



A young Afghan girl waits to receive a blanket from Afghan National Police during an ISAF reconstruction team visit to an orphanage in Khost City.

MASTER SGT. MATTHEW LOHR/U.S. AIR FORCE

Lessons FROM AFGHANISTAN

*Adherence to key principles can aid stabilization
and reconstruction operations*

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The ever increasing pace of change in the world is not only producing shifts at the strategic level but also has the potential to impact our human domestic environment more and more directly. The challenges we face on the world stage intermingle and overlap, generating composite risks whose implications and effects are not always easy to understand and foresee. The stakes are raised ever higher as increasingly parsimonious budgetary policies have become the norm and national policymakers' agendas have been increasingly overtaken by domestic priorities. To play a relevant role on the world stage, a nation must thoroughly rethink its approach and reconsider the instruments available for external action. There is an urgent need to reassess and modernize some of the major pillars of traditional foreign action, especially in the area of civilian crisis management.

As we are all aware, nowhere has the interdependency between NATO member countries' defense and global security trends been more clearly highlighted and the solution more plainly acknowledged than in the Afghan theater of operations. As stated in the declaration by the heads of state and government of nations contributing to the UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan issued at the Lisbon Summit: "Afghanistan's security and stability are directly linked with our own security." The declaration emphasizes the essential role of civilian power, stating that "success cannot be achieved by military means alone" and "increased coordination among key international stakeholders in Afghanistan, working in a comprehensive approach involving both civilian and military actors" is to be pursued. More recently, at the Chicago Summit, the Allies acknowledged that "a number of vulnerable, weak or failing states, together with the growing capabilities of non-state actors, will continue to be a source of instability and potential conflict" while, at the same time, reaffirmed their commitment to support Afghanistan in its Transformation Decade beyond 2014.

The Afghan experience provides us with empirical arguments for asserting that one of the essential tools of any relevant foreign action today is the capacity to run successful

conflict prevention, stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction operations. There are two major reasons why this emerging toolkit for external action is increasingly gaining prominence. First, the epicenters of most of the major security challenges we face today are to be found within fractured societies or failing states, and the only adequate remedy is to deal with the root causes of these failures comprehensively. Faced with most of today's conflicts, the military can deliver quick solutions in a short time, but the military is not designed to deal with the diffuse and sensitive nature of the sources of most crises. Additionally, domestic public opinion will not support an exclusively military resolution. Therefore, to achieve credible, equitable and sustainable results, we must lean more and more on diplomacy and development aid. Second, civilian crisis management stands out because the capacity for conflict prevention, stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction may be the best force multiplier there is in any soft power tool kit. One can hardly think of a more effective way of using the resources at our disposal than the ability to stabilize and prevent a crisis from breaking out. Thus "smart power" has become the name of the game, and conflict resolution has become one of the main drivers for streamlining and reforming modern diplomacy.

International efforts at reconstruction, particularly post-conflict reconstruction, are not, however, an invention of our age. An outstanding earlier example is the Marshall Plan, the post-World War II program that helped rebuild Western Europe. By laying the groundwork for sustainable structural and economic recovery within a secure political architecture based on democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights, the Marshall Plan is arguably the most successful reconstruction operation in modern history. With such an illustrious success in our not so distant history, it would appear that Europe has a ready-made blueprint for any post-conflict situation. Although this approach might seem to be the answer, it only fits the patterns of previous crises, while the questions have, in the meantime, almost completely changed. More recent cases, from the Balkans to Afghanistan, have shown that local culture and history,

economic trends and, most importantly, increasing interdependencies and the networking of our globalized world are examples of variables that must be factored in when searching for a solution to a crisis. There is no “one size fits all” answer, and the key to success is to keep an open mind, constantly questioning one’s own conceptual status quo and expressing a willingness to change course at any time.

Given the ongoing nature of such efforts, the domestic political implications for all involved, the investments in material resources required, the length of time dedicated, and the uncontroversial and worldwide accepted end-goals of international stabilization and reconstruction efforts, Afghanistan is a most appropriate case study for trying to identify challenges and lessons relevant to other stability and reconstruction operations of our age.

Before getting to strategic and operational considerations, one last jab at the conceptual framework: the need to dispel the myth of military primacy. While “the cavalry” will probably always get the headlines (military deployments get most media coverage and excite public interest) it is this author’s opinion that civilian assets are best positioned to mitigate post-conflict challenges. Despite the dominant narrative, it is the bland and inconspicuous civilian functionaries who are almost always the first in and last out. Diplomats and consular officers, international organizations’ representatives, businessmen and NGO activists are the first to enter the theater after a crisis (that is, if they ever left) and they continue to be present and engaged long after the media and political decision-makers have lost interest in that story. More than just being present, by being more flexible and responsive to local nuances they are better positioned to observe and act without creating unintended consequences or offending the locals.

OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Several crosscutting benchmarks can be taken into consideration when conducting operations. These relate to diplomatic engagement, crisis communication, team security and the legal “compass.” All of these are useful, but none is perfect:

Diplomatic engagement: Regardless of the intensity of the crisis, moral controversies, legal challenges or logistical difficulties, as long as a reconstruction team is deployed in a theater, it and/or the diplomatic representatives of the state or organization for which it acts should try to engage fully with as many actors in that environment as possible. It is of paramount importance to understand their capabilities and communicate them to the decision-makers back in the national capital as early as possible because this is key to the mission’s crisis contingency planning.

Crisis and strategic communications: In coordination with the operational headquarters, a strategic communications plan targeting host nation, international, and contributor state based audiences should be developed. All involved need to understand the scope and limitations of the kinds of assistance that can be provided and ensure that commitments can be met. Managing the expectations of both the

recipient of assistance and the contributor plays a pivotal role in the mission, as both can veto the end-goal of the operation, and, ultimately, determine how success is defined.

Taking care of the team: The mission’s staff can also be victims, and security is the top priority. Flexibility in deployment is a virtue in itself and reconstruction teams must always be ready for draw downs and evacuations. It is important that leadership understand the full range of options available when operating in what might be an extremely sensitive environment. (In Afghanistan, this has amply been illustrated by the murder of eight UN personnel in Mazar-i-Sharif in April 2011 or the dozens of casualties recorded in nationwide riots in early 2011, both instances triggered by the unpredictable circumstances of alleged Quran desecration.) When considering authorized or ordered departure, one must also ponder what would constitute realistic and attainable reverse tripwires for returning the mission to normal status. Being part of a network, teams should always be attuned to changing circumstances in neighboring areas as they may be summoned to support evacuees, operations, rescue efforts or humanitarian assistance.

Clear enunciation of legal (and moral) benchmarks: In the long term, it is almost always counterproductive to let a pseudo-pragmatic, Machiavellian and lawless approach take over the agenda. Despite short-term setbacks, the typical engagement should have a predictable, law-based vision that will ensure that the overall operational narrative keeps the moral high ground.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

While usually possible only in ideal situations, preparing for contingencies is always preferable to spontaneous responses when a crisis occurs. It is unlikely that a general approach can be developed with universal applicability, but some of the following suggestions may be useful when defining planning guidelines or developing policies:

Avoid setting ambitious but vague targets as well as falling for the magic of the holistic approach: The risk of overstretch is all too real as, on one side, the host nation risks being overwhelmed by projects it has limited capacity to deal with, while, on the other hand, programs seem to start responding more to the domestic concerns of the contributing nation than to the needs encountered in the field (“ghost in the machine” projects, etc).

Focus on building strong, sustainable, free-standing institutions: These have a high probability of generating and transmitting benign influences on the rest of the normative set-up (justice and home affairs, media, small- and medium-size businesses, education, women’s empowerment, etc.). The goal is not nation building – a vague and overambitious aspiration – but institutional consolidation. Planning for transition and transfer of responsibilities should be envisaged as early as possible. Ideally, no deployment should start without a feasible exit-strategy at hand. This does not necessary link with the concept of withdrawal but rather with flexibility and the ability to engage repeatedly when circumstances are favorable. This also emphasizes the role of

strategic planning and cooperation with the host country, as even the most brilliant assistance operation will fail without a reasonable follow-up.

Emphasize structural prevention, accountability, truth and reconciliation and transitional justice: The linchpin of most stabilization and reconstruction efforts is getting the local parties to acknowledge that fundamental change is necessary. To break the cycle of violence, the affected population has to break with the past, as tragic history has to be recognized and assimilated. The obvious way to avoid a relapse to the crisis-prone paradigm is to come to terms with history, learn its lessons, and incorporate them as solutions in the new dominant normative architecture of the host nation.

Shun overreliance on technology: Technology is simply a tool that can't by itself generate positive evolution. It is not a silver bullet. In fact, most of the world, and especially the man-made crisis-prone areas, are technologically underdeveloped and rely mainly on human interactions.

Examine the profile of the contributor's human resources, especially of deployed personnel: Given the novelty of these operations and the way the media usually report on them, they tend to appeal more to those, among contributor nation professionals, with a penchant for adventure.

Operations, however, have turned out to be both grizzlier and more inspirational than just a typical, colonial-style escapade. People operating in the theatre, where success and failure occur routinely without headlines and fanfare, need to have outstanding self-discipline, a moral "gyroscope" and an affinity for clockwork detail and precision. They also need to be prepared, intellectually and physically, for the kaleidoscope of scenarios and ferocious experiences they will encounter. In our globalised world, with no place left untouched by modernity, this is as close as our generation gets to stare into its very own "heart of darkness."

Build host nation ownership and capacity: Too overt foreign backing of any particular person or movement will compromise them in the eyes of their local supporters. In addition, since any authentic democracy is built on local ownership, foreign support should steer clear of anything interpreted as lecturing and be based instead on the idea of

equal partnerships. Similarly, recruiting human resources from the communities in which the mission is deployed and operates is priceless. Crisis-hit societies breed specific political cultures in which the spirit of civic responsibility wanes and people draw on tightknit tribal and ideological support and on networks mostly built on relationships and trust that

are notoriously difficult for outsiders to influence. Besides injecting social capital and slowly allowing for dividing and moderating bellicose factions, local engagement also has the advantage of balancing and managing the security risks faced by the reconstruction team, respecting the dignity of the engaged locals and building local capacity.

CONCLUSION

Even if no feasible operation is capable of establishing a Western-style democracy in Afghanistan, the mission was and is well justified. However, whether it will be a success, in terms of preventing the export of terrorism from Afghanistan and the nation's security forces managing the domestic status quo, can only be ascertained years from now. A general observation is that political progress is falling behind military and security developments, a trend that is unlikely to be sustainable.

Recognizing the context, mapping the circumstances and planning in advance

helps to assess how a crisis is likely to evolve in the future. Clearly there will be variables, but a focus on some of the key factors provides a good starting point, especially when the price of failure is increasing the risk of having to come back and/or face metastasis of the crises. This article has tried to evaluate a deliberately brief but broad range of considerations aimed more at starting a debate than at framing a conceptual paradigm. By the time these words are published, readers will be able to add their own postscript as to which of these suggestions are appropriate and why. But whatever the range in terms of the significance of actors and issues, crisis management and reconstruction operations will continue to represent one of the most substantive areas of present day foreign policy. □

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Afghanistan's new parliament is sworn in on January 2011. Establishing rule of law will help stabilize the country.

Information in this article is current as of May 2012. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. State Department or the U.S. Government.