

The search for common ground Civil–military relations in Afghanistan, 2002–13

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Key messages

- Stabilisation approaches are likely to continue to present challenges to the aid community's ability to act according to humanitarian principles in conflict-affected, fragile and post-conflict environments. Experiences in Afghanistan highlight significant tension, if not conflict, between stabilisation and internationally recognised guidelines and principles governing civil–military interaction.
- Civil–military dialogue was markedly more effective when it was rooted in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and strategic argumentation, as with advocacy focused on reducing harm to civilians.
- Aid agencies need to invest more in capacity and training for engaging in civil–military dialogue and, together with donors, seek to generate more objective evidence on the impact of stabilisation approaches.

While the belief that development and reconstruction activities are central to security is by no means novel, 'stabilisation' has assumed significantly greater prominence in the post-9/11 period, and is often a central component of Western involvement in conflict-affected or fragile states. The approach has however been highly contentious among aid agencies, perhaps nowhere more so than in Afghanistan.¹

This HPG Policy Brief summarises research on dialogue between aid agencies and military forces in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2013.²

¹ 'Aid agencies' refers to humanitarian and multi-mandate not-for-profit organisations that espouse recognised humanitarian principles in that they aim to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity, and are guided by the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Some, though not all, will also be guided by the principle of neutrality.

² For full research findings, see A. Jackson and S. Haysom, *The Search for Common Ground: Civil–Military Relations in Afghanistan, 2002–2013*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2013).

It aims to contribute to understanding of the challenges of civil–military dialogue in the context of combined international and national military forces pursuing development and reconstruction activities – traditionally the domain of aid agencies – as a central component of a military strategy.

The origins of stabilisation in Afghanistan

In the early years of the international intervention in Afghanistan (2002–2008), the primary instruments of stabilisation were Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Although predominantly military in composition at the outset, PRTs were defined by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as 'a civil–military institution'.³ Proposed by the United States as a solution to the power

³ ISAF, *Provincial Reconstruction Team Handbook*, Third edition, 3 February (Kabul: ISAF, 2007), p. 5.

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vacuum following the fall of the Taliban regime, PRTs aimed to buy time for the Afghan government to extend its authority and start to deliver services to the population.

PRTs were established by the United States and other troop-contributing nations (TCNs) at a rapid pace; by 2008 there were 26 PRTs led by 13 TCNs. While some PRTs were initially appreciated by Afghans, many interventions, particularly quick-impact projects (QIPs) or other activities focused on ‘winning hearts and minds’, lacked the requisite planning and involvement from communities and Afghan institutions to ensure appropriateness and sustainability. Many PRT military staff lacked the skills for ‘development’, and for most there was no PRT-specific pre-deployment training. Nor was there systematic handover or debriefing for PRT commanders, and frequent rotations meant that there was little institutional memory or lesson learning. Structures, activities and funding varied widely across PRT lead nations, with little effective coordination amongst them or with aid agencies. The result was what a US government report described as ‘a wide variety of entities with the same name’ with ‘no clear definition of the PRT mission, no concept of operations or doctrine, no standard operating procedures’.⁴

Aid agencies: objections and strategies for coordination

Despite pressure to support their activities, many aid actors strongly objected to PRTs engaging in ‘development’ activities on the grounds that this eroded the distinction between the military and civilian aid actors – with potentially dangerous consequences for aid workers. Many aid actors also worried that delivering aid in the expectation of gaining intelligence or loyalty would force civilians to make an impossible choice between badly needed assistance and their own safety.

Aid actors’ efforts to coordinate locally with PRTs had mixed results, and their attempts to limit the role of PRTs in hearts and minds activities were largely unsuccessful. While most objected to PRTs doing ‘development’, there was no common position on precisely what PRTs should do. Some felt that it would be impractical to demand that PRTs abandon reconstruction work altogether, while others felt that any military involvement in reconstruction or development was unacceptable. While difficult to achieve, a unified, sustained aid agency position would have undoubtedly been

⁴ US House of Representatives, *Agency Stovepipes vs Strategic Agility: Lessons We Need to Learn from Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan*, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2008, p. 18.

more effective than the often ad hoc, contradictory initiatives that emerged.

Directly or indirectly, many aid actors supported stabilisation. Some international and Afghan agencies accepted funding directly from PRTs to implement projects. More commonly, agencies accepted funding from PRT lead nation donor agencies to work in provinces where their PRTs were present, and in sectors seen as integral to consolidating military gains, including in ‘target’ districts dictated by security and military concerns. Each agency appears to have reconciled the resultant tension with perceptions of their own independence and impartiality in divergent ways. Some felt compromises were acceptable in ‘peaceful’ provinces, but not where international forces were heavily engaged in combat. Still others accepted funding from donor governments involved in the conflict but refused to utilise it in provinces where their troops were present.

These problems were exacerbated by insufficient aid agency capacity, leadership and coordination on civil–military issues. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), present in Afghanistan since 1988, closed in 2003, and humanitarian affairs were subsumed under an integrated mission (the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)). Even within the UNAMA Humanitarian Affairs Unit, there was reportedly just a single international staff member responsible for civil–military affairs for the majority of its existence. UNAMA nonetheless tried to resolve coordination issues with PRTs and establish greater clarity on their role.

Despite the challenges, there was productive engagement with the military during this period. This included the joint civilian–military PRT Executive Steering Committee, which provided policy guidance on PRT operations, and the Civil Military Working Group (CMWG), which facilitated the drafting and agreement of Afghanistan-specific Civil Military Guidelines. These guidelines sought to adapt internationally recognised principles to the particular challenges aid agencies faced in an operating environment dominated by concerns over PRT activity and growing insecurity. The guidelines faced opposition, largely from within the aid community, and were not sufficiently disseminated to military actors.

Dialogue during the ‘surge’

In 2009, the United States authorised a troop ‘surge’ that nearly doubled its forces in Afghanistan. In addition to major ‘clearing operations’, the new military strategy focused on counterinsurgency (COIN), supplemented with greater numbers of

civilians deployed from TCNs to support these efforts. Stabilisation funding rapidly increased: the annual budget of the US Commander's Emergency Response Fund (CERP), the primary funding mechanism for PRTs, rose from \$200 million in 2007 to \$1 billion in 2010.⁵ More than ever before, the military strategy focused on winning hearts and minds, solidifying the very approach aid actors objected to.

As troop numbers increased, insecurity spread through previously stable provinces and intensified in areas already deemed insecure. Aid agency operating space contracted: access in large parts of the south and east, and portions of the west, was virtually non-existent for many international agencies. There was increased pressure on aid agencies to support development and governance aspects of the military strategy, though aid agencies often saw this as little more than 'battlefield clean-up' and generally refused to take part. The appetite for dialogue rapidly diminished as many agencies avoided interaction with the military.

Aid agencies also increasingly sought to distance themselves from UNAMA, feeling that its close association with ISAF and the Afghan government undermined perceptions of their own neutrality and independence. At the urging of Afghan and international NGOs, OCHA was re-established in Afghanistan in 2009.⁶ Yet it initially suffered from many of the same challenges as the UNAMA Humanitarian Affairs Unit, including limited staffing and capacity, and struggled to fulfil its coordination and civil-military functions.

The new military approach also posed significant risks for aid workers and those they aimed to help. Civilians caught up in a conflict can rarely be 'bought' for the price of a school or a health centre, and attempting to do so only draws them further into the conflict. As ISAF attempted to implement COIN, focused on service delivery and engaging local populations, attacks on anyone suspected of supporting these efforts (contractors, Afghans working for the government or ISAF) increased. There is also strong evidence that insurgents increasingly came to see aid agencies as associated with the military effort.⁷

⁵ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to Congress*, 30 October 2012.

⁶ While not entirely separate from the UNAMA integrated mission, it reported both to UNAMA as well as directly to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator in a structure commonly referred to as 'one foot in, one foot out' of the integrated mission.

⁷ See A. Jackson and A. Giustozzi, *Talking to the Other Side: Humanitarian Negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan*, HPG Working Paper (London: HPG/ODI, 2012); M. Glad, *Knowledge on Fire: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan, Risks and Measures for Successful Mitigation* (Kabul: CARE/Ministry of Education/World Bank, 2009).

The most successful civil-military engagement during this period focused on civilian protection. While there had been some earlier dialogue on civilian casualties, the adoption of COIN rhetoric focused on 'protecting the population' presented a new opening. Human rights and aid actors adopted a 'strategic argumentation' approach, maintaining a position of neutrality while appealing to key tenets of COIN and shared concern over civilian harm.⁸ Evidence and data were critical to persuading military officials. Investigation and routine reporting of civilian harm by the UNAMA Human Rights Unit and Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, along with growing media attention, exerted pressure on military forces. After 2009, ISAF tightened its rules of engagement, introducing new Tactical Directives and reinforcing guidance restricting the use of force.

Civil-military engagement in the context of 'transition'

As the surge ended, attention shifted to the transition to Afghan responsibility for security. Questions remain about what will happen to PRT assets and military-led interventions once the transition is complete; long-running problems of insufficient technical capacity and oversight complicates any 'handover' to Afghan institutions, and given the poor quality or short-term nature of many of these projects, it is unclear what will be handed over at all.⁹ Afghan government and military forces have been all but absent from dialogue on civil-military issues, and attempting to establish relations with key individuals and Afghan institutions now will be challenging. While Afghan forces are unlikely to pursue the same kinds of militarised aid activities, their capacity and willingness to engage in dialogue remains unclear. Aid agencies will have to identify new strategies and means of engaging Afghan forces to ensure that they are able to operate safely and to improve protection for the populations they aim to assist.

The legacy of civil-military relations

Experiences in Afghanistan show a conflict – if not in theory, then in practice – between stabilisation and internationally recognised guidelines and principles of civil-military interaction that aim to safeguard IHL and humanitarian space. In situations where the military aggressively seeks to coopt civilians, lack of adherence to these principles is likely to be more extreme.

⁸ Advocacy was also undertaken, albeit to a lesser extent, with the insurgency.

⁹ N. Hopkins 'Afghan Schools and Clinics Built by British Military Expected to Close', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2012; SIGAR, *USAID Spent Almost \$400 Million on an Afghan Stabilization Project Despite Uncertain Results, but Has Taken Steps to Better Assess Similar Efforts*, Audit-12-8 Development, 25 April 2012.

Aid agencies also have an obligation to adhere to their own principles and ensure that their actions do not actively undermine them. Some agencies prioritised presence and funding concerns over principle, or appeared to assume that Afghanistan's post-Taliban recovery from conflict would be relatively linear and straightforward. Many rationalised their choices or sought to mitigate damage by, for example, limiting their direct contact with the military. It is unclear if this was sufficient. Working in geographic areas determined by TCN political/military interests led to the association of aid agencies with one side of the conflict. Even where agencies insisted that such programmes were based on need, and while many genuinely benefitted Afghans, aid agencies knowingly furthered the political and military objectives of one set of belligerents. This undermined their ability to advocate for truly neutral, impartial assistance with donors and eroded their adherence to the guiding principles of civil–military interaction.

Important lessons can also be drawn about the role of UN actors. UNAMA Human Rights and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) cultivated relationships with key stakeholders, received significant high-level UN support and developed a neutral position focused on the impact of the conflict on civilians. Substantial evidence was used to bring about policy change. Others were markedly less successful in influencing change, at least during the surge period. In the case of OCHA (and its predecessor, the UNAMA Humanitarian Affairs Unit), lack of support from senior UN officials, lack of capacity in terms of staffing and systems and an unclear role posed formidable challenges. The effect that the integration of OCHA under UNAMA had is debatable. Regardless of the structure of the mission, strong in-country humanitarian leadership was arguably not possible without consistent principled leadership from above and a genuine, complementary prioritisation of humanitarian concerns within UNAMA.

It appears that advocating against PRTs, stabilisation or COIN was largely ineffective. Arguments based on the perceived rights and special status of aid agencies were also largely ineffective, and often left military actors frustrated. By contrast, where dialogue was rooted in IHL and strategic argumentation, as with advocacy focused on civilian harm, which appealed to a shared interest to reduce that harm, it was markedly more

persuasive. Such engagement is complex and time-consuming, requiring a significant level of capacity that many aid agency staff simply did not have. A clear recommendation emerging from this is the urgent need to ensure that aid agency staff receive better training and preparation, particularly around IHL and the political and military contexts of the environments to which they are deployed.

NATO and TCN governments also have much to learn from experiences in Afghanistan. Implementing development interventions in areas of conflict in a partial manner, explicitly to further the chances of one side's military victory and with the involvement of armed forces, is not only dangerous for everyone involved but also often self-defeating. There is little evidence that NATO, TCNs or their donor agencies have critically examined the dangers posed by these strategies or learned from the pervasively negative experience of stabilisation in Afghanistan.

While it would be tempting to recommend that TCN governments and donor agencies conduct lessons-learned exercises with regard to stabilisation and PRT experiences, this is unlikely to have much impact. Seeking to generate more evidence on effectiveness and risks would be useful insofar as such policy decisions are based on objective evidence. In Afghanistan and other stabilisation contexts, the role of evidence in policymaking and programme design appears minimal. That said, more objective evidence on the impact of stabilisation would contribute towards a fuller understanding of the risks and limitations involved – even if such evidence is unlikely to be generated by donor governments themselves.

The legacy of international military engagement in Afghanistan for aid agencies is that military strategies have profoundly blurred the distinction between combatants and civilian aid actors in the eyes both of insurgents and of ordinary Afghans. This has contributed to negative perceptions of aid agencies and presented greater security risks for aid workers. These perceptions will endure after the departure of international forces, and will continue to present risks and challenges for aid agencies. The task of repairing the damage done to perceptions of aid actors will fall to those who remain in Afghanistan. Their ability to continue to work in the areas where there is the greatest need will rest on whether they can establish dialogue with all belligerents and restore faith in their independence and impartiality.