

Briefing

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Asia Programme | July 2015 | Afghanistan: Opportunity in Crisis Series No. 10

Military and Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan 2001–14: An Incoherent Approach

Summary

- The Afghan state is more dependent than ever upon foreign funding. Economic contraction, a fiscal deficit, a reduction in aid and increasing violence are compromising efforts to boost economic growth and trade.
- Identifying what contributed to and what undermined stability in Afghanistan is highly relevant to ongoing international engagement, at a time when counterterrorism heavily influences strategic approaches to foreign policy.
- Bilateral engagement, national priorities and weak Afghan capacity undermined efforts to forge a multilateral assistance strategy. As the biggest donor, the US prioritized state-strengthening but was unable to implement a coherent approach.
- The Afghan government lacked the political space and capacity to drive its own development, let alone security, agenda. Success stories showed the value of partnering with ministries where competent Afghan officials were in place.
- The US and its NATO allies engaged in a series of military interventions in which strategic objectives shifted and approaches involving counterterrorism, counter-insurgency and state-strengthening worked at cross-purposes.
- Divergent objectives within and between the military and civilian sectors gave rise to command-and-control problems and intra-agency tensions.
- An imbalance in resourcing military and civilian sectors characterized the 2001–14 intervention. Giving more weight to civilian perspectives on timelines and priorities for state-strengthening would help efforts to achieve stability.
- The importance of a comprehensive approach was recognized, but one did not materialize. The US military strived for unity of command; the civilian sector remained fragmented. Required are more integrated approaches to the planning and conduct of state-building operations, facilitated by intra-agency structures.



The background to the incoherent approach

The US-led coalition's intervention in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks had limited aims: to eliminate Al-Qaeda from the region and remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. In an emotionally charged atmosphere in which the desire for swift revenge on the perpetrators of the attacks was uppermost, the Bush administration was not closely examining options for the post-Taliban future of Afghanistan. To the extent options were looked at, it was envisaged that other countries and the United Nations would run the nation-building show.¹ The possibility of managing the transitional period under a UN administration – as in the run-up to the 1993 elections in Cambodia – was briefly discussed and dismissed. This left the international community without an authoritative international body, in charge of both security and financial resources, to direct what the military terms 'unity of effort' towards common objectives.

The post-9/11 intervention had opened a window of opportunity for change in Afghanistan that was broadly supported by the population, especially the majority poor, whose hopes for a swiftly transformed economic landscape had been raised by media reports to unrealistically high levels.

Covert operations conducted by US special forces and the CIA involving large cash payments were used to resource the commanders of the 'Northern Alliance' (NA)² – a coalition of Tajik and Uzbek Afghan ethnic groups dominating the northern factions that had opposed the Taliban – as proxy ground forces to expedite US objectives. No thought appears to have been given as to how re-empowering the former *mujahideen* commanders of the NA, and the warlords they were linked to, risked hardening factional divisions, thereby increasing the challenges of implementing reforms in the security sector on which building a stable state depended.³ According to

Barnett Rubin, a former adviser to Richard Holbrooke, the US special representative on Af/Pak, state-strengthening was supported by the US only 'in so far as it helped achieve the primary goal to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and prevent their return'.⁴ What happened beyond these objectives was of little interest to the Bush administration; it viewed the intervention in Afghanistan as the opening salvo in a global war on terror, the focus of which rapidly moved on to Iraq. Official US statements on the Afghanistan mission never referenced 'nation-building'⁵ and Rubin argues that a counterterrorism strategy, rather than nation-building, always represented the core of the US engagement. When perceived as necessary, this would trump longer-term state-strengthening considerations.⁶

The post-9/11 intervention had opened a window of opportunity for change in Afghanistan that was broadly supported by the population, especially the majority poor, whose hopes for a swiftly transformed economic landscape had been raised by media reports to unrealistically high levels at the outset of the intervention. The Taliban had signally failed to deliver on people's chief concerns over jobs, health and education. Even in the former Taliban heartlands of the southwest, the US-led military intervention did not immediately produce a xenophobic reaction; opposition only became apparent after 2004–05. There was also widespread support for a strong central government given Afghans' experience of the *tanzimats*.⁷ The intensifying political factionalism following the overthrow of the Taliban contaminated everything, however, from schoolteacher appointments to the media and especially the Afghan security forces. This prevented the development of national institutions capable of acting in the interests of all Afghans, and created winners and losers at local levels.

The restoration of the rule of impunity accompanied soaring corruption. The latter was fuelled by narcotics-trafficking controlled by local power-holders who were often closely linked to the government, and to the Ministry of Interior in particular.⁸ As well as being exposed to a predatory police force composed of former militias, the population had to

¹ Astri Surkhe, *When More Is Less – The International Project in Afghanistan*, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 24–25.

² Beneficiaries included prominent commanders such as Mohammed Fahim. NA militias had previously brought large areas of the country, including Kabul, under their control, having disregarded US calls not to enter the capital.

³ The NA took control of the key security ministries – defence, interior and intelligence – and appointed governors and chiefs of police in most Afghan provinces.

⁴ Dr Barnett Rubin, keynote presentation, 'Understanding the Political Economy of State-building Interventions', Chatham House, Stanford University and United States Institute of Peace conference, 'State-Strengthening in Afghanistan 2001–2014', Washington, DC, March 2015.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ In this context the term refers to the main Afghan political parties based in Pakistan, supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the West during the Soviet-backed communist period of Afghan government. *Tanzimat*-linked militias waged a destructive civil war following the collapse of the Najibullah government. This destroyed swathes of Kabul and killed large numbers of civilians, estimated by Amnesty International in 1995 at 25,000. Many more were injured.

⁸ See Jonathan Goodhand, *Bandits, Borderlands and Opium Wars: Afghan State Building Viewed From the Margins*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2009; and Doris Buddenberg and William A. Byrd (eds), *Afghanistan's Drug Industry: Structure, Functioning, Dynamics and Implications for Counter-Narcotics Policy*, UNODC/World Bank, 2006.

bribe officials for the most basic of services. For Afghans, the fact that corruption went to the top echelons of government (as the Kabul Bank scandal unequivocally demonstrated) was no surprise. All this and more undermined their confidence in a better and more stable future. It eroded trust in the role of the international community and in NATO/ISAF (the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan) in particular, its visible face in most of the country. The situation was not helped by Taliban propaganda labelling international forces as ‘invaders’, and an Afghan president who increasingly fanned the winds of conspiracy.⁹

The Bush administration’s wish to avoid nation-building altogether¹⁰ and the disastrous consequences of its invasion of Iraq¹¹ brought a broader constituency of NATO member states to the fore of policy-making in Afghanistan. Some elements argued that ‘the interveners now had an obligation to deliver more than a government of warlords’.¹² A ‘comprehensive approach’ which sought to integrate the political, military, economic and humanitarian aspects of policy that had informed lessons from nation-building interventions under the Clinton administration in the 1990s¹³ was referenced repeatedly by NATO member states in framing a growing involvement in Afghanistan.¹⁴ But there was still no overarching, strategic vision that delineated the country’s future contours and how this would be attained.

In addition to counterterrorism, international objectives between 2001 and 2014 included state-strengthening, state security, countering the insurgency and, finally, the transfer of full responsibility for security, governance and development to the Afghan government to enable the withdrawal of the bulk of international combat forces from the country. Many of these objectives were implemented simultaneously,¹⁵ with priorities determined at least as much by domestic political considerations in key NATO member states as by conditions in Afghanistan.¹⁶ The growing confusion was exacerbated by the absence of a sufficiently authoritative lead to align multiple assistance efforts, the limited capacity of the Afghan government –

especially evident at provincial and district levels – and the way in which the majority of military and civilian assistance was managed bilaterally, mostly off-budget and unaligned with Afghan national development strategies. Donor nations and organizations, both military and civilian, were left to act according to their own interests, and an incoherent approach was the inevitable result.

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Beyond continuing counterterrorism operations, US policy with regard to state-strengthening processes in the crucial early years amounted to ‘benign neglect’.¹⁷ The shift in US focus to Iraq is widely seen as a determinant in the limited state sustainability outcomes that resulted. Given the multiple agendas at stake with Afghan, regional and international dimensions and an operating environment rooted in the country’s violent recent history, the challenges of stabilizing Afghanistan were daunting. Opportunities to tackle these challenges were either missed or ignored by international actors plunging into a complex environment that they underestimated and did not understand.

Following attainment of the political objectives under the Bonn Agreement, which culminated in the holding of presidential elections in October 2004 and parliamentary elections in September 2005, the security objectives of the US military and NATO moved to the forefront of the state-strengthening agenda. Longer-term state-strengthening considerations came second to building up Afghan police and army numbers – objectives that were addressed with growing urgency, both to counter the Afghan insurgency, which was ‘defined primarily as a law enforcement issue’,¹⁸ and ultimately to enable an exit strategy.

⁹ President Hamid Karzai mistakenly believed that geostrategic considerations would lock the US into Afghanistan for the next 100 years, giving Afghan governments leverage in return for the retention of US bases.

¹⁰ Michèle A. Flournoy, ‘Lessons Learned and Unlearned’, in Francis Fukuyama (ed.), *Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, p. 86.

¹¹ By mid-2002, key air and other assets were being removed from Afghanistan in preparation for the invasion of Iraq.

¹² *Capturing the Lessons from the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team*, Wilton Park Report, 3–5 December 2014, p. 11.

¹³ Flournoy, ‘Lessons Learned and Unlearned’, p. 88.

¹⁴ Against a widening security gap, the 2006 NATO summit at Riga outlined the principles and intent of NATO’s ‘Comprehensive Approach’, which fed into NATO’s 2008 ‘Comprehensive Strategic, Political, Military Plan for Afghanistan’.

¹⁵ *Synthesis Report – Summative Evaluation of Canada’s Afghanistan Development Program Fiscal Year 2004-2005 to 2012-2013*, Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (DFATD), 2015. The report, released on a Canadian government website in March 2015, states that the objectives of the Canadian development programme were reformulated several times during this period. Canada was not unique in this.

¹⁶ The withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan beyond a US embassy detail coincides with the ending of President Barack Obama’s presidency in 2016. The pace of the withdrawal of remaining forces of around 10,000 was adjusted in 2015; the date of complete withdrawal by the end of 2016 was not altered.

¹⁷ Interview with Francesc Vendrell (former personal representative of the UN secretary-general on Afghanistan, January 2000–January 2002 and EU special representative for Afghanistan, July 2002–September 2008), London, 5 March 2015.

¹⁸ Interview with Nick Williams (political adviser to ISAF commander RC South, Kandahar, 2007–08, former deputy NATO senior civilian representative, Kabul, 2008–09, head of the Afghan Team, NATO international staff, Brussels since 2010), Oxford, 8 March 2015.

In effect, strengthening the Afghan security forces was seen by the US military and NATO as the same thing as strengthening the state, despite arguments by mainstream development professionals that a lasting stabilization would depend on developing the economy, governance and functioning ministries. ‘We said this at meetings,’ commented a former US government development professional interviewed, ‘but I wonder how much we were listened to?’¹⁹

NATO’s involvement

Widening NATO involvement from 2003 to 2006 was partly a response to the need to support the US, bogged down in what verged on a catastrophic aftermath to its invasion of Iraq, and to NATO’s own need to find relevant roles in what was then seen as a post-Cold War world. NATO’s central assumption was that on the basis of reconstruction and development, the Afghan government would extend its legitimacy and authority country-wide, thereby enabling its international partners to help build a sustainable stability that would foster economic development. This ‘end state’ would allow a military exit with continued foreign assistance typical of other post-conflict fragile states. The basis for such a conditional exit kept receding, however. Increasingly, donors saw Afghanistan’s problems as intractable.

The burden-sharing arrangement was not so much a demonstration of US confidence in NATO’s capabilities as a means of enabling the US military to focus fully on the Iraq campaign.²⁰ Nevertheless, by 2006 the US was increasing funding and other resources to state-strengthening processes in Afghanistan. There had been limited progress in security-sector reform (SSR) owing to differing national leads of SSR agreed in Tokyo in January 2002,²¹ and to the circumvention of SSR objectives by the Afghan Ministry of Interior and its associated networks in parts of the country. Though SSR processes were intended to be mutually reinforcing, the development of the police

and army led the international agenda. Reforms to the interior ministry, viewed by the diplomatic community in Kabul as the front line in the war on corruption²² and trade in narcotics, made little headway. This allowed the ministry to continue to circumvent reform processes where they clashed with powerful vested interests.

By 2006 the police sector, led by Germany, was supported by 25 countries and several international organizations, but there was still no common vision for the kind of police force Afghanistan needed. The growing insurgency prompted the US, the largest contributor to the police sector since 2004, to advocate an increase in police numbers by late 2006 (from 62,000 agreed in the Afghanistan Compact in 2006 to 82,000). Not all international police reform actors then fully supported what was viewed as a move from the establishment of a civilian police force towards the development of a paramilitary or counter-insurgency force. The fiscal sustainability of increasing Afghan National Police (ANP) numbers was also questioned.²³

Blurred lines

Counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine provided an entry point for the military’s engagement, alongside State Department and USAID representatives, in efforts to establish the rule of law and to improve the economy, the infrastructure and governance, especially the countering of corruption. A *de facto*, if inappropriate, military lead reflected the dynamics of international assistance to Afghanistan and the absence of a political strategy. In effect, the presence and weight of a single and powerful ISAF commander overshadowed a fragmented and leaderless civilian effort.²⁴

Constant demands from NATO capitals for fast and positive results²⁵ were made on civilians leading development efforts,²⁶ as well as on the military. The demand for ‘good news’ meant inconvenient truths tended not to be passed up reporting chains,²⁷ nor was reporting sufficiently nuanced

¹⁹ Conference call with former US government development advisers, Chatham House, 6 March 2015.

²⁰ Wilton Park Report, p. 11 (see note 12).

²¹ Italy led on justice, the UK on counter-narcotics, Germany on police reform, the US on building a new Afghan army, and Japan on demobilization and reintegration, and its successor, the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups project.

²² The Shura Nazar, a member of the Northern Alliance, controlled the interior ministry, selling police chief appointments that resulted in monthly kickbacks of thousands of dollars for lucrative positions situated on drug-trafficking routes. See Joel Hafvenstein, ‘Afghanistan’s Opium Strategy Alternatives’, in *The Rule of Law in Afghanistan – Missing in Inaction*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 124–25.

²³ Andrew Wilder, ‘Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police’, in *State, Security and Economy in Afghanistan Current Challenges, Possible Solutions*, Liechtenstein Colloquium Report, Vol. III, 2008, p. 23.

²⁴ Interview with Nick Williams (see note 18).

²⁵ A perspective corroborated by all interviewees.

²⁶ During 2004–05, as the situation in Iraq sharply deteriorated, development efforts in Afghanistan led by the US embassy were virtually micro-managed by senior members of the Bush administration.

²⁷ This affected civilian as well as military institutions. In 2003, following the murder of an UNHCR staff member in Ghazni and a car-bomb explosion outside the main UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) office in Kandahar, Jean Arnault, then deputy head of UNAMA, queried why the information in the more acute and presumably unedited report he was given by UNHCR security personnel based in Kandahar had not reached him before.

to capture the complexity of an environment in which the Taliban were just one of the problems faced by many Afghans. And as things got worse in Iraq, the more essential it became to show that all was going well in Afghanistan. The effects of the deepening conflict in Iraq – seen within the context of the ‘war on terror’ and international forces being put in harm’s way – also contributed towards a tendency for international donors to view the development of the Afghan security forces as a priority.

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The military’s engagement in assistance-type activities in Afghanistan took the securitization of aid to higher and controversial levels. A new phrase, ‘the burn rate’, referred to a process in which funds allocated under specially created funding lines for the military – such as the US Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP)²⁸ – were spent rapidly as a condition of their swift replenishment.²⁹ According to one US military analyst interviewed, 20 brigade commanders had US\$50 million a year to spend. ‘If you can’t solve the problem with money, spend more money,’ seems to have been the underlying rationale, and not just for US forces. One ISAF commander commented: ‘No conditionality was applied to the assistance given under ISAF which was all off-budget and not effectively tied to the development strategies led by the Afghan government.’³⁰ Limited absorptive capacity at all levels of the Afghan government was overwhelmed,³¹ while the danger of this situation fuelling corruption was, in practice, ignored.

‘Them that has the gold makes the rules’

US military and civilian assistance represented approximately half of all assistance during the early years of the intervention, rising markedly from 2007. It has

been estimated that between 2007 and 2009, one-half to two-thirds of all US assistance went to the security sector, covering the salaries, equipment and facilities of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF).³² The sheer scale and direction of Congressional funds placed the US Department of Defense and senior US military representatives in the field, in particular, in powerful positions as a result of which, according to many of those interviewed for this paper, other donors and the Afghan government were basically expected to do as they were told.

By 2011, the US was resourcing the bulk of the entire military and civilian assistance effort, leaving the rest of the international community as ‘bystanders agreeing to follow wherever the US pointed’.³³ Though some – Germany, the UK and the EU as a whole – were more important than others, they were still ‘outside the magic circle comprised of the US ambassador and the US military commander in Kabul where the actual decision-making took place’.³⁴

Nation-building lessons unlearned

The disparate agendas, interests and perceptions of civilian and military actors in the field were mirrored in ‘intra-agency’ planning of approaches to state-strengthening objectives in NATO national governments. In theory civilian perspectives were meant to carry equal weight in the setting of realistic timelines and objectives for state-strengthening.³⁵ Tensions were rooted in the bureaucratic politics that obtained in Washington, as in other NATO capitals. The US State Department, Department of Defense, FBI and CIA tended to prize departmental autonomy over getting a common approach. This was nothing new. US interventions in the 1990s had shown that in practice an integrated approach required the establishment of mechanisms to ensure unity of effort during both planning and execution phases in managing complex operations. This was captured in Presidential Directive 56 under the Clinton administration but ‘largely ignored when the Bush administration developed its post-9/11 strategy for Afghanistan’.³⁶ Successful civil–military collaboration, when it did occur in Afghanistan, was based on an absence of jargon and clear planning early on that took into account the realities of execution in a very demanding environment.³⁷

²⁸ Set up in 2003 to enable commanders in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and forward operating bases to fund reconstruction/quick-impact projects (such as roads, schools and clinics).

²⁹ The UK followed suit in Helmand in 2006, initially reversing the security focus of its former PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif that had specifically avoided making large amounts of funding available to PRT commanders.

³⁰ Interview with General Jonathon Riley, former deputy commander of ISAF, October 2007–January 2009, Oxford, 4 March 2015.

³¹ Afghan ministries often disbursed less than half of their annual budgets.

³² Surkhe, *When More Is Less*, p. 126.

³³ Interview with Nick Williams (see note 18).

³⁴ Interview with former NATO senior civilian representative to Afghanistan, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 11 March 2015.

³⁵ Conference call, 6 March 2015.

³⁶ Flournoy, ‘Lessons Learned and Unlearned’, pp. 86–89.

³⁷ Conference call, Chatham House, 6 March 2015.

Other external factors that contributed significantly to the incoherent approach in Afghanistan included the electoral, budgetary and news cycles of Western countries, which could lead to domestic political considerations winning out over Afghan ones.³⁸

The aid juggernaut

The widely held assumption that reconstruction and development produce a stability dividend went largely unquestioned.³⁹ A related assumption (which also informed developing COIN approaches to the growing armed opposition) was that Afghans – particularly in rural areas where the majority of the population is located – were able to choose between supporting the armed opposition or the Afghan government.⁴⁰ The situation was not helped by the combination of limited international understanding of the root causes of the conflict in the early and comparatively poorly resourced years of the engagement, insufficient local awareness and an overall failure to understand how international actions at provincial and district levels were viewed by locals.

By 2008 more nuanced approaches, which acknowledged the gulf between the government that the international community was ostensibly trying to build and how government was actually experienced by Afghans,⁴¹ developed in some areas.⁴² These time-consuming approaches came too late in the day to alter the perception that the primary role of big donors was to support the new, post-Taliban Afghan government in delivering reconstruction and development and ‘a new form of governance that would provide the necessary social services, especially health and education, that the Afghan people were looking for’.⁴³ This produced a seemingly unstoppable aid ‘juggernaut’⁴⁴ fuelled by the relentless demand for faster and positive results.

Insecurity and weak Afghan government capacity increased difficulties in monitoring projects, preventing corruption and delivering outcomes. The implementation of projects through extended chains of international and Afghan subcontractors clearly played a significant role in this. Repeated Afghan government protests over the qualitative costs and unnecessary squandering of off-budget reconstruction funds were largely overridden.

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The few success stories were mainly outcomes of on-budget funding via the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund administered by the World Bank. The Multi Donor Trust Fund model is now being exported by the UN to Somalia and other fragile states. But specific conditions and incentives in Afghanistan delivered success, namely a competent Ministry of Finance (MoF) which was committed to building up effective financial systems and which understood that increases in on-budget donor funding depended on doing so. Without such an effective partner, a former World Bank official emphasized in an interview for the research, World Bank efforts would have been a waste of time. Few other Afghan ministries had the MoF’s technical ability and commitment to implement reforms.

The Balkanization of the assistance effort

After ISAF’s expansion throughout Afghanistan, different approaches in the bilateral delivery of security and reconstruction assistance by donors became pronounced at provincial and district levels. They were largely conducted through Provincial Reconstruction

³⁸ Interview with US military analyst, Chatham House, 3 March 2015. For detailed analysis of the transition timetable and US political priorities, see Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, Simon & Schuster, 2010.

³⁹ Academic literature on the role of development assistance in providing a stability dividend is limited. An Overseas Development Institute paper co-authored by Alastair McKechnie references research using a cross-sectional sample of 100 districts in Iraq that indicated that the military handing out of grants to local leaders was most effective in reducing the number of violent incidents, whereas investment in infrastructure was the least effective. See Eli Berman, Michael Callen, Joseph Felter and Jacob Shapiro, ‘Do Working Men Rebel? Insurgency and Unemployment in Iraq and the Philippines’, Working Paper 15547, Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009. Research by Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, in *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship Between Aid and Security in Afghanistan* (Feinstein International Centre, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2012), found that development assistance could exacerbate conflict by providing new resources to fight over.

⁴⁰ As ISAF expanded, Afghan communities were caught between armed opposition groups (AOGs) monitoring their actions and taking punitive measures if they collaborated and ISAF whose presence acted as a magnet for attacks by AOGs.

⁴¹ Wilton Park Report (see note 12).

⁴² The stabilization advisers deployed to Helmand by the UK’s Stabilisation Unit pioneered approaches that produced stability/political/governance outcomes at local levels. See Barbara J. Stapleton, ‘The civil-military approaches developed by the United Kingdom under its PRTs in Mazar-e-Sharif and Lashkar Gah’, in William Maley and Susanne Schmeidl, *Reconstructing Afghanistan*, Routledge, 2014, p. 36.

⁴³ Conference call, 6 March 2015.

⁴⁴ Surkhe, *When More Is Less*.

Teams (PRTs). These were repeatedly criticized by the Afghan government as a parallel administration undermining its national development strategy, but government protests were again effectively ignored. Whereas US PRTs remained militarily led within a single command structure, this was not the case for PRTs led by NATO member states and other troop-contributing nations. The fact that PRTs were established under the protection of ISAF but remained under the control of their respective national authorities only added to the incoherence. Many were instruments of national development programmes and aid budgets and were usually directed by their respective countries. Civilian political and development advisers within PRTs did not always even include their respective embassies in reports back to capitals.

The increasing securitization of assistance via PRTs at provincial and district levels led to a Balkanization of the assistance effort, with the richer south and east of Afghanistan (where the heartlands of the insurgency are located) getting more aid and development than the poorer centre and north.

The US military-led surge

The 2009 Strategic Review conducted by the ISAF and US forces commander, General Stanley McChrystal, warned the new administration of President Barack Obama that continuation of the status quo in Afghanistan threatened ISAF with ‘strategic defeat’, and recommended an extensive, population-centric COIN campaign.⁴⁵ Following months of deliberation Obama authorized a temporary ‘surge’ of 30,000 additional US forces for this and reportedly ordered an (unpublicized) increase in the tempo of counterterrorism operations.⁴⁶ Planned numbers of ANSF were also significantly increased. The option of a fully resourced and open-ended counter-insurgency including nation-building aspects, for which General David Petraeus and the Pentagon had lobbied, was rejected.⁴⁷ The COIN mantra of ‘clear/hold/build’ rapidly changed to ‘clear/hold/transfer’ as NATO and the Afghan government formalized plans during 2010 for the drawdown of international troops via a phased handover of responsibility to the Afghan government for security.

The brevity of the transition’s timeline, from March 2011 to the end of 2014,⁴⁸ put commanders of the military COIN campaign under pressure to use resources while they still had them. It also meant that taking a conditions-based approach requiring that minimal levels of security, governance and development be established in districts selected for the transition was not in the realm of possibility.⁴⁹

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Whether the ANSF will be able to maintain control over areas restored to the writ of central government following the withdrawal of international combat forces and accompanying ‘reach back’ facilities remains to be seen. Overhanging everything is the question of how the inflated ANSF will be maintained. The pledge announced by US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter during President Ashraf Ghani’s March 2015 visit to the US stated only that the US Department of Defense ‘intends to seek funding for Afghan forces to sustain an end strength of 352,000 through 2017’.

Prioritizing objectives

Following his first visit to Afghanistan in January 2007, when international concern was mounting over the Afghan insurgency, the then US defence secretary, Robert Gates, summarized US efforts there as ‘significantly hampered not only by muddled and overly ambitious objectives but also by confusion in the military command structure, confusion in economic and civilian assistance efforts, and confusion over how the war was actually going’.⁵⁰ These words exemplify the continuing ambivalence in US policy circles towards longer-term nation-building processes. What is telling is that, at the same time, wider international attention was directed at improving the coherence of the civilian assistance effort as the way forward.⁵¹ By comparison, why and how Afghan

⁴⁵ The US Department of Defense released an unclassified version of the Strategic Review, 20 September 2009.

⁴⁶ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, pp. 314–15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ The security handover was accelerated and completed operationally by 2013.

⁴⁹ NATO and the Afghan government had pre-agreed minimal levels of security, governance and development prior to the start of the transition process.

⁵⁰ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, W. H. Allen, 2014, p. 205.

⁵¹ The attempt to appoint a senior civilian coordinator to oversee and align international assistance in liaison with the Afghan government is a case in point.

political realities were obstructing state-strengthening objectives⁵² would not be acknowledged until McChrystal's 2009 Strategic Review. By then exit considerations were at the forefront of White House considerations.⁵³

The brevity of timelines for the phased withdrawal of international forces required even faster results in setting conditions for the troop drawdown. Both civilian and military sectors were rewarded for setting conditions quickly. The effects of this further distorted Afghan politics and economics in what was already a rentier state of unprecedented proportions.⁵⁴ The presence of 140,000 international troops by 2011, with access to funding sources such as the CERP 'that had accountability and control that differed from any civilian equivalent',⁵⁵ further compounded an artificial situation.

By 2012, with the handover to the Afghan government viewed by the international community as being of paramount importance, panic hit with the question as to how any of this would be sustained by an Afghan government lacking domestic revenue for its civil servants' salaries, let alone for its inflated police and army. In the Canadian government's *Summative Evaluation of Canada's Afghanistan Development Program for 2004/05 to 2012/13*,⁵⁶ released in March 2015, some short-term quantitative results are acknowledged but the longer-term sustainability of results is questioned by the independent evaluation team from Ecorys that conducted the report.⁵⁷ A former head of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)⁵⁸ in Kabul disagrees with the report's claim that Canada was guided by a strategic vision throughout the period of evaluation, stating: 'Canada's largest venture in a fragile state was not well defined; nor was it supported with adequate analysis based on understanding of the history, society and culture, ethnic politics, the root causes of conflict and the realities of fragility conditions in the country.'⁵⁹

Evolving military interventions

Unity of command was as lacking on the military side of the assistance effort as on the civilian side, giving rise to turf wars and command-and-control problems. There were two separate and distinct chains of command operating in Afghanistan from 2003 when NATO took over command of ISAF: 'Operation Enduring Freedom',⁶⁰ which covered most conventional US forces deployed in Afghanistan, covert special forces operations, and the training and equipping of the Afghan security forces; and ISAF itself, composed of NATO members (including the US, of course) and other troop-contributing nations.

ISAF's first deployment as a peacekeeping force was directed towards enabling the implementation of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, focusing on SSR, particularly building a new army and training the police. The second ISAF configuration 'grew out of the rebirth of the Taliban and the re-emergence of the insurgency and though focused on the insurgency also had a state-building component, mainly to buy acceptance of the military presence'.⁶¹ Adding to the confusion, the second ISAF iteration, although it had different objectives from the first, was also framed as a peacekeeping mission in a post-conflict fragile state. In addition there was a third force, 'ABCA' (America, Britain, Canada, Australia), also referred to as the 'Four Eyes' intelligence-sharing agency. These countries operated 'black' special forces (comprising US Delta, Rangers, and UK and Australian SAS) that were focused on counterterrorism tactics including the highly controversial 'night raids' and 'kill/capture' operations. 'Black' special forces reported to and came under the direct command of US Central Command in Tampa, Florida.

Attempts to bring more coherence into the command structure brought the two disparate ISAF missions under a single British commander, General David Richards, in 2006. However, there remained a disconnect between the ISAF iterations – SSR for state-strengthening on the one hand and the utilization of aspects of state-building for force protection on the other.

⁵² The continued presence of factionalized militias in the Afghan police force and the failure of the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups process epitomize this.

⁵³ Woodward, *Obama's Wars*.

⁵⁴ See Surkhe, *When More Is Less*, pp. 126–30. Estimates based on World Bank and IMF reports are cited assessing foreign aid financing around 90 per cent of all official expenditure in post-Taliban Afghanistan for most of the period under discussion.

⁵⁵ Interview with former NATO senior civilian representative, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, March 2015.

⁵⁶ *Synthesis Report – Summative Evaluation of Canada's Afghanistan Development Program Fiscal Year 2004-2005 to 2012-2013*, Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (DFATD), 2015.

⁵⁷ To date this is the only third-party evaluation released by a NATO member state on civilian and military assistance to Afghanistan funded by its taxpayers. Norway and Denmark are in the process of conducting similar evaluations.

⁵⁸ CIDA has been amalgamated into Canada's Foreign Affairs and Trade Department.

⁵⁹ Nipa Banerjee (head of Canada's aid programme to Afghanistan 2003–06), 'Canada's Afghanistan Programme Not a Model to Follow', *Embassy Magazine* (Canada's foreign policy journal), 25 March 2015.

⁶⁰ The US government's official name for its contribution to the war in Afghanistan and global counterterrorism efforts.

⁶¹ Interview with General Riley, 4 March 2015; his direct experience of the military command structure informs this section of the paper.

The differing strategic objectives of counterterrorism, a counter-insurgency and long-term state-strengthening considerations and requirements often worked at cross-purposes.⁶² The possibility of establishing unity of command by having a single American command foundered on European objections to being drawn in on the basis of the operation being under the Alliance and on the grounds that it would make NATO complicit in black special operations, ‘which their publics would not stand for’.⁶³ During US General David McKiernan’s tenure as commander of ISAF he was also appointed commander of US Forces Afghanistan, bringing the US-led SSR processes as well as US logistics under a double-hatted control. But counterterrorism operations remained outside McKiernan’s command.

The conduct of night raids, which caused civilian casualties and outraged Afghan cultural norms, drew frequent and outspoken criticism of the international military from the Afghan president. But such raids were viewed by the US Department of Defense as a key means of reducing civilian casualties while targeting the Taliban. Counterterrorism operations were sharply increased alongside the intensified COIN military campaign. Tactical changes introduced by General McChrystal to reduce civilian casualties as a means of winning Afghan ‘hearts and minds’ did produce results.⁶⁴ But botched airstrikes, such as that in Kunduz in September 2009 on two fuel tankers stolen by insurgents (which resulted in over 90 civilian deaths),⁶⁵ and special forces operations (conducted by international and Afghan special forces) continued to cause civilian casualties. In one egregious incident in February 2010, three women and two men (all of whom proved to be non-combatants) were killed, and an open split between NATO and the UN occurred in which the UN challenged NATO’s initial account that diverted blame for the women’s deaths.⁶⁶

Disjuncture in the chain of command contributed towards the damaging fallout from this incident. This was by no means a unique situation; multiple allegations were made by Afghans over mistaken killings and detentions of non-combatants during counterterrorism operations over time. Unlike ISAF, usually deployed for six months to a year in one area and

able to develop a level of situational awareness, the Special Operations Forces (SOF) were rotated for 90-day periods with no interaction with the local community, generating their own targets. According to one senior US military analyst,

No-one has visibility on how and why they select certain targets, it can be on the back of an opponent saying that X is a bad guy. All our polling and Afghan friends told the US military that this is not advancing our campaign goals but retarding them by turning Afghans against you and most of the time you don’t get the bad guys.⁶⁷

The SOF incident in Ghazni ‘would have left the conventional commander of ISAF fuming because he knew he had lost the village who then try to kill his men’.⁶⁸ The US secretary of defence, Robert Gates, finally succeeded in establishing unity of command by summer 2010,⁶⁹ but whether SOF operations then came under effective central command is questionable.

A British former deputy commander of NATO/ISAF summed up the underlying causes of the military’s incoherence: no single command of the money, no addressing need, no means of prioritizing, and no means of rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The real transition is now under way. The success or failure of the national unity government (NUG) and the ability of President Ashraf Ghani to reduce corruption and violence, manage the conflict and develop a legitimate economy will determine how the international intervention between 2001 and 2014 is judged. A contraction in the economy and security forces is a real danger, making reaching a peace settlement and building regional economic connectivity the NUG’s priorities. This will take time, and the US and its allies will need to continue to bridge the funding gap, over the short term at least, if hard-won achievements in Afghanistan are to be built on.

Much work has been undertaken by the UN, the World Bank and others to identify the elements that should be central to coherent and realistic international engagement

⁶² Examples range from military operations or presence preventing access to communities by civilian aid and development actors, to Afghans joining the insurgents out of revenge for the death or detention of relatives.

⁶³ Gates, *Duty*, p. 206.

⁶⁴ The joint annual report by UNAMA and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Committee on civilian casualties, in March 2011, noted a reduction of 26 per cent in civilian casualties attributed to Afghan and international military forces in 2010, from 2009.

⁶⁵ Matthias Gebauer, ‘Aftermath of an Afghanistan Tragedy’, *Der Spiegel*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/aftermath-of-an-afghanistan-tragedy-germany-to-pay-500-000-for-civilian-bombing-victims-a-710439.html>.

⁶⁶ Special forces had mistakenly targeted an Afghan party celebrating the birth of a baby boy. See Rod Nordland, ‘Afghanistan: Different Accounts Offered About Civilian Deaths’, *New York Times*, 12 February 2010; and Richard A. O’Connell, ‘U.S. Admits Role in February Killing of Afghan Women’, *New York Times*, 4 April 2010.

⁶⁷ Interview with senior US military analyst, National Defense University, Washington, DC, 18 March 2015.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Gates, *Duty*, p. 206.

⁷⁰ Interview with General Riley, 4 March 2015.

in conflict and post-conflict countries. The New Deal for Fragile States underscores the importance of commitment to a set of common goals and the centrality to success of trust among and between national and international actors. In Afghanistan, this received wisdom did not survive contact with political reality.

A key lesson from the intervention in Afghanistan is that civilian perspectives must carry more weight in setting realistic timelines, priorities and allocation of resources for durable state-strengthening.

In the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, international appetite for intervening in fragile states is at a low point. This will not preclude nation-building interventions being seen as in the strategic interests of the US in the future, again drawing in US allies. Identifying what worked and what undermined the objective of stabilizing Afghanistan is also relevant to US aims to increase burden-sharing in an increasingly unstable world in which narrower counterterrorism approaches currently dominate strategic thinking.

A marked imbalance between military and civilian sectors characterized the 2001–14 US-led intervention in Afghanistan. In looking forward, the US military both believes in and needs unity of command and will continue to make progress towards that objective via detailed operational reviews and other measures. The comparatively fragmented civilian sector – be it the various UN agencies, donors’ differing national objectives, or the various ministries of government – lack an equivalent, unifying drive. The institutionalization of integrated approaches to the planning and conduct of state-building operations, facilitated by cross-ministerial structures, would offset this. However, a key lesson from the intervention in Afghanistan is that civilian perspectives must carry more weight in setting realistic timelines, priorities and allocation of resources for durable state-strengthening. A higher level of political orchestration and commitment than is currently apparent multilaterally, in the US and the UK will be required to effect this.

Opportunity in Crisis

The 'Opportunity in Crisis' project is supported by the governments of Australia, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland and is being undertaken by Chatham House in partnership with the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU).

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Cover image © Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images

ISBN 978 1 78413 075 6

Typeset by Soapbox, www.soapbox.co.uk

All Chatham House publications are printed on recycled paper.