations, QIPs had the advantage of providing fast, visible and quantifiable results. The numbers of schools, clinics and wells built could be

³³ QIPs figures for the Helmand PRT in 2006/7 amounted to \$US12 million and for 2007/8 \$US18million, according to a DfID representative.

³⁴ By 2006/7, US PRT commanders and the US Regional command were funded from a central fund of US\$100 million that was disbursed by Task Force 82 as fast as the commanders could spend it according to a development expert working with the British government's Department for International Development.

promoted both to the Afghan public and to policy makers in Kabul and Washington. However, the provision of skilled staff needed for the functioning of schools and clinics was beyond the remit and resources of PRTs. Decades of experience had demonstrated to NGOs that oversight was vital to ensure decent construction outcomes in Afghanistan, where contractors will often try to cut costs and use the cheapest building materials available unless closely monitored. These problems were overcome by PRTs in areas where a partnership existed with professional NGOs³⁵ that could provide the human resources required and support the community in the maintenance of the school or clinic, which had been constructed via PRT funds. Less frequently, this was also the case where a competent government line ministry was present.

Reports of PRT funded schools and clinics being built without teachers and medics to staff them continued to surface, however, leading to criticism from the Afghan government as well as NGOs. Lessons learned in this regard were identified.³⁶ However, the government's concern that the PRTs amounted to a parallel development strategy outside its financial control was reflected in an intermittent critique that surfaced in meetings between the government and donors over the years. In particular, PRTs were criticized for failing to coordinate sufficiently over national development strategies either at the centre, or via line ministry representatives in the provinces. In reality, the PRTs could find almost no effective counterparts at the provincial or district levels with whom they might coordinate.

³⁵ Over 2,500 NGOs were registered with the Afghan government by 2005, the majority of them Afghan. Many of these were 'brief-case NGOs' that consisted of one person with a bank account. A relatively small number of national and international NGOs that met internationally recognized professional standards were registered with ACBAR, the umbrella NGO organisation.

³⁶ Robert M. Perito, "The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified", *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 152, October 2005.

The external as well as internal pressures on PRT commanders to get results on the ground fast often led to substandard outcomes. In 2005, a US civil-military reservist in the Gardez PRT in the south-east, described the “uniformly poor” results of building work contracted out by the PRT to local companies in Paktia and the Paktika provinces stating, “you could put your feet through the sidewalk.” According to a UNAMA representative recently interviewed by the author, this situation has not significantly improved in the south-east. In addition to insufficient oversight, the brevity of military rotations³⁷ and the tendency of new PRT commanders to want to make their own mark via projects started under their watch also militated against continuity.

The core of the critique of the military’s involvement in development work was that rather than being ‘needs based’ (which referred to the core humanitarian principles of assistance being based on ‘neutrality, impartiality and independence’ claimed by NGOs), it was based on military and political objectives. However, many NGO activities in Afghanistan were also donor driven and similarly tied to overall political objectives. Some NGOs were able to utilize funding for Afghanistan from separate sources in an effort to retain independence. But the majority of NGOs was not in a position to choose and had little option but to become implementing partners in the Afghan government’s development plans, some of which, such as the National Solidarity Programme, had distinct political overtones.

In the aftermath of the 2004 Presidential elections, debates about the value added by PRTs ended. The PRTs had helped in delivering a positive outcome provincially and the concept was validated in the eyes of donors and government. Plans to place a PRT in all thirty four provinces developed apace as the subject of PRTs continued to take up

³⁷ An exception was the length of tour by US forces, which by 2007 had extended to 14 months.

increasing amounts of political space in Washington and Brussels. As numbers of PRTs increased throughout 2004, the utility of PRTs in providing eyes and ears for donors unable to access increasing areas of the country was obvious. PRTs also provided a secure “bed and breakfast” for the troop contributing nations’ development and political advisers and for visiting dignitaries. The involvement of PRTs in bridging provincial development and governance needs maintained a sense of momentum and became central to policy discussions in Kabul.

More Cooks in the Kitchen

In the second half of 2003, Britain, New Zealand and Germany stood up or took over the lead of PRTs under coalition command.³⁸ The German take over of the Kunduz PRT in the north followed the UN Security Council’s adjustment to ISAF’s mandate in September 2003, which finally permitted ISAF’s expansion beyond Kabul. Germany had led diplomatic efforts to secure the adjustment, which allowed the Kunduz PRT to transfer to NATO command. This was an important consideration for the German government, given the strength of domestic opposition to the war in Iraq. Although a shift towards security had been implemented by the British and New Zealand PRTs in the north and centre of Afghanistan, the attempt to establish a universal PRT model had not transpired. Instead, the PRTs’ broadly stated objectives and lack of mandate favoured the emergence of different national interpretations of PRTs to varying ends. Indeed, many NATO member states would not have become involved had it been otherwise.

The German PRT approach, which focused on visible development projects, departed from the more direct approaches towards security taken by the British and New

³⁸ Mazar-e-Sharif (UK in July) in Bamyan (New Zealand in September) and in Kunduz (Germany in October).

Zealanders. A risk adverse approach adopted by the German government was evident in the choice of its PRT location in Kunduz, a relatively 'benign' area where security was not adversely affecting the implementation of development programmes by NGOs and UN Agencies. The German PRT proved a harbinger of the disparate national approaches that would proliferate as NATO/ISAF expanded. The German government's refusal to allow direct PRT engagement in narcotics related issues would also be emulated by many NATO troop contributing nations.³⁹ This confused observers because poppy cultivation was the main problem that existed in Kunduz at that time.

The joint assessment of the first three PRTs facilitated by UNAMA, in May 2003, to inform directions of future PRTs, had included representatives from UN Agencies and NGOs as well as the coalition. A number of points were agreed to by the assistance community in a subsequent report: That it was too early to judge whether PRTs would prove to be a contributory factor in support of the Bonn process or not; That any PRT contribution would depend on the extent that PRTs shifted focus away from minor reconstruction projects to building government administrative capacity at the district and provincial levels, as well as the facilitation of the deployment and civic-action activities of the Afghan national army and the national police; That the absence of government representatives in the PRT process undermined the PRT's main objective – to expand Kabul's legitimacy and authority; And, finally, that in view of the deteriorating security situation, PRTs should support the establishment of greater security in Afghanistan by supporting security sector reform and DDR in particular.

³⁹ The possibility of antagonizing local populations by direct involvement of NATO/ISAF forces in eradication of poppy crops has continued to be central to NATO policy.

More controversially, the report stated 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 was challenged at the time by NGOs who had succeeded in maintaining programmes in insecure areas in Afghanistan. They argued that the international community's failure to address the rising levels of violence in Afghanistan was the determining factor in preventing NGO access and consequently assistance to increasing numbers of Afghan children, women and men in some of the poorest areas of the country. But despite the comparative advantages held by PRTs, their resources were not concentrated in the high risk marginalized districts that often comprised the very areas targeted by insurgents. Instead, PRT projects, like the PRTs, tended to be located in provincial centres and the immediate surrounds.

In other cases, situating projects in contested areas was considered too dangerous for PRTs, which were essentially geared towards, and promoted to domestic publics as, a contribution towards peacekeeping operations. Further factors that contributed to the tendency for the PRTs to focus efforts on the towns included ease of access and in particular the close working relationship that the PRT commander developed with the provincial governor. The governor, based in the provincial capital, probably only visited the more remote and insecure districts of his province once or twice a year. Visits were usually facilitated and encouraged by the PRT. The governor would be biased anyway towards locating politically legitimizing projects in the provincial centre or where his own tribal or ethnic group was located.

PRTs brought significant resources with them, which provided considerable leverage to governors. Consequently, every governor was very keen to have one. The

remote and extremely poor provinces, such as Ghor, depended on the efforts of the handful of NGOs able to maintain a presence due to funding from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) or as implementing partners in rather insecure Afghan government development programmes.⁴⁰ For such provinces a PRT presence represented a lifeline to chances of significant reconstruction and development projects being funded and implemented.

The Question of Access

Towards the latter half of 2003, increasing areas of the south west were assessed as “high risk” and coloured red on the UN security accessibility maps that were regularly updated. ‘Red’ denoted areas inaccessible to UN agency staff. The ability of leading development NGOs to maintain programme delivery increasingly depended on the efforts of locally recruited staff, some of whom had been networked into communities in Helmand and Kandahar provinces for over twenty years. Though international military forces tended to view NGOs as autonomous actors, it was the Afghan communities themselves that determined whether local NGO staff could continue to work with them or not. The only exception to this dynamic was if the NGO in question had links to local Taliban networks, which might allow some projects to go ahead. Up to 2005, such considerations were largely determined by the ability of the community in question to offer security to the NGO working with them. As the insurgency expanded and the government proved unable to offer protection, the question of whether the community could afford to be seen to be associated with NGOs, dominated. ‘Going local’ allowed

⁴⁰ACBAR *Briefing Paper*, “Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan: At a Crossroads”, November 2006.

NGOs to maintain programmes but significantly limited the range of programming to those that could be run effectively from a distance.

To reach communities, NGOs had to travel by roads. “Show me where the roads end, and I will show you where the Taliban begins”, General Eikenberry was reportedly fond of telling his staff.⁴¹ But the lack of security trumped the economic benefits that resulted from new roads, initially in the south and subsequently in other parts of the country. The deterioration in road security in the south, which increased from 2004, was a key factor driving the NGO retraction of programming to provincial capitals, if not a closure of programmes altogether. A series of ACBAR press releases issued throughout the latter half of 2003 highlighted security incidents, which mainly occurred on the roads. By the end of that year, ACBAR was reporting rising numbers of fatal attacks against NGO staff, a phenomenon that was to increase with every passing year.⁴² The complex factors fuelling insecurity were reflected in the limited investigations made into security incidents. These often revealed links to local criminal elements and banditry, factional disputes and the actions of local officials as well as those by anti government forces.⁴³ By the end of 2006, with insecurity erupting in the north and west, aid agencies were limiting and closing programmes in parts of Farah, Badghis and Faryab provinces.

⁴¹ Jim Hoagland, “The Key to Afghanistan: More Time”, *Washington Post*, September 24, 2006.

⁴² 28 aid workers were killed in 2004 and 31 in 2005. By the first half of 2006, this figure had already been exceeded (Figures: ACBAR).

⁴³ The murder of 4 international staff and 1 national staff of Medecins sans Frontieres in Badghis province in 2004 was later attributed to a disgruntled district chief of police who was due to be removed from his post. The car bomb attack against UNAMA’s regional office in Kandahar in the same year was also believed by the UN to be linked to local politics rather than to insurgent attack.

Civil Military Attempts to Square the Security Circle

The challenges inherent to the security situation were epitomized in Kandahar city where in addition to the terrorist threat at least five militias and police forces jockeyed for position under the control of different tribal leaders. This mirrored the security conditions that had led to the original rise of the Taliban in 1994. Following a series of security incidents targeting UNHCR and UNAMA in 2004, a new plan to win back the south was announced at a meeting with NGOs and UN agencies in Kandahar by coalition and UN representatives. It was called the 'Provincial Stabilisation Strategy' (PSS).

The objective of the PSS was to provide urgently needed reconstruction in the form of roads and water to dangerous areas that had become inaccessible to UN agencies and NGOs. With their ability to call in coalition air power, PRTs were at the heart of a security package tailored to facilitate leadership by properly trained Afghan police (as opposed to the militia forces called 'police' in Kandahar), and augmented by local authorities loyal to the central government. The inclusion of good governance for the first time was notable in that it reflected growing international concern in this regard. The plan was test run in two areas of Kandahar province, Shah Wali Kot in the north and Shurabak near the border with Pakistan. If successful, the approach would be implemented in other parts of the south where the government was losing control. Almost one year later, however, there was little to show for the plan. The root causes of failure were identified by a USAID representative who had directly observed its implementation as "an inability to include a viable security plan or to commit sufficient resources of the right kind fast enough." Nevertheless, the PSS, relabeled as 'Regional Development Zones' (RDZ), was widely referred to in military briefings and in policy

discussions in Kabul many months after the concept had ceased to have any relevance on the ground.

In 2006, ISAF used similar ingredients to the PSS in the promotion of 'Afghan Development Zones' that were established around provincial capitals in the South. As development and governance improved within them, the theory went, ADZs would expand like ink blots and gradually join up. A key difference from the PSS approach was that the ADZs followed major military operations, such as 'Operation Medusa', in Kandahar province, which had cleared insurgents out of the areas targeted. However, the inability of the Afghan police to hold ground cleared led to military gains being transient in effect. Over a year later the ADZs had not made significant headway and were rarely referred to.

It is interesting to compare the civil military approaches outlined above, with UNAMA's success in squaring the security circle from 2005 onwards in a tribal region known as the Zadran arc, which spanned the three south-eastern provinces that make up Loya Paktia. Historically this region had been far less penetrated by the state and coherent tribal structures remained in control of distinct geographical areas, unlike the south where tribal structures were far more fragmented. UNAMA acted on the political opportunity that the distinct tribal landscape in the south-east presented. The Zadran arc was rated as high risk by the UN⁴⁴ and had received very little reconstruction assistance since the fall of the Taliban. Like earlier attempts outlined above, UNAMA's approach also combined security, governance and reconstruction elements, but UNAMA was able to achieve a durable tribal consensus via the inclusion of all the Zadran sub and sub-sub tribes in prior consultations.

⁴⁴ The leader of the Zadran tribes, Jalaluddin Haqqani, is based in Pakistan and is closely linked to the Taliban.

The 'Zadran Arc Stabilisation Initiative' was signed by the three provincial governors concerned and promised the delivery of development projects, chosen by the tribes, against the provision of tribal security. An immediate cessation of development would follow if any attacks on projects occurred. UNAMA had already secured the funds for the agreed projects and was in a position to deliver on promises made. The trust and confidence engendered has led to further requests for UNAMA to mediate with anti-government elements to allow major development projects, such as the sixty million dollar Gardez to Khost road, to proceed. The maintenance of oversight and ongoing consultations between tribal representatives and UNAMA proved vital to the success of a process, which the socio-political conditions of the south-east had made possible.

In August 2007, PRT engagement in Helmand in the south-west included reconstruction projects following destructive military operations in Sangin and Greshk as well as attempts to develop the capacity of sub-national administrations in the delivery of services and sustainable development. Progress in implementing the latter was hampered though, both by a security situation where threat levels were so high⁴⁵ that civilian advisers were restricted from leaving the PRT and by a local administration described as "a mixture of the incompetent, illiterate and criminal."⁴⁶

Major counter insurgency operations had been launched the previous year in Kandahar province against hundreds of insurgents that threatened the politically symbolic city of Kandahar. A number of operations were launched, which culminated in 'Operation Medusa' in Panjwai and Zhare districts in September, to clear Taliban fighters from these strategic areas. NATO claimed that 1,500 insurgents were killed in

⁴⁵ According to PRT sources, up to fifteen suicide bombers could be found in the provincial capital of Helmand at any one time looking for targets in mid-2007.

⁴⁶ Author's interview, PRT Development Adviser, 22 August 2007.

the operation, which involved aerial bombardment, and an estimated 80,000 Afghans were displaced. In the wake of this operation, NATO forces moved into Panjwai “with bricks, bulldozers and lots of cash” in an effort to regain peoples’ trust.⁴⁷ According to Afghan sources, these operations temporarily restored peoples’ confidence. But within one year the insurgents had returned, illustrating again the inability of the police to hold ground cleared. The situation was described by one US journalist as part of “a bloody stalemate” between NATO forces and Taliban fighters across southern Afghanistan.⁴⁸ In a recent interview with an Afghan researcher based in Kandahar the situation in the south was also referred to as “a stalemate” and one that reportedly people increasingly felt could not be tolerated for much longer. “People don’t care if the roads built are paved with gold, they would rather have security”, I was told.⁴⁹

PRTs and Provincial Governance

In Afghanistan, the ‘plan’ can substitute for the action. As reform processes came up against the political constraints that often rendered them ineffectual the tendency was to start another process and abandon the former one. Alternatives to this would have required a unified effort by leading donors to make existing processes work by identifying and agreeing on the underlying problems, at central as well as provincial and district government levels, that held reform processes hostage and then committing the necessary resources needed to effectively confront them. No such unified approach has been taken over counter narcotics, DIAG, or police reform. The attempts to develop competent provincial governance structures have similarly reflected the ad hoc,

⁴⁷ Pamela Constable, “A NATO Bid to Regain Afghans’ Trust”, *Washington Post*, November 27 2006.

⁴⁸ David Rohde, “Afghan forces suffer setbacks as Taliban adapt”, *International Herald Tribune*, September 1, 2007.

⁴⁹ Author’s interview with Kandahar based Afghan researcher, 5 September 2007.

reactive and piecemeal approaches that too often have characterised the post-Taliban international engagement in Afghanistan.

Despite its failure, the Regional Development Zone concept influenced the development of 'Provincial Development Committees' (PDCs), which amounted to an economic cabinet for the provincial governor attended by provincial line ministry representatives. This structure added to the existing and emerging plethora of coordination mechanisms at provincial and district levels from late 2004. These coordination structures had developed in response to the donors' need to establish effective mechanisms for development at provincial and district levels as the majority of development funding remained trapped in Kabul due to limited government absorptive capacity at all levels.⁵⁰ In addition, the 2005 parliamentary elections would change, in theory at least, the structures, processes and politics of sub-national government in Afghanistan via the elected Provincial Councils. Concerns were raised by March 2005 over the danger that poorly funded and badly supported elected bodies with an unclear role would be the result and that the duplication of provincial coordination structures, which included the PRTs, only added to the overall confusion.⁵¹

From late 2004, the subject of PDCs had been central to discussions at the weekly meetings of the PRT Working Group⁵² in Kabul. The initiative had been formulated in response to government concerns, publicly voiced by the then Minister of Finance, Ashraf Ghani, that the PRTs were a law unto themselves. The PRT Executive Steering Committee, which authorized PRT policy and comprised ambassadors of PRT contributing nations, relevant members of the Afghan Cabinet and ISAF and coalition

⁵⁰ ACBAR *Briefing Paper*, 2006, 2.

⁵¹ Sarah Lister, "Caught in Confusion: Local Governance Structures in Afghanistan", *AREU Briefing Paper*, March, 2005.

⁵² The PRT Working Group is attended by government, donor, coalition, ISAF and UN representatives.

representatives, was tasked to examine the alignment of PRTs within the Afghan government's national coordination strategy for development, the National Priority Programs (NPPs). The PRT Working Group that prepared the agenda for PRT ESC meetings, was convinced that the PDC concept being developed would provide a mechanism to accelerate provincial development and governance. Theoretically, this was to be achieved by the inclusion of community *shuras* in the PDCs to ensure community "ownership" of the development process. The fact that government, at district and provincial levels, often tended to be either ineffective to the point of being non-existent or co-opted by criminal networks was not publicly commented on during these discussions, underlining the increasingly surreal disjuncture between policy discussions on aspirations to extend central government control and the reality on the ground.

By 2005, the 'Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy' (IANDS) had replaced National Priority Programmes as the government's master plan for development. It included the World Bank requirement for a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which was a precondition for International Finance Institution funding strategies. But government plans for urgently needed reforms both to sub-national governance and provincial administrations – in line with the vision laid out by the government in the IANDS – remained unclear. Analysts highlighted the need for increased attention and strong political leadership if reforms were to succeed.⁵³ In particular, the task of coordinating provincial planning activity and resolving the question

⁵³ Sarah Lister and Hamish Nixon, "Provincial Governance Structure in Afghanistan: From Confusion to Vision?" *AREU Briefing Paper*, May 2006.

of how elected but powerless provincial councils were to feed into these processes remained unresolved.

The IANDS informed the 'Afghanistan Compact' agreed to in London, in January 2006, by the Afghan government and donors. It framed relations between them following the ending of the Bonn process. The full ANDS included a requirement for sub-national consultations with provincial council and other civil society representatives at district and provincial levels over provincial development plans. The PRTs played the main facilitating role in this process in many areas, illustrating both the absence of other development actors and the limits of provincial government capacity. Where good governors and an active provincial council existed in addition to UNAMA representation, PRT involvement was less of a necessity.

The military is trained to identify and fill gaps. The US Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual states, "The organizing imperative is focusing on what needs to be done not on who does it."⁵⁴ Such attitudes are at odds with meaningful capacity building, which in Afghanistan will require time above all other factors. A recent World Bank report widely seen as critical of the involvement of PRTs in governance as well as development at provincial levels, summarised the critical dilemma "confronted and constituted" by PRTs - "in trying to create the space for the Afghan state to develop and cohere they run the risk of undermining it."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, 57.

⁵⁵ *World Bank*, "Service Delivery And Governance At The Sub-National Level In Afghanistan", July 2007, 46.

NATO's Expansion and the Insurgency

The phased expansion of ISAF forces from late 2003 to 2006 proved a difficult and very slow process⁵⁶ as well as a highly controversial one due to the likelihood of NATO forces being involved in kinetic operations in the south. The costly business of setting up the mandatory forward support bases, which included medical and air support, was one factor delaying the NATO plan to roll out PRTs. But the entire process was repeatedly delayed by the unwillingness of some NATO member states to commit sufficient resources in a timely fashion, despite having signed up to the overriding NATO mission in Afghanistan. Security plans for elections in 2004 and 2005 were predicated on the completion of Phases I and II of NATO's expansion to the comparatively stable north and west respectively. Neither phase was completed in time. By the final phases of NATO/ISAF's expansion to the south and south-east in 2006 (Phases III and IV), the insurgency had become much more of a force to be reckoned with.

That Afghanistan had been viewed as a sideshow to Iraq in Washington⁵⁷ was evident in the limited number of coalition forces available to man 'firebases' in provinces like Helmand and Uruzgan in the south-west prior to NATO's expansion south in 2006. Such limited forces on the ground could not prevent insurgents from moving beyond the remoter districts of the south west and south eastern provinces bordering Pakistan. As the insurgency spread across the south west, south east and to a lesser extent the east, its effects, which derived from internal as well as regional factors, increasingly hampered the ability of government and non government actors to pursue development or the delivery of services. In the north, where the security situation was characterized by

⁵⁶ Michael R. Gordon, "NATO Flirts With Failure In Afghanistan", *International Herald Tribune*, 21 May 2004.

⁵⁷ David Rohde and David E. Sanger, "How a 'good war' in Afghanistan went bad", *New York Times*, August 12, 2007.

warlordism, comparative stability allowed the NGO and UN agencies to continue delivering services and development. However, it was a fragile stability, which depended on the consensus of the de facto powerful. A consensus that could be withdrawn at any time and without warning should circumstances change.⁵⁸

Disparate PRT Approaches

The phased expansion of NATO starting in October 2003 in the North and ending in September 2006 in the East gradually brought all PRTs under NATO's command. For both Afghanistan and NATO a tremendous amount was at stake. NATO's future viability in the post-Cold War world was now a hostage to its fortunes in Afghanistan, while Afghanistan was urgently in need of course correction if growing public perceptions, inside and outside the country, that the state building project was drifting towards the rocks, were to be arrested. As mentioned, NATO's takeover of PRTs had led to increasingly disparate PRT approaches due to the plethora of national leads, differing agendas and respective lists of national caveats.⁵⁹ The latter limited the types of PRT engagement and/or use of PRT resources. In addition, ISAF's chain of command only covered the military components of PRTs. The embedded civilian development and political advisers considered vital by the military and donors to achieving the overall 'effect' of expanding the Afghan government's authority and ensuring alignment with the Afghan National Development Strategy, reported back to their embassies and capitals.

⁵⁸ The PRT in Mazar e Sharif had regular meetings with the prominent commanders in 2003 and was able to mitigate tensions in this way. There were occasions however when commanders would respond with force to events and with no prior warning to the PRT.

⁵⁹ The list was an extensive one, according to a former ISAF commander, filling over 8 pages of small print.

The inability of NATO member states to agree on the roles and objectives of PRTs was reflected in the continued absence of a detailed PRT mandate despite PRTs being at the leading edge of NATO's effort in Afghanistan. The question of overcoming the diversity of PRT approaches that derived from the lack of a detailed mandate, formerly a relatively marginalised NGO concern, now moved higher up the international agenda. A series of NATO conferences hosted by NATO headquarters and NATO member states during the course of 2005⁶⁰ focused on indirect ways to introduce greater coherence into the civil military approach and improve coordination between PRTs and other actors. The concept of 'Concerted Planning and Action' was promoted by the Danes, while NATO's 'Comprehensive Approach' was reaffirmed at the 2006 Riga Summit as official policy.⁶¹

ISAF IX (May 2006-January 2007) devoted considerable resources to attempts to improve PRT coherence indirectly. Training courses based on field experience were held regularly both in Kabul and in NATO bases overseas for incoming PRT personnel. A PRT Handbook was developed and updated in consultation with UNAMA, UN Agencies and NGOs. Best practice was highlighted throughout and informed the PRT conferences for PRT commanders regularly held in Kabul. The mechanisms governing PRTs, the PRT Executive Steering Committee and the PRT Working Group, were reinvigorated and a number of PRT Executive Steering Committee 'Policy Notes' were developed. These addressed critical areas where PRTs could make important contributions such as PRT support for provincial Disaster Management Teams⁶² and for the Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups (DIAG).

⁶⁰ The author attended and spoke at four NATO hosted or jointly hosted conferences on civil military coherence in 2004-2005.

⁶¹ General Ray Henault, "Reviewing Riga", *NATO Review*, Spring 2007.

⁶² Military resources, especially air resources, were of crucial importance for emergency response in humanitarian emergencies caused by the natural disasters Afghanistan is prone to.

It was not clear what impact all these policy notes actually had in the field where PRT personnel with limited resources had to cope with ever more visitors and report on their engagement in an increasing number of political processes. The relationship between PRTs and ISAF HQ began to bear some comparison with the problems that had historically surrounded the weak relations between Kabul and the periphery. In other words, the field could ignore instructions from headquarters, should it so choose. Or instructions from headquarters might be viewed in the field as irrelevant to realities as assessed on the ground and only ticked off in reports back to headquarters or national capitals. An underlying purpose of ISAF's efforts to improve PRT coherence was to heighten 'situational awareness' prior to deployment, particularly with reference to other development actors in the field. Pre-deployment training also offset the loss of lessons learned during brief military rotations. However, the failure to develop an effective Afghan cadre in the PRTs, the lack of which also exacerbated the impact of rapid military rotations, was not addressed. But beyond tactical considerations, efforts to improve the alignment of PRT activities with the government's Afghan National Development Strategy brought the possibility of a workable exit strategy, in theory, closer.

The involvement of more and more nations in PRTs saw a 'Balkanisation' of the aid effort. Troop contributing nations' development funding was increasingly directed towards the provinces in which respective nations' PRTs were located. Some European NGOs came under pressure from some European capitals to relocate programmes to the same province as their national PRT. NGOs often rely on government funding and are vulnerable in this regard.

Afghan Perspectives

There has been surprisingly little research conducted on Afghan perspectives of PRTs. However, one civil society organization that engaged in civic education in the run up to the presidential elections in 2004 found a degree of mistrust stated by a civic education partner in Kunduz. "Government people introduce the projects to the PRTs and they don't provide the right guidance. They employ corrupt people." Afghan journalists and aid workers in 2005 who traveled extensively in the country confirmed that Afghans saw the PRTs as being tarred by the brush of an officialdom mainly seen as corrupt or ineffective. "How can a PRT make a corrupt official legitimate?" I was asked by a young Afghan journalist in 2005. The answer was that aside from recommending the removal of the official in question, further action was outside the remit of any PRT.

The civil society initiative on voter education reached over 8 million Afghans in the run up to the Parliamentary elections. Civic education processes were conducted through a network of 15 local organizations in nearly all thirty-four provinces. During the Parliamentary elections over 1500 male and female civic educators nation-wide were employed. The UN and USAID suggested that this voter education network kept in touch and exchanged information with PRTs to increase their security. All the Afghan civil society organizations involved declined this offer. They were wary of what was seen as another military structure, amongst many in Afghanistan, with an unclear purpose and mandate. Association with PRTs, especially in the problematic south, they believed would increase their security risk.

By 2005, the continued targeting of NGO staff by forces opposed to the government had rendered the concept of humanitarian space far more relevant to Afghan

NGO staff. The Afghan director of the Kandahar office of an international NGO was adamant that any foreign military presence, including PRTs, arriving in an area where his staff was working posed an unacceptable risk. In such circumstances he would order his NGO staff to leave the area. By May 2006 the director of an Afghan NGO umbrella organisation based in Kandahar informed me that he avoided any meetings that included representatives of international organizations, including the UN. Just to attend meetings of organizations seen as supporting the government had become too dangerous, as meetings were being watched. By 2007, the risk to NGO staff in being directly associated with government development programmes was of increasing concern to NGO country directors.

The PRTs provided an important means of overcoming the information deficit, if they got out and about.⁶³ But they had always been associated by Afghans with intelligence gathering in the south. A PRT might visit a community to assess needs in the morning. The next day the same community might be subjected to coalition operations under Operation Enduring Freedom which was mandated to fight the 'war on terror'. As forces opposed to the government strengthened and kinetic operations increased, confusion over the purposes of PRTs mounted.⁶⁴

Though the PRTs insisted that Afghans knew the difference between coalition forces and the PRTs, they were wearing the same uniform as coalition forces in the east (and in the south until 2006). Also, Special Forces could operate out of uniform, making

⁶³ The extent to which PRTs proactively conducted patrols/outreach within respective areas of operation varied widely. Constraints were derived from instructions from capitals as well as security conditions on the ground.

⁶⁴ Confusion over the purpose of the international military presence per se was widespread by 2007 and had been detectable in Kandahar from 2004. Conspiracy theories revolving around US or CIA backing for the neo-Taliban were standard by 2005-6. According to an Afghan contractor from Ghazni, a province in the south-east bordering Kabul, interviewed in July 2007, people there were convinced that the Taliban were receiving regular payments from coalition forces.

it impossible to distinguish between them and PRT civilian advisers. As four Humvees carrying sixteen US soldiers usually accompanied State Department officials embedded in PRTs to meetings with community elders this also affected Afghan perceptions. Moreover, in areas where the insurgency was underway, Special Forces operated out of PRT compounds, detainees were brought to PRT compounds for interrogation or could be sent on to detention facilities in Bagram the main US military base.⁶⁵

Until 2006, the overall picture gained from personal and professional exchanges with civil society and NGO interlocutors with extensive networks at the grass roots remained unchanged. They consistently reported that the Taliban were seen as the least of Afghanistan's problems. The growing view that support for the insurgency was primarily driven by poor governance, continued impunity and corruption amongst other factors was recognized by international policy makers. However, the ongoing failure to get an integrated approach across the different pillars of security reform processes, which were led by different G8 nations,⁶⁶ the weak outcomes of political reform processes from the civil service to the police, and the failure of the central government to provide sufficient support to the provinces added up to a situation in which the PRTs were seen as de facto primary actors, usefully situated country-wide. Though able to act this was mainly in ways that supported the authorities who in principle "owned" the state building process.

In some instances local people challenged the status quo. Such initiatives tended to be led by ad hoc groupings of respected and, therefore, influential members of Afghan communities politically ranged from leftists to conservatives. In May 2005, in

⁶⁵ Author's interview with UNAMA political analyst, August 2007.

⁶⁶ Judicial reform was led by Italy, Counter Narcotics by the UK, the Afghan army by the US, DDR/DIAG by Japan and Police Reform by Germany.

northern Takhar, a protest against a commander led by teachers, mullahs and medics mobilised several hundred people. The commander's militia promptly started beating people up, which precipitated a response from the PRT. UNAMA considered that the Afghans had taken a considered risk to draw the PRT in. However this only paid off in the short-term. A few months later a new PRT commander of the same PRT did not follow in his predecessors footprints. A carefully prepared plan to disarm a local commander led by UNAMA with strong local support came to nothing when the PRT in question pulled out at the last minute. The PRT's actions in this case also jeopardized the start of the DIAG process in the region.⁶⁷

The main effort of the international community had been focused initially on ensuring the security of the state. This was exemplified by the presence of ISAF forces in Kabul from early 2002 in the interests of preventing a coup. But as the threat of a coup diminished over time, direct steps to improve the worsening human security of the Afghan people do not appear to have been at the forefront of military planning. Instead, NATO stated its broad intent to establish security to enable the government and other development actors to access insecure areas of the country.

The difficulties NATO has faced in increasing troop levels to its mission to Afghanistan have been well documented by the media, and senior NATO (civilian and military) representatives have gone on record with their concerns. Such shortcomings have reduced ISAF's options, but the failure to be in a position to take meaningful steps to provide an enabling environment at local levels that would have strengthened civil society has been a missed opportunity at a number of levels. Afghans concluded that the

⁶⁷ Barbara Stapleton, "Civil Society Perspectives on the role of PRTs", PRT "Best Practices" Conference, NATO Headquarters, 28-29 November 2005.

PRTs were largely irrelevant in terms of their human security. But most significantly the opportunity that consistent actions, directed at providing an enabling environment for people, would have represented in establishing the moral intent of the international presence in Afghanistan, has been lost.

An overall loss of hope and trust that the international intervention can bring about a sustainable stability has developed alongside the “mafia-isation” of the state on the one hand and the increased strength of anti-government forces on the other. Afghan perceptions of the government have become increasingly negative on the back of skyrocketing corruption, its ineptitude and perhaps most of all due to its weakness. The terror tactics of the Taliban have had the desired effect and people are much more afraid. Afghan employees of international organizations in provinces surrounding Kabul have moved their families (who could be targeted because of their work), to the relative safety of Kabul. A Pashtun who traveled regularly to the south over the last six years told me he would not be returning, “the killers are back” he said simply

Conclusion

Afghanistan needed a heavy footprint at the outset and a light one as the country gradually stabilized. Instead the reverse occurred. The decision to confine ISAF to Kabul at the outset of the Bonn Process was a turning point that weakened Afghan confidence in the nature of the international commitment. The objectives of the US-led ‘war on terror’, which is the leading priority of the US government, outweighed state building objectives at critical junctures, particularly in terms of establishing the central government’s control more comprehensively over the means of violence prior to the 2004 and 2005 Afghan

elections. The priority of keeping the Bonn process on track, which led the international effort from 2002-2005, rendered security sector reform, *the* pre-requisite for sustainable stability, a secondary affair. As a result, political structures and processes were established that outstripped licit economic development or improvements to the human security of the Afghan people. Consequently, the legitimization crisis surrounding the Afghan government has continued unabated. The PRT plan was predicated on the need for an enabling environment for reconstruction and development, which in turn would improve the security environment and expand the government's legitimacy. This formula, in the context of Afghanistan, amounted to a hope based on an assumption. The key question of how the security needs of the Afghan people would be protected was only addressed by the PRT concept in the broadest terms.

The weak outcomes of police reform closely linked to the failure to implement thorough reforms to the Ministry of Interior have undermined the military gains made by NATO, the coalition and the Afghan National Army, in the south and south-east. All actors are well aware that military operations have a short time-span before they become counter productive, as the increasing debate over the issue of civilian casualties has shown both inside Afghanistan and in European capitals. But the failure of Afghan security forces to hold ground cleared is only a part of the equation. A police force capable of winning the trust and confidence of the Afghan people is another.

The expansion of PRT numbers and funding has not had a significant impact on the interlinked political and security crises in Afghanistan, which continue to move in a downward trend. The contributions of PRTs to the development needs of Afghanistan, which require a carefully nuanced approach over time and effective oversight, are coming

under increasing scrutiny. During the period in which PRT numbers have increased throughout the country, security conditions, particularly in the south west and south east, have deteriorated and national and international assistance actors have increasingly lost access to the rural hinterland. The assumption that reconstruction and development would buy stability in Afghanistan created a chicken and egg situation in which the 'egg' of improvements to human security has so far not been laid.

In many respects the PRTs may have proved more relevant to the needs of the international community, in allowing the promotion publicly of good news over bad, than to the stabilization of the country. Internally the positive 'spinning' of information up the chain of command in response to the requirement for 'good news' was also a factor distancing planners from facts on the ground, but one that was not unique to the military. This is not to discount the sustained efforts of PRT personnel in the field to get corrupt or ineffective officials replaced, but such efforts could only have limited effect if not matched by decisive will and political leadership in Kabul. Though PRTs have undoubtedly amounted to a way of sustaining international interest and directly involving nations in Afghanistan, other agendas have often propelled commitments.⁶⁸

The disparate nature of PRT approaches, which largely derived from the absence of a detailed mandate, indicated the greater void caused by the lack of a unified, overall strategy for Afghanistan, particularly in the critical area of security sector reform. The main success of reform in this sector has been the development of a new Afghan army from scratch, which nevertheless is not yet trusted to operate independently from its international mentors.

⁶⁸ For former Eastern European nations the commitment is driven by a desire to be on board NATO, for Japan, as the current debate in the Diet shows, the commitment to OEF operations is linked to US interests.

Even if a PRT mandate had been agreed to it would have required the active commitment of troop contributing nations for its implementation. The inability of NATO member states to subjugate national agendas to the interests of forging a unified policy in Afghanistan does not lend confidence in this regard. The siting of PRTs in 25 provinces appeared to offer NATO/ISAF country-wide 'reach'. But the latter was undermined by the diversity of PRT approaches, the long list of national caveats which constrained the use of PRT assets and the fact that limited manpower was overwhelmed by the size of the area under their watch. The fact that civilian elements embedded in PRTs remained outside NATO/ISAF's chain of command and reported to national capitals further added to the difficulties ISAF confronted in attempts to introduce greater coherence to the effect of PRTs on the ground.

PRTs were also linked from the outset to the shoring up of the Bonn Process. Perhaps it is not surprising that following the completion of the political benchmarks that punctuated the Bonn process in swift succession from 2002 to 2005 and in the face of a growing insurgency, a more critical look is being directed towards the output of PRTs. The presence of PRTs also served to distract attention within and beyond Afghanistan from the limited progress being made in improving governance at provincial and district levels. Real progress in this critical area depended on the wider political context that was beyond the capacity of PRTs to alter. The political constraints therein on state building and stabilization processes were either avoided or lost out to political accommodations based on decisions governed by *realpolitik* that were externally as well as internally driven.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the international community has mainly responded to symptoms and has appeared either unable or unwilling to address underlying causes. Unless that situation changes, Afghanistan will continue to move in directions contrary to the democratic course intended by the architects of the Bonn Agreement and voted for by the Afghan people. Given this extremely worrying context, the degree of international attention and debate over the utility of the civil military relationship in Afghanistan can be compared to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.