

The U.S. Interagency Role in Future Conflict Prevention: *Provincial Reconstruction Teams* for Select Partner Nations

by Kevin D. Stringer and Katie M. Sizemore

Introduction

The international strategic environment has shifted to a situation where peace is more threatened by weak states, whose instability is a breeding ground for violent conflict, than by the world's most powerful actors.¹ For this reason, it is important to develop U.S. interagency conflict-prevention capabilities in selected partner nations. To date, several civil-military initiatives, such as provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative, and counter-extremism projects in the Horn of Africa, have strengthened target-state capacity across multiple, conflict-prevention dimensions including security sector reform, institutional capacity building, and economic development.²

Yet, amazingly after a decade of expeditionary wars and despite these efforts, the U.S. government still needs a serious, mature effort to build a truly effective civilian-military assistance and capacity-building program.³ Notwithstanding endless panels, commissions, studies, conferences, and hand-wringing over the past decade about developing a whole-of-government capability, it has not happened. The State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) do not have the resources to undertake large-scale, protracted operations. No civil part of the U.S. government has a robust, expeditionary capability to help build legal, governance, and intelligence systems in alien cultures that lack a tradition of rule by law.⁴ Hence a deficit remains in the whole-of-government force structure for dealing specifically with partner

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nations in the conflict-prevention phase.

The key to future success in American interagency conflict prevention in weak or failing states depends on a proactive rather than a reactive approach. The current focus on developing expeditionary civilian capabilities to match the military's prowess implies an ad-hoc reaction to crises in troubled lands. An alternative method is to pre-designate weak states that merit American national security attention and create standing interagency constructs at the partner-nation level to address the root causes of instability before these countries ignite into actual and debilitating conflict. A modified and permanent PRT structure provides an interagency model for tackling selected weak states through capacity-building at the local and operational levels. This proposal contrasts with the State Department's current methodology of centralizing the coordination of civilian conflict response within the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, which in turn deploys its experts worldwide.

This proposed future PRT would be a permanent organization, based locally in identified countries, within the respective domain of the U.S. embassy country team. This organization would not focus on responding, stabilizing, or even mitigating ongoing conflict, but rather on preventing the escalation of violence before it occurs using a tailored, rather than overarching, method.⁵ This organizational recommendation also reinforces the concept that nation building in both pre- and post-conflict environments is primarily a civilian and not a military task. Nation building should not even be a *de facto* military mission. If the essence of building a nation is governance and economic matters, then the State Department should assume the interagency leadership role.⁶ State Department officers should lead a future interagency unit of action and integrate it into an existing national or regional organizational structure, such as the U.S. embassy country

team.

This article elaborates on the concept of this future PRT by defining weak states, highlighting the importance of anticipation in conflict prevention in such states, and discussing the origins of the PRTs and their use in both Afghanistan and Iraq. It subsequently proposes how a modified, future PRT placed in priority countries could proactively address causes of conflict and strengthen the foundations of allied, but weak states before real conflict explodes. The article then describes a functionally-oriented PRT structure, while underlining the prerequisites for organizational success in terms of funding, personnel resourcing, and security for these new units.

Weak States and Prioritization

While there is no universal definition, a weak state can be characterized by decreased physical control over sovereign territory, a lack of a monopoly on the use of force, declining legitimacy to make authoritative decisions for the majority of the community, and an inability to provide security or social services to its people. Such states usually witness civil unrest, a slow or nonexistent economy, unaccountable governance, weak institutions, and a wide range of other factors, such as the presence of extremist organizations. Addressing conflict in weak states will remain a top priority for the U.S., but understanding their real threat remains somewhat elusive. Although reasons for state weakness or failure are complex, they are not unpredictable.⁷

Conventional wisdom asserts that failed states constitute a dominant, national security threat that demands urgent efforts to stabilize them. In 2004, Francis Fukuyama stated that weak and failed states constituted "the single most critical threat to U.S. national security."⁸ Less than a decade later, this assertion is questionable. Some failed states merely fail, with no particular danger to anyone. In many

cases, the reasons for state failure may be embedded in the political culture of the society, immune to outside help. In others, the efforts needed to stabilize such states are often so Herculean as to defy the attempt.⁹ Given the realities, policymakers must cast off the entire concept of state failure and evaluate potential threats to U.S. national security from weak states with a much more critical eye.¹⁰ With a more stringent risk assessment optic, only a limited selection of weak states will warrant the long-term attention of American national security decision makers.

Once identified, these weak states will pose a mix of security, development, and governance issues that can be addressed preemptively through the smart employment of U.S. administration resources to develop national capabilities. No single U.S. government agency has the expertise or resources to independently accomplish the wide range of activities needed to prevent and resolve conflict in weak and failing states. To date, U.S. initiatives to address weak states are limited by a lack of interagency cohesion. The U.S. does not have an official strategy or interagency guideline to follow when dealing with weak or failing states.¹¹ Therefore, a window of opportunity still remains to integrate civilian and military activities in a proper organizational structure, at a reasonable cost, and at the local or tactical levels.

Preventive vs. Reactionary Approaches

Any new policy toward weak states should focus on prevention rather than on reacting to an already established conflict. Addressing the sources and causes of low-intensity conflict in weak states before they reach the high-intensity level is critical to the effectiveness of a new model. Preventive action means being proactive and having a civil-military force that is ready to help and understands the unique needs and issues that may be ongoing in a country at the

national and local levels. Political, economic, and social programs are usually more valuable than military operations in addressing root causes of conflict.¹² In addition, an interagency approach should focus on helping those that have invited assistance and can be helped, such as countries like Liberia, Mali, and Haiti.¹³ Therefore, formulating a new approach to

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weak states would require identifying four to five states that have a national security priority for the U.S., and subsequently piloting an effective conflict-prevention program within their territories. In this way, limited resources could be allocated for effectiveness as well as for mutually beneficial programs to take place. PRT-like units offer a path to achieving these goals.

Short History of Provincial Reconstruction Teams

Provincial reconstruction teams are a part of the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization's response to the challenges of nation building in post-conflict intervention zones. The U.S. leads 12 of the 27 PRTs in Afghanistan and had 22 of the 31 teams in Iraq. PRTs in Afghanistan and Iraq differed in both their compositions and missions, which will be highlighted in the following sections. Generically, PRTs are civil-military or interagency organizations designed to work in areas that have recently witnessed open hostilities. They were intended to create a transitional structural atmosphere to provide

security and facilitate reconstruction and economic development. First implemented by the U.S in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002, over time they became an integral part of peacekeeping efforts and stabilization and reconstruction operations in the wider, Central Command theater of operations.¹⁴

Initially, PRTs were characterized as an ad-hoc approach to security and development. Although composition depended on location and local circumstances in a province, the standard model first initiated in Afghanistan was military heavy. Their mandate stressed governance, force protection, and quick-impact development projects to win the population's "hearts and minds" as a part of an overall counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. The emphasis on governance led to supporting Afghan provincial governors during public education campaigns for national assembly elections, providing a security presence during those elections, and educating people on alternative livelihood programs which, for example, led to an 83 percent reduction in opium production in Nangahar province.¹⁵

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The security role of PRTs was limited to self-protection while providing a security presence and assisting Afghan forces. For development, earlier PRTs established relations with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and nongovernmental organizations that were

already in Afghanistan. Despite the limitations of a restrictive mandate and their small size, PRTs provided technical assistance and training to Afghan police. One initial success was the key role PRTs played in the UN disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation of armed rebel groups.¹⁶ In secure areas, PRTs were able to turn their attention to village improvement projects such as schools, clinics, wells, roads, and bridges.¹⁷ PRTs were also able to act as the "eyes and ears" for policymakers by providing information on political, economic, and social trends at the local level. PRTs in both Iraq and Afghanistan supplied a steady stream of insights to brigade and division commanders on neighborhood conditions. They furnished operational foundations for COIN efforts by building ties with local populations, gaining knowledge of local politics and society, and developing governance and basic justice systems.¹⁸

Depending on where they were employed, PRTs faced a number of challenges because of their limited mandate and small size. Relations between PRTs and combat units relied heavily on personalities and individual circumstances, and these personal interactions are often cited as one of the strongest variables affecting the degree of success of PRT missions. Critics faulted PRTs for their mixed effectiveness and for lacking a clear method to evaluate their efforts. Although there are naysayers, PRTs contributed to the decentralization of power in Afghanistan with the strategic benefit of bringing decision making closer to the populations that should be served by the government. Finally, while not cheap to operate, they are less expensive than large combat units.¹⁹

PRTs in Afghanistan

The International Security Assistance Force Handbook described a PRT as "a civil-military institution that is able to penetrate the more unstable and insecure areas because

of its military component and is able to stabilize these areas because of the combined capabilities of its diplomacy, military, and economic components.”²⁰ Afghanistan PRTs are predominately military rather than development organizations; therefore, they are best suited for security tasks while secondarily delivering development assistance. A lieutenant colonel commands the PRT in Afghanistan, and its 82 staff members are composed almost entirely of military personnel, with the exception of representatives from the State Department, the USAID, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Afghanistan PRT consists of two U.S. Army civil affairs teams with four Soldiers each. One team focuses on civil-impact, development projects, and the second team runs the civil-military operations center. A U.S. National Guard platoon typically provides protection.

These Afghan-based PRTs are generally part of a larger team, operating in conjunction with battalions, brigades, and Special Forces units. They have had difficulty coordinating development projects and initially suffered from a lack of information on the progress of results. Additionally, the use of outside interpreters in the Afghanistan PRTs often leads to misunderstandings when trying to communicate with local populations and the provincial government they are trying to assist. Ideally, fluent native speakers would be a part of a team and would possess knowledge of the local languages and cultures. According to a report conducted in 2005 by the United States Institute for Peace, the most effective PRTs in Afghanistan were those where the military and civilian elements fused into a close-knit and mutually supportive team. Overall, PRTs in Afghanistan helped provide what the Taliban could not—development projects and a steady stream of improvement infrastructure—as well as helping with stability and providing breathing room until local governance was established.

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PRTs in Iraq

In 2005, the U.S. Embassy in Iraq decided to replicate the PRT program in Afghanistan and design a similar initiative for Iraq. The PRTs in Iraq were amended based on experiences in Afghanistan and were considered to be more interagency in their composition. Their mission statement agreed upon by both the State Department and the military was:

To assist Iraq’s provincial governments with developing a transparent and sustained capability to govern, promoting increased security and rule of law, promoting political and economic development, and providing the provincial administration necessary to meet the basic needs of the population.²²

Unlike PRTs in Afghanistan, Iraq-based PRTs were led by a State Department official and were composed primarily of civilian personnel. They were initially envisioned to consist of six to eight core members. In addition to the State Department officer who headed the team, additional members included a military deputy, a USAID representative, a unit combat engineer, a unit civil affairs officer, and a representative from the Army major military command responsible for the security of the province, which usually meant a brigade

combat team. In three of the ten provinces under U.S. management, PRTs were the functional equivalents of U.S. consulates. Their composition included representatives from the

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State Department, Justice Department, USDA, USAID, and Army civil affairs teams, as well as other U.S. military forces or commercial contractors who provided security. PRTs in Iraq also provided security for U.S. assistance programs outside Baghdad.²³

PRTs in Iraq benefited greatly from lessons learned in Afghanistan. Key interagency decisions for U.S. PRTs within Iraq were coordinated primarily through biweekly meetings of representatives from the State Department, USAID, Department of Defense (DoD), and USDA. This formal, interagency working group system provided a uniform process for creating policy, making logistical decisions, and sharing information among agencies. Most PRTs in Iraq lacked their full complement of personnel and there were time gaps between staffing the open assignments that caused problems in coordinating and completing projects, as civilians usually served 12 months while military personnel usually served 6–9 months at a time. This frequent staff turnover caused recurrent changes to PRT objectives and programs.²⁴ This Iraqi template, improving upon the PRT Afghan experience, provides the model for the conflict prevention PRT of the future.

The Future PRT

While the PRTs in Iraq and Afghanistan were geared toward a conflict and post-conflict response, an adapted process for the future should focus on pre-conflict activities that take place on a larger scale and over a more fixed and longer period of time to ensure sustainable results. A modified PRT set-up, integrated within the State Department's respective country team, would mean having a countrywide presence in selected weak states vulnerable to instability. A recent report published by the Center for New American Security highlighted this trend of civilian operations moving away from small, project-oriented programs in virtually every developing country to focusing on conducting fewer, yet better-scaled projects in targeted developing countries where progress is possible.²⁵

As a first step the U.S. government would identify four or five states with national security relevance as pilots for a PRT conflict-prevention program. With current federal budget constraints and limited interagency resources, the U.S. government must forecast which weak states are relevant for future national security interests and invest there. This prioritization of effort finds precedent in the European Union's Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, which limits its scope to only three priority countries in the region—Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—while recognizing the inextricable link between security and development.²⁶ With partner states defined, the respective U.S. country team, working with the host government, would establish the number of PRTs needed for the country based on a provincial or regional basis, while identifying the type of development and stabilization projects required. Since different loci of power exist in many countries, and the emergence of economic regions as well as the rise of local nationalism for ethnic minorities heightens this diffusion of power, countrywide emplacement of a number of PRTs is a way to establish footprints in remote regions and go

to the root causes of instability. A case in point for this approach would be a state such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, a vast country roughly one-quarter the size of the United States. Given its size, immense mineral wealth, strong regional autonomy, and ethnic conflicts, a number of power nodes and influence points exist far beyond the capital city of Kinshasa. Multiple PRTs are one way to establish a footprint in these other nodes of power and mitigate drivers of conflict. Another example would be a country like Mali, where the Malian national strategy focuses on insecurity issues in the northern regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal.²⁷ Here only a single PRT might be required for initial efforts.

The personnel composition of this future PRT should address the functional areas of governance, development, foreign internal defense, and law enforcement. For governance, the conflict prevention PRT would have two State Department Foreign Service officers, one as team head and one as the deputy team head. These officers would be either political or economic experts with requisite regional expertise. For development, the team would have one USAID representative and a single USDA officer. The former would manage classic development projects and funds, while the latter would address the extreme importance of agriculture and husbandry in many developing countries, as evidenced in Afghanistan.²⁸

The internal defense function would be covered by a military officer with a civil affairs, foreign area officer, or Special Forces background. Foreign internal defense is defined as the participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security. The focus of U.S. efforts is to support the host nation's internal defense and development, which can be described as the full

range of measures taken by a nation to promote its growth and protect itself from security threats.²⁹ The assigned U.S. foreign internal defense lieutenant colonel or major would be supported by a senior non-commissioned officer. Lastly, the team requires a law enforcement component for developing local law enforcement agencies and addressing threats such as illicit trafficking, corruption, or illicit finance. This requirement is supported from historical feedback that noted the need for not only more development-focused and capacity-building projects, but also rule-of-law civilian expertise.³⁰ This latter area would be covered by an appropriate generalist from the Department of Justice or Treasury. Other functional areas could be added based upon country requirements. Total PRT team size would be seven to ten individuals.

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To ramp-up these PRTs, the U.S. government should address four fundamental areas: organizational funding, personnel staffing, PRT security, and governance. Assured funding for the teams and their projects is critical for survival. Optimally, Congress should mandate this financing on a multi-year basis to prevent money being reallocated by individual agencies, rushed project planning and design, and the development of a “use it or lose it” attitude. The funding should be administered by the State Department, with sufficient amounts available at the PRT commander’s discretion to initiate development, agricultural, and other projects. This practice would mirror the military’s ability in Iraq and Afghanistan to fund local projects. In

fact, small amounts of funding for seed projects seem to offer better prospects for development than larger sums.³¹ Small amounts also mitigate issues of corruption.

For staffing, these postings would be fixed, longer-term, and placed on the respective departmental personnel bidding lists. In Afghanistan, PRTs were successful in meeting with provincial officials, involving local communities, hiring locals, and sometimes incorporating training programs, but short deployments made it difficult for members to understand and engage with local politics. Any future model should address this personnel dilemma as an important component of long-term success.³² For the future PRT, personnel would be rotated from the various agencies through these fixed organizations on 18-month to 3-year assignments. For example, the State Department could assign an economic officer to the relevant embassy for 18 months and then rotate the person to one of the PRTs in the field for the remaining 18 months. Team members would report to and be evaluated by the U.S. ambassador or deputy chief of mission. Military team members would be granted joint service credit for these postings.

PRT security will demand a country-specific approach. Since these units are not operating in conflict zones, the security element could be smaller and adapted to local conditions. This calibration would be best determined by the embassy regional security officer in cooperation with the host government. Depending on the threat spectrum, security could be managed in three possible ways. One option would be for the host nation to provide security with the PRT military representative as the liaison officer or advisor to the national security force. A second option would be to use contract security, with the team's senior military officer responsible for oversight. Lastly, U.S. soldiers from the Army National Guard or Reserve could be used in six-month rotational tours. For the latter

variant, Citizen-Soldiers are preferred in order to capitalize on usable civilian skills given the local focus of the PRTs.

Lastly, the PRTs would be integrated into the local ambassador's country team construct and report directly to him, and not to Washington-based bureaus. Unlike consulates, these PRTs would provide a balanced, interagency entity at the local level to address issues of security, development, and capacity building. They would strengthen presence and influence in important localities with a smaller footprint, while symbolically coming out from behind the embassy walls to address causes of instability and conflict. These direct PRT inroads into localities could create leverage opportunities for other embassy departments in areas such as trade, investment, information, public diplomacy, and business.

Conclusion

Conflict prevention is a challenging area for the U.S. interagency since it requires foresight, national security prioritization, and a willingness to work on the ground at the local level. Current Washington-based initiatives take on an expeditionary character, which implies reactions to crises rather than prevention. These expeditionary measures are also undertaken by agencies that do not have a tradition of organizing, planning, and executing such missions. This paper proposes a future PRT organization to be used in priority weak states with U.S. national security relevance. These civilian-led, modified PRTs would address governance, institution-building, development, and stability measures at the local level (province or sub-state). Strategically placed in critical regions in certain countries, multiple PRTs could provide direct local access to decision makers and populations while symbolically moving beyond the embassy walls. In this way, PRT personnel would "swim with the fish" of the population to premeditate causes of conflict.

The advantages of this modified PRT model are a fixed rather than ad-hoc organization, stabilized personnel tours, and a longer-term focus on capacity-building projects. With appropriate funding and staffing, such an entity could be piloted in one or two states to test the proof of concept. In this fashion, the U.S. interagency effort could move from the reactive back to the anticipatory front half of the conflict spectrum curve. **IAJ**

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