

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #10

Executive Summary

As the liaison officer between the coalition forces and the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the interviewee (an Army reserve Colonel) has a unique perspective on the functioning of the PRTs. Of the many functions, which PRTs perform, he stresses their humanitarian work as a tool to extend the reach of the central government. He has direct experience in seeking to refute the view held by many humanitarian NGOs and some UN personnel that military individuals should not be providing humanitarian assistance. However, he stresses that most UN executives are now very positive about the work of the PRTs, even though approximately one year ago, before he went to Afghanistan, during his consultations with UN officials, he found adamant resistance against the PRT concept. The interviewee opines that this shift in opinion is the result of the success of the PRTs.

The importance of the PRT members as mentors is one role that the interviewee underscores. He states baldly that things are being accomplished in Afghanistan only with U.S. leadership or financial backing. In addition, he describes how PRTs have become more adept at coordinating goals with NGOs in order to avoid overlapping. They have also learned to build-in sustainability to avoid, for example, building a school without ensuring a revenue stream for maintenance, teachers' salaries, books and supplies. In contrasting the success of the U.S. PRTs with the ISAF PRTs, he suggests that the latter have been less willing to cooperate with local entities to strengthen local government institutions, and that some of these PRTs labor under "national caveats" which hinder their effectiveness.

Finally, in terms of useful skills for someone in his position to have, he stresses that his background in business, having learned that to get things done you rely on personal, not hierarchical, relationships has been key to his success. He also credits his West Point training and six years of active duty as helpful preparation, but less important than his considerable business experience in both startups and large companies.

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Interviewed by: Barbara Nielsen
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Q: You're a member of the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan. Is that right?

A: I'm actually the coalition liaison officer to UNAMA.

Q: Okay.

A: So, I work on General Eikenberry's staff and I'm the primary point of contact with the UN in Kabul with UNAMA, which is the United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan.

I'm the liaison officer between the coalition forces and the UN. There are two types of international military forces here. You've got ISAF, which is under a UN mandate as well as the coalition forces, which is not under UN mandate.

Q: So you're part of the coalition forces, not under the UN mandate, but what is your specific mission?

A: My specific mission is to be the primary interface between the executives of the UN, of UNAMA and the coalition and to address any and all issues that either parties have, the coalition or UNAMA and bring the proper players together to either resolve or begin addressing whatever the issue is.

Q: Okay and how does this relate to the provincial reconstruction teams? I know that several people that I have spoken to have mentioned that they've worked with UNAMA as PRT members, but from your vantagepoint, how do you interact with PRTs?

A: Well, under the Bond mandate, the UN is here to get the government up and operational. I think there are five pillars that are part of that Bond mandate which is getting the government operational through elections, army reform, as well as police reform, judicial reform, and reconstruction and counter narcotics could be the other one. Out of those Bond mandate issues, PRTs are a solution or a partial solution to work with the government to get them established in certain areas. What PRTs are doing is they are providing a presence, which happens to be a military presence, to be able to provide humanitarian assistance in areas and in some cases in areas that humanitarian workers can't work in because of the security situation.

Q: You mentioned providing humanitarian assistance. Other PRT folks have said that they have a mandate similar to the five pillars that you enumerated, which makes sense. The emphasis that you just mentioned was on humanitarian assistance, is that right?

A: I really can't say it's humanitarian assistance, but the UN folks would look at it and probably say it's more humanitarian assistance than other things, but it's to get the government up and operational and we use that as a mechanism to do so. Let me just start. I've been here a year. A year ago I came and before I came I spent three days in New York talking with pretty senior folks at the UN and I also spent a couple of days at the State Department. At that point the UN -- and I think we probably had four PRTs in place then, maybe six or eight, I'm not sure, but it was just a new concept. At that time the UN folks were very adamantly against the military putting in PRTs. The belief was and I can't remember exactly where it was, but the belief was the U.S. is not good at doing that. It's not their role. It's what the UN should be doing. On the counterside you look at it and okay, show me where the UN has done a good job of doing reconstruction in turning around a country? The track record really hasn't been very good. If you look back over maybe the last 60 years or so, the only track record that seems to be good of establishing countries happens to be Japan, Germany, maybe Korea. So, they view that this is our job, this is our role and from a pure UN or humanitarian perspective, only humanitarian actors and humanitarian players should be providing humanitarian assistance. Military folks should only be providing security and provide security for humanitarian players to do that. I think there's also the perception that the military presence then blurs the lines between what humanitarian efforts should be and it could potentially put those folks at risk. Those were major themes that came out last year. I think over the last year a lot of that has died down for a number of reasons. I think probably the most important is that PRTs have been relatively successful, especially the U.S. PRTs. The U.S. PRTs have worked in alignment with the local government and it really probably depended on the quality of the local governors and the provincial folks that are there: if they are literate (not all of them are), if they have any type of management skills (and many of them don't), that they are able to work in conjunction with our PRTs in a mentoring type role. In areas that they don't have that type of mentoring role, where -- and I'm talking speculation-- some of the governors are criminals and have connections with drug factions, etc., then their instincts and the decisions they make are contrary to what's good for good governance. So, there's still a lot of corruption that's here and what PRTs do is to create a base of stability and a presence.

There's a view from UN people, and I can't say this is a full view, but there is a view from some UN people that PRTs should be providing security. PRTs - at least U.S. PRTs- do not provide security. What PRTs do provide is they have force protection folks that provide security for the actual PRT and the PRT workers and when they go out, but they are not there to provide security within the region. They're not providing combat; they're not doing any combat operations.

Q: Let me pick up on some of the things that you've mentioned. You've been in

Afghanistan a year and you've actually been able to visit different PRTs and you said that some of them are relatively successful in doing what they're assigned to do, depending on the skills of the local government officials. Could you give some examples to flesh that out a little bit of where you think the efforts have been successful?

A: I think there has been more success with the U.S. PRTs than there has been with ISAF PRTs. The ISAF PRTs have been constrained by national caveats. They've also been constrained probably by financial resources to provide CERP funds or any kind of funds for local types of projects whereas the U.S. PRTs are pretty much tied to the priorities of the province. Some of the things that I hear from the UN specifically is that ISAF PRTs are actually undermining efforts. I heard this from the special representative to the secretary general to the ESRG, specifically saying that because of how they are operating, certain ISAF PRTs are not supporting the government because they're their own separate entity and they're not working in cooperation to build the local governments and infrastructure. I think essentially the end game is that we civilianize or turn these over to the local government, the Afghan government and then we can lessen our presence in these things.

Q: How many ISAF PRTs are there?

A: I think out of the ... are there 24 or 26 right now? I think 19 are U.S. or have been U.S. so there are probably six to eight that are ISAF.

Q: You mentioned that the special representative believes that the ones that are ISAF are not functioning as they were intended.

A: Well, I think part of the problem is, when we were garnering support for other countries to come into Afghanistan, we being the coalition or UN, you just wanted people, countries to show up. As a result they may have established the national caveats that were appropriate in December of 2002 that may no longer be appropriate now.

Q: That makes sense.

A: At that point, say the Germans wanted to come in; I think they accepted anybody to come in at any time, but now things have changed and there are steps being taken to eliminate the national caveats. I think there needs to be an order, there needs to be a standard across the entire footprint that there isn't a difference in how the people are going to be operating or the different countries are going to be operating.

Q: That makes sense obviously and is that a goal that you're working toward or have many of those compatibility questions been sorted out by now or just what is the process?

A: It's a major problem. It's mostly an ISAF problem.

Q: You mentioned civilianizing the PRTs, which I guess long term would apply to all of them, the U.S. PRTs and the ISAF PRTs. How would you describe the status of that

process?

A: I can't really describe it. I would think that it is probably going to happen, but that will take some time and I mean it will be more turning over to the Afghan government because that type of work is stuff that they need to do. I don't know what the timeline is on that.

Q: Is it pretty far in the future anyway?

A: I would think so.

Q: On a day to day basis, do you have to travel frequently to visit the PRTs or are you spending your time largely in meetings where you're discussing with the UN and with the different forces there.

A: I spend 100% of my time interfacing with the UN on a myriad of issues, some of which include PRTs.

Q: Okay. I see. What would you estimate is the amount of time that you devote to PRT related issues?

A: Maybe 10%. I mean there are other people that are dedicated full time doing that.

Q: That's part of your portfolio, but obviously not the main part and when you are coordinating with the PRT commanders, how easy is it to serve as a liaison with them?

A: I do not have any direct relationship with PRT commanders. I work at the CFC (Combined Forces Command) level and the PRT commanders are two levels below. It would be the equivalent of the Pentagon communicating with CENTCOM, where you've got the Department of the Army and then CENTCOM.

Q: Yes, the CFC stands for?

A: Combined Forces Command Afghanistan, CFCA. The way it's structured is you have CFCA which goes down to Task Force 76, CJ (Combined Joint) Task Force 76 and then under Task Force 76 there are three other task forces. I think they are Longhorn, Thunder and Bronco. The PRTs are under those three task forces as part of those regional commands. From a chain of command standpoint, I do not interface directly with the PRTs or the PRT commanders other than possibly going to a PRT commanders' conference. That happens quarterly, more or less. I do interface with the CFC C9 or Civil Affairs Organization and do interface at times with the Task Force 76 C9 personnel, but that would be maybe on a once a week basis, at least with the 76 folks. It just depends. It depends on what issues are coming up. Essentially what I do if it's a hot issue, I work the issue to make sure that it is resolved, get the right players involved and then step back and only get engaged if it's got strategic importance or if it tactically hasn't been resolved.

Q: I see, and where are you physically located?

A: At Camp Eggers at Kabul Compound , which is right across from one of the main headquarters of the UN here.

Q: You're able to do your liaison meetings from your locale? You don't particularly have to travel outside of the Kabul area?

A: Right. I spend most of my time on the UN compounds in Kabul.

Q: You described historically the attitude of the UN toward the PRTs and then over the last year that the view has changed. What kinds of evidence do you have for that or how can you measure the change that you believe has taken place?

A: I think one of the first measures is that they've grown from four to 19. I think that there are a number of success stories on what has happened. I don't know the details on it, but I'm sure the PRT folks can talk about it specifically, such as reinforcing or assisting, mentoring local government to do certain things in areas. I don't know what the measure of effectiveness is on these things, but I also know it's been tied in very closely to national priority programs. I know that there is a significant amount of work to interface with not just the government, but with NGOs and to ensure that similar projects were not being completed. A year ago I do remember hearing that wells, which are a quick impact project for most of the PRTs-- what they like to do is a quick impact project. Wells was one where you go and drill a well. Well, if you drill too many wells in a certain area, they dry up and it is not helpful. The issue of building a school. If there is no sustainable revenue or any income stream or cash flow to be able to provide for teachers and schools and books and that kind of stuff, it doesn't help to build that school: so you built the building and there's nothing there. It kind of degrades. A lot of the sustainability issues seem to be built into these projects now, versus formerly it was just making it happen. There appeared to be a lot more conflict of goals before, and now they're in a much more aligned state with other players, so if you're building a clinic, they're ensuring that there isn't an NGO or an IO that's putting a clinic in the same general vicinity.

Q: That certainly is good news. I've heard that now there is more coordination with the NGOs and with international organizations so that there isn't so much overlap in your immediate objectives. You're basically confirming that observation.

A: Yes. I think the other thing --and this may seem like its American centric, but-- nothing is really happening in Afghanistan without the backbone or the infrastructure of Americans doing things. Any of the pillars that have been either successful or have made to work have relied on either U.S. dollars or U.S. dollars in power to be able to make things happen. The whole mentorship aspect of what the PRTs are doing with local people is huge. You're dealing with an environment here that is incredibly backward. The education level is distressing. Just the common things that you would think that you

take for granted, you can't take for granted here. It's almost like individual stepping stones and building blocks have to be built, created and you have to show the basics in many of these things, from filing systems to putting paper into a computer printer, because if you don't put paper into it, you know, it doesn't work.

Q: The U.S. is able to provide this mentoring because there is such a large number of U.S. personnel and such a large infusion of money and resources?

A: I think the money is staggering, but that's beside the point. I think it's commitment. I think we see it as pretty much the way that it has worked well with the ANA and it's just about the only thing that needs to happen. It's almost like having a den mother or grownup leadership that's providing direction. With 30 years of civil war or conflict with the Russians, the people that had the education just left. You've got some of those folks that are coming back, but there are a lot of people who aren't. You just don't have the intellectual capacity or the civil administration capabilities that you would expect in just about any place.

Q: You mentioned the ANA (Afghan National Army) and the success of rebuilding or building that force. Did that have PRT involvement or UN involvement or both?

A: No UN involvement. PRT involvement would be next to none other than maybe some peripheral insight into the development of training centers and areas that may be close to PRTs. I don't know. I'm sure there might be some interface, but for the most part I think that was outside the scope of the PRTs. I'm sure there was some natural overlap with the folks in OMCALPHA (as transcribed) who would reach out to the PRTs just to get some situational awareness in areas, but other than that, I don't think so.

Q: The question always arises regarding the many mandates that the PRTs have, i.e. promoting democracy and local government, economic reconstruction and development, promoting legal institutions, functioning prisons, training Afghan police and lastly, providing security. I know you began by saying that the PRTs don't provide security except for their own forces. Of all of those mandates, from your observation which do you think is best suited to the PRT structure and why would that be?

A: I didn't realize that was what their mandates were. It makes sense. I think the one that by de facto is probably the easiest for them to do is to provide security because it provides an international presence in an area that in some cases is like the wild, wild West, where they don't have anything. Probably that is the most successful thing that they've done; by having a presence in an area, it creates a buffer of security. All those other items I think are going to be completely dependent on two things: first of all, the quality of the leadership within the PRT as well as the quality of the personalities in the local areas and their relationships. What I have found in Afghanistan is that the relationships are what makes the difference. What doesn't make a difference is rank. In bureaucracy type things more is done through developing a very sound footprint of being able to work with the local folks. I think, especially if it's a strong relationship, having it last as long as possible is better than frequent turnover. This environment is not a simple

environment and anyone that is interfacing with the Afghans should be at least on a year tour. Anything less than that is probably not very effective. The reason I say that is it takes, it's such a unique environment, it takes longer than normal to get up to speed and I think if you look at what happened between ISAF and the coalition, ISAF being on a six month rotation, it takes too much to figure out what the job is. Then they work for two months and then they're getting ready to get out of there for two months. You've got effectively four out of twelve months of real work being done. It would be better to have eight out of twelve months where you're actively engaged.

Q: Sure, and now your own experience, you said you've been there a year. Is that right?

A: Yes.

Q: How long are you planning to be there?

A: I'm rotating out effective Saturday.

Q: Were there some factors in your background and experience that prepared you well for your assignment?

A: Well, I went to West Point. I spent six years on active duty. I was a reservist and essentially was out of the army for 20 years. I did liaison work for West Point, but I had taken a company public. I ran operations for two dot-com companies and I'm currently an (company name) consultant, so although I've been in the military for 27 years, I'm more of a businessman and I look at it from a business perspective and look at client relationships, which I think has enabled me to be very effective in this job, where I didn't have a narrow military focus. I've also had a pretty broad background in the military and in multiple sectors of business from start-ups to large companies, small companies as well as different functional areas within operations marketing, so I've seen just about everything. I think that has all been very helpful.

Q: You mentioned that building relationships is what helps you get things done and it sounds like as a business person those same skills helped you accomplish what you did in your business life; am I making a correct analogy?

A: Oh, exactly. It's a skill that is pretty tough to do in the military. On the other hand, a lot of the reservists that are in civil affairs, neither their credibility nor their skill set has been the highest of what I've seen.

Q: Now why is that? Since they're reservists, they could bring the same kinds of background that you did.

A: It's probably a stereotype. It's probably a bad stereotype, but it's also a reflection of maybe the types of individuals that they're looking to put into those jobs, both the Army and the reserves.

Q: I would like to ask what you have observed about attitudes of the local population to the presence of the PRTs?

A: Everything that I've seen from the local population to the PRTs has been very positive. I think they are appreciative of the support. I think they're appreciative of the influence that is there and they're also appreciative of the stability that provides. The locals are tired of war. They're tired of conflict. They're looking for some stability and there is nothing better than having this type of presence that is providing guidance, assistance and some financial benefit to making those things happen. So, as far as I'm concerned, I haven't seen anything that's negative from the local people. I know from theoretical standpoints of say certain UN or certain NGOs, people that have a strong humanitarian background, they're vehemently opposed to it. They just don't get it here in Afghanistan. I think there was a time and it was a long time where if you wore a UN badge or you wore an NGO emblem or a Red Cross emblem, you were protected; however, with the situation in the world now and with terrorism, with the attitude those folks have of making a quick impact by going after the soft targets, because they can't go against traditional military forces, the humanitarian UN/NGO people are now at risk. [The terrorists know] if they go against us we're going to wipe them out, simple as that. They look for the indirect attack and that's typically what happens in a counter insurgency type of war, which we're currently in.

Q: The UN folks have come to understand that to some degree, although initially that probably wasn't intuitive for them?

A: I think they're getting it better now, but it's almost like a religion where they are vehemently opposed to it.

Q: I think that probably characterizes it and your job has been to help them evolve in their attitude; is that fair to say?

A: Yes. I would have to say for the most part UNAMA executives have been very supportive of the whole PRT concept; in fact, I know they have been. There may be some of the staff in some of the other organizations that are say out of Geneva that have different viewpoints because it goes against their mandate or their upbringing. PRTs are something that are in alignment with the Bonn mandate in my opinion and going in the exact same direction that is needed to get this country up and operational.

Q: So, you're looking forward.

A: Let me do this, if you need to get a hold of me in the future, I can give you my e-mail account since I'm going to be rolling out of here.

[END TAPE]

[END INTERVIEW]