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## Provincial Reconstruction Teams A “cultural shift” within NATO?

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## *Editorial*

Discussing the future of peace operations at the University of Chicago in April 2010, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen underlined the need to strengthen the interaction between military security and civilian development in order to promote a Comprehensive Approach in Afghanistan and other areas of conflicts.

Indeed, since the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Afghanistan became part of the NATO-led ISAF mission in 2006, a wide variety of projects are underway. Schools are being rebuilt with the mentoring or assistance of ISAF engineers; pipelines are being constructed, bringing water to the local population; infrastructure is being repaired or built, thus facilitating communication; and access to medical assistance is being improved as well.

Aurel Niederberger's paper provides his assessment through a very timely analysis on the mandate of the PRTs, on NATO's Comprehensive Approach in Afghanistan, and on PRTs success so far

Furthermore, he raises a provocative question, on whether or not PRTs meet the strategic challenges in Afghanistan.

This paper is the result of the NATO School's ongoing cooperation and research exchange programme with partner institutions, such as International Relations and Security Network (ISN).Switzerland.

Mr Niederberger is currently completing his Master's thesis and resided in Oberammergau during the preparation of this paper.

I would like to extend my thanks to Mr. Niederberger for his work and contribution to this academic exchange program.

LTC Xavier Bréhier, FRA-A  
Course Director of the ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams Course, NATO School



## Provincial Reconstruction Teams A “cultural shift” within NATO?

### *Introduction:*

“The Taliban cannot militarily defeat us – but we can defeat ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> This quote from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Tactical Directive illustrates how the true challenge in Afghanistan lies beyond mere military tasks. Yet the Taliban’s inability to militarily defeat NATO is just one side of the coin – the other side is that the Taliban themselves cannot be defeated with pure military means either. It is not great power politics that determines NATO’s success this time, rather a complicated interaction of social, micro-political, economic and military factors. NATO encounters one of the most serious challenges in its history – a challenge of an entirely unexpected shape. Neither the type of enemy, nor the geographic region nor the scope of the mission – which has shifted away from collective defence towards nation building – are what NATO has been established and prepared for.

After ending the Taliban regime in 2001, NATO is leading the UN-mandated Peace Support Mission called ISAF<sup>2</sup> since 2003. In the search for the right procedure, the so-called “Comprehensive Approach” has emerged as the preferred method to answer the multi-faceted challenges in Afghanistan by combining military efforts with the development

aid and extension of governance capabilities. For this purpose, NATO has divided the ISAF troops into PRTs. Each PRT is responsible for either one or two provinces and is led by an ISAF-nation, which is usually, but not necessarily, a NATO-member. PRTs are the most distinct feature of the ISAF mission and they have become a primary tool to deliver large-scale reconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, there is currently no common opinion, let alone a standardisation, of what exactly PRTs should look like. Quite the opposite is true: PRTs offer a broad flexibility and each nation, of course, prefers its own approach, shaped by domestic and international political pressure. It is of no surprise then that ISAF PRTs differ considerably in structure and procedures. But it becomes even more complicated as the involved nations and organizations hold different views on ISAF’s dual role in development aid and counter-terrorism; which one is the final purpose and which one is but a means to an end? Shedding light on this will be the first step in this analysis.

In order to depict the idea behind NATO’s approach to the ISAF Mission and to critically reflect on the actual implementation of these ideas in the field, this article considers the strategic level, the operational level and the tactical level. The mission purpose as it is stated by the Security Council must be first examined, then NATO’s approach towards fulfilling this mission, and finally, the main challenges that this approach encounters in the field will be explored. It will also be

<sup>1</sup> Stanley McChrystal (2009): Tactical Directive of ISAF. URL:

[http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official\\_texts/Tactical\\_Directive\\_090706.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/Tactical_Directive_090706.pdf) (all URLs were last checked in March 2010)

<sup>2</sup> In NATO language, ISAF is a “non-Article 5 crisis management operation”. The UN again has its own terminology. “Peace Support Operation” is used throughout this article as a generic term. For more information on NATO crisis management terminology see [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49192.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49192.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Carter Malkasian / Gerald Meyerle (2009): Provincial Reconstruction Teams: How Do We Know They Work? Strategic Studies Institute, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/Pubs/Display.Cfm/pubID=911>

scrutinized how sincerely the ideals of the Comprehensive Approach have been implemented into action so far. Some comparative evaluations of PRTs in Afghanistan do exist and will be referred to as well to reflect on the effectiveness of the PRTs.

### *“NATO/ISAF PRT”: The history behind the name*

Long acronyms tend to spread confusion, but in this case the acronym “NATO/ISAF PRT” reveals more than it may have meant to. It depicts how the approach towards Afghanistan has evolved in the past few years and how NATO itself has evolved. In December 2001, two and a half months after NATO’s collective defence operation in Afghanistan began, the UN Security Council passed a resolution to establish the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The ISAF was a force restricted to security, taking over only an assisting role. However, today only the “I” in “ISAF” remains true: ISAF adopted tasks that went far beyond security issues; the “Assistance” became merely a label (or an optimistic wish, lets say); and the ISAF personnel does not consist just of members of the armed forces, but also comprises civilians that were extensively involved in the work of PRTs.

This development began when NATO took over command of ISAF in 2003. After that, ISAF has been expanded step by step over the entire Afghan territory and it was divided into PRTs. “PRT” is a better description of what ISAF is actually doing in Afghanistan: looking at the name, we would expect a reconstruction team to have a much wider task-load than a security assistance force does, and to go beyond “simple” military issues. They

implement the so-called “Comprehensive Approach”.<sup>4</sup>

While at first glimpse “NATO/ISAF PRT”, is just an accumulation of acronyms, it reflects the history of the operations in Afghanistan since 2001: It depicts the shift from a NATO Article 5 operation to a “classic” Peace Support Operation (PSO) – the first two years of ISAF – where the military sector and the development sector formed separated entities (an approach to PSOs that has blossomed in the 90’s) and finally to the Comprehensive Approach, which became popular in the new century as the 90’s approach to PSOs proved to be insufficient.<sup>5</sup>

It is of no surprise that the changing approaches and widespread responsibilities easily cause confusion over what the official tasks and goals of ISAF actually are. This shall therefore be explained first, before having a closer and critical look at the PRTs.

### *The Mandate: Development Aid or Counter-Terrorism?*

The states that participate in ISAF hold different views on ISAF’s dual role in development and counter-terrorism. Some underline the necessity to fight terrorism, others emphasise ISAF’s role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and prefer to avoid the term “war”. The diverging national approaches and their varying interpretations of the purpose of ISAF raise questions and

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<sup>4</sup> Although the Comprehensive Approach is often perceived as an entirely new approach, it is not unparalleled in history: Consider for example the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program in the late stages of the war in Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> See Christian Moelling (2008): *Comprehensive Approaches to International Crisis Management*. CSS Analyses in Security Policy 3 (42), p.1: “If traditional peacekeeping focused on containment and reduction of military escalation, contemporary crisis management aims at a social, political, and economic transformation to reach a comprehensive conflict resolution.”



misunderstandings concerning the actual goal of ISAF. But the ISAF mandate, declared by the UN Security Council, clearly defines ISAF's original purpose.

The first ISAF mandate stems from December 2001. Since then, the Security Council has regularly passed resolutions to renew and extend the ISAF mandate. In all resolutions regarding the ISAF mandate, the Security Council states its support for "international efforts to root out terrorism". Furthermore, it refers to two other resolutions taken in the aftermath of 9/11 concerning international terrorism. Made before the dust of 9/11 has settled, these two resolutions contain vigorous postulations to combat terrorism, albeit without naming Afghanistan. Whereas the first of them, passed on September 12 (S/RES/1368, 2001)<sup>6</sup>, is just a short statement on the attacks, the second one (S/RES/1373, 2001) is more detailed. Based on Chapter VII, the Security Council condemns terrorism as a threat to international peace that must be combated by all states with available means; the Council announces to take all necessary steps to ensure the implementation of the resolution. Declaring terrorism as a threat to international peace allows the Security Council to implement the measures given by Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Council's strongest tool.

Therefore, the ISAF mandate is clearly rooted in the international strive against terrorism. Starting with resolution 1707 from September 12, 2006, almost exactly 5 years after 9/11 and a few months after ISAF's

expansion to the hard-fought south of Afghanistan, the ISAF mandate mentions ISAF's role in counter-terrorism with ever-growing detail. For the first time, the Taliban and Al Qaida are mentioned by name in the mandate. The counter-terrorism Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is declared a partner of ISAF and of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)<sup>7</sup>, encouraging cooperation between OEF and ISAF. In the renewal of the ISAF mandate in 2007, the Security Council states:

*"Reiterating* its support for the continuing endeavours by the Afghan Government, with the assistance of the international community, including ISAF and the OEF coalition, to improve the security situation and to continue to address the threat posed by the Taliban, Al-Qaida and other extremist groups, and *stressing* in this context the need for sustained international efforts, including those of ISAF and the OEF coalition [...]" (S/RES/1776, 2007, emphasizes in original). The Security Council furthermore *"calls upon* ISAF to continue to work in close consultation [...] with the OEF coalition in the implementation of the force mandate;" (S/RES/1776, 2007, §5, emphases in original).

The ISAF mission is therefore closely associated with OEF and the fight against terror; what remains unmentioned is the engagement in development aid. The anti-terror strives of the Security Council's member states is indeed the driving power behind the strong ISAF mandate.

Some other documents help to determine the purpose of ISAF and have to be considered here. In the beginning of 2006, representatives of important international organisation such as the UN, NATO, EU and

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<sup>6</sup> Security Council resolutions, here abbreviated as S/RES/[number] ([year]) can be found on the Security Council Homepage, URL: <http://www.un.org/documents/scres.htm>

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<sup>7</sup> The ANSF are comprised of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). For detailed information, see the ANSF Order of Battle, URL: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/oob/afghanistan/index.php>

more as well as over 50 countries, not including the several countries with observer status, met in London for a conference that resulted in the so-called Afghanistan Compact. This names (1) security, (2) governance/rule of law and human rights, and (3) social/economic development as the three main pillars for further action. Whereas NATO sees a role for ISAF in all of these areas, the Afghanistan Compact names ISAF only with relation to security tasks, notwithstanding that in 2006 NATO's PRT-strategy with its cross-area approach has already been implemented for years. The London Conference on Afghanistan held in January 2010 did not bring any changes in this regard either.

The Afghan government's explicit wish for an international force, which takes over tasks beyond mere security and actively engages in reconstruction, has been expressed in the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan from late 2001, and is often just called the "Bonn Agreement". This agreement has been elaborated upon between UN-representatives and representatives of the Afghan interim government, namely Hamid Karzai. It contains the pledge to the Security Council to mandate an international security force, stating that it "would be desirable if such a force were to assist in the rehabilitation of Afghanistan's infrastructure". Albeit a short reference expresses the Council's principal endorsement of the Bonn Agreement, it is striking that the above desire has never been transferred into any of the Security Council resolutions.

Reasons for this could be manifold: Whether the Security Council deliberately intended to leave the mandate as flexible as possible; or whether the Security Council would have preferred to see the UN-led

mission in Afghanistan, the UNAMA, in the lead role for reconstruction – investigating this is not purpose of this article. Important here is much more the conclusion that reconstruction or any other type of development aid is not part of the ISAF mandate as given by the UN Security Council: purpose of the ISAF mission is clearly and exclusively security.

### *NATO's Interpretation of the Mission: The Comprehensive Approach*

The aims and tasks of ISAF, as dictated by the Security Council, are in the security sector. But security in Afghanistan, which is the idea behind NATO's approach, can only be achieved by triggering political and economic development, thus winning the people's support. Hall and McChrystal state in the Counterinsurgency Guidance that NATO therefore<sup>8</sup>

"must undermine the insurgent argument while offering a more compelling alternative. Our argument must communicate – through word and deed – that we and GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] have the capability and commitment to *protect and support* the people",

To gain this support, NATO cannot focus exclusively on security tasks, but must foster good governance and economic development as well.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, NATO aims at using "localized development and economic support

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley McChrystal / Michael T. Hall (2009): ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance: Protecting the People is the mission. URL: [http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official\\_texts/counterinsurgency\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf), p. 4 (emphasizes by the author).

<sup>9</sup> The NATO terminology is "stabilization and reconstruction". As "stabilization" can be understood in a military as well as in a civilian context, this article will use generic terms instead of the NATO terminology to always clearly distinguish between military activities and activities in the civilian sector. For NATO terminology, see [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_51633.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_51633.htm)



to bring community leaders and people together for their own success".<sup>10</sup>

NATO's Comprehensive Approach is intended to reach security through social, political, and economic transformation. The ISAF Counterinsurgency Guidance explains:

"To be effective, therefore, we have to help change the local context so people are more attracted to building and protecting their communities than destroying them. Leverage economic initiatives and routine *jirgas*<sup>11</sup> with community leaders to employ young men and develop peaceful means to resolve outstanding issues; create viable local alternatives to insurgency."<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, the Comprehensive Approach is all but a standardised procedure. It should be considered as a broad framework, built on the idea that civilian and military challenges are intertwined. NATO adopted its key documents on the Comprehensive Approach in 2006 and 2008, which is quite late, keeping in mind that NATO took over command of ISAF in 2003.<sup>13</sup> But still only rough guidelines exist on NATO level, as the specific approaches of the different PRTs remain subject to the respective nations.

Regardless of a Comprehensive Approach or not, the core task of PRTs remains security. They do not necessarily demand that they play the major role in development aid and

reconstruction at least not anymore, as, namely with the U.S. PRTs, this has changed within the first years.<sup>14</sup> It must be stressed that the latter are means to an end, and the ISAF Tactical Directive leaves no questions about the strategic goal of ISAF: "Our strategic goal is to defeat the insurgency threatening the stability of Afghanistan."<sup>15</sup> This is perfectly in line with the Security Council resolutions and the Afghanistan Compact – however it does not necessarily reflect the stated goals of each of the governments participating in ISAF.

### *Pros and Cons of the Comprehensive Approach*

In theory, the Comprehensive Approach unites the ability to protect the people with the ability to support them. It is this dual capability that is meant to gain both trust and respect among the people. Ideally, the Comprehensive Approach promises to be the long overdue implementation of lessons learned from so many previous counterinsurgencies and PSOs. Effective counterinsurgency must be based on a highly restricted form of "warfare" and must be coordinated with development aid and extension of governance capabilities – whereas the latter are at least as if not more important than the actual fighting.<sup>16</sup> With the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Jirgas are assemblies of tribal elders.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The main NATO documents are: the Comprehensive Political Guidance (2006), the Effects Based Approach to Operations (2006), The Comprehensive Approach Action plan (2008). Documents by the UN: In larger Freedom (2005), Integrated Missions (2006) Capstone doctrine (2008). Documents by the EU: The European Security Strategy (2003), the CMCO (2003), the Crisis Management Procedures CMP (2003). See Christian Moelling (2008): Comprehensive Approaches to International Crisis Management. CSS Analyses in Security Policy 3 (42). See also NATO page, URL: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_51633.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_51633.htm) and [http://www.nato.int/issues/com\\_political\\_guidance/index.html](http://www.nato.int/issues/com_political_guidance/index.html)

<sup>14</sup> Peter Viggo Jakobsen (2005): PRTs in Afghanistan: Successful but not sufficient. DIIS Report (Danish Institute for International Studies) 2005 (6), p. 18. For the structure of PRTs see also <http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/provincial-reconstruction-teams-prts>

<sup>15</sup> Stanley McChrystal (2009): Tactical Directive of ISAF. URL: [http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official\\_texts/Tactical\\_Directive\\_090706.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/Tactical_Directive_090706.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive history on the evolution of military strategy since the 19th century with a special focus on counterinsurgencies and "war amongst the people", see: General Rupert Smith (2008): The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World. Vintage Books, New York.



Comprehensive Approach, the ISAF Tactical Directive and the Counterinsurgency Guidance, NATO adheres to these principles at least theoretically. One might expect this shift in strategy and also in the mindset to be welcomed by NGOs and humanitarian organisations, but they have expressed an essential critique. Due to the profound experience in development and humanitarian aid of some NGOs, their critique may help to reflect advantages as well as disadvantages of PRTs and the Comprehensive Approach, and therefore deserves closer attention.<sup>17</sup>

A frequently expressed complaint is that PRTs blur the distinction between the civilian and the military sector, which puts humanitarian workers at risk of becoming targets of the insurgents. PRTs have even been blamed for cases where Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) staff has been killed by militants. They argue that the PRTs engagement in development aid makes humanitarian work less safe and also less effective. It is also argued that PRT soldiers receive minimal training in the area of development aid and possess much less expertise than NGOs and humanitarian International Organizations (IOs).<sup>18</sup>

The renowned International Crisis Group has published policy recommendations

in the beginning of 2008, asking NATO to amend the mandates of the PRTs by “emphasizing their security sector roles and phasing out development activities in areas where civilian-led approaches by the UN and others are more appropriate”.<sup>19</sup>

Although the critique points out some very important issues, it must be countered with several points. The blurred distinction between the civilian and the military sector has not been caused by PRTs; rather the cloudiness between civilians and belligerents is a distinctive feature of insurgencies. The military sector can never be clearly separated from the civilian sector in insurgencies. The Comprehensive Approach is not the reason for this phenomena but, instead, a response to it. Furthermore, aid workers are never perceived as neutral by an enemy whose ideological views and/or strategic interests are endangered by economic development and social transformation. In Afghanistan, especially UN agencies and staff are exposed to high risk situations, as the UN is the mandating power behind ISAF and moreover fosters national elections and a democratic government. UN staff and sometimes NGOs are perceived as enemies or at least as unpleasant by the militants. The tragic incident in October 2009, where several UN workers were killed by a Taliban raid is just one of many sad occurrences of this problem.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> As the article focuses on PRTs, this section considers some viewpoints of NGOs regard PRTs without examining or evaluating the work of NGOs itself. This does not imply that the Comprehensive Approach puts NGOs into a competition or even renders them obsolete, on the contrary, the Comprehensive Approach is reliant on the work of NGOs, see [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_51633.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_51633.htm)

<sup>18</sup> For a summary of the discussion between NGOs and PRTs see *Michael J. Dziedzic / Col. Michael K. Seidl (2005): Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Military Relations with International and Nongovernmental Organizations in Afghanistan*. United States Institute of Peace Special Report 147. Also see *Robert M. Perito (2005): The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified*. United States Institute of Peace Special Report 152.

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<sup>19</sup> *International Crisis Group (2008): Afghanistan: The Need for International Resolve*. Crisis Group Asia Report 145, 6 February 2008, p. iii.

Up-to date argumentation can be found on the homepage of the Association of German development non-governmental organisations, for example: <http://www.venro.org/> (German). Yet, the argumentation has not essentially changed in the past few years.  
<sup>20</sup> *Sabrina Tavernise / Sangar Rahimi (2009): Attack in Afghan's Capital Illustrates Taliban's reach*. New York Times, Oct 28, 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/world/asia/29afghan.html>



But although neither PRTs nor the Armed Forces are to be blamed for the complicated differentiation between the military and the civilian sector, they must remain aware of this issue and be as careful as possible. The usage of white cars by ISAF troops, for example, has reportedly led to incidents. Although well intended to appear non-aggressive and to show visibility instead of using camouflage, they apparently made insurgents confuse humanitarian organisations that traditionally use white cars, with Armed Forces.<sup>21</sup> As the tasks between Armed Forces and humanitarian organisations increasingly overlap, visible distinction must still be ensured.

Several distinct advantages of the Comprehensive Approach and the PRTs remain. Not only are PRTs able to operate in non-permissive or dangerous areas and to deliver their support to areas that might not be accessible to NGOs but there is another advantage to the Comprehensive Approach. In order to build a stable Afghanistan, it is not enough to deliver relief and foster economic and social development; people must also develop respect and trust in the new Afghan government. ISAF, as a close partner of the Afghan government and with a Comprehensive Approach, can strengthen governance and establish trust in the government more than NGOs.

Finally, as fore mentioned there is a fear that PRTs could misuse humanitarian support as a strategic tool. This fear may stand to reason, however the affiliation of security

tasks with governance building and development aid will ideally lead to the opposite where the Comprehensive Approach allows for both better coordination of the two sectors and ensures that security operations will always and directly serve the political needs instead of becoming an end in themselves. Naturally, all of these assets remain a utopian ideal unless implemented consequently and without trade-offs.

### *Structural deficits of PRTs in Expertise, Training, and Division of Labour*

Unfortunately, some of the critiques stated above are a true problem, especially those concerning civilian expertise and training of soldiers. Doubts arise as to whether the composition of the PRT staff sufficiently reflects the idea of the Comprehensive Approach and the guidelines defined by the ISAF Tactical Directive. 90 to 95% of the PRT staff consists of armed personnel, which leaves little space for civilian staff and expertise. Again, this varies from nation to nation. U.S. PRTs have a staff of 50 to 100 people each, consisting of three components: military, political advisors (usually from the US Department of State) and development/reconstruction experts (mostly USAID, sometimes U.S. Departments of Justice and Agriculture or others), yet all components are under military command. Only 5 to 10% are civilian, with most being policemen and women.<sup>22</sup>

Although soldiers sometimes have additional civilian skills, the deficit in civilian expertise remains. LTC Todd Brown, who has

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<sup>21</sup> This is what the author has been told by a former International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) field worker in a private talk. However, the evaluation of such incidents remains difficult and this example is rather an illustration than clear-cut evidence.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert M. Perito (2005): The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan

served as a US PRT Commander, criticises the lack of experience and skills within PRTs and demands not just more experienced officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), but also more civilians. He specifically asks for more representatives from the Justice Department, the Department of Education, and the Department of Health & Human Services to assist with the establishment of functional government systems.<sup>23</sup>

It is hard to assess how broad the Comprehensive Approach should be, and there appears to be no golden rule: flexibility that accounts for local circumstances and for civilian agencies operating in the respective region is needed to decide how much civilian staff should be deployed and what their task should be. Theoretically, PRTs offer this flexibility. But since even former PRT commanders complain about the lack of civilian expertise, appropriate steps appear to be highly necessary to turn the principles of the Comprehensive Approach into actions and to meet the demands stated in the Tactical Directive as well as in the NATO Counterinsurgency Guidance.

One may raise the question though whether or not it is reasonable to put civilians under military command, as it is the case in most PRTs. German PRTs are an example for an adjusted chain of command, as the PRTs are lead by a civilian representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). They have a larger staff and also a relatively higher number of civilians (around 50 out of 300). But whereas the German AF are very restricted in the type and scale of their operations, the civilian PRT staff resides outside of the PRT compound and operates mostly

independently.<sup>24</sup> This reduces the cooperation between the two entities and, therefore, not taps into the potential of the Comprehensive Approach.

It must be concluded that expertise within PRTs can and probably has to be extended by deploying more civilian experts. Efficiency and division of labour is another reason for this: by reducing the task load of soldiers and raising the division of labour within the PRTs, the deployment of more civilians could help to reduce troop shortages and, at the same time, would raise less opposition than the deployment of more forces.

Last but not least, it must be ensured that soldiers deployed in PSOs receive appropriate training. Currently, soldiers are insufficiently prepared for the numerous additional tasks that they must take over within the framework of the Comprehensive Approach. Training in the Armed Forces is to a large extent still tailored to classic warfare.<sup>25</sup> While it is understandable that nations will not give this entirely up, they must nonetheless restructure their Armed Forces and adjust the training in order to meet the new demands. This restructure means highly professionalized Armed Forces, with an emphasis on the skills, education and equipment of each single soldier rather than a mass army the British and the Canadians may show a positive example. What is equally important though is a “cultural

<sup>23</sup> Todd Brown (2007): U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Best Practices and Recommended Improvements. Connections 6 (4), p. 4-6.

<sup>24</sup> William J. Durch (2006): Twenty-First-Century Peace Operations. U.S. Institute of Peace Press, cited after the *Institute for the Study of War* Webpage, URL: <http://www.understandingwar.org/themenode/provincial-reconstruction-teams-prts>

<sup>25</sup> As LTG Petraeus and LTG Amos state: „[Leaders at all levels] must ensure that their Soldiers and Marines are ready to be greeted with either a handshake or a hand grenade while taking on missions only infrequently practiced until recently at our combat training centers.“ In: David H. Petraeus / James F. Amos (2007): Foreword, in: *The U.S. Army / Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24; Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5), publicly available through the University of Chicago Press (2007).



shift within our forces”, as demanded by McChrystal.<sup>26</sup> For this purpose, training must be adapted to the demands of PSOs and of the Comprehensive Approach.



Does the Comprehensive Approach still allow for labour division and expertise? A Sargeant puts away his rifle to gather a soil sample from a field. (© ISAF media)

### *Force Protection and Civilian Casualties: Friction on the tactical level*

Probably the worst dilemma in PSOs is that force protection and the protection of civilian life do, to a certain extent, oppose each other. Unfortunately, maximum force protection is not compatible with maximum care about civilian integrity. Although the ISAF Tactical Directive demands a maximum protection of the local population, the nations do – naturally – not want to waive force protection. A democratic state is responsible for the life and integrity of its soldiers, which attempts to minimize exposure to a higher risk than absolutely necessary. This is the critical point where implementing theoretical ideals into action often fails. The Comprehensive Approach suffers from a double bind between force protection and the avoidance of civilian casualties. This is not specific to the PRTs or

the Afghanistan mission though. In every PSO and humanitarian intervention, the intervening nations will encounter this dilemma.

Thus, how much force protection is enough? Too much force protection will certainly undermine the legitimacy of any PSO and will moreover lead to a protraction of the mission by alienating the population. In the long term, such a protraction does not help to safeguard the lives of soldiers either. On the other hand, a soldier requires a basic feeling of protection to be able to work concentrated and stay professional; reducing stress can help to prevent incidents as well. General McChrystal states in the ISAF Tactical Directive:

“I recognize that the carefully controlled and disciplined employment of force entails risks to our troops – and we must work to mitigate that risk wherever possible. But excessive use of force resulting in an alienated population will produce far greater risks. We must understand this reality at every level in our force.”<sup>27</sup>

There may be no perfect solution to this, and the ISAF nations follow very different approaches: The UK PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif in 2003 and the German PRTs in Kunduz and Feyzabad the same year allow for a comparison, since they were located next to each other in the relatively quiet north. Today the PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif is Swedish, as the Forces of the UK moved on to the south. In order to win the population’s trust and respect, the British PRT<sup>28</sup> sent out so-called Mobile Observation Teams (MOTs), consisting of 6 lightly armed personnel, along with a team leader and a translator. As MOTs are meant to appear as non-threatening as possible, they neither wear helmets nor flack jackets unless

<sup>26</sup> McChrystal (2009): Tactical Directive

<sup>27</sup> McChrystal (2009): Tactical Directive

<sup>28</sup> Jakobsen (2005): PRTs in Afghanistan

they face an immediate threat. They undertake long-range operations for up to two weeks outside of their home base, acting independently and seeking connection to the locals. The British force protection appears to be relatively low, designed to win the support of the local population. If there is enemy contact, British troops will call close air support, which is a very common method of raising the protection of ground forces in Afghanistan. The supposed advantage of close air support as a method of force protection is that it remains invisible when not needed, thus enabling a non-threatening appearance, but is very effective when needed. The crucial downside is that close air support causes high civilian casualties, as will be explained later on in this section.

The Germans on the other hand follow a very defensive and passive approach to force protection, designed to avoid critical situations in the first place, before strong reactions or even air support becomes necessary. Patrols comprise of up to 30 soldiers who travel in armoured vehicles and, unlike the British, return to their base over night.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, the Germans try to combine a high force protection with a low endangerment of civilians. Unfortunately, such a passive approach rarely allows the troops to operate and therefore does not solve the force protection dilemma either. Although this kind of force protection may be able to reduce incidents, it is unable to create trust and respect among the population. The ISAF Counterinsurgency Guidance points this out by stating that “excessive force protection is distancing, not inspiring.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Jakobsen (2005): PRTs in Afghanistan*

<sup>30</sup> Stanley McChrystal / Michael T. Hall (2009): ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance: Protecting the People is the mission.

The examples above illustrate the broad variety of methods towards protecting the own forces, but each one has its downsides. Simultaneously, it shows that force protection seems to be shaped by domestic preferences rather than by regional needs, which is seen in 2003 when the German and the British PRTs chose very different methods, albeit being confronted with similar circumstances.

While there may be no solution to the force protection dilemma, there is nevertheless room for improvement: As already mentioned, close air support is used to raise force protection. Albeit not carried out by PRTs themselves, PRT troops can call in close air support when in contact. Unfortunately, these air strikes account for most of the civilian suffering caused by NATO forces, which is also why closer attention is given to close air support in this section. A Human Rights Watch Report states that civilian casualties due to air strikes were rising constantly, exceeding collateral damage due to NATO ground fire in 2007.<sup>31</sup> Above that the report points out the significant destruction of civilian property. A very important finding is that casualties rarely occur during planned air strikes on suspected militant targets; instead they occur mainly during quick reaction air strikes, which are the ones that deliver force protection:

“High civilian loss of life during air strikes has almost always occurred during the fluid, rapid-response strikes, often carried out in support of ground troops after they came under insurgent attack.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, Air Force weapons are not designed to conduct counterinsurgency

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[http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official\\_texts/counterinsurgency\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Human Rights Watch (2008): Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan.* <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/09/08/troops-contact-0>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.



amongst the people and their destructive power does not really appear to match the “R” in “PRT”. Although the precision of modern air craft weaponry is extremely high, the weapons are too dangerous and are not always used with necessary care.<sup>33</sup> The top priority under McChrystal is to safeguard civilians; he tries to account for the damage due to air strikes in the revised ISAF tactics: “I expect leaders at all levels to scrutinize and limit the use of force like close air support (CAS) against residential compounds and other locations likely to produce civilian casualties”<sup>34</sup>. Brigadier General Eric Tremblay, chief spokesman of ISAF, has estimated that close air support has been an element in 30 to 40% of the major clashes before McChrystal issued new directives and since then, this figure has dropped to around 10%.<sup>35</sup>

It is important though to differ between the two kinds of air strikes mentioned above. There are planned air strikes, which are carefully prepared, simulations are run and drones that check for civilians near the target beforehand; on the other hand, there are quick

reaction air strikes, which are conducted under time pressure when troops are in unforeseen enemy contact.<sup>36</sup> The latter allow for barely any preparation at all and, according to the Human Rights Watch Report, account for the most civilian casualties; whereas planned air strikes have much better records. Close air support may thus work in planned kinetic operations in enemy terrain with low population density, but quick reaction air strikes appear to cause more harm than good.

But criticism has been raised that the new restrictions on air strikes ironically rule out the prepared, precise air strikes whereas the quick reaction air strikes, which cause the most victims, got slightly reduced but continue. It is said in the Directive that there must evidently be no other way to engage a target other than with air strikes rules out even carefully planned offensive operations, while being waived more easily in “emergencies”.<sup>37</sup>

Again, it is understandable that the decision to restrict quick reaction air strikes is not done light-heartedly. The tragedy lies in the very fact that it is not the offensive operations that cause most civilian casualties, rather it is the defensive ones, from which it is naturally harder to abstain. But refusing to accept that civilians must be safeguarded at all time in peace support and counterinsurgency operations will lead to no avail, only raising the civilian bloodshed without reducing the ISAF nations’ blood toll in the long term.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For a report including an interview with U.S. pilots on a stealth air base close to Afghanistan on this topic see: *Noah Shachtman (2010): How the Afghanistan Air War Got Stuck in the Sky*. In: *Wired Magazine*, January 2010. [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2009/12/ff\\_end\\_air\\_war/al/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2009/12/ff_end_air_war/al/1)

See also *Candace Rondeaux / Karen DeYoung (2008): U.N. Finds Airstrike Killed 90 Afghans*. In: *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2008. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/26/AR2008082600301\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/26/AR2008082600301_pf.html)

For a discussion on the use of depleted uranium ammunition, as being deployed by the A-10 Thunderbolt II, see *BBC (2003): U.S. to use depleted uranium*. In: *BBC News Special Reports*, 18 March, 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/2860759.stm> For technical information about the Gatlin Gun, with which the A-10 is equipped, see the *Global Security* webpage: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/aircraft/systems/gau-8.htm>

<sup>34</sup> *McChrystal (2009): Tactical Directive*

<sup>35</sup> *Laura King (2009): New U.S. tactics said to reduce Afghan civilian deaths*. In: *The Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 2009. <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/aug/28/world/fg-afghan-civilians28>

<sup>36</sup> *Shachtman (2010): How the Afghanistan Air War Got Stuck in the Sky*

<sup>37</sup> *Shachtman (2010): How the Afghanistan Air War Got Stuck in the Sky*

<sup>38</sup> This argumentation can not only be found in the *Tactical Directive* of McChrystal, but also in the *U.S. Army / Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24; Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5)*, publicly available through the *University of Chicago Press (2007)*.

As the defensive air strikes must be rigorously cut back, an alternative has to be found to reduce the resulting lack of force protection. Obama's and McChrystal's decision to send in more troops while reducing air strikes appears to mark the right way, even though these changes come at a very late point in the engagement in Afghanistan. But new rules alone won't bring change, as long as their enforcement is not ensured. The quick reaction air strike against stolen fuel trucks, which had been ordered by the German PRT Commander of Kunduz only a few weeks after McChrystal released the new Tactical Directive, has been released and caused more than an estimated 140 civilian deaths. This shows in an unfortunate way that new rules and directives cannot always change individual conduct.

As both the avoidance of losses among their own forces and the avoidance of civilian casualties will decide over legality, legitimacy and success of any PSO, this should be looked at in much more detail. A reduction of air strikes is highly necessary but also means that PRTs must find new methods of force protection – a highly delicate task. It must unfortunately be concluded that the theory behind the Comprehensive Approach and the PRTs will only be successful to the extent to which it can and will be implemented on the tactical level.

#### *The division into provinces: Inner-regional flexibility and cross-regional inflexibility*

The provincial division of responsibilities and the wide choice of tools offered by the Comprehensive Approach generate the important freedom for every PRT-lead nation to design its PRTs individually. This creates a dual flexibility: flexibility towards the internal-policy related aspects of the troop-

sending nation, thus helping to conduct multinational operations despite national caveats, and flexibility towards the specific needs of the troop-receiving region, thus offering potential to account for the high diversity in the multi-faceted Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> It may be natural that the approach of a nation will be a compromise between the regional demands on-site and the political pressures at home, although from a strategic point of view a highest possible adaptation to the regional demands would be desirable. But unfortunately, for most nations, domestic considerations do not only lead to a compromise but seem to outweigh strategic considerations.

A report by the Danish Institute for International Studies, evaluating British, US and German-led PRTs, concludes that local variations do very little to explain differences between their PRTs, and that it is individual national attitudes that serve as a better explanation. One obvious indicator that visualises this is that a nation's PRTs are all structured in the same or in a similar manner, regardless of where they are; this may not be significant in the case of Germany, which has two bordering PRTs, but it is surely an evidence regarding the U.S., which commands most of the 26 PRTs, that is spread all over Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> The PRT staff on-site may be able to account for regional characteristics as far as the national mandate allows them to, but the capability to adjust the entire structure of

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<sup>39</sup> This accounts for social and cultural differences, different tribes and warlords, but also for different insurgency groups. See also: *Scott Shane (2009): Insurgents Share a Name, but Pursue Different Goals. In: The New York Times, October 23, 2009.*

<sup>40</sup> This is also criticized by Todd Brown, a Lieutenant Colonel and former PRT commander. See: *Todd Brown (2007): U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Best Practices and Recommended Improvements. Connections 6 (4), p. 4-6.*



each PRT to the needs of province under its responsibility remains widely unused.

An advantage of PRTs is demonstrated in the assignment of the nations to the provinces. A rather safe area can be assigned to a nation that, maybe for domestic reasons, tries to avoid direct involvement in conflict as far as possible. Yet, there is a serious downside to this asset: militants operate across regional borders, and a safe area can become non-permissive from one day to another. Even worse, the fact that it is well-known which nations are ready to take a higher stake and which are not constitutes an inherent weakness of PRTs. It can be exploited by militias by going to those provinces where they can expect to face more passive security forces, or by trying to inflict costs on the troops of those nations that have a difficult domestic stand anyways and can therefore more easily be driven out of the country. Regional quick reaction forces do exist but in general the shift of troops between different PRTs, especially if they are subordinate to different nations, is difficult. A problem of this kind may lie ahead, as the militants are emerging in the Northern provinces where the German PRTs are located. Since domestic pressure in Germany is high, they are much more prone to casualties and would be quicker to leave the mission than the U.S. or the British, for example. Therefore, the militants' emergence in this area has to be monitored with special care and must be countered in the earliest possible stage.

Up until now militants apparently did not exploit this weakness. This may suggest that the militants are perhaps not able to fully

operate all over the country, whether due to micro-politics (e.g., warlords, tribes) or due to limited mobility, at least on the fast routes (e.g., through patrols, check points). More importantly though, the necessary precautions have been made: ISAF has its own quick reaction forces, and above that OEF and in the future the ANSF could be deployed nationwide and support PRTs wherever needed; their mere presence may thus make any endeavour of such a kind less promising for the militants.

It is important here to understand that the high intra-regional flexibility of the PRTs goes hand in hand with a high cross-regional inflexibility. To overcome this inherent approach of the PRT, it is essential that PRTs, especially in multinational operations, are supplemented by nationwide deployable troops. Yet such quick reaction troops must act with special care, since their high fire power and their rapid intervention heighten the risk of collateral damage. A sound intelligence is crucial to conducting prearrangements rather than overhasty reactions: the insurgents' movements must be watched with regard to the different internal politics of the PRT-lead nations responsible for the respective areas, anticipating movements or possible exploitations of the domestic pressure of a PRT-lead nation early. This is, of course, easier said than done, but is nonetheless indispensable for success.

### *Effects*

Unfortunately, the most important question is the hardest to answer: Are PRTs successful? Due to the high number of organizations and nations involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, it is nearly



impossible to ascribe achievements and failure with certainty to a single actor. While collateral damages are easier to count and to ascribe, mid-term and long-term developments are hard to measure and to be accredited, which may easily lead to a biased conclusion.

Success on the strategic level is defined by the Security Council mandate: the mission is to support security in Afghanistan and to effectively counter the threat by the insurgents. But measuring the success of PRTs at the overall security of Afghanistan would include the use of criteria that their limited capacities are unable to meet. Evaluations of PRTs usually refer to the operational objectives of PRTs rather than to the strategic goal of ISAF. Comprehensive evaluations have been done, for example by Jakobsen (2005) and by Malkasian / Meyerle (2009), albeit the latter only considers U.S. PRTs. They both conclude that PRTs have a positive but limited impact.

Malkasian and Meyerle perceive PRTs to be useful in short-term projects rather than in mid- and long-term projects which they believe should be left to humanitarian organisations.<sup>41</sup> Yet, it is tempting to carry out such short-term projects for the sake of winning hearts and minds without delivering any lasting values – this puts the PRTs at risk of becoming public relations teams rather than Provincial Reconstruction Teams. If projects do not deliver any manifest and lasting benefit, the gain in the people's support can quickly vaporize. U.S. PRTs have experienced this and they shifted their emphasis from quick impact projects designed to win hearts and minds to the rebuilding of essential

infrastructure.<sup>42</sup> Such infrastructure projects can yield an immediate impact but at the same time deliver lasting benefit to the population. Yet, even here Jakobsen warns that the range of their impact is often overstated by the responsible agencies.<sup>43</sup>

In regards to security, it is difficult to determine the extent to which PRTs have influenced the level of violence and security within their operational areas. Irrespective of PRTs, militants have regained strength throughout 2009 and have engaged ISAF and ANSF troops as well as civilians more frequently. One can surely not put all the blame for this on ISAF. The ANSF on their own would contemporarily be unable to shield population centres from militants and the security situation would therefore probably be far worse without ISAF.

This section depicts that it is nearly impossible to make a reliable and detailed assessment of ISAF's impact on Afghan security; even more so as NATO is facing a "war" that is not fought over absolute strategic victory, which impedes distinguishing the victor from the beaten. The final goal of the ISAF mission as stated in the UN mandate is to establish security in Afghanistan, which in the most basic sense means to ensure that civilians will not become victims to violence. Any statistics on infrastructures built and money invested in development and governance may reflect that efforts have been made, but they cannot be used as a threshold for success. In this context, those tools must be understood as a very crucial yet supplementary means to an end; they may not distract from or forget the mission given by the UN Development projects are crucial tools of

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<sup>41</sup> *Carter Malkasian / Gerald Meyerle (2009): Provincial Reconstruction Teams*

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<sup>42</sup> *Jakobsen (2005): PRTs in Afghanistan: 18*

<sup>43</sup> *Jakobsen (2005): PRTs in Afghanistan: 31*



PSOs – but they may not be misused to distract from a failed counterinsurgency operation.

There are many other issues remaining that will equally decide over the success of ISAF. In regards to security, the extension and functioning of the ANSF will be crucial, but this depends heavily on the budget accredited by the participating nations as well as on the right conduct and steering within the ANSF. In regards to governance and social development, two huge challenges remain with which the success of ISAF will stand or fall: corruption and the disastrous situation regarding women's rights.<sup>44</sup> Corruption undermines any efforts to establish a functioning government and a judicial system. The challenges are furthermore intertwined in a society where women are often denied independent access to money, as corruption in this case excludes women from basic public services, even the judicial system. Neither good governance nor development – and thus also no security – can be achieved as long as these issues remain unsolved.

Despite the unused potentials and the critiques above, it must be assumed that PRTs helped and continue to help improving the situation in Afghanistan, or, at least, they help prevent from getting worse. The conclusion of the evaluations listed above is that PRTs, although they need improvement, do make a difference within the scope that their resources and their budget enable them to.

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>44</sup> For more information on the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan see: *Human Rights Watch Report (2009): We Have the Promises of the World: Women's Rights in Afghanistan*. <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/12/03/we-have-promises-world-0>

Flexibility is probably the main asset of the PRTs. This refers to both flexibility towards the needs of the troop-receiving province and flexibility towards the domestic political situation of the troop-sending nation. The flexibility stems from the provincial division and the broad strategic framework which the Comprehensive Approach offers. This allows for a somewhat smoother conduct of multinational operations despite national warnings and allows for a better adaptation of operations to the complex micro-political situations in the different regions of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the latter asset remains widely unused, as domestic considerations often outweigh strategic needs in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the inner-regional flexibility causes cross-regional inflexibility, which is a weakness that could easily be exploited by a nationwide operating enemy. Furthermore it is not the PRTs main task to actively engage the enemy. This is why PRTs must be supported by nationwide deployable forces that are specialised on carrying out combat tasks and can attack the enemy forces wherever they emerge. This is done by OEF and increasingly by the ANSF as well. Nevertheless, OEF has produced serious collateral damage, especially with air strikes to support ground forces that are facing enemy contact. This approach has been revised by McChrystal, since it has caused civilian suffering and jeopardized the mission.

Whereas some nations have at times been too careless regarding the use of force, others have chosen the other extreme and tried to hide behind the civilian aspects of the Comprehensive Approach in order to avoid

direct involvement in the armed conflict. As understandable as this may be, it does not reflect the intention of the UN mandate. Again, this shows that the flexibility given by the PRT-approach is too often used to account for restraints given by domestic politics rather than for strategic needs.

Finding the appropriate scope of force protection may be the most crucial but also the trickiest precondition for effective PSO and counterinsurgency. A shift in Force Protection away from air force towards more ground troops could lead to an improvement. Close air support must be limited to absolute emergencies, whereas more troops *and* more civilians seem to be highly necessary. McChrystal's restriction of air strikes and Obama's decision to deploy 30'000 additional troops are surely a good step; recalling the Human Rights Watch investigation on civilian casualties in Afghanistan; this could help to reduce civilian deaths. Yet it is doubtful whether the 30 000 additional troops alone will be sufficient to turn the tides. As long as the lack of civilian expertise within PRTs exists, their approach can never be really comprehensive.

Although this article is in support of the Comprehensive Approach and PRTs, it raises the provocative question as to whether or not PRTs are indeed designed to meet the strategic challenges in Afghanistan, or whether they are more of a by-product of the international community's inability to fully cooperate in the security sector. Furthermore, it second-guesses the commitment of all involved parties to implement the Comprehensive Approach with all its requirements.

Essential improvement must be made in order to benefit from the capabilities which

PRTs offer. But overall, and despite the critique, PRTs are a promising development and create many new capabilities. Whether in future NATO crisis management or even in UN blue helmet missions, PRTs should also be considered for future PSOs. However, to render success possible and to follow up the idea behind the Comprehensive Approach, not only structural adaptations are necessary but also, in the words of McChrystal, "a cultural shift"<sup>45</sup> within NATO forces.

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<sup>45</sup> McChrystal (2009): Tactical Directive