HPG and BAAG dialogue: Civil–military relations in Afghanistan, 2001 to transition

This closed roundtable on civil–military relations in Afghanistan was co-hosted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG). It aimed to bring together military, political and humanitarian/non-governmental (NGO) actors to reflect on what lessons could be learned with regards to civilian–military relations after over a decade of dialogue in Afghanistan. Comments were also gathered from civil society groups in Afghanistan and where relevant incorporated into this summary.

The last decade has been particularly challenging for civilian–military dialogue. The experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq, where military actors assumed a greater burden of reconstruction and development activities, have tested both military actors’ and civilian agencies’ willingness and ability to constructively engage. While at times the relationship between civilian and military actors has been productive, the pursuit of ‘hearts and minds’, counter-insurgency and stabilisation strategies has often created tension and strained relations.

Reflecting on a decade of civil–military dialogue

The discussion on civil–military dialogue and the lessons that could be learned from past practices was foregrounded in a discussion about the degree to which individual actors experiences have varied highly and have been fragmented. Military strategy has shifted significantly over time, as have troop levels; Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) led by different nations have engaged in different activities and approaches across provinces; and security and other conditions have varied greatly across space and time.

A large part of the discussion focused on the early years (2001–2003) of the international intervention, and on examining how PRTs evolved. One participant highlighted that the US predecessor to PRTs, Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLCs) had incorporated a focus on protection issues, which had been factored into the operations of the initial NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (for example, in targeting airstrikes during 2001). The aim of the CHLCs was to facilitate and coordinate the delivery of humanitarian aid between military and humanitarian actors, to ensure that military operations did not interfere with humanitarian delivery and to implement small projects.

It was noted that, during the early years of the PRTs, there was a modicum of security and a sense that there was space for both aid agencies and PRTs to work. PRTs were envisaged as complementing aid agencies by reaching areas that were considered too dangerous for aid agencies to access. These PRTs comprised combat personnel with little training in development and relief, civilian staff often with diplomatic backgrounds and non-combat military personnel, such as engineers. They were seen as supporting structures in the expansion of the role of the government, and temporary in nature. Transition plans drawn up as early as 2004 envisaged PRTs being phased out by 2006.

Aid agencies expressed concerns about this model from the outset. Participants agreed that, from the initiation of the PRTs in 2003, there was a lack of clarity about their mandate, command structure and function, and dialogue with aid actors was often strained. Participants highlighted that concerns initially focused on whether military involvement in relief and development activities would erode the distinction between civilian aid actors and the military, presenting potential risks to aid workers, as well as concerns about the lack of capacity within PRTs to implement projects.
Participants also pointed out that poor monitoring and evaluation of PRTs meant that they had little sustainability. Participants discussed incidents where military forces had occupied medical facilities and expired or unsuitable items were distributed, showing poor understanding of both the local context and of good aid practices on the part of military actors. Military actors often failed to sufficiently involve communities, and where they did so they required them to contribute towards projects, raising concerns about sustainability and the creation of a culture of dependency. Participants said that PRTs undermined the autonomy of aid agencies, and that military personnel did not understand the role, objectives and mandate of aid agencies.

In 2005 military-led stabilisation was adopted by ISAF and PRTs became more focused on ‘development’ (as opposed to infrastructure projects). The subsequent increase in funding for PRTs and their expansion (by the end of 2008 28 PRTs led by 13 countries had been established), coupled with a counter-insurgency strategy from 2009 onwards, led to an increase in tension between NGOs and military actors. Each country had its own model and approach, meaning coordination and dialogue between aid agencies and PRTs declined further.

ISAF’s new military strategy led to an increase in troop levels and a dramatic increase in the amount of money spent through PRTs. There was great pressure on PRTs to spend money quickly, resulting in poor accountability and high levels of corruption. An audit of a DAI project, for instance, found poor standards of accountability, wasted resources and a rush to implement projects without a proper understanding of the needs of the intended recipients. Participants also noted that the stabilisation strategy was not supported by rigorous evidence, and contained fundamental contradictions. While participants pointed out that many Afghan civilians welcomed PRTs initially, their behaviour was often seen as contradictory. Examples included individuals and communities accepting goods and projects from ISAF and ISAF-funded programmes while simultaneously supporting the insurgency (or at least enabling it, in order to ensure their own safety). Whatever goodwill existed appeared to fade over time. Insecure areas received significantly higher PRT budget allocations and generally higher levels of development aid, creating the perception amongst Afghans that the international community was more concerned with insecurity, and populations in insecure areas, than with democracy and human rights, especially in areas where the insurgency was not present.

While acknowledging these shortcomings, many participants felt that some improvements were made and that lessons had been learnt over time. All participants emphasised the need to better understand local history, to integrate lessons learnt into the design and implementation of programmes and to retain a more nuanced and functional institutional memory. Many felt that stabilisation in general had been marked by an obsession with ‘building things’, and the lack of evidence as to what works was a broader problem not exclusive to the Afghanistan context.

Participants also debated the ways in which aid agencies’ own actions may have contributed to the erosion of humanitarian space. The practice of agencies accepting money from PRTs or from donors with troops on the ground was seen by some as undermining the credibility of aid agencies and reducing the force of their criticism of military activities. Others felt that, even when agencies had accepted money from donors with troops on the ground, they had been successful in maintaining perceptions of their neutrality and independence. They also highlighted the dilemmas such agencies faced in deciding whether to accept such money for programming when they felt that it would improve the lives of Afghans. The fragmentation and lack of coordination in the PRT approach was also echoed in the humanitarian and development sector, and a lack of unity and infighting between aid agencies prevented the development of a coherent approach to the military. The range of competing and contradictory opinions amongst aid agencies was seen as overwhelming and confusing by military officials.

This roundtable was held on 29 May 2013 at the Overseas Development Institute, London.
Many participants also felt that there had been a lack of humanitarian leadership from the UN, and that humanitarian concerns were seen as subordinate to military ones. The UN had to be viewed as the sum of the interests of its member states – many of which had troops in Afghanistan, and thus their military and political interests were at play in Afghanistan. It was however noted that the UN – most notably the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – was neither given the resources nor enabled by member states to effectively coordinate relief or civil–military dialogue. This was reiterated by contributors, who argued that high-level support would have been required to allow the UN to take a leading role in humanitarian and development affairs. The necessary political will to support the UN in such a role was absent.

Faced with increasing insecurity and fearing that their perceived neutrality and independence would be lost, aid agencies withdrew from civil–military dialogue and pulled away from the UN. Where civil–military dialogue was successful, it occurred at senior levels between high-ranking ISAF officials and country directors of aid agencies. It was argued that low-level discussion produced little result.

Participants raised other criticisms as well. Many felt that civil–military dialogue efforts should have included more Afghan NGOs. The lack of engagement with Afghan forces was also highlighted, although some expressed fears that Afghan NGOs or Afghan staff working for international NGOs may have been less willing to engage with Afghan security forces for fear of punishment or retribution. One discussant felt that the fragmented chain of command in the Afghan security forces and an operating culture in which information and commands were often circulated across – as opposed to down – the military hierarchy posed significant challenges to such interaction.

Civil–military dialogue on protection was judged by the roundtable as being more effective than efforts to influence PRT development work. One reason lay in the shared interest of military actors and aid agencies in protecting civilians. However, other reasons for the success of dialogue were the fact that it did not take place on ideological terms but was firmly grounded on accepted norms and International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The greater emphasis on counter-terrorism activities, often conducted with suspect intelligence, that accompanied the troop surge was seen by some participants to be at odds with the ISAF’s rhetoric of protection.

**Lessons learned and implications for the future**

There was general consensus that military actors were aware of the shortcomings of stabilisation approaches and that significant changes had been made in training to better equip the military to function in future stabilisation missions. The lesson-learning exercises conducted by the military were seen as important by participants, but concerns were expressed that they would not have a significant impact on practice. The role of civilian engagement in discussions on military doctrine was put forward as a means of potentially influencing practice, as was engagement with stabilisation units established within national governments. Some units are actively seeking to adapt strategies and approaches based on lessons from Afghanistan, and aid agencies should try to inform these discussions. Aid agencies were encouraged to engage with the military in rewriting military doctrine and in troop training, both during pre-deployment and while in theatre.

There was also much discussion of civil–military coordination with regard to the transition to Afghan control for security and the drawdown of foreign combat forces. One clear problem was the lack of coordination in transition planning. Despite attempts to produce greater coordination, ISAF troop-contributing countries appeared to have divergent transition plans and did not appear to be effectively coordinating with one another or communicating their plans to external actors, including aid agencies. There was also some concern that PRTs had raised the expectations of nearby
communities – expectations which the Afghan national security forces do not have the resources to meet – and that this will negatively affect perceptions of Afghan forces when they assume responsibility for security.

Given the perceived lack of capacity of Afghan forces and the lack of clarity as to what the security situation will look like in 2014 and beyond, some questioned the usefulness of direct engagement between aid agencies and Afghan forces. However, participants identified specific gaps and areas that would require long-term follow-up between aid agencies and Afghan security forces after the security transition.

Participants agreed that enhancing respect for IHL would continue to require engagement. Afghan institutions would require support from national military actors with a clear understanding of IHL. Detention was highlighted as a concern, particularly the lack of a clear legal framework for the handover of detainees from ISAF to the relevant Afghan authorities. Transfer of detainees should be accompanied by pre-transfer safeguards and post-transfer monitoring. Medical facilities should be handed over with enough support to ensure that there was no loss of quality in these services. In order to facilitate this, participants noted that the legal status of detainees needed to be clarified and that best practices present in ISAF detention should be adopted by the Afghan government.

Investigation of civilian casualties and compensation procedures also require attention. ISAF has established fairly sophisticated procedures to monitor civilian casualties and policies around compensation or _solatia_. Yet similar procedures within Afghan structures are lacking. The handling of human remains, medical assistance to all wounded combatants regardless of allegiance and revising tactical directives to reduce civilian casualties were highlighted.

Throughout the discussion, participants lamented the unrealistic timeframes and goals that marked military and civilian interventions in Afghanistan. With regard to transition, participants felt that the process should have been driven by realities on the ground, not political expediency. The importance of evidenced-based decision-making was highlighted with regard to stabilisation, and participants agreed on the need to gather more evidence on the impact of stabilisation to inform future policies in other contexts.