



BRIEFINGS

LINKING PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS TO SECURITY ENHANCEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

In Afghanistan in 2002, United States-led Coalition commanders began planning for the reconstruction phase after the main combat effort was reduced. Initially called Joint Regional Teams, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept was launched on 21 November 2002 with the support of President Karzai. Consisting of 50-300 international military and civilian personnel, PRTs operate at the provincial level throughout Afghanistan. They have four main areas of operation: to expand the legitimacy of the central government to the regions; to enhance security; to facilitate reconstruction processes; and to undertake activities in the area of limited relief operations, the so-called 'hearts and minds' and quick impact operations (Jakobsen 2005). From a military viewpoint, the PRT concept has been considered a success since the beginning (Borders 2003) and regarded as an effective, flexible, low-cost instrument that can easily be adapted to other conflicts.

This briefing discusses one of the PRTs' main areas of operation: 'enhancement of security' from the perspectives of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) and international and Afghan NGOs. These stakeholders' perspectives were derived from a literature review and subsequently verified at a PRT conference in the Netherlands which was attended by representatives of UNAMA, the Afghan

National Coordination Bureau (ANCB), the International Office for Migration and the Ministry of Defence, among others.

To verify how closely these perceptions correspond with activities in the field, the first author paid a four-week visit to Afghanistan in June and July 2005. This briefing offers insight into the actual contribution of NATO-PRTs – specifically the Dutch-led PRT in Baghlan (NL PRT) and the German-led PRTs in Kunduz and Feyzabad (GE PRT) – to the provision of security at grassroots level. The empirical data illustrate that the improvement of the security situation at the grassroots level as a result of PRT contributions was insignificant.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Security

Despite extreme poverty, ill health and hunger, Afghans define the lack of security as their greatest problem (World Bank 2006). The main threat they cite is an absence of the rule of law resulting in violent predation by local power holders, criminals and corrupt officials. To address this insecurity, PRT activities span three sectors: support to the disarmament process; mediating conflicts between militias; and elements of security sector reform (SSR), namely:

- Counter-narcotics led by the United Kingdom;
- Judicial reform led by Italy;
- Disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration (DDR) led by Japan;
- Support to the Afghan National Army (ANA) led by the U.S.;
- Training of the Afghan National Police (ANP) led by the U.S. and Germany.

Understanding the ways in which the different stakeholder groups regard the role of the PRTs in ensuring security is crucial to assessing their effectiveness (Save the Children 2004).

From the point of view of UNAMA, PRTs can make the greatest contribution by focussing on support to SSR. Specifically, they could play an essential role in the accountability of weapons collection, supporting and guiding ANA units and supporting and training the local police. The fact that PRTs are military and thus able to function in an insecure environment is a key component of their value to the stabilisation and reconstruction process. However, a generic concept of PRTs is lacking, and in 2005 the UNAMA representative described PRTs as 'ambiguous franchises' (CGN 2005). 'Different lead-nations interpret the concept in different ways. The result is a fragmentary support to governance of Afghanistan' (Osario 2005). According to Jakobsen (2005), PRTs have been successful in extending the authority of the government, facilitating reconstruction and reducing violence. However, PRTs are not fully able to address underlying causes of insecurity in Afghanistan. Other instruments are needed to tackle the military threat posed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, warlords, the increased lawlessness and banditry, and opium cultivation and the drugs trade.

The international aid community views the PRT concept as 'a merging of development and security' (Stapleton 2003) which presents problems. Aid workers feel their security is put at risk by the military engaging in 'hearts and minds' or quick impact operations (Save the Children 2004). This is because the blurring of military and humanitarian roles may have a significant impact on the neutral and impartial status of NGOs. Moreover, trying to do both development and security distracts the military from its primary responsibility of providing security. There is broad consensus within the assistance community that PRTs should focus on areas in which they hold a comparative advantage such as providing a safe and secure environment and training of local police (Sedra 2004; Taylor 2003; Hoshmand 2005). However, PRTs lack sufficient military strength to address insecurity caused by armed militias and conflicts between warlords. PRTs' activities in support of SSR

are expected to be beneficial in expanding the reach of the central government, thereby reducing lawlessness and banditry. They have not yet been seen to engage in counter-narcotics activities, such as severing the relations between local militias and narcotics trade. Providing infrastructure to facilitate SSR will be beneficial to the nascent national police force and the judicial system, necessary to reduce high levels of lawlessness. Finally, strengthening government authority in the regions requires a robust Afghan national army and police force, infrastructure, and support to emerging institutions. According to NGOs, PRTs have undertaken these activities in an ad-hoc manner (Save the Children 2004; Rietjens 2006).

According to ANCB, national NGOs are the backbone of Afghan society. They are in contact with local beneficiaries at the grassroots levels. Based on their awareness of the people's needs, local NGOs should be involved in decision-making and planning processes with regard to security, reconstruction and humanitarian activities. This has not yet happened. Many indigenous NGOs feel they are used as cheap labourers to implement the solutions PRTs and international organisations have thought up.

Although the central government has adopted the PRT concept as its overall policy, the ANCB spokesman insists the central government's interests are not always aligned with the provincial (or local) authorities' interests (CGN 2005). Some of the ministers only recently returned to Afghanistan, having lived abroad during the war and subsequent Taliban rule. Authorities 'from Kabul', fearing for their own security, hardly dare show their faces in the provinces. Consequently, they are not in touch with reality outside the capital area. This has important ramifications for development as well. For example, as women are afraid to leave their homes, ANCB considers the lack of security in the provinces the most important obstacle to the coveted education and the participation in society of Afghan women (CGN 2005).

Afghan society is extremely complex and the country has hardly ever known centralised governance. This complicates stabilisation and reconstruction efforts, as it requires in-depth insight into local power and governance structures. As a result, well-intended efforts might undermine the security situation at the grassroots level; for example, if only a single tribe benefits from the reconstruction efforts, this will lead to inter-tribal tensions. To address this, ANCB urges greater participation by local NGOs in PRT activities.

PRTs' Contributions to Security Enhancement

Both the Dutch-led PRT in Baghlan and the German-led PRTs in Kunduz and Feyzabad were involved in providing security in various ways: collection and removal of mines, weapons and explosives; training of the Afghan National Police; support to the Afghan National Army; and support to humanitarian organisations, through, for example, a Disaster Response Committee, which was intended to evacuate personnel of humanitarian organisations in case of an emergency such as an earthquake.

The study's empirical data illustrates that the contribution of the Dutch- and German-led PRTs to security enhancement remained limited. There are various reasons for this. First, the lack of local actors' involvement in several activities contributes to insufficient engagement in grassroots security. While PRTs themselves generally determine the activities they want to undertake, often they refrain from identifying local stakeholders and involving them in this process. To increase community legitimisation of and commitment to the PRTs, however, it is important to involve these stakeholders at an early stage. This was quite apparent in the training courses the NL PRT conducted for the highway and provincial police of Baghlan. Drawing on Dutch police training experiences in Iraq, the Dutch Ministry of Defence decided that running a comparable bottom-up training course in Baghlan could

benefit the SSR process, but the NL PRT hardly consulted Afghan police commanders. In preparation for the training course, a Dutch textbook on police training was translated into Dari. Only after the contract was signed between the commander of the NL PRT and the local police commanders did it become apparent that half of the Afghan trainees were illiterate (Rietjens 2006). To educate the trainees to read and write was considered time-consuming: the translated textbook was rewritten and pitched at the level of the trainees. This significantly lowered the quality of the training.

The second reason for the limited contribution to security enhancement is the lack of resources at the disposal of most PRTs. Consisting of approximately 130 military personnel the NL PRT was responsible for covering an area half the size of the Netherlands. As more than half of this unit consisted of overhead – administration, force protection, etc. – very few people remained operational to contribute to security enhancement at the grassroots level. The NL PRT had only one advisor on explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and regulations required a minimum of two specialised persons for the work. Cooperation with other organisations was therefore necessary to be able to localise, remove and destroy these items. EOD advisors of the GE PRT initiated cooperation with local organisations. Only after a serious accident involving several deaths did the GE PRT decide that cooperation with a professional international humanitarian organisation, Halo Trust, was the only safe option for EOD.

Third, many military respondents stated that force protection was one of the main drivers of the activities of the PRTs. As such, activities to increase the safety of troops were often favoured over improving Afghan grassroots security. In Kunduz province, much of the effort went to supporting important lines of communication for the GE PRT, such as the main connection between Kunduz and Feyzabad. This is clear from a statement by the civilian head of the GE PRT: 'We are

“Gutmenschen”. This means we are not only good people but we also have our interests’.¹ Fourth, many PRT activities were not embedded in civil and military programmes. Although the priorities of PRTs were reportedly derived from the national development framework as established by the Afghan Transitional Authority, there were little interaction and feedback between the various actors involved in this strategic framework. As a result, many PRT activities were performed in isolation from civilian actors such as UNAMA. In recent years, for example, the Aga Khan Foundation has constructed approximately 300 micro hydro power plants in rural Afghanistan. Within a year of completion, half of these plants were no longer functioning properly. The Dutch military were unaware of these negative experiences when the NL PRT set up a similar project in Baghlan province to increase the perception of safety in villages and communities.

Finally, many humanitarian organisations considered visibility of cooperation or association with the military to be a serious threat. They argued that if military personnel worked in close physical proximity to them, communities would no longer distinguish between military and civilian implemented assistance. The blurring roles could significantly harm the relationship between humanitarian organisations and the communities they served. It could also pose security risks if civilian humanitarian workers were perceived to be collaborating with an unwanted military force and accused of channelling intelligence to it. During the fieldwork, no evidence was found to sustain these concerns. Instead, many respondents argued that assaults on humanitarian employees were often not directly related to their association with military forces. They rather suggested that these attacks were aimed at a retreat of humanitarian organisations from Afghanistan, which would then destabilise the area and thwart the military mission. Some humanitarian organisations in Kunduz and Baghlan remained reluctant, however, to execute activities jointly with military personnel.

Conclusion

The empirical data regarding the Dutch- and German-led PRTs’ contribution to security corresponds in large extent to the perspectives of three major civil actor groups operating in Afghanistan – UNAMA and international and Afghan NGOs. Although security is the Afghan people’s greatest problem, the PRTs investigated do not seem to enhance it significantly at the grassroots level. However, PRTs are an evolving tool (Jakobsen 2005) which can be potentially valuable. International civilian and military actors are considering efforts to shape and influence the evolution of the PRT debate.

PRTs run the risk of becoming ‘internationalised’: governments and institutions all over the world are looking into the options of using PRTs as a model for enhancing both security and development beyond Afghanistan. This may be a bridge too far, since PRTs appear to have created dilemmas and controversies that have yet to be debated and resolved. In this debate, the target group consisting of various Afghan beneficiaries should feature prominently. An approach such as this is likely to result in the vision of the late Ambassador Brahimi, former head of UNAMA, who wanted a light UN footprint and an ‘Afghan solution to an Afghan problem’.

Based on the findings of this briefing, it is recommended that PRTs:

- Dedicate more resources to security enhancement;
- Involve more Afghan people in their activities as this would contribute to a demand-driven approach as well as to sustainability and capacity building;
- Increase coordination among themselves and with international humanitarian actors to avoid duplication of effort and ensure continuity;
- Focus on support to international

organisations and NGOs in their reconstruction and development activities as these activities require training, expertise and a long-term approach, which many military lack.

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Endnote

¹ Interview with civilian head of the GE PRT, 16 July 2005.

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