

The Role of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Counterinsurgency Operations: Khost Province, Afghanistan

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We are not going to kill or capture our way to victory.

--Robert M. Gates, Secretary of Defense (July 16, 2008)

Often, PRTs have been left on their own, with little strategic guidance, minimal funding, a lack of staff and overly restrictive security requirements. The arrival of PRTs in Iraq may be too late to be of real value, and their presence in Afghanistan may lack critical mass to make a difference. PRTs will need to change to its order to fulfill their promise – and too much should not be expected of them.

--Frederick Burton, Center for Strategic and International Studies, HASC Oversight and Investigation Hearing, September 5, 2007

Introduction

The counterinsurgency (or COIN) in Khost province was supposed to represent the “crown jewel” in American COIN doctrine and tactics. Afghan President Hamid Karzai called Khost a “provincial model of success,” and former CENTCOM commander ADM William J. Fallon described it as “a wonderful example” for the entire country. (Armed Forces Press Service 2007) Anne Marlow (2008) wrote a glowing review of recent efforts in the province in 2008 for *The Weekly Standard*, suggesting that the forward positioning of small platoons at “Force Protection Facilities” or FPFs, which are located in the district centers of the province, along with the substantial increase in the number and scope of projects such as road, schools, wells and diversion dams through the provincial reconstruction team, had cracked the code for American counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. Within a couple months, as the security situation continued to deteriorate, she was backtracking on her assessment of why American counterinsurgency strategy was “successful” in Khost province by suggesting that that it had more to do with the “role of commanders’ personalities may be larger than we want to acknowledge.” The previous commanders were “brilliant and personable,” leading one to conclude that the individuals who replaced them were less so. (Marlowe, In War Too, Personnel is Policy 2008)

If only it were that easy, then we could merely charm our way to victory. But any knowledgeable assessment of the counterinsurgency effort in Khost would not conclude that the war was going well. Hype and publicity cannot hide the fact that the situation was growing dire, both in Khost and throughout the country.

The Three Block War

General Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, coined the phrase “Three Block War” in a speech to the *National Press Club* in Washington, D.C. in December of 1997. His words caught the imagination of military and security thinkers when he suggested that “our enemies will not allow us to fight the Son of Desert Storm, but will try to draw us into the stepchild of Chechnya.” He noted that in the future, American servicemen would find themselves “feeding and clothing displaced refugees, providing humanitarian assistance” in one moment, “conducting peacekeeping operations” and then finally being engaged in “a highly lethal mid-intensity battle” – all in the same day and within three blocks of each other. While this is probably a simplification, metaphorically it speaks to the larger point that how the United States conducts its wars has dramatically changed.

Since September 11th, the American military has had to go about applying these new theoretical concepts, typically called 4th Generation Warfare, in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Beginning in Afghanistan, American objectives were threefold: destroy all *al Qaeda* training camps, capture or kill Osama bin Laden and remove the Taliban from power. (Gerard 2006, 260) By the end of 2001, it had taken approximately 450 U.S. Special Forces and Central Intelligence Agency operators, supported with air power, along with 15,000 Afghan fighters organized under the Northern Alliance, less than three months and a dozen fatalities to overthrow the Taliban. (Jones, *The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad* 2008, 7) Indeed, much like the afterglow of Operation Desert Storm, it seemed that once again, the U.S. had created a new form of warfare. The 100 hour major combat operation had been further refined so that only a few hundred personnel could achieve the same rapid, low-casualty result. However, as the American effort moved into the “post-conflict stability” phase – or nation-building phase – an insurgency began to arise. Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami (HIG), Haqqani network (HQN), foreign fighters, local tribes, and criminal gangs began a sustained effort to overthrow the Afghan government. As this insurgency began, the U.S. and its coalition partners failed to help build a competent, effective security force – especially police – that enjoyed a monopoly on the use of force. The allies were unable to improve the quality of governance, especially in the rural areas outside of Kabul where the vast majority of the population lives. Finally, the insurgents enjoyed a relative safe-haven in the tribal areas of Pakistan adjacent to Afghanistan, and the U.S. and Coalition Force have to date been unable to effectively deny them this sanctuary. (Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* 2008, xii-xiii) By 2005, the U.S. announced that it was withdrawing 2,500 combat troops – at the same time that the insurgency was truly gaining speed. This only reinforced in both the insurgents’ minds and the Afghans’ minds that the Americans were heading for the exit door and lacked the will to sustain their presence. (Barno 2007, 42) The perception (and fear) among Afghans that the United States will abandon them still exists today.

It is not an overstatement to note the challenge that Coalition Forces faced in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, and even today. Capstick (2007) remarks, without embellishment:

“Thirty years of conflict had not only destroyed the basic structures of the state and much of the physical infrastructure, it had also inflicted serious damage to the social fabric of the country. This is the kind of damage that is almost impossible to see but it is probably more significant than the kind of damage that can be photographed and measured. Massive population movements have all but destroyed many of the traditional methods of social regulation and conflict resolution, and constant fighting has left the population with a collective case of psychological disruption.”

In order to address the need to conduct stability operations centered around governance, reconstruction and development, the United States developed “Provincial Reconstruction Teams” (PRTs) which were designed to be joint civil-military units. By 2008, the U.S. had 34 PRTs in Iraq and Afghanistan total – 12 U.S. led PRTs in Afghanistan and 22 in Iraq. (Overall, there are 50 PRTs in Afghanistan under NATO command and headed by other nations such as Germany, Great Britain and Canada.) To date, PRTs have been an integral part of the Allied counterinsurgency strategy addressing peacekeeping and stability operations. However, they have been criticized on their mixed effectiveness, “overemphasis” on military objectives, lack of coordination with the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and incoherent mission objectives and haphazard staffing. (Abbaszadeh, et al. 2008, 47) PRTs in Afghanistan are considered “military driven” while those in Iraq more balanced in their approach. (Drolet 2006, 14) PRTs have proven to be unsuitable in addressing the dominant drug economy which funds the insurgency, and in practice have little to do with establishment of the rule of law. (Gauster 2008, 10)

The design and number of PRTs has grown since they were first introduced in 2002 into Afghanistan. American PRTs are approximately 80-90 personnel headed by a commander at the O-5 level, usually a Navy Commander or Air Force Lieutenant Colonel. PRT members are drawn from the Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard as well as respective Reserve components. Typically, members have a variety of backgrounds and specialties and may or may not be engaged in work related to their normal military occupation. Co-located with the PRTs are civilian representatives from the Department of State, USAID, U.S. Department of Agriculture as well as contracted local nationals serving in a variety of capacities, from linguists and laborers to cultural advisors and specialists in law and health care.

While the PRTs are the primary civil-military relations tool in both Afghanistan and Iraq, they are directly mentioned only once in the new Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24. They are described as “a means to extend the reach and enhance the legitimacy of the central government” into the provinces of Afghanistan beyond the capitol in Kabul. While in more secure areas, they are to keep a lower profile, but in areas of conflict they are to “work closely with maneuver units and local government entities to ensure that shaping operations achieve their desired effects.” The Field Manual described the PRT lines of operation as “pursue security sector reform, build local governance, or execute reconstruction and development” – though they are supposed to be given “tremendous latitude” to create their own strategy. (20062-12)

Khost Province, Afghanistan

When considering America's response to the terrorist attack of September 11th, 2001, one must first begin in Khost province, Afghanistan. Sometimes spelled as "Khowst," (an "Americanized" version of the spelling that Khostis do not recognize, according to the natives who live here), this province was home to two of the three al Qaeda training camps where the terrorist attacks were planned. Situated in the southeast region of the country, the province is currently part of Regional Command East (RC-East), made up of Ghazni province, Paktya province, Paktika province and Khost province.

It shares a common border with Pakistan, along the troubled region known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Khost principally borders the area known as North Waziristan. The tribal areas today in Pakistan represent the lawless safe haven for Taliban and al Qaeda affiliated organizations and groups that remains a critical security issue for Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Khost-Pakistan border is approximately 184 km in length, almost entirely mountainous and covered with natural forests. While there are border checkpoints along some of the main roads between Khost and Pakistan, the border itself is largely porous, difficult to defend and monitor. Afghan Border Police (ABP) units are undermanned and ill-equipped, and are being asked to do the impossible – secure a long border of rough terrain which provides easy cover for enemy infiltration.

The major ethnic groups in Khost province are Pashtuns, who mostly do not recognize the artificial border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Durrand Line, as the international border is called, was drawn by the British in 1893 to separate then India – the "Crown Jewel" of the Colonial Empire – from Afghanistan. Named after Sir Mortimer Durand, the demarcation cuts "a nonchalant swathe through Pashtun territory, sometimes drawing the line through the middle of villages, grazing grounds or in such a way that farmers lived on one side of the border while their fields were on the other." (Tanner 2002, 218) Afghanistan had become a buffer zone between India and Tsarist Russia, with both world powers attempting to exercise sway in the lawless land by playing "The Great Game."

The designs of foreign powers tend to run smack into the fierce ethnic and tribal pride of Afghanistan's many tribal groups, and the Pashtuns more so than the rest. They easily cross between countries to see family, go to school, trade, and recently, to learn to make *jihad* on the infidel foreigners who have come to their land – first the Soviets, and now the Americans and their Coalition partners.

This is not to suggest that all Pashtuns are Taliban bent on retaking Afghanistan after their brief reign of terror from 1996-2001. Indeed, most Pashtuns feel no love for the Taliban, al Qaeda or any terrorist organization. They appreciate the help and assistance of the international community and NATO security forces. But family ties and tribal customs run deep. The tribal code of "Pashtunwali" is far older than the introduction of Islam, and often carries more weight determining behavior and interaction among individuals and villages. They view the radical Islamists as trying to overturn their traditional Pashtun way of life, and chafe under their imposition of Sharia law.

Recent estimates put Khost's population at 639,849. There are 87,199 households which have, on average, 8 family members living there. Almost 98 percent of the population lives in rural districts, with the remaining 2 percent in the urban core of Khost City. Nearly half (46 percent) of households rely on agriculture as their source of income, and over half (54 percent) own or manage farmland or plots. Overall literacy is projected around 28 percent (44 percent of men versus 7 percent of women) though 52 percent of men age 15-24 are literate. There are 157 primary and secondary schools and 2,205 teachers working to educate 107,732 boys and girls in Khost. Khost is also home to a university – Shaik Zayed University – which had 687 students as of 2005. The vast majority of villages do not have health care facilities readily present. (Program for Culture and Conflict Studies 2007)

The Insurgents and Insurgency

The long, barely guarded border with Pakistan and Khost Province has made the area very vulnerable to infiltration activity. The ease with which people can traverse the border, coupled with the inability of either the Afghan government to guard its border or the Pakistan government to push its control and sovereignty into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) left a huge opportunity for the Taliban and al Qaeda to take sanctuary and recover from their initial defeat in 2001-2002. The unwillingness of the U.S. to have a “large footprint” of its own military forces in the country in order to avoid appearing to be an occupational army meant that U.S. and later NATO forces would not have the resources to follow up and finish off the terrorist network. (Feith 2008) An alternative approach might have been to arm local tribal militias in order to provide security and keep out the Taliban, however that approach was never taken. To date, the Coalition has also not adopted the practice of recruiting and employing former insurgents in security operations, despite studies showing their benefits.¹

Two factors came into play in the ensuing years that led to the Taliban insurgency. First was structural. The collapse of the Taliban government and the subsequent failure of the Coalition and international community to create a sustainable Afghan government left an anarchic void throughout the vast majority of the country. Even today, the reach of the government is largely confined to Kabul and a few major cities, eerily reminiscent of the Soviet occupation during the 1980's. Second, the largest insurgent group, the Taliban, was motivated by a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam derived from *Deobandism*, a conservative Islamic orthodoxy that follows a “Salafist egalitarian model and seeks to emulate the life and times of the Prophet Mohammed.” Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Hizb-i-Islami were motivated by the *Ikhwan* model of Islamic revolution, similar to *Deobandism*, and seeks the establishment of a “pure Islamic state.” (Jones, *The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad* 2008, 28) The fact that the insurgents are motivated by ideology, not merely ethnic rivalry or greed, means that any attempt by the Afghan government to form a coalition of sorts to bring them into the fold will likely fail in the long run. The insurgents are not looking for “a seat at the table,” as a Westerner might understand it. They want the table for themselves.

¹ Counterinsurgents gain many advantages employing former insurgents, including that they are very capable fighters, they assist in targeting and eliminating the insurgents' infrastructure, they help restore government legitimacy and they can assume a variety of security functions. Their use has proven to provide “an exponential increase in the forces available to prosecute counterinsurgency.

The collapse of governance left a power void which has to date been filled easily by the ideologically motivated insurgents. The inability and unwillingness of the international community – principally the United States – to devote the resources and military manpower to the effort only magnified the dire situation we find today.

Joint Provincial Reconstruction Team Khost Organization

Beginning operations in 2005, Joint Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Khost is currently comprised of approximately 80 U.S. military service members from the United States Army, United States Army Reserve, United States Navy, United States Naval Reserve and the Army National Guard. Also attached are civilian and military personnel from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The overall command of the unit is a Navy Commander of O-5 rank. This contrasts with the standard practice in Iraq, where PRTs are civilian led by a Foreign Service Officer from the U.S. Department of State. (Abbaszadeh, et al. 2008)

The PRT is conceptually organized as a joint civil-military unit operating under a “board of directors” concept. The military, however, retains ultimate control of PRT operations. Current at PRT Khost are representatives from the U.S. Department of State (DoS), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The guidance is that civilian agencies and military units coordinate activities and programs aimed at complementing the governance, reconstruction and development mission of the PRT.

The PRT is organized around four lines of operation: Civil Affairs (CA), Engineering, Operations and Security Force Protection (SECFOR). The CA unit is split into teams, with small teams located at three district centers in the province. Each CA team has responsibility over a geographic area of the province (North, East and West). A command team element is located with the main PRT. The CA teams coordinate project identification, development and funding through a process created with the provincial government. Theoretically, projects are identified through district sub-governors and then approved and ranked in order of priority to the entire province by the Provincial Development Council (PDC), headed by the Provincial Governor. Once approved by the PDC, the project proposals are submitted through the CERP (Commander’s Emergency Response Program) process for funding. If funded, then the project can be implemented. CA teams are also responsible for humanitarian supply distribution, and have on hand a supply of foodstuffs, school supplies, medical supplies and radios. Engineering assets are used to oversee and manage the contracting process to design and construct physical projects such as schools, roads, diversion dams and clinics. They are responsible for the quality assurance and quality control over construction, working closely with the provincial and district government officials and tribes in order to ensure that building requirements are being met.

The Operations (OPS) element covers a wide array of support areas, including personnel administration, intelligence analysis, operations, supply and logistics, communications, information operations and public affairs and medical services. The SECFOR team – a unit from the Pennsylvania National Guard – provides all security and force protection for the

forward operating base as well as for all convoy missions and units stationed at the district centers.

Civilian agencies (DoS, USAID and USDA) have their own charges; however their programs are coordinated and supported through the Board of Directors. Military lines of operations provide support and assistance to their mission.

It is important to note that all areas support one another. Intelligence provides support to the SECFOR for mission planning. Information operations (IO) enhance public diplomacy efforts, Civil Affairs and medical outreach. Communications ensures all offices and vehicles have radio, satellite and electronic communication connectivity. But not only do elements support one another, but they jointly conduct missions and amplify programs. For example, the engineering staff hire university engineering students from Khost University to conduct quality assurance and control at sites, thereby increasing not only the number of projects that they can better manage but also helping develop long-term human capital – a component of both public diplomacy and information operations – by providing necessary training and experience to future engineers. Along a similar vein, USAID and USDA work together to develop programs that improve not only farming techniques and alternatives to poppy crops, but also ways to bring goods to local market to meet ever increasing demand rather than having them taken across the border to Pakistan .

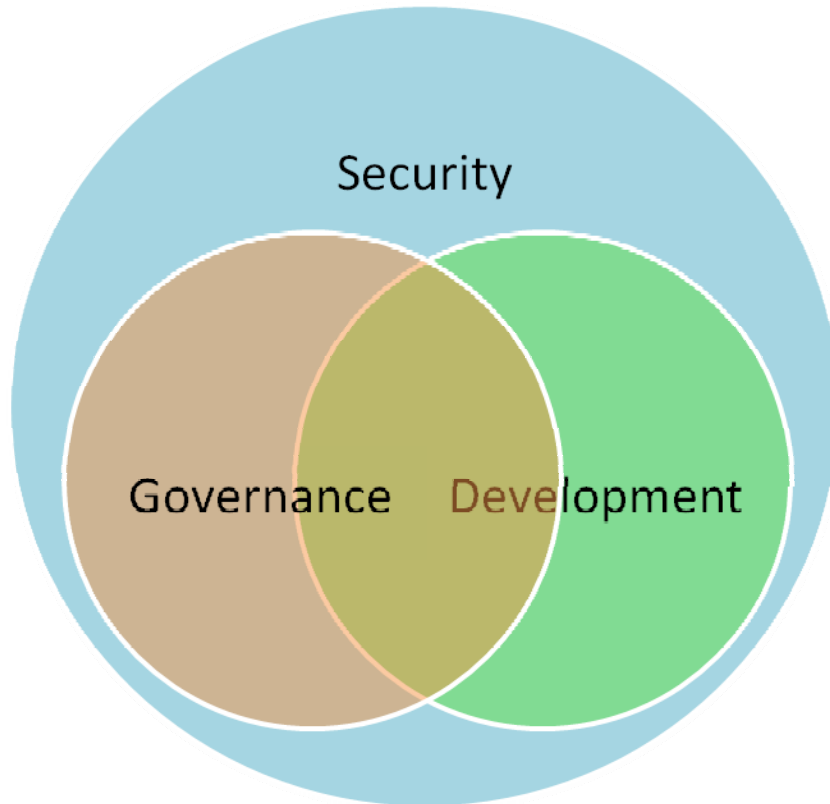
The PRT in the Khost Counterinsurgency Mission

The Provincial Reconstruction Team is supposed to be military's answer to addressing the security sector reform, reconstruction, development and governance domains of counterinsurgency operations. While sounding plausible in theory, the PRT faces significant challenges in being a practical component of COIN strategy. Operations by the PRT in Khost province have received a great deal of attention in the media, yet the “ground truth” is often a different story.

COIN operations defy timetables and easy measurement of success. There are no front lines of battle, as the enemy moves within and through the population. Often, the enemy will change sides, as is the case of the Sunni tribes in Iraq. Success is often tenuous, and the danger of setbacks looms around every corner. Victory will not come with a single battle – there are no “Waterloo's,” or “Yorktown's” – nor will engagements dictate the course of the war. Consider the simple fact that the United States was victorious in every battle with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, yet is generally considered to have “lost” the Vietnam War. Victory in counterinsurgency operations is possible only through long-term patience and the maintenance of political will. It is a new form of attrition warfare - not necessarily attrition of men and material, but attrition of staying power.

The objectives of Coalition Forces and the international community in Afghanistan can largely be stated as follows: improve security conditions in the country while developing the capacity of the Afghan national government to provide the basic functions of the state within its territory and assisting the Afghan people in creating the tools necessary for economic sustainment and

growth.² These are summarized along three general domains: security, governance and development, which can be viewed as concentric circles. This correctly suggests that all three domains are interrelated and connected, as well as mutually dependent. However, security is probably the most important of the three in the sense that a government which is unable to defend itself or its people will lack legitimacy and credibility. The existence of security permits the improvement in governance and development, which is why it is shown surrounding governance and development.



COIN Domains

The Provincial Reconstruction Team is designed to fill the gap in the development of governance and reconstruction domains when the international community and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are unable or unwilling to operate in certain areas, largely due to security concerns. While this does lead to some consternation among NGOs and international organizations and complaints that the armed forces are “militarizing” humanitarian operations, the fact is that only military organizations have the resources and capacity to sustain themselves and operate in a hostile environment while conducting these types of activities. (Ryan 2007, 59) PRTs inevitably cross over into the “humanitarian space” traditionally owned by NGOs and international aid organizations. There is also different perception of security between the two – military emphasis is on “national security, public order and force protection” while civilian assistance providers merely want to “ensure belligerents do not perceive them as a threat.”

² American national security interests can probably be more narrowly defined as preventing terrorist organizations from using Afghan territory from which to conduct operations against the United States and her interests.

Humanitarian organizations provide assistance without regard to political objective. (Dziedzic and Seidl 2005, 2-3)

The mission of the PRT in Khost can be described as “enhance the popular legitimacy of the provincial government by developing their capacity to conduct reconstruction and provide effective governance.” From January 1, 2008 through this writing, the PRT has completed construction of 31 schools and started on another 23. 189.4 km of road have been completed or are under construction. Five local government district centers have been completed, and another 2 have started to be built. Construction has finished on nine diversion dams, and started on 15 more. A prison complex, a new headquarters for the National Directorate of Security (NDS – similar to the American FBI), a new Governor’s complex and an electrical power grid for Khost City have all started construction. More than \$31 million in new projects have been built since 2008, and \$44.8 million in new project funding has been requested. These new projects will include upgrades and repairs to more district centers, the construction of new Centers of Excellence (a government alternative to *madrassas*), building of eight new bridges, and a small-scale international airport linking Khost province to the UAE as well as transport around Afghanistan. By the end of 2008, total spending in Khost province alone on reconstruction and development will top \$76 million.

Perhaps the hardest lesson of the PRT experience in Khost has been that no amount of development will improve security conditions. In fact, security in Khost province has largely deteriorated to almost alarming levels despite the substantial increase in funding of projects and development. From January 1 through July 13th, 2008, attacks by the Taliban and their allies (HQN) have increased by 20 percent over 2007 levels for that same period to a total of 301. (Radin and Roggio 2008) In 2007, there were 107 “clashes” – actual engagements between the Taliban and NATO/Afghan security forces. As of August 31, 2008, there were already 115. (McCreary 2008) Some spectacular Taliban attacks on the major U.S. installation in Khost province – FOB Salerno, located just outside Khost City – give pause to any previous speculation that U.S./NATO efforts in Khost represented a “model counterinsurgency” as some suggested. (See Marlowe for example.) A day after a double car bombing at the gates of FOB Salerno which killed 10 civilians and injuring 13 others, approximately 30 Taliban fighters and suicide bombers attempted to storm the base in order to inflict significant American casualties. In late July, nearly 100 heavily armed Taliban fighters attempted to overrun the government center in Spera district, in the southern portion of the province. In March, a Turkish-born German who was recruited by the Haqqani network detonated a truck bomb at the Sabari district headquarters, killing two U.S. soldiers and dozens of Afghan security personnel. (Long War Journal 2008)

It should therefore come as no surprise that as the level of violence rose, public perception of the provincial government’s effectiveness waned considerably. Where once the major issue on a local Khosti’s mind might be whether their village can get a new well dug, now it quickly became a matter of survival. Not surprisingly, people began making the rational choice of supporting the Taliban, if in name only. Whatever accommodations needed to be made in order to keep the Taliban out of their villages would be made.

Governance

In 2006, PRTs shifted their focus to encourage communities to play a more “active role” in their own development “while incorporating provincial and local government officials in the delivery of services.” (Fore 2008, 18) In practice, this has not turned out as hoped.

Khost province is a microcosm of the collapse of governance in Afghanistan. A promising, well-educated leader is made governor, yet after a few years of service, by any measure the situation within his political jurisdiction has grown worse during his tenure. There are a number of factors which have contributed to the degradation of governance. First, the arcane political system established at the national level is not conducive to expanding power and legitimacy into the rural provinces. The provincial governor has no direct authority over the line ministers in his province, such as Education, Public Health, Rural Reconstruction and Development and Tribal Affairs. Nor does the provincial governor have any direct control over the Afghan security forces within his area, such as Afghan National Police, Border Police or Army. Each department answers to national ministries in Kabul, creating a convoluted chain of command.³

Second, in Khost province the governor is believed to have questionable ties to criminal elements (not unlike most in the national government and other provinces). This appears to have led to the appointment of district sub-governors in the province who seem to have been selected on the basis of their ties to these elements rather than for competence. Of the 12 district sub-governors appointed by the Khost provincial governor, perhaps only two or three could be considered fully supportive of the Afghan government and work actively to perform their duties. The others spend only a few days a month in the district they are supposedly governing, expect bribes from the local population who come to them for aid and assistance, steer Coalition funded reconstruction projects to companies they own (or their family member owns) and conduct secret negotiations with insurgent elements to permit passage and safe haven in their districts, some even going so far as to provide intelligence and support to insurgents. They consistently request funding and personal items from the PRT, such as televisions, computers, cell phones and vehicle rather than going to the government. These items invariably end up as their personal property.

In performing its mission to build and sustain governance capacity, the PRT is directed to coordinate all functions and projects through the provincial government. Yet what can reasonably be expected when the government itself is systemically corrupt? The PRT becomes an unwitting partner in crime, sustaining culture of graft because there is no other alternative with which to deal. In order to ensure transparency and maintain quality, it is almost always in conflict with those in the government and contracted businesses who seek to enrich themselves at the expense of the Afghan people and American taxpayers. The local population, growing weary of having to bribe officials in order to have their issues addressed, seeks to come directly to the PRT with their concerns, and are subsequently turned away and told to work through their government – a government which is corrupt. We can be little surprised that the population simply throws its hands up in disgust and walks away.

³ Imagine if in our federal system, state governors had no direct authority over the state education secretaries, who instead answer to Washington rather than the state capitals.

The PRT in Khost is supposed to support counterinsurgency through building government legitimacy and capacity while conducting reconstruction and development in order to separate the local population from the insurgents. Yet the way it is designed and used, it can do neither.

Security Sector Reform

The PRT has Navy rated Masters-at-Arms, and the national guardsmen who are civilian correctional and law enforcement officers. Security sector reform, which includes training for both the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Afghan National Army (ANA), is actually handled by an Enhanced Training Team (ETT) located at a different installation in the province. Therefore, these PRT assets are not being utilized and there is no attempt at coordination and cooperation.

Reconstruction and Development

The vast majority of activities conducted by PRT Khost have centered around reconstruction and development. These have been driven by the Civil Affairs and Engineering teams. The Governance and Reconstruction/Development domains are intricately tied together, as noted before. Development projects are ideally identified at the local (village) level and brought by the district sub governor to the Provincial Development Council. The Provincial Development Council is made up of local representatives and Coalition Forces. Their job is to coordinate all development and rank projects in order of importance in order to guide reconstruction efforts. Projects are funded through the Commanders Emergency Response Program, or CERP funds. Reconstruction and Development projects are to be tied to the overall Afghanistan *National Development Strategy*. This structure seeks to ensure local participation in the decisions surrounding provincial reconstruction.

Funding of projects remains the critical stumbling block. There are multiple sources of funding, such as CERP, Local Governance and Community Development (LGCD) Program Funds through USAID, Title 22 funding (Foreign Relations and Intercourse), O&M funding (Operations and Maintenance) and “Quick Impact Funds.” These funds each have their own set of restrictions, often overlap or contradict each other. CERP funds cannot be used for “food or transportation,” or for “training, equipping or operational” costs of Afghan security organizations. LGCD funding is notoriously slow, with some project requests languishing for months. (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations 2008, 22) The military units charged with administering contract payments in Khost province were so dysfunctional that during the entire deployment of the current PRT, not a month went by where one or more contracts were not paid on time or in full.⁴ Regular briefings on the status of project funding requests were never held, despite repeated requests. The myriad of bureaucratic and legal hurdles a project must go through meant that it might be months before the PRT might receive word whether a project could or would be funded. If the project was rejected because it did not meet the narrow funding definition, then

⁴ This presents its own challenges to mounting a successful IO campaign when Coalition forces are not only called “invaders” by the insurgents but also unable to pay their debts to their friends!

the project would have to be rewritten and submitted to an entirely different funding source.⁵ This had a significant impact on the ability of the PRT to fulfill its reconstruction and development mandate. This also discouraged innovative projects which fell outside the typical “bricks and mortar” concept, especially those which emphasized human capital development.

At the strategic level, PRTs find it easier to focus on reconstruction and development projects. As the old engineering saying goes, “What gets measured, gets done.” PRT leaders find it advantageous to emphasize the bricks and mortar aspect of their mission since that is what is most readily visible and easily funded. This creates a natural tendency to gauge progress in a counterinsurgency by dollars spent, the miles of road paved, number of schools built or number of homes now able to receive power through a micro-hydro dam. However, other projects or programs which focus on human capital development are more difficult to have approved, funded and implemented because it is far more difficult to measure success or failure. So there is often less emphasis on training programs (except the ANA), which tend to be more long-term in focus, and a tendency to look for quick-impact projects on a large number of people.

No strategic plan was developed at the brigade level for integrating how the PRT in Khost would fit within the larger objectives of the brigade. Often, the PRT was left with the sense of “doing its own thing.” Coordination of operations usually consisted of merely informing the battle space commander in advance that a PRT convoy was moving through the area. While weekly meetings were held between the battalion commander, PRT commander, Afghan security forces and the Governor, those meetings were devoted to security issues. There was no coordination between maneuver operations or Special Forces operations, Afghan security forces and follow up by the PRT to address development or governance in an area recently affected by security operations. However, the PRT was often called upon for crisis management issues, such as the killing of a local national or the destruction of property by Coalition Forces.

Who Are We? And Why Are We Here?

One of the most fundamental problems for Provincial Reconstruction Teams is that there is no clearly defined strategic mission, no concept of operation and no standard operating procedure. (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations 2008, Perito 2005, USAID 2006) It is unclear how the PRT fits within the broader counterinsurgency effort in Khost province, and there is no unity of effort between the PRT and the other Coalition units in the province. For example, there are separate Coalition units to deal with police and Afghan National Army training (ETT Teams), IED detection and defeat, kinetic operations, counterterrorism operations, reconstruction and development and governance. These Coalition units vary, from mixed service joint commands such as the PRT to Army battalions to civilian agencies and Special Forces units. Some of these units answer to a brigade level task force, while other fall under a completely different combatant command and do not fall under the control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO command. Even if one could easily identify the overarching strategic mission of the PRT, it would be almost impossible to measure its effectiveness. One could count dollars spent, miles of road, numbers of schools or vaccines administered. But those represent outputs, and do not

⁵ Project submittals would languish for months before one might find out that it was denied, further inhibiting PRT efforts.

necessarily correlate within a strategic framework. How does the building of a new school in Tani district or the paving of a road in Jaji Maidan district support the counterinsurgency effort or fit within the larger strategic plan? In theory, reconstruction efforts should be guided by the Afghanistan *National Development Strategy*, but the *Development Strategy* is not tied to an overall counterinsurgency plan. (Capstick 2007) No metrics exist with which to measure success and effect. (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations 2008, McNerny 2005, Abbaszadeh, et al. 2008) It has been reported that some PRT teams actually counted “smiling children” and “local cooperation” in attempting to define their measure of success. (McNerny 2005, 39)

Recommendations

Based on the experience of serving on a PRT team in Afghanistan, several recommendations can be made for consideration. These should not be considered all-inclusive, nor can they substitute for a review of the larger strategic goals and objectives of the Coalition in Afghanistan. Recently, Congress issued a report on PRTs in Iraq and Afghanistan which outlined a number of recommendations as well, including better interagency coordination, a less-convoluted funding mechanism for PRT projects and better training and staffing. Other agencies, including USAID, the Marshall Center, and the Woodrow Wilson School have also compiled reports on the performance of PRTs and made similar recommendations. (Abbaszadeh, et al. 2008, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations 2008, USAID 2006, Gauster 2008) Reforming provincial reconstruction teams without addressing the entire counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan will do little to meet U.S. national security interests.

Unity of Effort

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are the linchpin to counterinsurgency success because they are designed to address the entire COIN spectrum of operations. At present, maneuver battalions and counterterrorism forces are considered equal elements within the force structure. Their activities often undermine the work of the PRTs, many times requiring the PRT to engage in consequence management actions, diverting resources and time from its core purpose. (Sedra 2005, 8) Unlike maneuver and counterterrorism units, PRTs are civil-military units and have a leadership structure that follows the guidelines of American counterinsurgency doctrine found in FM 3-24. They are better equipped to conduct full-spectrum operations, from security training to reconstruction, governance and humanitarian relief. PRTs are geared toward interacting with the local population, and receive cultural and language training which is designed to facilitate cross-cultural communication. Maneuver battalions are designed around warfighting – something which they do extremely well. Military efforts are essential – but *secondary* to “a comprehensive strategy employing all instruments of national power.” (U.S. Army; U.S. Marine Corps 2006, 2-1) Therefore, the PRT should be the lead unit in managing the counterinsurgency.

Civilian Lead

Because PRTs in Afghanistan are military led, they have a natural tendency to examine counterinsurgency and nation building issues from primarily a military perspective. However,

counterinsurgency is widely recognized to be as much a political and law enforcement issue as it is military. Counterinsurgencies which bend toward being solely military operations have historically proven to be less effective and ultimately fail. (Sepp 2005, 10) PRT teams in Afghanistan should be led by the civilian agencies, much like those in Iraq are headed by Department of State Foreign Service Officers.

Secure the Population

Recommending that PRTs lead counterinsurgency operations and be civilian led should not be mistaken for suggesting that security issues do not lie at the heart of COIN operations. Security is the paramount concern, but not necessarily through the deployment of conventional force or mirroring the tactics of insurgents. (Payne 2008, 42) Millen (2008) states “the attainment of security must be the first stage of hearts and minds. Without a solid foundation of security, the other incentives will crumble on a bed of sand.” Security first begins with the training and expansion of host national forces, with a primacy of police and not military units. PRTs have a natural comparative advantage in security sector reform, much more so than on the more humanitarian functions in which they become involved. They must be the lead efforts on security force training. There is a natural connection between governance and security, because in an environment like Afghanistan, governance only extends as far as the security forces are present. Police force recruitment, training and enhancement should be emphasized however. Police corruption is probably the single largest obstacle separating the population from the government. PRTs must be adequately staffed and equipped to take charge of police and Army training. The embedded training teams are currently too small and cannot conduct the regular training on a consistent basis in order to address a culture of corrupt, unprofessional police.⁶ A more robust PRT team, supplemented with the ETT personnel, could ensure that security training was integrated into an overall governance and development plan.

Develop Human Capital

It is natural to focus on those things which can easily be measured: schools built, miles of road paved, number of clinics opened or vaccinations administered. But the long-term future of a nation depends on investment in human capital, especially the knowledge and skills which enable civil society. This is a tricky thing to accomplish however, especially in Afghanistan which is organized around tribes. It is important to resist the temptation to attempt to reorder local culture around our Western values. The rural Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan have no love for the Taliban, but they have no desire to “Westernize” the way they govern themselves either. (Johnson and Mason 2008) Therefore, human capital development must take place within the framework of the local culture and values. Its focus should especially be on children and young adults – those most easily vulnerable to the insurgent ideology. It would be wise for counterinsurgency planners to circle on the map of Afghanistan the location of every university, technical school, madrassa and primary and secondary school (including girls’ schools) and target resources and time toward building their capacity. They can be given the basic tools to teach literacy and mathematical skills, along with their own cultural history and literature. PRTs, being located in the provinces, should lead this effort. But there is more to human capital

⁶ The ETT training team located in Khost province cannot even leave its FOB because there are so few of them and no resources to transport them to police centers.

development than schools and education programs. PRTs must implement training programs for local public administrators focusing on the basic skills necessary for the technical, professional administration of government. There is a great need for provincial administrator training and civil society development. This should also include media training, not only for members of government but also for the new crop of journalists who put out information on television, radio and in newspapers each day. Importantly though, PRTs can look for ways to invest in human capital at the local level in ways that support cultural paradigms.

Live Among the People

The vast majority of Afghanistan's populations are in the rural provinces, and within the provinces, in the far-flung districts. In Khost, a province with a relatively large urban center, most inhabitants live outside the city, its rugged terrain means that it can take hours just to travel a few kilometers. It is there, in the mountains dotted with villages of a few hundred to a few thousand that the insurgents can move about with impunity, demanding support from a local population who has no alternative. What is needed are District Development Teams – smaller units of approximately 50 or more, composed of Coalition and Afghan forces, who are located in the districts, able to interact with local villages daily.⁷ PRT Khost, for example, would be lucky to go to the same district two or three times in one month, let alone the same village. CA teams located in three of the districts for a period of a couple months during the deployment were able to interact at the village level more often, but these numbers were so small (two CA and two SECFOR) and they had to rely on the co-located maneuver units in order to venture outside the district center compound. Some CA teams would go for weeks, unable to leave the compound, for lack of manpower. Johnson and Mason (2008) suggests that the District Development Teams would “provide a steady security presence, strengthen the position of tribal elders, and bolster the district police” and “serve as the primary organization for Afghan rural development.” They note that currently, PRTs have had no discernable impact on the counterinsurgency environment. Counterinsurgencies must separate the local population from the insurgent. In order to do so, the counterinsurgents have to be located among the population, able to provide a reasonable level of security, presence and reconstruction.

Staffing and Time in Country

Currently, PRT teams are drawn from all service branches, both Active and Reserve components. Typically, these individuals are selected on an availability basis, and not necessarily for specific skill sets, such as foreign language or cultural or regional expertise. Units are given a three month training program which is designed to cover everything from basic language training (a few key phrases and a crash culture course), to force protection and convoy operations. Once they arrive at their home station, they should have approximately 10 to 14 days to conduct a turnover (sometimes far less) with the unit already stationed there.

With a mission as culturally complex and sensitive as counterinsurgency, it is remarkable that we have had any level of success given the inadequate preparation. On top of training requirements, units have to develop cohesion, since team members are drawn from all services all over the

⁷ This should not be “small platoons” posted in the FPF's in the district centers that Marlowe referenced. Those units were approximately squad size – or less.

world. The men and women of the U.S. military have always proven highly capable at adapting to a new environment, and it is a testament to their professionalism that within a few short weeks, PRTs can gel into remarkable teams.

However, it is clear that military planners should begin thinking long-term. The current method of team selection resembles an *ad hoc* approach taken to address the inadequacy of the Army to staff them. PRTs should become self-contained units, with substantially more preparation. If the Navy and Air Force are going to continue to lead PRTs in counterinsurgencies, then they should be built around two-year tours, with a minimum of six months cultural and language training and 18 months in country. It normally takes at least six months before the new team has become acclimated to a province or district, with a keen understanding of the local and regional players. Currently, PRTs train for three months and spend nine months in country. By the time the unit has gotten to know the human terrain as well as the geography, they are sent home and a new team arrives, meaning that the ramp up time starts all over again. No doubt there would be other issues to consider, but in general, having PRTs composed of individual members assigned “temporary duty” for 12 months puts units at a disadvantage.

Conclusion

One tour in Afghanistan does not make one an expert on the country, or on counterinsurgency. Yet serious deficiencies are easily seen in how PRTs are structured and the role they play in America’s larger COIN strategy. It is hoped that this analysis and recommendations will elicit further discussion and research. Without question, American national security planners, military planners and policy makers all want to do right by the people of Afghanistan.

We have an opportunity in Afghanistan to assist a nation and its peoples in developing to the point where they are better able to resist the radical Islamic elements that would once again turn their land into a terrorist safe haven. Doing so, we will make mistakes along the way. It is a frustrating and tedious process, where one moves the ball toward the goal line inches at a time. But a far greater mistake would be throwing up our hands in exasperation and abandoning Afghanistan’s people.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are designed to assist the host nation in developing its governance capacity, improve its security sector and cooperate in reconstruction and development of the infrastructure. By looking at how we can hopefully do things better, we improve our chances of success.

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