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The Role of PRTs on the Battlefield

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The role of the PRT on the Iraqi battlefield and in the immediate post-conflict phase is an interesting topic. As insurgency warfare took hold in the 20th century, the battlefield transformed from a strictly military-based operation focused on geographical terrain to one that employs civilians in the human terrain, for reasons of political expediency, economics, and tactics ‘other than war’. This transformation has been challenging, not just for reasons derived from enemy actions, but also due to the challenges of various agencies’ cultures and the bureaucracy of the US government. The article in the *Foreign Service Journal* by Captain Sean P. Walsh, *Improving the PRT-Military Professional Relationship* delves into the issue of how to make this interagency process work more effectively. Captain Walsh makes two very important points—that the PRT must closely coordinate with the military “battle-space” owners, and secondly, that PRT members must better understand DoD culture and lingo. Without these two points being closely adhered to, PRT members will be lost and unable to find their way. It is the purpose of this essay, which is directed at young military officers, is to discuss from the PRT perspective the value of civilians in modern conflict zones, using Captain Walsh’s article as a jumping-off point. Small wars and counterinsurgencies are the way many wars are likely to be fought for the foreseeable future, and it is up to the DoD and DoS to arrive at solutions on how best to cooperate and coordinate efforts to stabilize struggling nations. Furthermore, it is critically important to prepare today’s young leaders to meet the challenges of interagency operations for both today’s and tomorrow’s battlefields.

We would urge all civilian PRT members to take Captain Walsh’s advice to heart. That said, there are several points in his article that need elaboration. Captain Walsh is only partially correct when he writes, “Whatever your personal feelings are about how State Department employees should be utilized in conflict zones like Iraq and Afghanistan, the reality is that the military runs the show.” As a practical matter, that’s pretty accurate (PRTs are housed, fed, moved and protected by the military), but policy-wise, PRTs in Iraq are under the Ambassador; the relationship with the military is one of partnership. Admiral Mullen and several other senior military leaders have expressed strong support for strengthening the civilian role in reconstruction and stabilization. On December 19, 2008, then Secretary of State Rice discussed with the Council on Foreign Relations the evolution of the civilian role in nation building, brought on in Iraq and Afghanistan by necessity due to specialization and capabilities found more in civilian agencies than in the Department of Defense. She stated, “...in Iraq, the Defense Department had responsibility for it and it really wasn’t right for the task. But giving the State Department oversight of the U.S. government effort in this regard but also being able to really mobilize civilians who have the specialized expertise that is needed, that is going to work. We’ve also pioneered provincial reconstruction teams, where military and civilian aid workers and

governance experts are all together in an area like Anbar [Province] in Iraq or in parts of Afghanistan, [such as] Kandahar [Province]. That's really the way these institutions get built.”

This is not a slight on the U.S. military, since the DoD has fielded the finest fighting force in history. Rather, the goal is to point out that civilians have an inherently easier time working with other civilians more accustomed to dealing with other unarmed and non-uniformed individuals, especially in the immediate post-combat stage. Certainly Iraqis regularly make a point of telling us they feel more comfortable dealing civilian-to-civilian. Furthermore, civilian agencies have a distinct focus on certain specializations. It is unfair to ask our military counterparts to learn to be instant experts in velocity of money, value chain analyses, women’s issues and a multitude of other topics well outside the traditional duties of a combat force, in addition to their already burdensome task of security, logistics, maintenance, briefings, etc, required to coordinate military efforts. In Iraq, State has the lead on such non-lethal issues as health, public diplomacy, governance, economics, and rule of law. PRTs and their partner BCTs have Unified Common Plans based on the Joint Common Plan between the Ambassador and the MNF-I Commander. Where we would concede a weakness in the civilian agencies “in the fight” is that they are severely understaffed and often unable to meet the full demands of non-lethal counterinsurgency operations. In fairness, however, these staff members come from smaller agencies which are not generally called upon to provide such large numbers of personnel to conflict and post-conflict zones.

In his article, Captain Walsh discussed the clash of cultures between DoS and DoD. Captain Walsh wrote, “And I won’t try to downplay the fact that some military personnel view civilians as ‘weenies...’”. By heeding his advice, civilians can avoid faux-pas and make it easier for the military to acknowledge that they too have suffered casualties in action. Also noteworthy is the fact that a significant number of PRT members are retired military, reservists, in some cases veterans of Vietnam or the First Gulf War. Each PRT also has a military element and a military Deputy Team Leader (O-5 or O-6) to help mitigate culture clashes. Regardless of past military experience found in the PRTs, it should be acknowledged that all civilian PRT members left their comfortable civilian lives and volunteered to serve alongside our military counterparts, exposing themselves to hardship and risk that does not normally “come with the territory” in their professions.

Captain Walsh went on to write, “If you cannot articulate the PRT’s role in the short term (12 months or less), that commander may simply see you as a burden, a tasking that takes away from the ‘real’ mission.” True, but the US military is also tired of re-fighting the same war deployment after deployment. PRTs do not deploy or rotate as a unit; as such, they provide valuable continuity as BCTs rotate. In our experience, newly arrived military units are keen to work closely with the PRT and go out of their way to be supportive – they understand we are part of their exit strategy.

The issue of agency culture is one of great importance, since it can lead to unnecessary interpersonal conflict, especially in already tense combat zones. Captain Walsh’s statements illustrate the need for better training for young military officers on dealing with interagency personnel. The DoS already teaches interagency culture, with a particular focus on DoD culture, at the Foreign Service Institute’s PRT training course. The first thing that needs to be

understood is that not all agencies see things through the same lens. The military is primarily oriented toward immediate action, based on quick results quantified by time/numerical and other objectives, while most civilian agencies are process oriented and relationship-based, meaning they see a long-term path to their goals. This is especially true of the DoS, which is the USG agency responsible for nurturing the overall bilateral relationships with foreign nations over the long term. The PRT mission of ‘building provincial capacity’ has a ‘touchy-feely’ sound compared to ‘take and hold Hill X by 0900 hours tomorrow,’ but long-term sustainability, brought about through effective long-term governance, is the key to success in unstable states.

Leaders must focus on end states and what each contributes. The key to success is learning to be tolerant of each other’s approach, and determining the proper proportion of each approach through lessons learned and better interagency training. Again, this is an issue that should be discussed before deployment, if possible by visits of PRT members to training sites and unit members to the PRT. The reality is that PRT members often stay deployed to war zones for several years at a time. As we write this essay, several current Salah ad Din PRT members, military and civilian, have been in Iraq for 2-5 years straight. As a direct consequence of their tenure, a good deal of trust has been built with the Iraqis. And yes, many of the PRT members have at some point in their tour been shot at, IED’ed, rocketed, or mortared. This fact illustrates the point that although PRTs are often short-handed and asset-poor, they are engaged and bring “to the fight” a great deal of cohesion, institutional knowledge and memory—not to mention determination and “staying power” to see the mission through. A final point that needs to be addressed in Captain Walsh’s article is that of organizational structure. Captain Walsh wrote, “Because Provincial Reconstruction Teams exist outside the chain of command of the units that support you, some within the military consider it a professional insult for a PRT to ‘task’ them with a mission such as a movement to a meeting.” PRTs do not task the military. Rather, when the PRT needs to coordinate movements, it is usually the result of a “frago” being issued from higher headquarters to the battalions, which usually provide the movement teams. This was the method used when the PRTs needed to move to the polling sites to observe the provincial elections, and it is the method we employ in our coordination in Salah ad Din between the PRT and the Brigade. This is based on continual discussion and a jointly written Unified Common Plan between the Brigade and PRT. Using this method ensures that senior military leaders are tasking the battalion and company levels with a blanket mission of movement support, rather than the PRT, which simply determines specific locations and times. Security of movement and on-site clearance are left up to the movement team. If a Battalion is displeased with the movements, it is probably because it does not understand the nature and value of the PRT’s work. A liaison in the form of a senior NCO or junior officer can be established to help both sides work together. Individual PRT members should explain their activities to the military so it can see such missions as a “force multiplier.” It is a valuable leadership tool to have each Soldier (or Marine) providing movement support to a PRT understand why a meeting is being held and the results. In the end, it must be the leaders who set the tone of the relationship between the PRTs and the military, since they bear the responsibility of their units’ performance.

The bottom line is that PRTs and non-DoD agencies (e.g., USDA, DOJ, CDC, and USAID) are not “burdening” combat power by requesting support. Rather, these agencies’ personnel are working toward a long-term solution to reduce the need for combat power in the future as Iraq

transitions to a stable and sustainable government. In the end, this will benefit both the American and Iraqi nations in the preservation of precious blood and capital.

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