Provincial Reconstruction Teams
A Literature Review

BY CHRISTOFF LUEHRS

Considerable writings and testimony have been produced by the U.S. Government, nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and academia on Iraq and Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) since their inception. A review of the literature beginning in 2004 through mid-2009 reveals certain trends and broad consensus on a number of issues. The most prominent of these trends is the failure to learn the lessons throughout this period such that the challenges and gaps identified in 2004 persist into 2009. Issues identified include the need for:
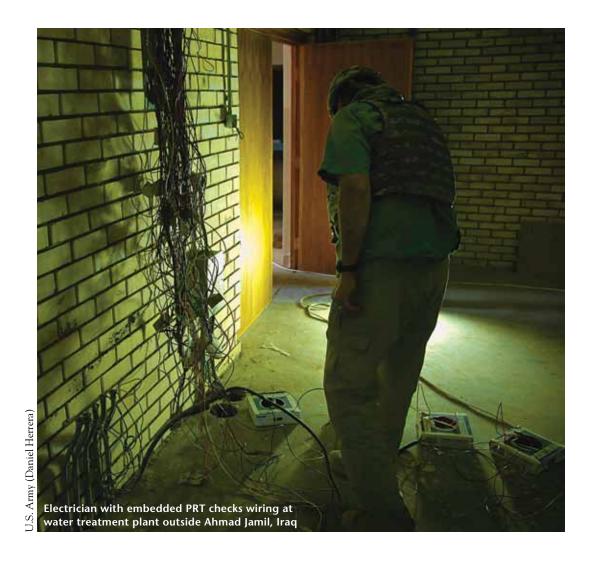
- ❖ better defined mission objectives and transition strategies
- ❖ integrated interagency training with greater input from subject matter experts
- ❖ resolution of command and control issues and "culture clash" between civilians and military, and among civilian interagency partners
- ❖ increased planning to integrate civil-military and interagency members
- ❖ streamlined and integrated funding mechanisms
- ❖ augmented host-nation involvement throughout the reconstruction and stabilization process
- ❖ continuity of human resources and enhancement of institutional knowledge retention
- ❖ coordination of and integration across the sectors and programs—breaking down stovepipes.

The list of representative documents is relatively short, as every effort has been made to present only those issues on which there appears a broad consensus, rather than going into the details of all specific recommendations that have been made to date.[1]

Mission Objectives and Strategy

At the most basic level, the various documents under review state that there is a fundamental uncertainty as to the proper concept, role, and objectives of PRTs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Basic

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Electrician with embedded PRT checks wiring at water treatment plant outside Ahmad Jamil, Iraq

questions are not settled. What is a PRT? What is it trying to achieve? How does the objective relate to an overall political purpose?

Several texts note that PRTs were originally designed in Afghanistan to deal with the "spoiler problem" by coopting and reconciling local power brokers, and that other missions such as counterinsurgency and postconflict reconstruction were added on later. Thus, the basic understanding of what a PRT should be trying to achieve and what it realistically can achieve has been in flux.[2]

Some authors stress that PRTs should be focused on security (security sector reform, intelligence, force protection), only conduct limited reconstruction, and avoid governance. In this view, PRTs can make a valuable contribution in areas where a lack of security makes "regular development work" difficult but not impossible.[3] On the other hand, the International Security Assistance Force has identified discrete lines of operation for PRTs: security, governance, enabling reconstruction, and coordinating with other actors. Beyond such broad mission statements, there is no agreement within

the U.S. Government (or between the government and its allies) on how PRTs should be organized, how they should conduct operations, or what specifically they should accomplish.[4] At the same time, no endstate has been defined at which the PRTs would be replaced by "regular development" teams, making it more difficult for personnel on the ground to balance the desire for rapid results with sustainable development and capacity-building; all too often, this results in the pursuit of "feel-good projects."[5]

Predictably, a lack of clarity on the objectives that PRTs should pursue translates into a similar state of affairs with regard to strategy. Thus, virtually all documents under review lament the lack of an overarching strategy and put forward a range of "strategic fixes" from civilianizing the PRTs across the board, to limiting their role, to "buying time" for kinetic military efforts and "development proper," to setting up in-country interagency coordinating bodies with a mandate to fit PRT efforts into broader U.S. foreign policy objectives.[6]

Interagency Command and Control Issues

Policymaking Level. This problem has been flagged without exception in all publications in the reviewed literature. There are no clear lines of authority, let alone a single chain of command, to ensure that military and civilian PRT efforts are effectively coordinated. The problem starts at the policy level and persists down to the tactical in a more or less severe form depending largely on circumstances in theater, personalities, and goodwill. As the Deputy Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction summed it up in 2007:

> On the issue of civil-military integration, the problems that we are finding are that

> there is really no permanent, predictable method of integrating decisionmaking and resource-sharing. Instead, there is a patchwork quilt of memoranda of agreements and [fragmentary orders] and military orders and cables that, all together, sort of provide the policy underpinnings that are used by PRTs.[7]

Despite efforts to remedy the situation through implementing National Security Presidential Directive 44, Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, and similar documents, this state of affairs persists as per the latest texts under review.[8]

Intra-PRT Level. At the level of individual PRTs, the literature particularly emphasizes the "clash of cultures" in addition to more

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detailed descriptions of command and control issues playing out at the tactical level.

In Afghanistan, civilian PRT members have frequently complained that they were being treated as outsiders by their numerically stronger military counterparts. This issue was being compounded by poor synchronization of tours and team deployments.[9] Beyond the (likely inevitable) persistence of unique organizational cultures, insufficient joint training and predeployment socialization exacerbate the problem and reinforce a lack of understanding of organizational cultures and modus operandi.[10] Even where functional overlap exists between military Civil Affairs units

and civilian experts, these assets are not fully integrated as teams, and may therefore end up working at cross purposes.

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Beyond the individual PRTs, there is a lack of coordination between PRT activities and Regimental Combat Team/Brigade Combat Team (BCT) efforts in Iraq, and between PRT activities and nonkinetic military efforts, as well as between other civilian efforts in Afghanistan. In Iraq, two measures were taken to mitigate the chain of command problem. The Departments of State and Defense agreed upon a Memorandum of Understanding for administrative and logistical support and for providing security. In addition, the United States established the embedded PRTs (ePRTs), which work directly for the BCT commander's staff. In Afghanistan, the problem has been addressed more recently through the establishment of the Integrated Civil-Military Action Group (ICMAG), which is intended to be the go-to problem solver for the range of interagency and civil-military issues.

Planning and Assessment

The absence of clear objectives and supporting strategies combines with interagency command and control issues to inhibit coordinated planning and sound assessments of PRT efforts.

Virtually all observers cite the lack of an overall strategic plan and resultant difficulties of joint operational planning as major obstacles to successful PRT operations.[11] As a logical corollary, U.S. agencies and PRTs often struggle to establish metrics for progress; without a plan articulating specific objectives and measures to achieve them, measuring progress becomes a haphazard endeavor.[12]

In Iraq, this issue has been addressed through the development and revision of the Office of Provincial Affairs' (OPA's) *Planning and Assessment User Guide*, which requires PRTs to draw up specific work plans, conduct assessments of their provinces of operation, and revise plans in light of their assessments. According to the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, the capacity to monitor PRT progress in Iraq is improving as a result.[13]

In the Afghan case, the literature offers numerous suggestions as to how planning and assessment can be improved. For example, the Vietnam-era Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support Hamlet Evaluation System has been held up as a model to improve the hitherto rather basic measurement tools.[14] More recently, the ICMAG has been cooperating with a Washington reach-back group to develop metrics with a view to linking the emerging assessment tools to the Afghan government.[15]

This particular "known issue" is of critical importance, especially with a view to the House Armed Services Committee's general skepticism toward various initiatives to improve assessments in the absence of statutory obligations to do so.[16]

Funding

Across the board, analyses agreed that PRT funding mechanisms are overly complex, leading to inefficiencies in the field. Many lamented that there is no "unity of funding," mirroring the lack of unity of command.[17] As

a result, projects are too often based on how funds can be spent rather than on assessment of local needs.[18] While recommendations cover a broad range, there are three elements common to all of them: there should be a single source of funding for PRTs, civilian access to funds must be improved, and functional experts need more authority over funding to ensure money is spent wisely in different functional areas.[19]

Host-nation Relationships

Throughout the literature, a lack of engagement with the host nation is cited as an impediment to PRT efforts in both theaters. Commentators agree that PRT members must "go outside the wire" and build relationships on a personal level, even—and especially—if their host-nation partners are more motivated by graft than long-term development goals and struggle with U.S. notions of budgeting and planning.[20] Some lament that the Afghan National Army has "nothing more than token involvement" with the PRTs in the form of liaison officers[21] and stress that Afghan involvement is required at all levels to avoid building a culture of dependency on PRTs.[22]

Similarly, analyses on PRTs in Iraq stress the need to engage with Iraqis at all levels from the provincial government to tribal and religious leaders, as well as ordinary citizens and civil society organizations (and to make specific, detailed "tribal engagement" or "religious engagement" plans). On the flip side, it should also be noted that the confusing PRT structure makes it more difficult for host-nation members to engage with the teams.[23]

Several publications pointed to recent developments that may be utilized to mitigate this problem, such as the Afghan National Development Strategy, Independent Directorate for Local Governance, Provincial Development Plans, National Solidarity Program, and Local Development Councils.[24]

Management

Apart from the need to engage the host nation more, the literature shows general agreement that basic management issues need to be addressed if PRTs are to be effective (once a mission/strategy has been sorted out).

While this category covers myriad observations, many of them agency-specific, broad consensus exists on two key problems: lack of continuity between rotations, and information-sharing/coordination between PRT elements. Most documents under review made the case for improved procedures to ensure continuity between PRT efforts from one rotation to the next. Many suggested that this could be best addressed by developing standard operating procedures and publishing them for OPA

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as well as each individual PRT in Iraq and to develop "desk top procedures" or "continuity books" for each section or portfolio within each PRT/ePRT in Iraq. However, it should be noted that there are limits to "fixing" this problem; there will always be a steep learning curve for newly deployed individuals, and the necessary building of relationships with key host-nation individuals will take time.[25] In the case of Afghanistan, the same problem has been framed more generally as a need to strengthen civilian management systems inside, and in support of, the PRTs.[26]

Airman deworms livestock during veterinary medical outreach conducted by Zabul PRT, Afghanistan

U.S. Air Force (Keith Brown)

Second, regarding the issue of communication, all documents lament the problem of stovepiping and describe instances in which the various elements of PRTs fail to communicate and share information with the result that they may work at cross purposes.[27] Specific issues range from a lack of joint meetings and briefings on the actual PRT[28] to breakdowns in communication between PRT members and their "home agency."

Training

Training is a concern in all surveyed documents. The topic is often discussed at great length, offering numerous detailed insights and suggestions on the specific content of various training programs and what should be dropped/added to make them more effective. All documents agree on two key points: training has to become *truly interagency* to allow military and civilian PRT members to exercise together for their deployment as well as enabling socialization and familiarization with each other's unique approaches and operating procedures; and there is a need to increase subject matter expert input into the design and execution of PRT training to ensure it is realistic and up to date.

Several suggestions were offered to make PRT training truly interagency. Some texts recommend incorporating PRT training and personnel from the Department of State's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization into joint and interagency exercises.[29] Others state more generally that some effort has to be made at standardized joint civil-military PRT training for all team members or, at a minimum, to include briefings on the roles of all team members in-theater.[30] While

the issue has persisted into the most recent documents under review, there are also signs that the problem is being addressed, specifically through Army initiatives and the incorporation of Marine Corps personnel into Foreign Service Institute training.[31]

The second point is stressed just as frequently, and a number of suggestions have been offered. The most frequent is the call to include subject matter experts in the design and execution of training to ensure training is current and realistic. Some also recommend incorporating PRT veterans. Another suggestion is to include host-nation nationals in the training process to ensure it is as realistic as possible.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that the issues and problems outlined above were identified early in the development of the PRTs. The literature from 2005 essentially focuses on the same problem set as that of early 2009. Therefore, the most important lesson may in fact be that significant improvements in any of the areas will only result if senior leadership of the relevant agencies prioritize PRTs and act on the insights and advice produced over the last 4 years. PRISM

Notes

[1] The Center for Complex Operations (CCO) reviewed some 60 documents, including academic studies and articles, official government reports, and internal surveys, reports, and PowerPoint presentations compiled by government agencies involved in PRT operations. Most of the material is publicly available and cited throughout the review. While agency-internal documents have also informed the CCO analysis, such documents are not specifically referenced.

[2] Oskari Eronen, "PRT Models in Afghanistan: Approaches to Civil-Military Integration," *Civilian Crisis Management Studies* 1, no. 5 (2008).

[3] U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2006).

[4] Robert Perito, "The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan," testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, October 17, 2007.

[5] House Armed Services Committee (HASC), *Agency Stovepipes v. Strategic Agility: Lessons We Need to Learn from Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: HASC, 2008); and Michael Hallett, "New Potentials for Provincial Reconstruction Teams," *Small Wars Journal* (2008).

[6] Eronen; USAID, 6; Nima Abbaszadeh et al., "Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons and Recommendations," Woodrow Wilson School Graduate Workshop on Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Washington, DC, 2008; United States Institute of Peace (USIP), "The Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams," USIP Oral Histories Project on Stability Operations, 2009, available at <www.usip.org/resources/oral-histories-iraq-provincial-reconstruction-teams>.

[7] Quoted in HASC.

[8] Ibid.; Abbaszadeh et al.; Perito.

[9] Carlos Hernandorena, "U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan, 2003–2006: Obstacles to Interagency Cooperation," in *The Interagency and Counterinsurgency Warfare: Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Roles*, ed. Joseph Cerami and Jay Boggs (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007).

[10] International Resources Group (IRG), *Follow Up Field Survey: Evaluation of Interagency PRT Training* (Washington, DC: IRG, 2008); USIP.

[11] Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), *Review of the Effectiveness of the Provincial Reconstruction Team Program in Iraq*, October 18, 2007; SIGIR, *Provincial Reconstruction Teams' Performance Measurement Process Has Improved*, January 28, 2009; HASC; I.D. Westerman, "Provincial Reconstruction in Afghanistan: An Examination of the Problems of Integrating the Military, Political and Development Dimensions with Reference to the U.S. Experience in Vietnam," *Small Wars Journal* exclusive, July 15, 2008.

[12] Abbaszadeh et al.; Perito; HASC; Westerman.

[13] SIGIR, *Provincial*, 15.

[14] Westerman.

[15] John E. Herbst, Prepared Statement Before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, May 19, 2009.

[16] HASC, 32.

[17] USIP; HASC.

[18] HASC.

[19] Ibid.; USAID; Hernandorena.

[20] USIP.

[21] Westerman, 21.

[22] Save the Children, *Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Humanitarian-Military Relations in Afghanistan* (London: Save the Children, 2004); HASC; Eronen; Westerman.

[23] Eronen.

[24] Save the Children; HASC; Westerman; Hallett.

[25] USIP.

[26] USAID.

[27] USIP.

[28] USAID.

[29] U.S. Joint Forces Command, "Pre-Doctrinal Research White Paper: Provincial Reconstruction Teams," November 27, 2007.

[30] Abbaszadeh et al.; IRG; USAID; Hernandorena.

[31] HASC.