

Nick Horne

## Throwing Money at the Problem

### *US PRTs in Afghanistan*

First formed in Gardez in 2003, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have become the dominant development actors in much of Afghanistan. Numbering 26 and present in almost every one of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, their combined budgets pushed from modest millions into the billions of dollars. As NGOs and UN agencies were forced by deteriorating security to scale down and withdraw from much of the country, the role that PRTs play became much greater than originally envisaged.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are based on the premise that a development project can win the support of a community, secure its loyalty to the Afghan government and cause it to oppose the Taliban insurgency. Many question this logic,<sup>1</sup> but within this piece I shall accept it, examining the practical challenges that PRTs face. I contend that PRTs largely fail in their objectives because the operating model is fundamentally flawed. I will use the example of the US PRTs in the four provinces of Southeast Afghanistan to illustrate this because I am most familiar with them and also because there are twelve US PRTs in total across Afghanistan that are very well-resourced and well-

funded. (The other PRTs are led by different nations and operate based on widely varying models.)

Based in UNAMA's office in southeast Afghanistan and covering the four provinces of Paktya, Paktika, Khost and Ghazni, I worked closely with the four PRTs in the region. Envious of their resources, far in excess of what we in the UN could dream of, I was thoroughly impressed by the dedication and approach of the twelve PRT commanders with whom I worked during eighteen months and that of their staff. Many in the civilian aid community are dismissive of PRT staff, regarding them as over-resourced and overbearing amateurs blundering into a field in which they themselves have made their careers. But while it is true that few PRT staff have a background in development, most are reservists, and some have civilian careers in project management, engineering or related fields. And although a few of the PRT commanders and their senior staff with whom I worked tended towards the arrogant, the majority was earnest, dedicated and sincerely committed to working with the Afghan provincial authorities.

A standard US PRT is 80-persons strong. Of this, 40 make up the security force whose sole purpose is to protect the PRT, particularly when on mission. Only around 10 of the 80 are involved in substantive work: projects, liaison with the government and other partners, and information operations. Force protection rules require a mission to deploy with at least four vehicles, each carrying up to five people. In theory, a PRT could run two separate field

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Andrew Wilder and Stuart Gordon, 'Money Can't Buy America Love', *Foreign Policy* 1 December 2009, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/01/money\\_cant\\_buy\\_america\\_love](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/01/money_cant_buy_america_love); and Matt Waldmann, 'Falling Short', Oxfam International ACBAR Advocacy Series, March 2008, available at [www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/debt\\_aid/downloads/aid\\_effectiveness\\_afghanistan.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/debt_aid/downloads/aid_effectiveness_afghanistan.pdf).

missions concurrently. But given the need to attend frequent meetings in the provincial capital, which usually requires the same level of security, a PRT can realistically manage only one field mission at a time. Given deteriorating security and an increased risk of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), PRTs often require 'route clearance packages' – specialised vehicles and personnel – which they have to borrow from manoeuvre units already over-stretched with an increasingly kinetic campaign. This significantly limits the mobility of the PRT staff.

Paktya is one of Afghanistan's smallest provinces. To drive from one end to another takes approximately five hours through beautiful mountains. But the PRTs based in Gardez could rarely find the time or muster the resources to reach the furthest end in Dand-e-Patan district, which butts up against Kurram Agency of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). Paktika on the other hand is a vast province little served by roads. It could take a few days to drive from the provincial capital of Sharana in the province's extreme northwest to the opposite end in WazaKhwa district. The province is extremely dangerous, and the chances of encountering IEDs while traversing the province are high.

The Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) – the 'money as a weapons system' – that is the principal source of funding for US PRT projects comes with rules attached. PRTs are compelled to run a competitive tendering process and can only award contracts to private companies, as opposed to community or government departments. PRTs must then visit project sites themselves to perform 'Quality Assurance and Quality Control' (QA/QC) before authorising payments.

This means that PRTs must visit each of their project sites before, during and at the end of the implementation. Given the logistical challenges of running projects in remote and often highly insecure districts, projects usually tend to run in the more accessible and secure locations. Paktika PRT illustrates this point well. Unable to access regularly the insecure, rural areas, successive PRTs chose instead to build from scratch the provincial capital, constructing large and impressive government buildings. Unfortunately, as the government seems unable to attract civil servants to work in this remote, insecure and non-lucrative province, these buildings are practically empty – a folly of governance, in which even former Governor Khpalwak's pet peacocks had their own office.

Granted, this is an extreme example. But among the standard portfolio of PRT projects, most will be clustered around the provincial capitals and some

of the district centres. Given the difficulties of accessing sites and managing contractors, a PRT can perhaps manage at any one time 40-50 projects ranging from a few tens of thousands of dollars to a few millions. The constraint is not so much money but management.

Provinces typically contain upwards of 900 communities, some many more. For the development-security continuum to work, all of these communities (or a large and preferably contiguous proportion) would need to benefit directly from at least one project. Such are intra-tribal and inter-tribal rivalries that the good fortune of a neighbouring community in attracting a PRT project is less likely to engender warm feelings and goodwill than envy and resentment. What is needed is a major programme of small projects distributed across many villages, along the lines of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). However, US PRTs are not capable of managing such a programme but are only able to manage a limited number of discrete projects.

Money not being much of a constraint, there are always ways to spend it. From my own experience, it is clear that PRTs are obtaining poor value for their money. A good comparison to make is that of school construction, as schools tend to be built according to designs standardised by the Ministry of Education. The NSP can construct a school within its maximum budget of US\$30,000. UNICEF, working through the provincial departments of the ministry of education, is able to do so for approximately US\$50,000. In contrast, it usually costs the US PRTs in the Southeast upwards of US\$150,000. Even allowing for differences in specification, it is evident that PRTs are being ripped off. How can this be? Especially as PRTs are following open and competitive tendering procedures, and some are even running capacity-building workshops for local construction firms. In Southeast Afghanistan there are a limited number of companies capable of writing a decent proposal that a PRT could realistically consider. As payments are staggered and PRTs are not allowed to pay money up front, only firms with a certain level of operating capital can afford to take PRT business. There are also a limited number of firms willing and able to work in dangerous districts. Given the small pool of Afghan companies willing and able to bid for PRT work, it is obvious that there is a cartel effect at work; there is enough work to go around as we try to throw ever more money at the problem. Contractors can afford to charge PRTs much more, in the knowledge that their few competitors will do likewise. Furthermore, it is hardly even a matter of contention that it is

increasingly necessary for local firms to factor into their prices bribes to insurgents to not attack their staff or the projects and to make payoffs to government officials.

Those firms to which the work is awarded frequently sell the work to others less placed to deal directly with the PRTs. In a phenomenon best termed as 'serial sub-contracting', projects are sold down a chain until the firm that actually does the work has a budget so small they cannot afford to do the job properly. PRTs are not blind to this practice, but it is hard to prevent it when many Afghan firms are of an informal nature with a fluid workforce.

Adding to this mix, there is usually a gatekeeper effect with PRT national staff, interpreters and government officials. During my time in the Southeast, I learnt that certain provincial governors and chiefs of police owned contracting firms and were getting rich on PRT contracts. These factors conspired to make PRT projects spectacularly expensive. In addition, with an estimated US\$1 million per year to maintain an American soldier in Afghanistan, PRTs are carrying an overhead of some US\$80 million dollars per year before running a single project.

Finally, for the development and security nexus to work, PRT projects should build support not so much for the PRTs themselves but for the Afghan government. PRTs with whom I worked were generally very good about consulting with the provincial governors and heads of departments and would be faithful attendees of interminable meetings of the Provincial Development

Committees (which usually consist of departmental directors pushing pet projects in the few areas they could safely access).

Having played a part in project selections, local government usually has minimal involvement in their implementation, limited though their capacity may be to assist in any way. At the completion of a project, the governor or senior official will be wheeled out, often under duress, by the PRT to take credit for the project in a ribbon-cutting ceremony that fools nobody. The communities know how little involvement the government has had. So if the aim is to build links between communities and their government through project delivery, the PRT model is hardly a sound one.

Visitors to PRTs, treated to a show of PowerPoint slides and an impressive list of projects, then meeting the earnest and capable men and women that comprise the team and perhaps taken nearby to an immaculate new school that the team has built, often cannot help but be impressed, perhaps even inspired. These men and women deserve our respect and gratitude. They work incredibly hard, in difficult circumstances and at considerable personal risk to deliver projects that may be valuable and even valued by those who benefit. The failures of the PRT concept are not those of its staff. Nor is it a lack of resources, and it is certainly not a lack of money. But even if we continue to assume that development projects can build stability, it is time to take a more critical look at the limitations of the PRT model.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: NICK HORNE

Nick Horne worked closely with PRTs, first of all covering development and humanitarian coordination for UNAMA in the southeast of Afghanistan between June 2007 and December 2008 and then co-chairing the PRT working group on behalf of UNAMA as a civil affairs officer based in Kabul from January to the end of October 2009.

## ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

The chapters and full document can be found on the AAN website ([www.aan-afghanistan.org](http://www.aan-afghanistan.org)) under publications.

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