



# Development and COIN in Regional Command-East, 2004-2008

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

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PHOTO: Soldiers from 101st Division, Special Troop Battalion, air assault into a village inside Jowlzak Valley, Parwan Province, Afghanistan, 10 November 2008. (U.S. Army, SPC Scott Davis)

**T**HE LARGE INFUSION of development funds into Regional Command-East during the years 2004 to 2008 clearly supported counter-insurgency (COIN) efforts at the tactical level. At a strategic level, the correlation between COIN and projects is less clear, but was probably positive in many instances. The option of spending heavily on development was an asymmetric advantage that the Taliban and other insurgent groups could not match. It also provided a degree of acceptance for an international presence among a traditional, at times suspicious, mostly Pashtun population. Many of these development programs, including the military's Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), showed some degree of success. However, various structural problems during this time hindered progress—including the lack of Afghan government capacity, shortfalls in U.S. government (USG) interagency cooperation, the imbalance between civilian and military staff, the differing timelines between various players, and the inherent difficulty of rebuilding a very poor country in the middle of an insurgency that gained momentum during this period.

This paper will look at how reconstruction and development assistance contributed to the COIN campaign in Regional Command-East in Afghanistan during 2004 to 2008. Specifically, did small-, medium-, and large-scale projects carried out by USAID, through CERP, and to some extent the international community and the Afghan government, enable a COIN campaign based on three main pillars: security, governance, and economic development? How did the various organizations involved coordinate? How did the local Afghan population perceive these reconstruction and development efforts? Did these reconstruction and development projects reinforce and enable the security and governance pillars of the COIN strategy, while weakening the insurgency? What were the lessons learned?

Regional Command-East is the American-led military area along the border with Pakistan, from Pakitka Province in the west to Nuristan Province in the east, then north to the Hindu Kush Mountains. In 2004, only one brigade, supported by a logistical aviation hub at Bagram Air Base, covered the 13 provinces of Regional Command-East. By 2008, there were three brigades assigned to the area, and provincial reconstruction teams were present in all provinces (although one team covered both Kapisa and Parwan Provinces).

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world; the UNDP's 2004 report on Human Development Index (HDI) noted that "Afghanistan's [2002] HDI value of 0.346 falls at the bottom of the list of low human development countries, just above Burundi, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sierra Leone."<sup>1</sup> Life expectancy in 2002 was just over 44 years, and national literacy rates just above 28 percent (but only 14.1 percent for females), one of the lowest among developing countries. Adjusted per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was only \$822. Particularly in the rural areas of RC-East, the general lack of basic services and the meager gains from subsistence farming could be shocking to officers from developed countries. Clearly, this very low baseline was a challenge for development workers and counterinsurgency efforts.

## Macroeconomic Factors

During this period the Afghan GDP grew quickly (in part due to the amount of international aid coming in), but how much this growth filtered down to rural and border areas in RC-East is debatable. Although many Afghans along the border used Pakistani rupees in addition to Afghanis, the stable exchange rate of the Afghan currency was a positive factor, as were low inflation rates. Perhaps more important locally were the multiplier effects of cash from payroll and purchases for military bases, the benefits from the transit of NATO supplies (particularly through the Khyber Pass and into Nangarhar), the smuggling of goods brought duty-free into Afghanistan, then smuggled back into Pakistan, and remittances from overseas workers. While drug production did not reach the levels seen in RC-South, in some years Nangarhar had considerable poppy production, and there were

indications that raw opium produced elsewhere was being refined there and moved across the border into Pakistan. Both of these factors would have injected significant money into the local economy.

## Development Programs Relevant to COIN

During this period, the Afghan Government at all levels—national, provincial, district, and municipal—was undergoing a slow and difficult process of reestablishing itself. Rebuilding (or building) government in the middle of an insurgency, with limited human and financial resources, was difficult, and tribes and communities often provided governance where the reach of the formal government did not extend. At least on paper, Afghanistan has one of the world's most centralized governments, which put control of development planning and funding in the ministries in Kabul. At the same time, the ministries were "stovepiped," with lines of authority extending directly to officials of that ministry in the provinces, often bypassing governors or mayors offices, and making interagency coordination difficult. Several provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) organized interagency meetings to improve coordination between ministry representatives at the provincial level.<sup>2</sup>

The most active ministries in RC-East during this time were the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock; Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; Education; and Public Health. Both the Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs and the Ministry of Women's Affairs were underfunded and understaffed, and the latter encountered some opposition in culturally conservative Pashtun areas. After its creation in 2007 the Independent Directorate for Local Governance was increasingly active, and organized local government to formulate development plans, while also trying to expand its authority into spending development funds, including CERP. One of the more successful development schemes was the community-based National Solidarity Program, under the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and the Basic Package of Health Services, established in 2003 under the Ministry of Public Health.

At the national and international levels, the Interim-Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS and eventually the ANDS) and the

Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund provided overarching frameworks. However, these plans were just beginning to be implemented, and local Afghan officials as well as coalition officers were often not well informed about them. The “lead nation” concept agreed to at the Tokyo donor’s conference in 2002, where individual nations took responsibility for a developmental area—for example, the Italians were to lead on justice, and the Germans on the police—did not translate in many cases to activity by these nations on the ground in RC-East.

## USAID

According to a report of the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), “In 2002 and 2003, USAID initially focused on humanitarian and short-term assistance, such as assistance to displaced persons and food assistance.”<sup>23</sup> “In 2004, USAID expanded assistance to include quick impact projects, such as infrastructure projects.” By the end of the period, USAID was following an integrated strategy, intended to “create economic growth, effective and

representative governance, and the human capital base needed to eliminate the conditions that breed extremism.”<sup>24</sup> Programs included road construction and rehabilitation (including farm to market roads), development of electrical networks, credit and micro-credit programs, and assistance in the privatization of state-owned enterprises. There was also an agricultural component, including irrigation and alternative livelihoods (aimed at diminishing poppy cultivation), governance, health, as well as a large education program. Considerable funds flowed into Afghanistan; a 2008 USAID report noted, “With over \$3.4 billion spent on development programs in Afghanistan since 2002, USAID provides the largest bilateral civilian assistance program to Afghanistan.”<sup>25</sup>

In RC-East during this period, most USAID field personnel operated out of PRTs, with some posted to brigade commands. Many were contractors on one-year assignments. At the same time, USAID was awarding large-scale contracts for development projects to contractors such as the International Organization for Migration and Development Alternatives Inc. As a Senate report notes, “From FY 2007 to



(U.S. Army, SPC Russell Gilchrest)

**U.S. Army SSG James Calvert directs a CH-47 Chinook aircraft to land after the ground crew released the aircraft’s sling-load in the town of Bargimatal, Nuristan Province, Afghanistan, 7 August 2008.**



FY 2009, USAID obligated about \$3.8 billion to 283 contractors and other entities,” and that “Two contractors—Luis Berger International and Development Alternatives Inc.—accounted for about \$1 billion . . .”<sup>6</sup> USAID officers in RC-East often faced hurdles in monitoring the contracts, due to security challenges and lack of transportation. At the same time, contracting organizations (including the International Organization for Migration) were slow to carry out some contracts due to security concerns.

### Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP)

As noted in the *CERP Smartcard* (GTA 90-01-017 November 2008) produced by the Center for Army Lessons Learned, “CERP funds provide tactical commanders a means to conduct multiple stability tasks that have traditionally been performed by U.S., foreign, or indigenous professional civilian personnel or agencies. These tasks include but are not limited to the reconstruction of infrastructure, support to governance, restoration of public services, and support to economic development.”<sup>7</sup> Commanders could also use CERP funds for condolence payments and repairs due to combat damage.

In RC-East during this period, the PRTs were the primary conduits of CERP funds, although maneuver battalions and, in some instances, brigade commands used them as well. The greatest advantage of CERP funds was the flexibility and speed with which commanders could use them (in contrast to many USAID projects, which were subject to significantly more mandatory oversight and reviews). This allowed the PRTs to provide funding for projects immediately after combat operations, and also quickly seize opportunities when communities or tribes were open to aligning themselves with coalition forces and the Afghan government.

During the earlier years of this period, most CERP projects were relatively small, including building or refurbishing of schools, health clinics, markets, irrigation systems, and the upgrading of existing roads. By 2007, large amounts of funds moved through CERP, with some PRTs handling tens of millions of dollars—a major shift in COIN efforts. The GAO noted in one report, “Since 2004, DOD has reported total obligations of about \$1 billion for CERP in Afghanistan, growing from \$40 million in FY 2004 to

\$486 million in FY2008. As of April 2009, Congress allocated . . . \$683 million to fund CERP projects in Afghanistan.”<sup>8</sup> While some of these CERP funds also went to other RCs, it clearly altered the military’s role in RC-East, from doing more “tactical” projects to being a major development player. For example, major road projects began through mountainous areas in Konar and Nuristan that required long timelines and considerable engineering.

While this increased funding made a positive impact in many places (particularly some road projects) it also strained the capacity of the civil affairs units and PRTs, in terms of engineering, quality assurance/quality control, and planning, despite the best efforts of those on the ground. The GAO report notes: “The [CERP] program has evolved over time in terms of the cost and complexity of projects . . .” and “In a July 2008 memorandum to CENTCOM, the CJTF [combined joint task force] commanding general noted that, in some provinces, units have repositioned or are unable to do quality-assurance and quality-control checks due to competing missions and security risks.”<sup>9</sup>

Particularly after the expansion of its budgets in 2007 and afterwards, the augmented CERP program pushed the military into areas that many view as falling in the domain of USAID, international donors, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). To some extent, this was intentional—military officers, from captains to generals, remarked to the author that more traditional development programs were moving too slowly to support the military’s COIN strategy and tactics or were not present in areas the military considered as priorities. As Major Mark W. Lee notes, “While the U.S. Army is uniquely trained, manned, and equipped to operate in unstable regions, it lacks the development capacity and expertise of its civilian partners in conducting these tasks. However, civilian diplomatic and development agencies are often challenged to address such tasks in unstable areas with their traditional delivery systems.”<sup>10</sup>

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International Security Assistance Force soldiers walk through the village of Paruns in the Nuristan Province, 2 September 2008.

## Agricultural Development

Much of the population of RC-East, and practically all of the rural population, was involved in agriculture in one form or another. This fact made it necessary to focus on agriculture, especially given the more rural nature of the insurgency in some areas. Improvement and reconstruction of irrigation systems, as well as farm to market roads, were early efforts. However, U.S. Department of Agriculture officers were present only in some PRTs, and then had very limited (if any) funding at their disposal. Beginning in 2008, the U.S. military began deploying “Agribusiness Development Teams,” National Guard units whose soldiers brought agricultural, animal husbandry, and agribusiness skills. The first Agribusiness Development Teams deployed to Nangarhar in 2008, followed by a Texas unit in Ghazni.

## Education

Education is a key to the democratic future of Afghanistan—it will be difficult to maintain a viable democracy without it. At the same time, a more educated workforce will be necessary to form a civil service cadre to govern the country, to provide a workforce for businesses, and to counter the Taliban’s propaganda aimed against the Afghan government and coalition forces. Hence, this is an important COIN aspect as well.

During the early years of 2004 to 2008, the Ministry of Education was still extending its reach into parts of RC-East, and suffered from scarce resources, including teachers. While the PRTs built schools, the Ministry did not necessarily have the means to staff and support them, and teacher salaries were very low. Education in madrassas, both locally and across the border in Pakistan, was an option



that many parents took. In conversation with the author, and in surveys, Afghan parents put a priority on education for their children (including daughters in many cases).

USAID invested heavily in education across Afghanistan. By 2011, its programs printed more than 97 million textbooks for grades 1 through 12, trained more than 53,000 teachers (including radio-based teacher training), and built or refurbished 680 schools. USAID also supported programs for adult literacy and vocational training.<sup>11</sup> While there is still much to be done, education seems to have been a bright spot among development efforts. The World Bank notes that by 2011, across Afghanistan 6.2 million Afghan students were attending grades 1 through 12, of whom 2.2 million are females. However, the World Bank notes that there remains “an acute shortage of teachers—many teachers do not receive their salaries on time, and have little or no training.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, schools provided easy targets for insurgent attacks in some areas.

## Other USG Development Programs

The Performance-Based Governor’s Fund, intended to provide governors with administrative funds to run their offices and maintain a staff, through the transfer of roughly \$25,000 per month, began at the end of this period. According to the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (which administered the program), it was “to provide interim financial assistance to Governors so they are better able to meet operational and community outreach needs, enhance their relationships with citizens and improve their overall management capacity.”<sup>13</sup> State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement had its own “Good Performers Initiative,” launched in 2007, to reward provinces that eliminated or sharply reduced (by 10 percent or more) their poppy cultivation. The department granted funds for development projects, in coordination with the governors and provincial development councils. Both programs were much smaller than the CERP and USAID programs, but held considerable potential to improve provincial governance and development programs, by tailoring programs to local conditions to attain specific policy goals.

## Cooperation Challenges

Coordination between the various development and reconstruction players in RC-East during this period was, unsurprisingly, a major challenge. Different goals, organizational cultures, the inherent difficulties of operating in a country as unstable as Afghanistan, rapid turnover of foreign staff, and the need to adhere to guidelines passed down from Washington (or Kabul or Brussels or New York) made this difficult. Interestingly, personalities and personal connections often made the difference in overcoming obstacles.

Coordination between development actors during the earlier years of this period was often ad hoc, with field officers working together to try to deconflict programs at their level. In 2004, the challenge of forming an overall, interagency strategy—coupled with insufficient information exchanges and considerable differences between the USAID, State, and Army bureaucracies—led to coordination challenges in RC-East. Other players in the U.S. government included the embassy-based Afghanistan Reconstruction Group charged with advising embassy and Afghan officials on commercial and economic policy and attracting corporations to Afghanistan.



A truck is being loaded with almonds in Nili, Dai Kundi Province, 22 December 2009. (United Nations assistance mission in Afghanistan).

***There was considerable debate—and acrimony—over the “humanitarian space,” roughly defined as the provision of emergency relief, development, and reconstruction assistance to the civilian population.***

By 2008, U.S. efforts were more efficient and logical. The Integrated Civil-Military Action Group, established in 2008 within the U.S. Embassy, pulled together senior State, USAID, and military officers with roles in development for regular meetings, and fed into a higher-level Executive Working Group. State’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization provided officers to do interagency planning at embassy, brigade, and PRT levels. Brigade commands served as nexuses in the field for coordinating projects across several provinces, and PRTs did the same for individual provinces. One example of interagency, integrated planning was Nangarhar Inc., which brought together U.S. players involved in COIN, counternarcotics, and long-term development.<sup>14</sup>

Toward the end of this period, the Afghan government at the national and, in some cases, provincial level took a more active role in development coordination, and by 2007, it had produced “Provincial Development Plans” for all provinces. At a higher level, the GOA and UN chaired the Joint Coordination Monitoring Board (established in 2006) to implement the Afghanistan Compact (agreed in 2006), including development activities under the I-ANDS.

## **Some Challenges to Development**

During this period, there were considerable challenges to reconstruction and development programs. The possibility of attacks by insurgents after the Taliban and other groups began to extend their operations in the spring of 2005 restricted (or in some cases completely stopped) efforts by various development players. The attacks also added considerable overhead to pay for security and made the actual implementation of projects that much harder. The lack of Afghan capacity in trained development workers and government officials slowed

efforts. Rapid turnover of officers—military, State, USAID (or UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan [UNAMA]), often deployed on 12-month tours, led to a lack of continuity. Corruption on the part of Afghan government officials (or Afghan citizens’ perceptions of it) hindered project implementation and ensuing public relations benefits.

There was considerable debate—and acrimony—over the “humanitarian space,” roughly defined as the provision of emergency relief, development, and reconstruction assistance to the civilian population. Many NGOs believed, by virtue of experience, neutrality, and mandate, that they should set the terms and strategies for development assistance, but security concerns prevented NGOs from operating in many parts of RC-East during this time. Inevitably, this led to tensions with the military, as it filled a gap in development work that was an important pillar of U.S. strategy (despite the fact that the military often did not want the role). In theory, the UNAMA could help resolve problems and coordinate among players, but in practice its limited numbers on the ground (and lack of funding) reduced its influence; in the field, UNAMA could suggest, but not dictate.

The “metrics” of development and reconstruction—quantifying the number of projects underway or completed—was straightforward for the military, which had systems in place to collect and present this information. Metrics became more complex, however, when they assessed the quality of projects—not only how well was the work done, but how much a project benefited the recipients, and how much it advanced coalition goals, including COIN goals. The difference in metrics in terms of methodology, and goals evaluated between the military, USAID, and other donors added another layer of complexity.

A related challenge was the incompatibility of databases. The U.S. military used one system, USAID another, and the Government of Afghanistan relied on a third. By 2008, the U.S. Embassy

launched an effort to resolve this issue, but merging separate databases was challenging. In some cases, there was no central repository of data previously collected—it resided on hard drives, thumb drives, and servers of units and officers who had long since departed Afghanistan. The mundane problem of different e-mail systems between State, USAID, ISAF, the U.S. military, and the Afghan government made information sharing harder than it needed to be, as did the military's tendency to put much data on the classified SIPRnet system.

Quality assurance also presented challenges, particularly in areas with security problems. While the military could visit projects if convoys were available (given military priorities), it was much more difficult for USAID workers to move around—they often had to rely on military patrols that might or might not go to all the places they needed to visit. Nongovernmental organizations also tended to avoid moving with the military in order to maintain their status as neutral players. Long-term maintenance of projects was also a challenge—with very limited budgets. The Afghan government (particularly at the local level) did not necessarily have the means to maintain large projects such as roads.

## Afghan Perceptions

What did the Afghans in RC-East think about these development efforts? The answer seemed to change over time—in 2004, the mood was one of hope, with the expectation that the international community would bring the resources and capabilities to improve people's lives.<sup>15</sup> By 2008, the overall mood changed, as these expectations were often not met. One factor was that, while Afghans heard of large international donations arriving in Kabul, they often did not see immediate returns—leading them to the conclusion the money was feeding corruption or funding comfortable lifestyles among foreign aid workers in Kabul. This depended on location. Rural areas remained poor, but some towns such as Jalalabad, Khost, and Ghazni saw relative progress, some districts received significant flows of money by local standards, and large road project areas received direct benefits.

Did the assistance projects mesh with what Afghans wanted? In the author's experience, at the local level Afghans themselves sometimes disagreed about what they wanted, with different parts of a

community or different tribes having different priorities. Considerable effort went into prioritizing projects, with coalition officers doing numerous, sometimes repetitive, surveys and shura sessions, which allowed a community to debate and (sometimes) concur on proposed projects. Some requests, such as grid electricity, were difficult to provide in a short time, and basic services—health and education in most areas—required time to build up.

Particularly along the insecure border areas with Pakistan, and increasingly after the insurgency gained momentum in 2005, security was the priority for many Afghans. Beyond that, many Afghans in RC-East, especially in rural areas, lived at a subsistence level. As a result, jobs that augmented income from small-scale farming were the priority. This was a critical COIN issue as well. A strong rationale for creating jobs was to offer young men more than insurgent groups might pay them to carry a gun or set off IEDs. A national survey by the Asia Foundation published in 2008 notes that, after security, the most important issues were economic issues including unemployment (31 percent), high prices (22 percent), poor economy (17 percent), and corruption (14 percent). This study also notes that “The most important local problems relate to lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity (30 percent), water (22 percent), and roads (18 percent)” and that “at an aggregate national level, electricity supply is ranked as the top priority, followed by water supply, roads, health care, and education.”<sup>16</sup>

## Success of COIN Efforts

Although it is very difficult to quantify in any meaningful way, in the author's experience development assistance in RC-East between 2004 and 2008 clearly contributed to improving the lives of many people in eastern Afghanistan, and supported COIN efforts. In a broader sense, it increased tolerance of U.S. forces operating in an area traditionally hostile to outsiders, where the population weighed the direct benefits of U.S. assistance against any perceived need to force the foreigners out. Projects in the earlier part of this period seemed to provide a sense of hope among a population that, after decades of war, was exhausted and probably suffering from a form of communal post-traumatic stress disorder. Among other donors, USAID programs were designed to establish a sustainable economy in



RC-East, and CERP filled some short and medium term gaps. These development programs provided something the insurgents could not match, and were therefore an “asymmetric” advantage. Some jobs programs probably held down poppy production by providing alternative livelihoods, which in turn helped prevent a large-scale narcotics problem that would have made COIN even more complex in RC-East.

Field officers, as well as the current literature, come to a variety of conclusions regarding any positive correlation between development programs and effective COIN. Several U.S. military officers told the author that road projects under CERP had clear, positive COIN effects. The Afghans saw the roads as having direct practical benefits—by providing access to markets and as a source of construction employment, which the insurgents could not match. Roads also showed the provincial Afghan government was functioning and making a positive impact, while making it easier for government officials to reach the population and organize shuras in mountainous terrain. Completed road projects also showed that the international community got results, and was not just making plans

and proposals. Similarly, CERP served the military in “economy of force” situations, where projects provided a presence and an impact in areas where patrols were infrequent due to limited numbers of soldiers.

David Kilcullen, in his excellent study of road building projects during this period in Konar, notes an additional benefit: the road building project “seems to be succeeding because people have used the process of the roads construction, especially the close engagement with district and tribal leaders this entails, as a framework around which to organize a full-spectrum strategy . . . to separate insurgents from the people, win local allies, connect the population to the government, build local governance capacity, modify and improve governance capacity, (and) swing tribes that had supported the insurgency into the government side.”<sup>17</sup> Kilcullen is positive about the COIN effects, noting a “conscious and well-developed strategy that uses the road as a tool, and seizes the opportunity to generate security, economic, governance, and political benefits.”<sup>18</sup> A common saying among military officers was that “security ends where the road ends,” underscoring the importance of these projects for security forces as well.



(U.S. Army, SSGT Isaac A. Graham)

**U.S. Army soldiers from the Kalagush Provincial Reconstruction Team conduct a foot patrol outside Forward Operating Base Kalagush in Nuristan Province, Afghanistan, 12 June 2007.**

Carter Malkasian and Gerald Meyerle make a positive connection between development projects and COIN effects during research carried out in RC-East during 2007 and 2008. They note that “in Khost an aggressive project ‘blitz’ corresponded with fewer attacks and the emergence of a real partnership between tribes and the government. In Konar, road projects in two major river valleys led to a rise in local community political participation and local resistance to insurgent activity. In Ghazni, PRT projects appear to have helped counter rising violence, and the PRTs focus on reducing corruption and improving Afghan public health can be said to have improved governance.”<sup>19</sup>

However, a 2010 Wilton Park conference that brought together military, government officials, and development workers to examine the effectiveness of development on COIN in Afghanistan came to some less positive conclusions.<sup>20</sup> Among other views, the conference concluded that development assistance often provided stabilization benefits at a tactical level, the longer-term strategic benefits were less clear. The conference also noted that “Too much aid money spent quickly with little oversight can be delegitimizing and destabilizing in many ways, including by: fueling corruption; creating destabilizing winner-loser dynamics in ethnically and tribally divided societies; supporting a lucrative war/aid economy that benefits insurgents, corrupt government officials and other malign actors; and creating perverse incentives among key actors to maintain the status quo of insecurity and bad governance.”

Andrew Wilder, in his perceptive 2009 paper, makes a similar argument, saying “despite counterinsurgency doctrine’s heavy reliance on the assumption that aid ‘wins hearts and minds’ not to mention the billions of dollars being spent on it, there is remarkably limited evidence from Afghanistan supporting a link between aid and stability.” Wilder makes the case that “As the conflict has proceeded, Afghans’ perceptions of U.S. and international aid, as well as those who deliver it (be they military forces, the government, aid contractors, or NGOs) have grown overwhelmingly negative.”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the best conclusion at this time is that development projects clearly provided tactical benefits for counterinsurgency. Strategic gains may well be mixed, but it will take years for this to be clear. Separately, the infusion of large amounts of assistance

funding almost certainly fueled corruption, and there is a danger of establishing a culture of dependency on foreign assistance as well. It is also worth considering how much these projects will benefit the Afghan government and security forces in the future, as U.S. forces draw down and hand off difficult provinces such as Konar. Will the clear COIN benefits from the construction of roads remain after the eventual handoff to the Afghan government, or will entirely new projects be needed to maintain any counterinsurgency momentum?

## Lessons Learned

- The large infusion of development funds into RC-East supported COIN efforts, provided an asymmetrical advantage that the Taliban and other insurgent groups could not match—projects that improved people’s lives and prospects for their children’s future. It also provided “space” and a degree of acceptance for an international presence among a traditional, suspicious, mostly Pashtun population. Otherwise, the local population would most likely have met this presence—particularly a military presence—with considerably more hostility.

- Given the very low standard of living, particularly in rural areas, small, cheap projects often make a positive impact on people’s lives in the short term. For example, improvements to existing irrigation systems, community projects to pave roads with stones, improvement of market areas, refurbishment or construction of school buildings, or assistance with crop or livestock production often had a very good cost to benefit ratio. While nascent during this period, microcredit schemes had considerable potential.

- In addition to differing cultures, many different “clocks” were in play on development issues during this period. The U.S. military wanted (and at times was able) to move quickly and get results. This reflected a “can-do” culture, tours of less than 15 months (which spurred officers to get projects accomplished in this time period), and the reality that development was a key to COIN—and to saving soldier’s lives. USAID was often more deliberate, using years of experience in what works best in development—while at the same time being more restrained by regulations and oversight relative to CERP. Afghan society, particularly in rural areas, often moved to the slow rhythm of an agricultural, consensus-based society. These three very different

speeds led to considerable friction. The Taliban and other insurgent groups had yet another “clock”—the perception that they could outwait the international community from sanctuaries in Pakistan.

- During the early part of the period from 2004 to 2008, much of the development seemed ad hoc and lacking in overall strategy or goals. By 2008, various larger-scale programs were in place. In addition, the Afghan government did not yet present or implement development strategies systematically. There were disconnects at times between coalition efforts and the national framework, or large-scale international schemes, in part due to lack of communications. The framework of the newly developed ANDS, for example, was not necessarily used as a guideline, and commanders managing large CERP accounts were not always aware of Asian Development Bank or EU projects and the like planned for their areas of operation.

- In RC-East and other parts of Afghanistan during this period, some governors, as well as some in the central government, voiced concerns that provinces with security challenges, particularly active insurgencies, received more aid than relatively stable areas did. Some governors believed that efforts to limit insurgency in their provinces had the unintended result of reduced attention and assistance from the international community.

- By 2007, PRTs received increased CERP funding, in some cases tens of millions of dollars. While each PRT had different capacities, at times this stretched their abilities to identify the best potential projects, carry out project design, get buy-in from the involved communities, and carry out project oversight. This funding surge may have also reduced their ability to do other tasks, as development crowded out efforts such as political or public affairs work. In addition, while the need for development in local communities seemed inexhaustible due to low initial baselines, there may have been limits in the ability to absorb aid in relatively short time spans.

- Afghan society is complex at all levels—national, provincial, and local—and it has direct impacts on development projects. A detailed knowledge of local dynamics was crucial to planning and implementing successful projects. Never simple, this presented coalition officers with endless opportunities for mistakes. For example, not knowing that rivalries between tribes or communities often went

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back decades could result in officers inadvertently backing one group over another through project planning and implementation—possibly leading to anti-coalition feelings, and/or failed projects. The risks communities and their leaders sometimes ran in accepting projects was a related complication: insurgents at times targeted those who cooperated with counterinsurgents or the Afghan government.

- A related issue during the period 2004 to 2008 was the rapid rotation of units and officers through Afghanistan. On the ground for only 8 to 15 months, officers were challenged to build up the local knowledge and personal relationships needed for success—then a new group would follow, and begin the process anew. Later in the decade, the United States made an effort to improve the transfer of local and regional knowledge and to rotate the same military units, and civilians, through the same area, both of which showed positive results.

- Perhaps an even more fundamental issue during this period was the imbalance of civilian to military personnel on the ground in RC-East. With each PRT often having only two or three civilians from State, USAID and the Department of Agriculture (and often less in 2004 and 2005), and similar numbers in brigade commands, there were simply not enough civilians to manage development issues, and military officers therefore were pressed into service in these areas. While the military did have civil-military affairs units on the ground, by 2007, they were insufficient to cover the range of activities and the increasing flows of CERP funds. Officers in other specialties at times covered development issues.

- During this period, development projects and programs, particularly CERP, seemed strongly oriented toward infrastructure, with less emphasis on human resources and government institutions. In particular, the development of a larger, more adept civil service cadre was lacking. The lack of progress



was a weakness in the COIN strategy. The rapid rotation of military and civilian officers may have been a factor, in that building a civil service cadre in Afghanistan requires extended effort over many years, it is not something that can be achieved over a short tour of duty.

- The gradual reduction in USAID Foreign Service officers over a number of years had a direct impact on operations along the border. Compared to the number of career officers and programs deployed during the war in Vietnam, USAID badly stretched its resources during this war. At the same time, the lack of multiyear funding was a structural problem with major implications for COIN.

- The sustainability of projects—such as the maintenance of roads—presents serious long-term challenges in Afghanistan. While smaller, low-tech projects that have community buy-in can succeed without much Afghan government support, more complex projects—especially those that require a steady stream of maintenance funds and technological or engineering capabilities—are

challenging. The pressure to get projects completed during relatively short rotations almost certainly hindered sustainability.

- As CERP evolved in Afghanistan, one of its greatest advantages was the devolution of decision making to lower levels. Although oversight was in place for chain of command review of project packets, considerable responsibility went to lieutenants, captains, and majors. These officers often had the best visibility into the needs of communities and knew which projects might have the greatest COIN payoffs.

- Afghanistan has experienced various natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods, and outbreaks of disease. USAID and the military were often able to provide disaster relief, thanks to logistical capabilities, experience, manpower, and ready funding. These efforts often built goodwill among the population. Similarly, band-aid efforts such as “MEDCAPs” and “VETCAPs” that provided immediate medical or veterinary assistance yielded local goodwill.



(U.S. Air Force, SSgt. Joshua T. Jasper)

**A U.S. Army soldier from the Arizona Army National Guard provides site security from the turret of a HMMWV during a canal assessment mission with the Nangarhar Provincial Reconstruction Team, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan, 10 November 2007.**

- From a long-term perspective, the improvement in the educational system—in terms of quality, quantity, and access—will form the underpinnings of any sustainable democracy. This may be easier than it appears—Afghan parents seemed to put a priority on learning.

- While fundamental to the economic development of RC-East, large-scale projects such as electricity generation and transmission were clearly beyond the scope of PRTs and to some extent USAID efforts. Fortunately, later projects, particularly those bringing electricity from Central Asia, may help resolve this fundamental challenge.

- Afghanistan was a *rentier* state during much of the 20th century, but this may be less of an option given shrinking government budgets in the U.S. and Europe. This will almost certainly result in decreasing assistance budgets for Afghanistan in the future, although China may bolster its involvement in order to increase its access to Afghanistan's considerable mineral wealth.

- One long-term result of the money invested and the projects (and foreign military and civilian presence) is the partial transformation of Pashtun society. Roads that open up previously isolated valleys, the improved education system, and the provision of electricity have changed this part of the world. Commercially driven changes such as the rapid expansion of cell phone coverage have done the same. This rapid change may actually fuel some parts of the insurgency, as a violent reaction to modernization.

- There has been a lively debate, both within governments and in the academic press, over how much international development funds have fueled corruption in the Afghan government, and by extension Afghan society. While this is difficult to quantify, it is hard not to conclude that the large amounts of money, coupled with at times loose oversight, weak legal structures, and a mentality among some Afghans that it is best to grab what is available as insurance against future instability, have caused corruption to expand. Similarly, there are concerns over how much dependency the massive aid flows are causing. Again, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, given Afghan government fiscal realities and cultural tendencies, some degree of dependency has been formed.

- Microeconomics—jobs, affordable necessities such as food, and households' standards of living—are critical to the long-term success of COIN efforts.

If people see their living standards increase (or at least not get worse), they offer more support for the government and accept a foreign presence.

- As a basic tenet of development, mechanisms to hand the maintenance of projects over to the Afghans—government, NGOs, and communities—is of fundamental importance. In the rush to get projects moving in the early part of this period, this sort of planning was not always a priority. In a related issue, community “ownership” of projects was not always optimal. Infrastructure, such as schools or medical clinics, did not fully benefit communities if Afghan staff and administrative support was not yet in place. The centralization of the Afghan state also presented challenges to local ownership of projects, as did the difficulty of doing regional projects that involved multiple provincial governments unaccustomed to working together. The international community found it difficult to manage expectations: many Afghans expected more than the international community could deliver, while at times too many promises were made.

- After decades of war, it was Afghanistan's misfortune that so much money desperately needed for reconstruction and development instead had to go to defray arms, security, and military expenses. These tens of billions of dollars could have instead gone into education, health, and infrastructure. This is a fact for which the Taliban and its backers should be held accountable.

## Epilogue: U.S. Efforts After 2008

Many of the impediments to efficient development in RC-East from 2004 to 2008 have since received high-level attention within the U.S. government, with various positive results. As a 2011 Senate staff report concludes, “The U.S. effort (in Afghanistan) began in earnest in 2009, when the administration and Congress recognized the need for properly resourcing the civilian effort.”<sup>22</sup> The establishment within the State Department of the office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan under Ambassador Richard Holbrooke provided a single office where officers from various bureaus and agencies could exchange information and coordinate efforts. Holbrooke also headed a “civilian surge” that brought hundreds of additional officers into Afghanistan, both in the Embassy and in field positions, pushed for improved coordination of development efforts

along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and saw the need for more assistance in agriculture, given the large number of Afghans who make a living through crops and livestock. The U.S. review of the Afghanistan strategy during the last months of 2009 also provided more direction to the overall effort.

The Afghan government has gradually increased its development capacity, as ministries expanded their staffing, put internal controls in place so that more funds could be provided directly to ministries for projects, and gained experience in project management and interagency coordination.

The U.S. embassy in Kabul created new positions to improve development efforts, including an ambassador-level development coordinator (the Coordinating Director for Development and Economic Affairs). An RC-East civilian coordinator position was established in Bagram, and filled by a senior civil service officer, while civilian staffing at PRTs and brigade commands were significantly increased. The size of staffs grew at the district level, supported by programs such as the District Delivery Program, with USAID funds reoriented to support projects and local governance at this level, particularly in “key terrain districts.” In 2010, USAID launched the “Accountable Assistance for Afghanistan” program to increase controls over its funding. During the same year, the U.S. military published a “Counterinsurgency Contracting Guidance” and established Task Force 2010 to address issues with contracting, so that “coalition forces have been doing a much better job of channeling assistance and construction dollars

into the right hands.”<sup>23</sup> NATO allies, particularly the Poles in Ghazni and the French in Kapisa, provided significant numbers of troops, while Turkey and the Czech Republic became involved in civilian efforts through their PRTs in Wardak and Logar Provinces, respectively.

Given the long border with Pakistan, and the difficulty of controlling the flow of people and contraband across it, what happens in Pakistan has considerable influence in the Afghan border provinces. The establishment of “border coordinators” at the U.S. Embassies in Kabul and Islamabad helped coordinate development efforts, lacking at times in previous years. The decision to provide several billions of dollars of additional assistance to Pakistan could also benefit Afghanistan’s border areas. Importantly, the counterinsurgency offensives of the Pakistani military in Swat, Mohmand, Bajaur, and South Waziristan—all of which border Afghanistan—could improve security enough that development efforts in Afghanistan are more effective.

The United States deployed a cadre of talented, dedicated military and civilian officers to RC-East between 2004 and 2008, who had a considerable positive impact, despite risk and hardships. Given the very low human development index baseline of 2001, the difficulty of reconstructing a nation in the middle of an active insurgency, and the challenges of getting programs and projects “right,” the international community will need to be involved in Afghanistan for years, and probably decades. **MR**

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