International Security Programme: Rapporteur Report

The UK's Approach to Stabilisation: The Comprehensive Approach in Action?

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of coordinating civilian and military activities in the stabilisation and reconstruction of post-conflict environments in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan has led to a broad policy consensus on the need for a more integrated approach. The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of coordination efforts with the Comprehensive Approach, which provides the framework for British operations in Afghanistan. While the term frequently elicits exasperated sighs among practitioners, there is growing (yet cautious) optimism about the ability of the current model to deliver results on the ground.

At an event at Chatham House on 7 June 2010 in conjunction with the UK Government's Stabilisation Unit, a leading centre of expertise in stabilisation, a wide range of practitioners involved in the UK Comprehensive Approach came together to debate the essence of the British approach to stabilisation; to share insights on successes and failures in the course of its implementation; and to critically evaluate the sustainability of the current model in light of budgetary restrictions and tenuous popular support for prolonged military deployments. The report on this discussion is divided into three parts. It starts with a number of observations on the conceptual framework behind the Comprehensive Approach. The second part turns to the question of operationalising the model both within Whitehall and on the ground and in partnership with a wide range of actors. The third part then inquires into the sustainability of the current model and prospects for its future.

I   THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL: DOES THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION?

For the UK 'stabilisation' has come to mean far more than building bridges or refurbishing schools: it stands for an ambitious agenda that comprises a complex set of activities that must be led and owned by the host nation government. This requirement is at the core of the British approach to stabilisation in Afghanistan. It was noted that stabilisation requires first and foremost a secure space within which political and economic processes can take hold. Hence, defence, diplomacy and development must pull together behind one plan. Participants agreed that the Comprehensive Approach was widely seen as valid in most situations where military force was required as well as in other post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation contexts. It was further argued that thinking about military campaigns has undergone a fundamental shift: while the military is the key actor in the first phase the overall objective is 'civilian'. Some commentators viewed the question of who was in charge at any given point in the campaign as secondary as long as the mission on the ground was absolutely clear.

One commentator suggested that there had been a decisive shift in the British approach to stabilisation with the discovery of a framework that allowed a link to be formed between the strategic, operational and tactical levels of the campaign in Afghanistan. This framework bridged a crucial gap that had initially existed between the objectives identified for stabilisation and the ability of those deployed to Helmand in 2006 – 'a military brigade and a handful of civilians' – to implement them. The ensuing discussion centred on two main aspects of this model: the sequential logic behind it and its state-centric nature. One participant questioned the utility of discussing labels and definitions, as they risked distracting from the main task at hand. It was suggested that a conceptual framework should be demand- rather than supply side-led. The Comprehensive Approach arguably emerged from the identification of needs on the ground and the recognition of shortfalls in the British response and was never meant to act as a set template fixing roles once and for all. Yet while definitional debates may appear secondary in light of pressing operational concerns, they are noteworthy in that they might reveal a degree of uncertainty behind the overall project of stabilisation.

A sequential model?

Stabilisation tasks are often conceptualised in the form of parallel arrows or concentric circles representing security, governance and reconstruction as simultaneous areas of activity. In discussion, however, it was argued that the current, and preferred model was a sequential one. The sequential model was strongly advocated on the grounds that there can be neither development nor governance without security. It was deemed to have worked where it had been properly delivered. The logic behind the sequential approach is simple and compelling: the creation of a secure space is the *sine qua non* for governance and reconstruction efforts; efforts to enable credible district-level governance should follow rapidly from the establishment of a secure environment before reconstruction and development can take place. One participant suggested that so-called Quick Impact Projects and 'hearts and minds'-related activities should not become the cornerstone of a stabilisation project as these efforts tended to circumvent the sequential model. It was highlighted that the delivery of security must be tailored to the growth and capacity of local (Afghan) governance. One participant warned that rushing the Afghans to deliver their own security before they had the capacity to do so was a recipe for failure. A sequential model requires considerable political appetite to stay the course. While success was defined overall as the delivery of security and governance by the government of Afghanistan, local progress indicators such as the (re-)opening of schools, markets, shops and *shuras* were highlighted. One commentator pointed out that the people of Musa Qaleh are now regularly paying tax – a sign that the government was delivering.

The dangers of placing the Comprehensive Approach on a pedestal and the necessity to remain open to alternative models were acknowledged. Yet delivery of aid prior to or in parallel with the creation of a reasonably secure environment in places like Afghanistan has not worked well in the past. Likewise, the risks associated with a more remote approach based on channelling funds to local institutions – risks such as high levels of corruption and the danger of fuelling the insurgency – are well known. Several participants nevertheless voiced scepticism with regard to the sequential model. One commentator asked whether the implications of research findings on the relationship between aid and security (as offered for instance by the Feinstein Center at Tufts) were fully understood. It was suggested that the military in particular might privilege a sequential approach for parochial

reasons. Placing security first has clear implications for decision-making arrangements and whoever goes in first is likely to remain in charge and to set the agenda for subsequent decisions. It was argued therefore that the model outlined may not be simply a product of experience and lessons learned, but could equally be shaped to some degree by organisational and special interests .

A state-centric model?

The approach adopted by ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) revolves around a central notion of authority, which builds on the concepts of mandate, manner, consent and expectation. The primary goal is to support the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) in the delivery of security, justice and services in a non-corrupt and even-handed fashion. It was pointed out that the Taliban compete with the government mainly in the delivery of justice and security and slightly less in terms of economic services. Several participants highlighted the parallel existence of an informal justice sector alongside formal (state) institutions and the need to provide adequate space for both within one single justice system. The challenge of reconciling formal institutions and informal processes and traditions in Afghanistan extends beyond justice to broader questions of governance. The main focus of the Helmand PRT was thus described as 'Afghan solutions delivered by Afghans with the support of the PRT'.

One participant questioned the nature of 'government' in Afghanistan with a view to the formal ISAF PRT objective of 'assist[ing] the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority'. It was highlighted that Afghanistan had never been colonised and had never seen a centralised government in the past. The discussion turned to the question of whether the UK approach to stabilisation was perhaps overly state-centric. As one participant argued, legitimate governance did not automatically have to be equated with the establishment of a strong central government. An overly state-centric model may pose considerable and insoluble problems if it means that the UK effort may become closely tied to a government that is widely perceived as corrupt and illegitimate. Where the state system does not function well it is crucial to have experts that can bring *local* solutions to *local* government. Hence, the form and shape of governance may ultimately matter less than the imperative that governance must not be corrupt or delivered in such an unjust manner

that further conflict is incited. The end state may well be a combination of some forms of governance that we recognise in the West and others – such as *shuras* – that have little resemblance to our own understanding of the state.

II OPERATIONALISING THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Putting the Comprehensive Approach into practice requires a wide spectrum of very different actors to work effectively together towards a shared objective. One participant argued that success in Afghanistan depended on whether the alliance could be kept together in the face of the Taliban's relentless attempts to break it. It was noted that the strengths of the various contributing organisations must be seamlessly tied together 'to make sure everyone is singing from the same sheet'. This is even harder when non-state actors – such as the NGO community – become part of the picture. Discussion touched on both governmental and non-governmental organisations as key actors in the Comprehensive Approach. Participants acknowledged the crucial role played by Afghan counterparts at district, province and national levels. The Helmand Plan guiding British efforts in the province was developed in close consultation with Helmand's governor Gulab Mangal who was consulted at every stage and now 'owns' the plan alongside the PRT.

Cooperation on the ground: a civilian-military 'stabilisation community'

There was wide agreement that civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan could not be considered separately but were inextricably tied together. The plethora of actors operating on the ground in Afghanistan were described as forming a 'stabilisation community' where civilian and military efforts were two sides of the same coin. The British-led PRT in Helmand views its area of operations as one 'stabilisation space' within which civil-military partnerships at province and district levels ensure a coherent approach in support of GIROA. District stabilisation teams operating out of the Helmand PRT are a mix of members of the Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG) and civilian stabilisation advisers fielded by the Stabilisation Unit, as well as American and Danish officials. It was noted that there is one mission in theatre that effectively creates a complete overlap between different actors' interests. It should not come as a surprise that this cannot be the case within Whitehall where larger organisational agendas are at play. One commentator for instance highlighted the difficulty of 'hardwiring' the FCO and DFID to operations on the ground in the same way as the military.

The problem of deploying civilians on the ground was addressed by several participants. There was agreement on the critical need to have people in possession of the relevant skills ready to deploy in stabilisation contexts on very short notice. Yet several participants argued that Foreign Office duty of care arrangements – which applies to the majority of civilian experts and civil servants – was impeding some civilians from effectively carrying out their work. It was suggested that the current policy should be re-evaluated in consultation with deployable civilian experts (DCEs) who have a better understanding of conditions on the ground. One participant argued that pursuing the current policy was balanced by the fact that civilians did not have access to military compensation schemes. One discussant emphasised that the ways of delivery were actually secondary considerations: they key issue was that those setting the objectives in a given area were the experts in that domain.

Cooperation within Whitehall: the Stabilisation Unit

While there is arguably complete overlap between military and civilian objectives in the theatre of operations, delivering this is more complicated in the corridors of Whitehall. If one includes the Home Office in addition to the three departments generally associated with the Comprehensive Approach – MOD, FCO and DFID – one looks at four large organisations as opposed to a single integrated stabilisation team in Helmand. Unsurprisingly, cooperation is widely perceived to be easier to achieve on the ground than within the institutional architecture. It was argued that – although strategy papers from the military, FCO and DFID overlap to a significant degree – there has not yet been an effort to consolidate the financial implications contained in different sources. This might suggest a more prominent role for the Treasury, which has remained a rather passive observer so far. The Cabinet Office was said to play an increasingly active role in bringing together the three departments. One commentator pointed out that the joint visit of the new Foreign, Defence and Development ministers to Afghanistan sent out a strong message in favour of close coordination.

The role and place of the Stabilisation Unit within Whitehall and its contribution to the Comprehensive Approach occupied a prominent place in the discussion. It was suggested that there might be an opportunity with the new government to raise the place of the Stabilisation Unit to Cabinet Office level. It was noted that the Stabilisation Unit lacked the authority to call upon parent departments to plan together at an early stage – in other words, to 'to push the button' to initiate the planning process – even though joint planning

at an early stage was widely recognised as absolutely crucial. The Stabilisation Unit is uniquely well placed to bring people with relevant skill sets to where they are most needed at short notice. The Stabilisation Unit furthermore provides a centre of expertise for stabilisation within Whitehall and is home to the Civilian Stabilisation Group that cooperates closely with its military counterpart (the MSSG). Its aim is to 'provide the right people, properly prepared, in the right place at the right time.' Afghanistan is the largest Stabilisation Unit deployment and the Helmand PRT takes up the majority of the Unit's resources. The future place and role of the Stabilisation Unit is not a question that would resolve itself over night. Yet it was noted that other NATO members were closely observing institutional developments within the United Kingdom in the area of stabilisation. One participant thus argued that it may be in the UK's interest to ensure consistency and refrain from constant re-labelling and remodelling.

Non-governmental organisations as potential partners

Participants further discussed whether and how NGOs could become part of the Comprehensive Approach and which part of the effort they were contributing to in Afghanistan. The question was raised whether the current relationship between non-governmental and governmental actors perhaps represented an 'uneasy truce'. One participant wondered whether the Comprehensive Approach was only working in Afghanistan because the security situation did not allow for a large NGO presence in many parts of the country. If improved security conditions allowed for NGOs to start operating in the same area, would it be possible to avoid the confusion, duplication and mutual frustration that many actors remember from operations in the Balkans in the 1990s? Was it feasible to have two parallel approaches – a political-military one centred on stabilisation and a purely humanitarian one – and could major contradictions between the two spheres be avoided?

One commentator pointed out that the CIMIC doctrine that came out of the Balkans did not yet take into account the decisive strategic shift that had occurred in the operational environment with the rise of anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism. This represents an additional challenge to the NGO community's commitment to humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence. Operating in a stabilisation environment is difficult for NGOs as the stabilisation project is inherently political and the proximity to intervening forces creates an 'image problem' by association. NGOs are keen to maintain a clear distinction not only for their own sake but also for the safety of their local staff and the security of aid recipients. It was pointed out

that between eighty and ninety per cent of NGO staff involved in programme delivery on the ground were locally recruited. One commentator argued that the involvement of NGOs in the Comprehensive Approach would be a 'complicating but welcome' development. An NGO representative on the other hand cautioned that if NGOs became associated with a military presence – as a means of service delivery – in the early days of a campaign, they risked finding themselves unable to fulfil a meaningful role later on.

It was further discussed to what extent the model at the core of the UK approach to stabilisation was amenable to NGOs. As outlined above, this model is clearly subjective and dependent on people's perceptions, though it places a strong emphasis on the role of the state. Given the weak government capacity in Afghanistan the idea of a partnership with NGOs operating as service providers is tempting. The example of BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) – a non-governmental organisation providing cheap services to the poor in Afghanistan – was mentioned. Non-governmental means of service delivery have been tried in other places – Yemen, Somalia – and these may be more sustainable solutions as long as those who provide the security have nothing against them. While this is not altogether an impossible scenario for Afghanistan, it is clearly not going to happen in the near future. In sum, while NGOs may be a welcome addition to the Comprehensive Approach from a government perspective their participation comes not without potential pitfalls. Yet at a time where the British public's will for engagement in Afghanistan is clearly being tested, and in the absence of a more substantial UN presence in Afghanistan, the debate over whom to hand over to in the longer term is certain to include NGOs.

III THE FUTURE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Several participants raised questions about the future development of the model and its sustainability in the face of diminishing popular support for overseas engagements and spending cuts. In addition it was argued that the post-Afghanistan phase will bring a new series of challenges to the three organisations involved in the Comprehensive Approach. As one commentator noted – in addition to questions over when to intervene and how (e.g. with a civilian-lead or a military-lead) – organisations will also be pushed to redefine the boundaries of their involvement. With regard to DFID, it was argued that the organisation had come to the conclusion that a lot of aid and development work was directly relevant to stabilisation and made it clear that it was in for the long haul. Unlike the military, DFID has no problem envisaging a prolonged presence on the ground.

Discussion turned several times to the sustainability of the current approach and the degree to which it could be adapted to future engagements. The current model is very integrated locally and generally viewed as delivering. However, it is costly to maintain as it comes with a big overhead and requires a lot of manpower. Funding for the Stabilisation Unit is provided by three parent departments, pending toe 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review. For the Helmand PRT the challenge is not so much securing donor funding but designing ways to spend it sensibly. One commentator doubted whether the Comprehensive Approach could be done more cheaply – especially in the initial phases of the conflict and its aftermath. However, the steep learning curve of the past few years should allow for costs to be cut in future engagements by ensuring a a more coherent approach from the start. External factors such as levels of insecurity or host nation capacity equally affect the nature of the approach: a more civilian-oriented model that required fewer 'boots on the ground' would be less costly for instance. Likewise, greater levels of local capacity (than encountered in Afghanistan) would allow for a reduction of the 'eye-watering cost' of deploying international civilians.

It was argued that the current framework rests on two main pillars: building local (e.g. Afghan) capacity and reducing the security threat posed by the insurgency. Within this framework, political choices have to be made over the degree to which the residual challenge should be addressed. It was noted that in the case of Afghanistan, the UK had decided to address the residual

challenge quite broadly. This would not necessarily have to be the case in a future operation. Constraints on the scalability of the model include NATO and UK troop capacity; the availability of international deployable civilians; and the level of capacity of local institutions (which was very low in Afghanistan but higher in Iraq). An additional constraint that was highlighted in the discussion was the degree of popular support for the war at home. Several participants underlined the need for the government to do better in terms of informing the public and sending out strong and consistent political statements of intent. As one commentator noted, 'the commitment to stabilisation within the government is high but there is a lack of clarity about what we are doing and in which contexts it is working. We need to get a clearer picture of what it is that the brilliant people that are sent out on the ground are doing, and demonstrate the added value of stabilisation.'

Consistent messaging is a requirement not just with a view to the public at home but also with regard to the local Afghan leaders and population. The situation in Afghanistan is dynamic and iterative: various actors on the ground react to whatever approach is chosen by the UK. Managing expectations is crucial and requires careful signalling with regard to Britain's commitment. Declaring success in a particular area sends out a strong signal that will raise expectations. The security provided through the British presence on the ground, however, is a finite resource. It was noted that the Helmand PRT was in place before the surge of US troops in Regional Command South and that the intention was to maintain it beyond the June 2011 reassessment announced by the Obama administration. While one participant argued that handing over responsibility to the Americans – not to Afghans – in Helmand had been very damaging in terms of local perceptions, others viewed the changes in command as 'absolutely reasonable'. It was argued that the changes reflected the scale of the challenge in Helmand and allowed for better force density (the ratio of troops to the local population). Had UK forces not handed over command to the Americans, they would have found themselves in control of 70 per cent of the population of Helmand, leaving the Americans – with more than double the number of troops – responsible for vast unpopulated areas.

CONCLUSION

Participants from a wide range of backgrounds came together to discuss a broad spectrum of issues associated with the implementation of a Comprehensive Approach in an open and constructive manner. Discussion of the UK approach to stabilisation was characterised both by a measure of confidence that a workable model had been found and by a sober understanding of the formidable challenges that remained to be addressed. Any optimism discernible in the conversation stemmed from the feeling that the model was working, its objectives were realistically pitched and progress was finally being made. Yet doubts remained as to whether progress was occurring fast enough and whether the current model was sustainable in a climate of budgetary austerity and waning popular support for the maintenance of troops in Afghanistan. There was agreement that a lot had been achieved in terms of operating comprehensively and that the UK should learn from this engagement for other contexts including conflict prevention. There was a keen sense that the UK approach is seen as 'cutting edge' in the wider international community and among coalition partners and that it offers an opportunity to promote the UK brand. Yet in the absence of consistent messaging and strong statements of intent, the progress achieved so far remains utterly fragile both on the ground and at home.