Civil-Military Interaction: Practical Experiences of a PRT Commander

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1. Introduction

Mr Chairman, fellow speakers, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great pleasure for me to be returning to the subject of Afghanistan having handed over command of the UK PRT almost exactly twelve months ago – not least because it brings back many happy memories and gets me away from a very busy desk in the UK Ministry of Defence. I also strongly believe discussions and debates such as this examination of the civil-military interaction are *the* debates of our generation, especially within a European defence construct. Perhaps 5% of our time will be in the execution of war fighting operations; while this 5% may be vital we do need to ensure that we get the remaining 95% right.

The experiences that I will share with you today are drawn from 6 months in command of the UK PRT in Mazar-e Sharif 2005. In passing on those experiences I would first like to set the context, the "what", "where", "when" and "how" the PRT engaged in its business, then look at the civil-military interaction from an internal perspective within the PRT (I promise I will not advocate any exact model for PRTs as I know there is no "one size fits all"), and then, expand my view to external relations, and eventually, conclude with some general characteristics and potential lessons for us to consider in open forum.

2. Context

Within the ISAF Northern Region, a regional structure that came into being during my tenure, the UK PRT was responsible for four provinces: Balkh, Jowzjan, Samangan and Sar-e Pol. Straight away the map of the

ISAF northern region highlights the lack of common boundaries. We had the UNAMA North-western region looking after five provinces, the four covered by the UK and Faryab in the West, while Regional command north has responsibilities for the nine provinces throughout the North.

Lesson 1 – common areas of responsibilities at regional level mean common issues and should lead to a stronger relationship between the civil-military agencies who share them.

Personnel

The PRT consisting of 148 international, 141 soldiers and seven civilians, and 93 Afghans – interpreters, one MoI liaison officer and support staff. Military observation teams (MOTs) are teams of eight men assigned to each province. They are the eyes and ears and often the voices of the PRT – fundamental to its situational awareness and influence, both for the military and civilian parts of it.

PRT Activities

During the six months in command, the PRT was engaged in numerous activities; most significantly in the program *Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups* (DIAG), principally the initial voluntary phase but also election related DIAG, and more significantly, the National and Provincial Council Elections which took place in mid September 2005 and finished in late October following the verification and announcements of results.

In terms of who and what influences were shaping activity, there were not many days when either of these two characters or their followers were discussed. As an aside, when dealing with such characters the need for close cooperation between UNAMA and the military on the ground is essential to prevent one being played off against the other. Other agencies involved were the fledgling ANP, not only at provincial level with new recruits shown here in Samangan, but at the regional level at the police regional training centre or RTC in Mazar-e Sharif. Add to the

ANA in the shape of 209 Corps based in Dedahdi, again with a regional responsibility across the nine provinces in the north, and you can begin to build up a complex picture in the security sector alone.

NGO-Activities

On the civil side, Mazar-e Sharif was home to many international consulates such as the Turkish and Uzbek consul generals, NGO activity in the PRT area of responsibility was complex and often very difficult to track; indeed these figures were taken from ACBAR. Many questioned why we, as a principally military organisation focussed on security and enabling activities, would wish to track such activity. In headline, there were approximately 50 NGOs conducting 300 development or humanitarian projects.

PRT Mission

In this complex environment which covered the grand strategic through to the lowest tactical level, the PRT was tasked with

> "Assisting the Government of Afghanistan to extend its authority in order to facilitate the development of a secure and stable environment […] and through military presence <u>enable</u> Security Sector Reform and the reconstruction effort."

With such a light footprint the maintenance of consent was fundamental to our success not only in security terms with the Afghan population, but I believe consent for PRT activity across the other civil actors in the area – not that they could stop us but for success, I see the need for a broad understanding and acceptance of each other roles.

Lines of PRT-Operation

Our lines of operation were: Security and Stability, principally led by the military with political advice form the *Foreign and Commonwealth Office* (FCO), Governance and Development with a strong DFID lead, in particular in areas such as Public Administration Reform. As an observa-

tion I would say that as the north of Afghanistan was relatively stable, the relative balance of resources between military and civil responsibilities within the PRT was not consistent with the number of people available to do the job – this led to frustration at times but also to the acceptance that the military with more available resources would assist under guidance of DFID.

3. Internal

Having set the context, I would now like to discuss the internal workings of the PRT.

Command

Much has been written on the PRT model, mostly centring on the way in which command is executed. The command team in the UK PRT consisted of three representatives, each contributing equally to decision-making, although in reality, each would take the lead on their respective areas, the military for security for example. Much of the traditional civilian activities fell to DFID and while I have immense respect for their work, the situation and sheer volume of change programmes going on in their area required them to have a stronger presence. One representative could simply not cover four provinces, even with support from Kabul. This situation was eased slightly by having the USAIR representative and a Danish Development advisor in Samangan, but while we wished to have a coherent development strategy, the national priorities of these two representatives had to be respected, but it was workable.

Civil-Military Interaction

The PRT is consisting of a strong military presence, principally the Military Observation Teams (MOTs). Beside, there are specialists both civilian and military liaison officers supporting PRT activity. In this sense, the PRT did provide a framework for other actors to operate under – we did not test the flexibility of the structure to accommodate additional

experts such as a Rule of Law specialist, but it would be entirely reasonable to do so. Within this framework, it was perfectly possible to have a lose affiliation in terms of overall objectives. For example, the USAID representative clearly had specific priorities that she would follow, many outside of the security sector. However, it was just as important that the MOTs knew what activity USAID were engaged in and what effect it would have on the communities in which they worked. Similarly, it was equally important for USAID to understand the security context and where, their action could assist. Clearly a lot depends on personalities in the context.

Assessment Methods

The next point I would like to stress is the need for an agreed method of assessment. On my arrival I asked where we were across the Lines of Operation – it was less than clear. We experimented with the example shown here throughout my time. Using the military observation teams with their detailed knowledge of the provinces and the security situation, we were able to build up a picture of the security situation in each district, and then, monitor this on a four-monthly basis. Not only would this provide continuity to cater for the six-month military handovers, but it would allows the PRT command team to target areas of weakness and coordinate activity and our information campaign. In line with our mission, this activity was focussed on the security sector. Assessments outside of SSR and Governance would have potentially raised an expectation that we were going to do something directly to improve schools or irrigation; it would also have encroached on the activity of the 50 or so NGOs operating in the area. While it is easy to suggest this delineation, my soldiers were often frustrated by their inability to deliver assistance to communities in which they worked. The only way through this we found was to ensure that where we did encounter a need that it was passed to the relevant civilian organisation, ideally through UNAMA. Through UNAMA, given the careful development of relations with the NGO community, we found we were able to develop and share this information – even if it meant that the military had to speak in plain English.

4. External

Governors

The four provincial Governors, with whom I had the pleasure to work at the celebration of the second birthday of the UK PRT, perhaps did not realise some of the friction that existed within the international community in particular with regard to who had lead authority, and in military terms, who was responsible for coordinating the battle space. It took me a great deal of time and effort to manage this issue and to ensure all international security agencies worked to support the Governor. The answer to the question of whose battle space it is, is easy: it is the Governor's. Understanding this and promoting Afghan authority rather than simply getting on with it to our own international plan is a mistake and will not encourage and support the development of the Afghan ministries. For the military, with a traditional short-term view, this can be hard to understand and frustrating to implement, but it is essential.

Situational Awareness

In line with our mission we had a clear role to enable and facilitate. This was achieved through sharing our situational awareness, principally the security situation. On several occasions we briefed NGO and development agencies form other countries, such a JICA on the detailed security threats and would even escort them onto the ground should they have required it. This reassurance and knowledge-sharing did lead to new developments in more remote areas and importantly for us it showed that the PRT was able to encourage development even if it could not do it directly itself. *How* you achieve the effect is almost irrelevant.

Coordination

Coordination was also a key activity to achieve closer civil-military interaction whether during elections, during the weekly UNAMA brief to NGOs at which we would update on security matters, or in disaster relief planning such as the reaction to a chemical incident at the Fertiliser fac-

tory. These two souls are all that stands between an ammonia cloud and Mazar-e Sharif. At more difficult times where tension is higher, such as in the aftermath of the murder of Ashraf Ramazan, or even when we are targeted such as in an ambush near the Blue Mosque in which one of my men and five others were wounded, coordination becomes even more necessary and provides reassurance to what can be a fragile and fairly twitchy international civilian community. If we are to maintain stability in the face of such challenges, the passage of information, coordination and mutual understanding of the military and civilian players is essential.

5. General Characteristics

On reflection it is clear that the military and civil interaction is shaped by many of our inherent characteristics.

Military side

- The military tend to look inwards and seek their own resources to solve a problem.
- They are optimists and have a short-term (normally about six months) view on a situation; this leads to their proactive stance.
- They are generalists and try to turn their hand to everything. In doing so, their strength is their situational awareness and understanding of the context.
- They love to plan – only my French Liaison Officer could have arranged for French champagne in Mazar-e Sharif to celebrate Bastille Day. However, it was excellent civil-military cooperation.

Civilian side

- Tend to be more focussed towards the outside and do not in any one agency possess the skills to do all aspects of the job, and therefore, need to coordinate activity.

- However, as a rule, they are not used to or good at coordination.
- Take a long term view and are realists.
- They have a tendency to be reactive rather than to place emphasis on planning.
- They do not understand the military structure and terminology.

From these simplistic observations you can see why we really do need to complement each other and work together if we are to deliver the coordinated activities within Afghanistan.

6. Conclusion

- The PRT is a successful framework within which to encourage and develop better internal civil-military interaction. I think that it has much more utility and can be exploited even further.
- Command and a clear understanding of who has lead authority in any situation are keys. This is as important internally within a PRT as well as externally especially during periods of increased tension.
- Situational awareness: all *should* contribute, but all *must* share.
- Difference in military civil culture exist and will not change – closer understanding through increasing closer cooperation in training and education, planning operations form the outset and establishing exchange posts will all help to move towards the comprehensive approach to tackle situations similar to the one in Afghanistan.