

Britain and Afghanistan: policy and expectations¹

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Even a cursory reading of events in Afghanistan would reveal an undeniable sense of confusion in UK policy as each one of its primary objectives – legitimate government, stabilisation, counter-narcotics and development – is systematically challenged by events on the ground. Senior military officers are on record as saying that the war in the country is un-winnable in any conventional sense. Meanwhile, international aid organisations are caught in a quandary. On the one hand, Afghans say repeatedly that they want stability and security as a prerequisite to any sustainable recovery; on the other hand, the proximity of foreign armies compromises aid agencies' perceived neutrality, making the distinction between military and humanitarian intervention a matter solely of degree.

'Stabilisation'

The UK government has explicitly addressed the link between military and development strategy with a new paradigm – 'stabilisation'. The vision of the 'Comprehensive Approach' to Afghanistan is of a partnership between the Department for International Development (DFID), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Foreign Office to 'engage, stabilise and develop' the country in a seamless continuum ranging from 'kinetic' engagement (i.e., counter-insurgency) to Afghan-owned development.² This echoes an earlier military doctrine that recognised the interrelationship between political, military and aid efforts and sought to 'improve joined-up approaches to civilian-military planning and training'.³

¹ This briefing was published in Humanitarian Exchange, Number 43, Overseas Development Institute, London, June 2009

² Speech by International Development Secretary Douglas Alexander, 'Afghanistan: From Stabilisation to State-building', International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 17 September 2008, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/sos-afghan-statebuilding.asp>.

³ UK Ministry of Defence, 'The Comprehensive Approach', Joint Discussion Note 4/05, January 2006.

What is remarkable is how quickly this alliance between the sword and the ploughshare has evolved in UK government thinking. The international community moved from NATO-led peacekeeping to counter-insurgency in 2006, and the UK military deployed to Helmand in the south of Afghanistan. The chosen vehicle for a ‘comprehensive approach’ has been Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), piloted in Iraq. However, unlike the relatively peaceful north, where PRTs have had a degree of success, Helmand is a conflict zone. It has been difficult for aid agencies and DFID to focus on reconstruction and development when access to populations is largely determined by which areas are ‘secured’ by British and Afghan military forces. Development here requires longer timeframes and a more sophisticated form of interaction with target beneficiaries. It is also difficult to find technical experts willing to stay on the ground for any length of time in a highly volatile and dangerous environment.

The problem is complicated by the presence of two distinct foreign military forces: first, the Coalition Forces (CF) under Operation Enduring Freedom, which are on a war footing but occasionally involve themselves in humanitarian and reconstruction work, political reform, information gathering, psychological operations and special operations; and second, the NATO/ISAF operation, under a UN mandate. Both forces are in uniform and both are, irrespective of their mandates or functions, indistinguishable to the public, with the image portrayed by one inevitably affecting the degree of acceptance of the other. News spreads fast, and the bombing of civilians in the east understandably colours notions of ‘security’ offered by military forces in the south.

As a department of government, DFID is of course tied to UK foreign policy, which means that, if its role within the PRT in Helmand raises questions over ‘humanitarian space’, such a charge is misplaced. Nevertheless, the close civil–military nexus (the PRT is inside the British military camp) means that very few international NGOs are prepared to work with the PRT. At the NATO Summit in Strasbourg in April, 11 NGOs, including Oxfam, Christian Aid, Save the Children, Care and Action Aid, called for aid delivery and military goals to be de-linked. These agencies claim that the PRTs’ ‘hearts-and-minds’ approach to assistance, drawn from counter-insurgency

doctrine, 'is not only unsustainable, it is highly unlikely to achieve its intended security objectives'.⁴

(Re)building the state

The PRT concept was originally devised as an element of international military engagement outside Kabul, in support of disarmament, demobilisation and nascent reconstruction efforts.⁵ In practice, it has evolved to take on a wider range of objectives related to post-war stabilisation.⁶ Backed by a new government organisation, the inter-departmental Stabilisation Unit, the PRT in Helmand now adds state-building to its list of tasks, its mission being 'to assist the government of Afghanistan to extend its authority, in order to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operations, and through military presence, enable SSR [security sector reform] and reconstruction efforts'.⁷

State-building – and by extension state legitimacy – have been central to DFID's strategy in Afghanistan since its office opened in Kabul in late 2001. Afghanistan is a 'fragile state', one of the poorest countries in the world, and the December 2001 Bonn Agreement saw a collective determination by donors to lend maximum support to the new interim government to enable it to build authority from the centre. The UK is the third-largest development aid donor to Afghanistan (after the USA and EC), giving just over £100 million per year since 2004–2005, 80% of which is channelled through the central government.

⁴ 'Caught in the Conflict: Civilians and International Security Strategy in Afghanistan', briefing paper for the NATO Heads of State and Government Summit, Strasbourg, 3–4 April 2009.

⁵ There are currently 26 PRTs in Afghanistan. Until 2006, the UK led PRTs in Mazar-e-Sharif and Maymana, before handing these over to NATO partners. It now leads only the Helmand PRT.

⁶ 'A PRT is a civil-military institution that is able to penetrate the more unstable and insecure areas because of its military component and is able to stabilize these areas because of the combined capabilities of its diplomacy, military, and economic components'. *PRT Handbook*, Edition 2, 31 October 2006.

⁷ PRT Steering Committee, January 2005, www.isaf6.eurocorps.org.

Along with most donors, the UK government has sometimes acted as though Afghan history started in 2001. This peculiarly ahistorical notion suggests a *tabula rasa* upon which a new vision of statehood can be written. The implicit assumption is that the historical evolution of statehood can be compressed.. Thus, the UK's programme has been predicated on several assumptions:

1. That the formal political transition process would result in a stable political settlement for the country as a whole.
2. That building the state from the centre first would confer legitimacy upon it; this would then spread to provincial and local levels.
3. That the pillars of growth are the formal institutions of society (the judiciary, the legislature, banking, the private sector).⁸

Building the architecture of a viable state has meant a strong focus on technical assistance and capacity development of formal state institutions, particularly in the executive branch of government. As a consequence, relatively little attention has been paid to accountability, including the monitoring and advocacy role of civil society and other accountability mechanisms.

After 2006 the fault lines of the approach became increasingly visible. Not only was there an intensified insurgency and regrouping of the Taliban, but also the assumed privilege of the Pushtun ethnic majority reared its head as discontent over the division of political spoils among other ethnic groups after 2001 intensified. Declining confidence in President Hamid Karzai's government has raised doubts about the viability of the state-building project. Kabul-based central institutions are perceived by many as predatory and corrupt; by backing them, international donors may have inadvertently become part of the problem. Some NGOs and analysts have argued for a more limited view of what is possible at this stage – investments in provincial or district programmes may have a more direct impact on poverty reduction.

⁸ See, for example, Written Answers: Afghan DFID Assistance, 22 April 2004, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200304/ldhansrd/vo040422/text/40422w01.htm>.

A lack of shared vision

The UK government as a whole has not had a shared vision of the link between security and development. At least until mid-2007, various government departments pursued almost separate approaches towards counter-insurgency, counter-narcotics, peace-building and development – each inherently a legitimate objective, but not necessarily mutually reinforcing. The picture is further complicated by the mismatch between the policies of Afghanistan’s various donors; the UK cannot be immune from what the dominant donor in Afghanistan, the US, is doing elsewhere in the country. For example, the US military’s use of the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) – an armed but ill-trained counter-insurgency proxy force – has been piloted in Wardak Province, and is likely to be expanded. However, APPF forces may reinforce and legitimise precisely those forms of behaviour that epitomise a lawless state. Local warlords, given a cloak of authority, may conduct activities in furtherance of their own objectives or interests – for instance the production and trafficking of narcotics or seeking to gain advantage in local, tribal or ethnic conflicts and rivalries.⁹

Perhaps the greatest omission by the major donors including the UK has been the absence of a concerted effort to gauge public opinion. Only recently has the Asia Foundation begun to conduct public opinion polls on issues ranging from the military occupation to government performance.¹⁰ Local perceptions of peace operations suggest that, for some communities in Afghanistan, assistance is welcome regardless of the donor’s military identity or political objective. This may provide some comfort to those who provide humanitarian assistance in the wake of military engagement (the Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) in Helmand, for example). But in the country as a whole, the lack of good national or provincial data and security constraints on access to beneficiaries impede an accurate assessment of project progress. Moreover, as the Asia Foundation reports, the security of one’s family is the primary determinant of Afghan loyalty, and Afghans know better than anyone how inherently precarious their position is if they are seen to be too closely aligned to NATO/ISAF forces.

⁹ ‘Caught in the Conflict’.

¹⁰ Asia Foundation, *State Building, Security and Social Change in Afghanistan: Reflections on a Survey of the Afghan People*, 2008.

The fact that the survival of the Afghan state relies almost entirely on external capital and the provision of military support continues to undermine its domestic legitimacy. The dialogue between central government and the periphery is characterised by shrewd political bargaining and patronage, rather than common purpose in the pursuit of durable solutions and lasting peace. There is no easy solution, but the more UK government departments talk solely to themselves about time-bound ‘targets’, models of statehood and ‘integrated approaches’, the more difficult it will be to achieve a peaceful settlement that matches the expectations of the Afghan people. One of the reasons Afghans can be ‘hired but not bought’ is that they have an acute sense of history and of the relatively brief presence of foreigners in their country. Reflecting on the ten-year Soviet occupation of the 1980s, many Afghans know that there is nothing unique about this latest attempt to bring ‘peace and development’ to their country.

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