

PRTs – guaranteeing or undermining a secure future in Afghanistan?

by Paul O'Brien

Afghanistan may be 'the war before' but it remains a critical test case for post-11 September US foreign policy.

Despite, (or perhaps because of) worldwide attention on Iraq, the Bush Administration still needs a success story for the war on terror. Afghanistan remains their best hope. In search of a viable self-policing state and a plausible exit strategy, they look hopefully towards June 2004 – the end of the Bonn process and the date proposed for national elections – as a possible moment to declare 'success' in Afghanistan.

In April 2003 US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that military-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are the "best thing that can be done to ultimately provide security" in Afghanistan. This article argues that US policy makers are overly optimistic to think they can use the PRT model to achieve quick and cheap success in Afghanistan.

Security on the cheap?

In February 2002 the US Army initiated the first PRT in Gardez, followed soon afterwards by other US-led PRTs in Kunduz and Bamyan and a British

PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif. Germany and New Zealand are considering running PRTs in Herat and Ghazni. Each PRT has a contingent of 60-100 soldiers, civil affairs officers and aid professionals. They face different reconstruction needs and security threats. While Bamyan is relatively peaceful and well served by NGOs, the Gardez region has seen repeated military attacks by warlords and neo-Taliban and has only a limited presence of the assistance community. In Mazar-e-Sharif, feuding between militia leaders impedes reconstruction while Ismail Khan's iron grip on Herat permits reconstruction while clamping down on political freedoms.

At first glance, the PRTs appear a plausible response to Afghanistan's myriad security challenges. Their small size gives them flexibility to respond in a tailored fashion. Staffed by civil affairs officers and psychological operations experts, they are supposed to negotiate with local power brokers to expand the space in which security and reconstruction can thrive and the writ of the central

government be strengthened. They are also expected to contribute to the international war on terror by collecting intelligence about the Taliban and al-Qa'ida. Sometimes they engage in reconstruction directly. More often they contract with local business people or NGOs to do reconstruction projects. Their reconstruction budget is small but stretches well, as their human resource costs fall into military defence budgets.

Civilian assistance organisations in Afghanistan expressed scepticism soon after the US Defence Department announced the PRT concept in November 2002. In June 2003 more than 70 international relief organisations in Afghanistan publicly stated that Afghanistan is facing a security crisis and needs more international attention. Humanitarians argue that:

- the military should restrict its engagement in assistance to situations where logistical capacity or insecurity gives them unique capacity to reach people in need
- by 'blurring the lines' between the military and humanitarians they put civilian aid workers at risk and politicise, and even militarise, aid work
- PRT personnel do not have the expertise or the mandate to facilitate community-driven reconstruction
- PRTs are a waste of precious resources: it is 50 times more expensive to keep a US soldier on the ground than to pay a senior Afghan aid professional working for an NGO or the Afghan government.

Some believed that NGOs were being naïve and even territorial and that in post-conflict settings donor governments have a legitimate interest in promoting

NATO and UN officials arriving for handover of the International Security Assistance Force, Kabul, 11 August 2003



overtly political and security goals. Some NGOs in Afghanistan have struggled to make the transition from the days of humanitarian crisis when they wore their political neutrality from donors and the Taliban on their sleeves. Today, there is a functioning, quasi-legitimate government that the international community wants to strengthen. Donors like USAID want

the PRTs are powerless to intervene directly

NGOs to work hand-in-hand with the Afghan government and the US military, to wear donor political support on their sleeves and to suspend any level of disbelief that the Karzai government is not here to stay. They are being asked not just to accept the political dimensions of their work (which is fair) but to subjugate their anti-poverty missions to broader, more complex political and sometimes military goals (which may not always be either fair or smart).

Problems with the PRTs

Six months after their launch, PRTs are not only still operational but they are expanding. Despite the fact that there has been no serious impact analysis, they have, in effect, been declared a successful model by international donors. Increasingly, the criticism of the PRTs is not about **what** they are – whatever their flaws, they remain a tiny part of both the reconstruction and security equations – but about what they are **not**.

Ironically, the military seems to agree with NGOs about what they are and

are not. NGOs in Afghanistan have yet to hear a military officer describe the PRTs as an adequate international response to Afghanistan's current security needs. Even the PRTs themselves concede that their role is not to keep peace, to protect civilians, to disarm militias or intervene militarily between fighting factions. They simply do not have the resources or the

mandate to do so. While militias are growing stronger by

charging illegal taxes and customs, the PRTs are powerless to intervene directly. Neither can they prevent the dramatic post-Taliban rise in poppy cultivation and heroin production. They are unable to call on coalition forces for military back-up and operate under different chains of command that only meet at the highest levels. With less than one PRT member for every 50,000 Afghans, their mandate is restricted to negotiation, intelligence gathering, small reconstruction projects and other forms of hearts and minds work.

Apparently reconciled to the fact that the PRTs are here to stay, many NGOs now argue that they should be given a chance at success, should focus on security and should be renamed as Provincial Security/Stability Teams.

With immense pressures to deliver a cost-effective 'success' in Afghanistan, PRTs provide a useful talisman for international policy makers. Although there are fewer than 400 PRT soldiers currently operational, and additional PRTs unlikely to add more than 300 new personnel this year, policy mak-

ers can, nevertheless, talk about 'soldiers on the ground all over Afghanistan' while placating the public that they are neither spending their taxes nor risking the lives of too many troops as would be the case with a conventional large-scale peace-keeping force. They can point to how PRTs are helping not just to bring security but to rebuild Afghanistan (even though the current PRT budget is less than 1/1000th of Afghanistan's reconstruction needs).

All this hype and promotion will not be without its cost. On 11 August, NATO took over the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul (ISAF). If the PRTs did not exist, NATO might seriously consider expanding ISAF beyond Kabul; NGOs, who have long called for expansion of ISAF, still hope they will. But with the PRT success story already declared, Afghans may end up losing this critical opportunity for a more appropriately resourced international effort to provide real security for ordinary people.

Afghanistan's successful emergence from violence is under threat. Peace hinges on commitment by the international community to help fill the security vacuum. Our response will help to define the terms of international relations, not just for Afghans but for all those who live in fear of violence. They will ultimately be the real judges of Afghanistan's 'success' story.

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