



# Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Eastern Afghanistan

## Utility as a Strategic Counterinsurgency Tool

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*The views represented in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. State Department or the U.S. government.*

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PHOTO: U.S. Navy PO1 Brylan Riggins, corpsman with the Nuristan Provincial Reconstruction Team, crosses a temporary bridge on the Alingar River as U.S. Army 1LT Michael Lutkevich, Nuristan PRT security force platoon leader, stands guard in the Nurgaram District, 23 January 2011. (U.S. Air Force, CMSgt Richard Simonsen)

The United States and its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) partners have been engaging in counterinsurgency (COIN) in the area covered by Regional Command-East (RC-East) in Afghanistan for much of the last decade, with varying approaches, levels of resources, and results. One of the key players has been the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), civilian-military platforms designed to extend the reach of the government of Afghanistan and for other functions. While many are concerned about the Afghan government's capacity and negative trends in the counterinsurgency, RC-East has seen some notable successes. It forced insurgent groups to operate from outside of the area, and local government has taken root in many places.<sup>1</sup>

What role have PRTs played in the positive COIN trends in this part of Afghanistan, and what have they done that may be detrimental? How do they fit into the recently modified COIN strategy? How might we apply them to insurgencies outside of Afghanistan?

This article has three sections and will focus primarily on the period from 2004 to 2008 (when I was there, with consideration of events since then). The first section will look at the utility of PRTs, focusing on governance, diplomatic efforts, and civilian-military coordination, with some observations on the strategic significance of these efforts. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, is a point of reference.<sup>2</sup> The second section examines the challenges the PRTs face in RC-East. The third section includes an overall assessment of their success or failure, and makes some recommendations on how they can operate more effectively.

Of course, PRTs are part of a larger coalition team. They operate in conjunction with battalions, brigades, and Special Forces units. While each of these units has its specific tasks, they often blend in with those of the PRTs, so that any assessment (and credit for success) applies to them as well. This article focuses on the political role of PRTs, rather than their military or development assistance efforts.

## Utility of PRTs

This section examines the utility of PRTs from a political officer’s perspective, particularly between 2004 and 2008, focusing on three main areas:

- Assistance in developing local governance.
- Reporting, analysis, and diplomacy.
- As a hub for coordination within the U.S. government, the government of Afghanistan (GoA), and international organizations.

Observations on the strategic value of these actions follow.

**Developing local governance.** The COIN manual notes, “The primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government.” How have PRTs contributed to this line of operation?

While most international civilian efforts immediately after the 2001 defeat of the Taliban sought to establish a functioning central government in Kabul, by 2004 more effort was being put into establishing and developing provincial-level governance. There was a need not only to build

up governance, but also to reestablish a functioning civil society whose fabric had been torn by a series of wars beginning in 1979. Provincial reconstruction teams were central to military, State Department, and to some extent U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs to improve governance.<sup>3</sup> By 2007, more emphasis could be put on improving district-level government, along with some programs to build up municipal governments.

Initially, PRTs in RC-East worked in a fluid environment, with uneven GoA presence and considerable influence by informal power brokers, including tribal leaders, militia leaders, mullahs, and landowners. The insurgency was still in its nascent stages, allowing civilian and military coalition officers more opportunities to engage with Afghans. Many, perhaps most, Afghan civilians at this time were hopeful about the country’s future and positive regarding coalition efforts. Taking advantage of these circumstances, the PRTs worked with maneuver units to move provincial government forward by providing Commander’s Emergency Response

(French Army photo/Stiaff Sergeant Romain Beaulinette)



**U.S. Army SGT Patrick Reilly, Panjshir Provincial Reconstruction Team, gives a hand to local villagers while delivering materials for an irrigation canal in Shutol District, 20 December 2010.**

Program (CERP) funds as well as mobility and security to governors and other officials. They also provided advice and assisted with information campaigns and interagency coordination within the Afghan government.

Working in conjunction with other coalition units and UN teams, the PRTs contributed significantly to the various rounds of elections by assisting with logistical support, planning campaigns to explain elections to the population (and to the candidates), and organizing security efforts. Team members also served as election observers. While far from perfect, these elections were important in putting at least some elected officials in place; the 2004 and 2005 elections, in particular, were seen as credible by many Afghans.

By 2005, several insurgencies were beginning to gain momentum in RC-East. This had multiple effects: shadow insurgent governments were established, GoA officials were targeted, coalition officers' freedom of movement and contact with Afghans were reduced, and more effort overall went into combat operations. At roughly the same time, popular support for local government began to wane as infrastructure and services improved only marginally, and the perception (or fact) of official corruption increased. This hindered PRT efforts to build up local government, although the teams' role in development increased as tens of millions of dollars of CERP funds became available to encourage the government to take more responsibility for planning, coordination, and security, and prodding informal actors to deal with the formal Afghan government.

**Reporting, analysis, and diplomatic functions.** Provincial reconstruction teams provided an important service by being the “eyes and ears” for policymakers and rear echelons. Much of this duty fell on State Department officers tasked with providing insights on political, social, and economic trends and the nature of rapidly morphing multiple insurgencies. This is important given that military

intelligence tends to focus on gathering counterterrorism and combat information.

Provincial reconstruction teams provided a steady stream of insights on local conditions to brigade and division commands and to NATO headquarters in Brussels. Since many viewed them as neutral actors, PRT officers were in a position to provide information and analysis with greater credibility to GoA officials and policymakers in Washington, an important function given the complexity of Afghanistan.

The PRTs also provided an opportunity to watch for corrupt officials, although the overall impact of this effort was marginal, given the difficulty of obtaining clear proof and Afghanistan's weak legal system. They also kept an eye on cross-border issues, including attacks and attempts to extend influence into Afghanistan. The teams were able to gradually build an understanding of tribal relations and disputes, a major issue in COIN operations. They disseminated current U.S. and ISAF policy positions and helped local government officials understand policy coming out of Kabul. Finally, PRT reporting was an extra “dissent channel” from the field, providing a sometimes needed reality check to policy.

**PRTs and coordination.** Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, notes, “The political and military aspects of insurgencies are so bound together as to be inseparable.” It adds, “The integration of civilian and military efforts is crucial to successful COIN operations. All efforts focus on supporting the local populace and host nation government. Political, social, and economic programs are usually more valuable than conventional military operations in addressing the root causes of conflict and undermining an insurgency.” Provincial reconstruction teams knitted together political and military lines of operation and coordinated with the GoA. They were a hub for coordination at several levels (although it should be noted that in RC-East, the PRTs were effectively run by the military). Within the PRT itself, military,

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State Department, USAID, and U.S. Department of Agriculture officers exchanged information and synchronized projects. More importantly, they served as platforms to reach out to local leaders and functioned as neutral sites for dispute resolution between forces in local society. For example, PRT Ghazni engaged as a neutral party/honest broker between the Pashtuns, Hazaras, Tajiks, and the nomadic Kuchis in that province.

The teams and brigades also served as forums for coordination within the U.S. government inter-agency community. For example, in Nangarhar Province in 2008, the team coordinated counter-narcotics efforts between the military, USAID, the State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and other players before further coordination with the Afghan government (although in this case much work was also done at the brigade level).<sup>4</sup> The teams also functioned almost as embassies, providing the infrastructure and planning for high-level visitors, including congressional delegations, Afghan officials, and military officers.

**Strategic benefits.** As David Kilcullen notes, "In essence, effective counterinsurgency is a matter of good governance, backed by solid population security and economic development measures, resting on a firm foundation of energetic IO."<sup>5</sup> As strategy continues to shift to a population-centric approach after the reviews of late 2008 and 2009 (coupled with years of practical experience), the PRTs' inherent purpose—to interact with the local population and build up government—makes them an important player. They help provide the operational foundations of this modified strategy in multiple ways: by building ties with the local population, by gaining knowledge of local politics and society, and by moving governance and basic justice systems forward. Although the results have been uneven, PRTs engage in public diplomacy campaigns, explaining the coalition presence in towns and villages and countering insurgent disinformation.

By supporting local government, PRTs contributed to the de facto decentralization of power in Afghanistan, with the strategic benefits of bringing decision making closer to the populations that the government intends to serve. This is not a defined



**Afghan authorities and personnel from the Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team of Herat City celebrate the foundation stone ceremony of two new schools in Injil District, Herat Province, 12 June 2011. (Photo by Regional Command West PIO/Staff Sergeant Garcia, Spanish Army)**

PRT goal but rather a byproduct of their work with local authorities.

While they are not cheap to operate, PRTs have the advantage of being less expensive than large combat units. As Afghan police and military units expand, PRTs provide an option to maintain a coalition presence at a somewhat reduced cost. This is particularly important because part of the Taliban's strategy is to outlast the international presence. Viable because their operating costs are only a fraction of ISAF's overall operating expenses, PRTs give countries with limited combat forces an opportunity to play a meaningful role. The successful New Zealand-led PRT in Bamian Province of RC-East is one example.

In their effort to expand governance, the teams benefit from the grassroots democracy present in Pashtun society. In local or regional shuras (councils), discussions can go on for hours or days, often reaching consensus decisions that are binding, such as embracing the outcome of the 2004 elections, the National Solidarity Program, and related development councils that have been successful in some areas. This cultural tendency toward local democracy strengthens the contention that PRTs

should carry on their long-term effort to build a viable democracy.

Eventually the teams will cease working in Afghanistan, the hope being that the Afghan government will independently carry out its functions (several provinces are approaching or have reached this state). As a subset of governance, PRT activities form the kernel of Afghan development at the provincial level by transferring expertise and establishing a framework of Afghan interagency coordination. Given the extremely low level of development in many areas, this is of strategic importance—there are decades of work ahead for the Afghan government and the international community. To prevent future insurgencies, Afghans must see improvement in their lives and see that their children have the possibility of a better future. Having a relatively competent indigenous development structure in place with an acceptably low level of corruption will allow foreign donors to provide development money with less expatriate staff and the resultant overhead costs.

Many Afghans expected the international community to bring concrete improvements to their lives, which was evident in the cautious optimism of 2003. By 2008 hope had drifted into disappointment, with foreign assistance providing only limited benefits. This change of mood is a serious matter for the counterinsurgency effort, and PRTs have a role to play in distributing development funds to benefit Afghans outside of major cities (while making sure the Afghan government gets much of the credit at the local level).

Provincial reconstruction teams also performed the less tangible function of providing an international presence at the local level. This is important in a tactical and strategic sense, in that many Afghans, particularly along the border with Pakistan, are

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“fence sitters,” preferring to hedge their bets to see which faction will come out on top. Having a PRT presence can give the local population confidence to side with the government (as well as giving confidence to the local government) and makes it harder for insurgents to fill any vacuums, particularly as the Taliban establishes shadow local governments.

## **Challenges Facing PRTs in RC-East**

Provincial reconstruction teams face a wide variety of challenges, some brought on by the complex environment they operate in, some by the weakness of Afghan organizations, and some a result of flawed tactics, a flawed strategy, or a flawed understanding of what is happening on the ground. In a sense, given the very low level of development of Afghanistan, the teams are involved in construction, not reconstruction, and are misnamed “reconstruction teams.” What are their challenges, and how can we meet them?

Provincial reconstruction teams in RC-East operate within a society that remains deeply traditional and conservative, particularly in Pashtun and Nuristani areas. The society is working through how it will adapt to encroaching modernity and outside influences, such as the role of women in society. The more conservative sectors of society want to put the brakes on change and, to some extent, development, which at times puts them in opposition to the PRTs, whose officers want to push development forward. Provincial reconstruction team officers’ relatively short tours of duty (12 or 15 months) exacerbate this situation, which puts pressure on them to get results quickly, despite the slow speed at which the Afghan society often works. Similarly, PRT efforts to build up government institutions encounter a system where personal relationships and personalities often matter more than institutions and formal structures.

Efforts to build up local governance in provinces along the border run up against a harsh reality. Insurgents can assassinate government officials or, at a minimum, hinder the steady development of local government. This clearly reduces PRT effectiveness. Similarly, if the insurgency is seen as one large (if loosely affiliated) movement active in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, PRTs have the extremely difficult task of carrying out a COIN campaign in which they can directly influence only half of the population.



(French Army, Staff Sergeant Romain Beaulinette)

Local villagers unload a truck full of materials delivered by a local contractor and the Panjshir Provincial Reconstruction Team for an irrigation canal in Shutol District, 20 December 2010.

Education is a key to maintaining democracy, countering the ideology of the Taliban and other insurgent groups, and creating a workforce with employable skills, not only within Afghanistan but also as expat workers in the Gulf and elsewhere. Education is critical to giving Afghan youths alternatives to radical madrassas and the insurgent life; much of the young population may be ready for positive social change. Aside from helping with infrastructure, PRTs have had only limited impact on the Afghan education system, which was almost nonexistent in 2001. There is a need to build up a body of teachers and administrators, a task which PRTs are not designed to do.

This author returned to Afghanistan four times between the spring of 2003 and the spring of 2010, and each time it was clear that increased security measures were in place to protect U.S. personnel. They included bigger and more heavily armed convoys with more armor and more restrictions on travel. In effect, the insurgents are achieving one of our COIN goals—separating us from the Afghans, through our reactive security measures.

Selecting the provinces in which to locate PRTs and determining the resources they receive has strategic implications. For example, the PRTs in Paktia and Ghazni Provinces initially covered Logar and Wardak Provinces as well. While this worked well while the insurgency had limited capacity, it worked poorly when the insurgents became active in the two provinces that abut Kabul. Eventually, a Czech PRT arrived in Logar, and a Turkish PRT in Wardak, but this caused challenges too. Kapisa, a province to the east of Kabul, also received only limited attention, and eventually had a hard-to-eradicate insurgency take root. The remote province of Nuristan presented different challenges. Its remoteness, harsh winters, small population, and rugged mountain terrain made both civilian and military leaders reluctant to deploy a PRT, although one was eventually established. Similarly, the remote province of Dai Kundi was judged to have such limited strategic significance that a PRT has yet to be established there, despite multiple requests from the governor.

A fundamental problem of U.S.-led PRTs (and battalions, brigades, and divisions) is the rapid

turnover of staff, and the knowledge lost as a result. The complexity of Afghanistan and the rapid changes in the Afghan government, society, and the insurgency have held back COIN advances. The rapid turnover of personnel has also led to too frequent changes of policies, as incoming officers make fundamental changes to their predecessor's policies and priorities. However, this situation has improved because many military and civilian officers have now served multiple tours in Afghanistan. The difficulty the central government in Kabul has in developing coherent national policies for a country as diverse and rapidly changing as Afghanistan remains a challenge for embassies and national-level military commands.

Perhaps more important was the imbalance of civilian versus military personnel in PRTs. In part, this reflected the vastly greater resources of DOD in comparison to the State Department and USAID—as Kilcullen notes, “the U.S. Defense Department is about 210 times larger than the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department combined.” In terms of staffing and funding the ratio is even greater. This held back COIN efforts. For example, in early 2005, I wore two hats, working for the brigade and the PRT in Khost Province while at times covering

Paktia and Paktika Provinces—a clear overstretch. With the appointment of Ambassador Holbrooke as the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, this situation significantly improved, but imbalances remain.

The PRTs are the counterinsurgency's “Swiss army knives.” While they do well operationally, they have produced uneven results in some areas. Beginning in 2006, the amount of CERP funds moving through the PRTs may have outpaced the teams' abilities to manage these funds. Some PRTs worked on women's rights issues, with less than desirable results—not surprisingly, given the extreme sensitivity of this issue, particularly in Pashtun areas. Although the PRTs had limited scope and legal authority to do so, they may have been better able to work more with the Afghan National Police. However, the shortcomings of the police, glaringly apparent by 2005, were beyond the scope of the PRTs to address in a significant way. This matters, in that the war in eastern Afghanistan between 2004 and 2008 was more a police war than an army war.

Similarly, the development of the judicial sector, an important part of defeating the insurgents and developing Afghan civil society, lagged badly. Finally, support for agriculture was weak, with limited U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) deployment and almost no funding. National Guard units focused on agriculture, and increased USDA deployments under Ambassador Holbrooke helped address this deficiency.

While difficult to precisely define and quantify, the limited attention paid to developing an overarching political strategy for RC-East and its provinces (in contrast to detailed military planning and strategizing) reduced the overall effectiveness of PRTs and the general COIN effort, at least until the last years of the decade. The time lost may be hard to recover.

As FM 3-24 notes, “PRTs were conceived as a means to extend the reach and enhance the legitimacy of the central government into the provinces of Afghanistan at a time when most assistance was limited to the nation's capital.” The teams have had some success in assisting the slowly forming central government reach the provinces, but they may encounter a problem: what if some Afghans do not want the central government to reach them,



**Afghan workers dig trenches as part of a USAID public works project in the Nurgaram District, 23 January 2011. (U.S. Air Force, CMSgt Richard Simonsen)**

because they are convinced that it is corrupt, inefficient, and dominated by members of a different ethnic group?

The COIN manual also notes, “The long-term goal is to leave a government able to stand by itself. In the end, the host nation has to win on its own. Achieving this requires development of viable local leaders and institutions.” Due to a variety of factors, including years of war, massive casualties, and an ensuing exodus (plus the collapse of the education system under the Taliban), the base for a new civil service cadre is limited, and those who have the skills to run local government often prefer to live in Kabul or other large cities. Provincial reconstruction teams could do more to establish civil service academies at the provincial or regional level, but do the Afghans have the will to build a government capable of standing on its own, putting national interests ahead of personal, family, or tribal well-being? Will inherent divisions in Afghan society make any national cohesion or reconciliation impossible to achieve? And most unsettling of all, what if the international community, particularly the United States, wants this nation-building effort to succeed more than Afghans do?

## Conclusions

Over the last eight years of their operations in RC-East, PRTs have been successful as joint civil-military hubs extending the reach of government, pushing out development funds and helping to stabilize many areas of Afghanistan. While they have had numerous flaws, with the lack of an adequate civilian presence being one of the most obvious, they have adapted, and the increased attention and resources given to Afghanistan under the Obama administration have only increased their utility. Clearly, PRTs contribute to stabilizing RC-East, and to what has been an overall successful COIN effort in RC-East. The fact that there was no large, internally based insurgency against the coalition and the Afghan government in RC-East, particularly between 2004 and 2008, underscores this success.

Provincial reconstruction teams also laid the foundation for the expansion of the civilian component begun under Ambassador Holbrooke in 2009. Not only was some of the necessary infrastructure already in place, but previous experience could be

brought to bear in terms of priorities, best practices, and Afghan acceptance of PRT methods. Similarly, the PRT presence helped the Afghan Independent Directorate for Local Governance, newly formed in late 2007, extend its operations to the provincial and district levels. Provincial reconstruction teams are also able to support the Afghan government’s sub-national governance policy.

Provincial reconstruction teams helped develop local leaders, an important initiative given the dearth of trained civil servants. This is mostly an ad hoc effort, but methods include funding the governor’s staff, providing transportation, training on basic administration, and giving advice as requested. One success story is the very capable Governor of Helmand Province, Gulab Mangal, who had worked closely with coalition forces previously in RC-East.

Provincial reconstruction teams help provide what the Taliban and other insurgent groups cannot offer—development projects, including major road projects, and a steady stream of improvement to infrastructure. This gives the coalition an “asymmetric” advantage, given the stark poverty of many areas. Small-scale projects carried out immediately after combat operations are also important COIN tools.

More important, the PRTs have helped with some stability and “breathing room” as local government establishes itself and begins to function. They were a relatively low cost presence in eastern Afghanistan until more resources were shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan.

The “ink spot” approach to counterinsurgency, in which security, governance, and development expand outward from a central location, pushing out the insurgents, has practical relevance in RC-East. In most cases, the center of any ink spot will be the provincial capital, usually the largest town and the economic and government hub. The teams locate in these capitals and offer money, political support, and to a limited extent, the security to fuel the expansion of the ink spot. Nangarhar Province is an example. It has gone from being mostly “red” in 2004 to being prosperous by Afghan standards in 2008, with a functioning government, greatly reduced narcotics trade, and an expanding economy. The PRT played a role in a COIN success that first took root in the capital city of Jalalabad, expanded

to surrounding districts and then to the neighboring provinces of Konar and Laghman.

The experiences in RC-East may have relevance for ongoing COIN efforts in Kandahar and precincts of Kandahar city. One of the reasons for PRT success in RC-East was a coherent chain of command, coupled with sufficient manpower and money. This is relevant to the precincts of Kandahar city, as well as the districts that surround the city. Perhaps more important are lessons learned in the control and auditing of development money, so that funds are efficiently and transparently spent, and the population sees this happening.

Recent developments have improved coalition efforts to support local governance. The deployment of district support teams has extended the PRT concept to the district level, an important step in building up local governance. The District Delivery Program, intended to build up local government in key districts, particularly after combat operations, is an important initiative to get the necessary resources to the district level. An RC-East senior civilian representative now coordinates civilian agencies, provides a comprehensive political strategy at the provincial/regional level, and manages critical civilian-military relationships. This is a step forward.

While the PRTs in eastern Afghanistan have made significant contributions, in the end success or failure depends on the Afghans. Will Afghans be able to stem corruption, develop credible leaders, heal rifts between ethnic and tribal groups, resist negative foreign influences, and put the good of the nation

above narrower interests—factors that outweigh any impact PRTs can make? This will obviously require a long-term effort by the Afghans, the coalition, and the international community.

## PRTs in Other Places and Other Times

The basic concept of PRTs may be useful to other countries with insurgencies, where there is a need to extend the reach of the government and for civilian-military coordination. Indeed, the U.S. introduced the concept in Iraq after seeing how the PRTs had performed in Afghanistan. If PRTs reduce the need for the costly deployment of combat units, the teams make sense as a money-saving option. Partnered with police forces, PRTs are certainly cheaper than maneuver units and can stay in place for years. They may also have relevance for “nation-building” efforts that do not necessarily have an active insurgency to confront, or for post-conflict situations. Something similar to the PRT model could support elections in post-conflict countries.

Provincial reconstruction teams have provided practical (and hard-won) civilian and military officer expertise in how to conduct counterinsurgency. They are a valuable asset for the United States, and we should retain this expertise, whether through USAID, State, or parts of the military involved in future counterinsurgencies, such as Special Forces or the U.S. Marines Corps. As jihadists move to incite insurgencies in countries beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, we will need this experience. **MR**

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### NOTES

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