

Power Prevails

The Failure of Whole-of-Government Approaches in Afghanistan

Over the last decade, Afghanistan has served as the testing ground for a range of whole-of-government (WoG) approaches to international intervention in crisis situations. Examining the WoG approaches of four countries – the USA, the UK, Germany and Norway – we find that the concept has been used to connote widely different practices. There is considerable tension between efforts by individual external actors to coordinate their own activities and the goal of building effective coordination for Afghanistan. Furthermore, balanced interaction between various actors is an illusion in a situation of massive international military engagement and severe insecurity. When the level of uncertainty is as high as in Afghanistan, we are better served by replacing the lofty ambition of strategic integration with the more modest aim of coordination at the operational level.

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Conceptions of Whole-of-Government

At the most basic level, WoG is a call for coordinating the efforts of all intervening actors in complex crisis and conflict situations. Accordingly, the debate on WoG is an extension of decades-old debates on coordination of international assistance efforts. Yet, WoG – in its various forms – has a more recent history, one that coincides with post-Cold War thinking on humanitarian interventions, the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) and the ‘war on terror’. While the conventional debate on coordination has been as much about ensuring that various actors with similar mandates or areas of operation (e.g. the health sector) work in concert as about synchronizing efforts across different domains, the focus of WoG is mainly on the latter. In short, the main point of reference for WoG is a specific external agent (be that a government or a multilateral organization) and its need for coordination across its sectorial entities, rather than the authorities of the host country and their need to have multiple sectors work within a common framework.

A wide range of concepts have been coined to capture the ambition of coordinating across a government’s sectorial domains when operating in crisis or conflict situations:

Whole-of-Government (WoG). Used generically, and promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), this term usually connotes approaches that place development assistance at the centre. According to the OECD, ‘when dealing with fragile states it is important to engage with a wide range of actors.... Even though the fragile states issue is still predominantly perceived from a development co-operation perspective ... the effect of non-aid policies on development outcomes is now widely accepted. As a result, security actors and objectives related to the security domain are increasingly included in the development debate, as are economic actors, justice departments and others.’¹

3D (Defence, Diplomacy and Development). A concept favoured by the Canadian government, but also widely used by the UK, the USA, and a variety of multilateral and non-governmental actors. In a Canadian White Paper from 2005, it is stated that ‘our official aid programs and our broader international

policies must operate in tandem. This requires government departments to work more closely together—from planning through to execution.... Increased collaboration with existing networks of Canadians will also be essential to ensuring coherence on the ground.’²

Integrated Missions. The UN’s key concept, defined in an influential 2005 report for the world organization as ‘an instrument with which the UN seeks to help countries in the transition from war to lasting peace, or address a similarly complex situation that requires a system-wide UN response, through subsuming various actors and approaches within an overall political-strategic crisis management framework.’³

Comprehensive Approach. NATO’s key concept, launched at the Riga meeting in November 2006, focuses on the primarily military role of the defence alliance, but recognizes the alliance’s dependence on other types of capacities for implementation of its security mandate. The concept was affirmed at the 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon, where it was stated that ‘lessons learned from NATO operations show that effective crisis management calls for a comprehensive approach involving political, civilian and military instruments. Military means, although essential, are not enough on their own to meet the many complex challenges to Euro-Atlantic and international security.’⁴

Counterinsurgency (COIN). A long-standing term, used by the USA and within NATO, its principal point of reference is the military effort, but it includes a broad range of interventions: ‘the set of political, economic, social, military, law enforcement, civil and psychological activities ... [that] aim to defeat insurgency and address any core grievance’.⁵ While the relationship is obvious, not everybody would agree that this is a variety of WoG, given COIN’s prime focus on the military dimension.

An examination of the various conceptualizations is revealing. First, most definitions place one of the three dimensions – security, governance or development – at the centre. Second, the actors behind the definitions tend to see themselves as the principal points of reference, not the governments or populations hosting a given intervention. Third, and more

implicitly, it is clear that all the major actors who would claim to represent the so-called international community are committed to WoG in some form or other, although it is not equally clear that the so-called emerging powers with more recently developed global ambitions have bought into the idea.

NATO Allies in Afghanistan

So, how has the commitment to a WoG approach manifested itself in the Afghanistan engagement of the four NATO countries examined here?

United States

For the USA, the early period in Afghanistan was overwhelmingly focused on military operations, with ‘nation-building’ assigned to other actors. Although a large-scale civilian effort was under way on the drawing board, this was held back as operations moved into ‘light footprint’ mode (and preparations were started for the invasion of Iraq). With a ‘war on terror’ focus on going after Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the main thrust of US operations was military. The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept, introduced in 2003, could have represented a change, but the US-model PRT was very much militarily dominated. The first PRT to be established, in Gardez province in the southeast in late 2002, was in the main a search-and-find operation. By late 2006, when NATO adopted the ‘comprehensive approach’ strategy at the Riga meeting, strategic thinking had started to change. The view was taking hold that poor governance and a lack of economic development were feeding the insurgency in Afghanistan. For the US military, the idea of a comprehensive approach equated with a COIN strategy, which became the strategic foundation for its troop surge from early 2009. The COIN strategy, which takes military operations as its point of reference and civilian efforts merely as support, was soon overshadowed by a more single-minded kill-or-capture campaign, combining night raids, special operations and drone attacks. By then, the COIN approach had been put to the test in Marjah in Helmand province with little success. The USA, while leading a military alliance that had adopted the idea of a comprehensive approach, now hardly did so itself. The PRTs remain primarily military actors, and civilian efforts from the PRTs are fine-tuned to support security objectives.

United Kingdom

The UK was the NATO ally that aligned itself most closely with US priorities in Afghanistan (and Iraq). It was also one of the countries that took early measures to institutionalize a WoG approach. The three dimensions of WoG all figured prominently in Tony Blair's presentation to the Foreign Affairs Committee in early October 2001 before the start of the Afghanistan intervention. In Afghanistan, the UK spearheaded the PRT concept, which NATO came to see as the encapsulation of the 'comprehensive approach' strategy adopted in Riga in 2006. When the UK moved its focus to the country's more troubled south in 2006, it soon met resistance on a massive scale, making it hard to live up to the initial idea of creating 'ink-spots' of peace and development that would spread outward. With the military forces tied up in existential fights with the Taliban, the civilian operations struggled. By 2007, the UK government established the Stabilisation Unit at the interface of the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development (DfID). Interestingly, the UK had its PRT led by a civilian, and the first PRT team in southern Helmand province consisted of roughly equal numbers of civilian and military personnel. The civilian character of the PRT was watered down significantly with the establishment of the Stabilisation Unit, however, which was also put in charge of sending civilians to the field. As security in the region continued to deteriorate, the civilian component of the PRT was further weakened, as was its ability to affect the overall agenda on what to do and how.

Germany

For a country strongly committed to peaceful resolution of conflicts, the engagement in Afghanistan has represented a controversial change of course. In the first five-year period of the intervention, Germany limited its military exposure but shifted to more offensive military operations in the face of increasing criticism from NATO allies, seeking to strike a fine balance with a critical domestic audience. In 2003, Germany was the first country after the USA to deploy a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), in Kunduz province. The German government emphasized the civilian component of its PRTs, while the military presence was portrayed as being there primarily to protect the civilian efforts. The German

PRTs have a dual leadership: one military commander and one civilian diplomat. Although the two leadership positions have a similar formal status, the military's resources, its ability to use armed force and its authority in assessing the security requirements of all staff in practice make the relationship uneven. This became even clearer when Germany's military engagement in Afghanistan took on a more offensive orientation and as security became more difficult, not the least in the PRT's area of operation. Overall, Germany's WoG approach seems primarily to have been a risk-minimizing strategy, maintaining strong control from Berlin, limiting military exposure without alienating allies, and emphasizing civilian efforts in order to limit domestic criticism. By early 2010, Germany announced that its forces would start withdrawing from late 2011, but that the government would remain committed to Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Norway

Despite the high-profile nature of its international engagement for peace, Norway has been firmly committed to the operation in Afghanistan, which has been the dominant military engagement and one of the largest aid efforts in the ten years after 9/11. Like Germany, Norway has had to compensate for distancing itself from the US-led invasion of Iraq. In 2005, Norway took over the PRT in Faryab (previously under British control), which at the time seemed a manageable operation in one of Afghanistan's more quiet provinces. Norway has made the separation of civilian and military efforts into a hallmark of its approach, and also, by 2008, suggested 'parity' of civilian and military financing as an ambition. The military-civilian division has been controversial, not least within the armed forces, where many viewed the separation as a prescription for ineffectiveness, while others explicitly argued that not using development assistance for security purposes put Norwegian soldiers at increased risk. As security in the area deteriorated from 2006 onward, these tensions grew. On the ground, the level of cooperation depended heavily on personalities. Although, formally speaking, Norway's top civilian leader was to report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while its top military leader was to report to ISAF, reporting within Norwegian channels dominated for both. The WoG approach was clearly institutionalized

only at the home-country level, where a committee of deputy ministers met regularly in Oslo – in part to streamline efforts on the ground, in part to sort out differences between the three parties of a coalition government whose continued existence hinged on their success in managing tensions over Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the Norwegian PRT model was challenged in 2010 by the new presence of US military and civilian capacities, when US forces took over the kinetic part of the war and followed their own standard practice of directing assistance to support local security objectives.

Thus, despite their all being members of NATO – whose 'comprehensive approach' provides a common member standard – the four countries have practised WoG within their military engagement in Afghanistan in quite different ways.

Is There a Future for WoG?

In the course of the last decade, WoG has nominally become the core approach adopted by many governments and multilateral organizations in relation to states in crisis. Afghanistan has been a primary test site, with virtually all key actors involved over a sustained period of time in an intervention that has become increasingly complicated. What, then, does the Afghan experience tell us about WoG and the future of the concept?

The formal adoption of a WoG approach does not eliminate competition among actors, and may simply mean replacing old fissures with new ones. With tall coordination ambitions, power considerations come into play. In practice, WoG is less about committing all resources to one overarching strategy than about individual national actors synchronizing their own efforts to maximize influence. The PRTs in Afghanistan, which tend to take on the role of lead donor for all dimensions of assistance within a single province, are problematic if the aim is to build an Afghan administration that coordinates both vertically (with the central administration in Kabul) and horizontally (between sectors at the province level).

While attractive in theory, the idea of balancing efforts across the three dimensions (defence, diplomacy and development) has proved difficult to live up to. In Afghanistan,

where the military effort quickly became central, WoG has implicitly meant subsuming diplomatic and developmental efforts under a security perspective. As security has deteriorated – in large part caused by a misinformed armed campaign – the military dominance has only grown. The call for tight integration entails assertion of authority, and is therefore openly challenged by many actors and more quietly disregarded by others. Moreover, resources – whether in the form of money, equipment or people on the ground – are in themselves a source of authority. As the more heavily resourced actor and the ultimate arbiter of power in a situation of armed conflict, the military will necessarily have a strong influence in setting the terms for coordination.

The transaction costs of coordination are widely recognized as high, of course, but an integrative ambition for the country hosting an operation would be well justified, though demanding. The challenge when numerous actors come in – each with its own WoG approach that places the respective actor at the centre – is that one ends up with numerous logics of integration that are effectively irreconcilable. From the perspective of securing a solidly coordinated effort, which also reasonably takes into account the interests of the host country, the establishment of a host-focused coordination mechanism is clearly necessary.

In a situation where security deteriorates to a level where there is no effective government presence in large parts of the country, and the conflict manifests itself in distinctly different ways from one locality to another, a host-country-based coordination effort may not be possible. In such a case, strategic coordination tends to fall back on external actors, but we might still ask whether tight strategic integration is too costly in terms of efficiency and

legitimacy. Pursuing a tight coordination path is challenging, in part because the international aid regime has strong anarchic features, with thousands of actors mostly in competition with each other. Opting for less strategic integration would still require solid coordination at the operational level (e.g., exchanging information, developing joint standards and codes of conduct, sharing responsibilities), but such an approach may be more appropriate under conditions of uncertainty; it would be more adaptable to rapid change and serve as a better foundation for responding adequately to the real-life challenges of societies in conflict. ■

- ¹ OECD (2006) *Whole of Government Approaches to Fragile States, DAC Guidelines and Reference Series*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (p. 21).
- ² Government of Canada (2005) *A Role of Pride and Influence in the World*. Canada's International Policy Statement (p. 20).
- ³ Eide, Espen Barth; Anja Therese Kaspersen, Randolph Kent & Karen von Hippel (2005) *Report on Integrated Missions: Practical Perspectives and Recommendations*, Independent Study for the Expanded UN ECHA Core Group, May (p. 3).
- ⁴ NATO (n.d.) A "Comprehensive Approach" to Conflict Management (http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_51633.htm).
- ⁵ NATO (2010) *Counterinsurgency. Bi-SC Joint Operational Guidelines (JOG) 10/01*, NATO Allied Command Transformation, 26 May 2010 (para. 0109).

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