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# PRISM

VOL. 1, NO. 2 ❖ 03/2010

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CENTER FOR  
COMPLEX OPERATIONS  
DIPLOMACY • DEFENSE • DEVELOPMENT

A JOURNAL OF THE CENTER FOR COMPLEX OPERATIONS

U.S. Air Force (Christine Jones)



Village elders hold shura to discuss issues of local concern

## Not in Our Image

# The Challenges of Effective Peace-building

BY JAMES STEPHENSON, RICHARD McCALL, AND ALEXANDRA SIMONIANS

The international community was thoroughly unprepared to respond effectively to new post-Cold War challenges, which included the appearance of complex emergencies, many of which revealed ethnic, religious, cultural, or nationalistic faultlines. These lines have been manipulated in many cases by state and/or nonstate actors and have led to the unraveling of many states, a large number of which were former superpower clients. What remained were hollow entities—states with few attributes of nationhood, especially the institutional underpinnings of legitimate governance, the foundation upon which viable nation-states are based.

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Within this context, U.S. policymakers need to reevaluate many of their assumptions and develop different analytical tools and frameworks that are essential components of a new national security strategy. The logic of democratization and free market economies has driven the notion that societies are in transition—that there is a linear progression from centrally controlled political and economic systems to centrally controlled democratic and market-driven systems. Yet in these so-called transitions, it is apparent that a difficult and patient societal transformation is the more appropriate description of the processes required for peace, stability, political pluralism, and tolerance to be established and sustained over the long term. What evolves may not reflect Western notions of the modern, democratic nation-state.

In too many areas of the world, countries have not undergone the processes fundamental to the creation of modern nation-states. All too often, the international community has made the mistake of assuming that a reconstitution

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of the state apparatus alone, along with democratization and market liberalization, will form the basis for long-term stability. What we have failed to understand is that once an authoritarian state collapses or is overthrown, there is no societal institutional underpinning or coherence left. In the absence of functioning institutions that reflect a working consensus within society, particularly those diverse in their ethnic and/or sectarian makeup, the potential for reemergence of violent conflict should be anticipated.

Violent conflict generally breaks out in a society when the fundamental ideas and agreements that constitute order break down. It is these ideas and agreements, when given the force of law and enforced by the state, that regulate behavior. Conflict is first and foremost a political failure where states cannot, or will not, build productive political communities or enable them to operate.

The international community has a preoccupation with top-down approaches to nation-building, with a major focus on reconstituting central government institutions. While most modern nation-states have gone through the creation of institutions at all levels of society, many countries have not. Citizens have not had the opportunity to participate in what is termed *constituting processes*—the creation of institutions at all levels of society. It is a highly participatory process whereby common values and rules are identified and agreed upon and institutions are created that reflect fundamental societal consensus. This process allows members of a group to include their cultural and traditional values in a governing framework. In virtually every conflict or postconflict country, one can find a strong identity at the community level, ethnic or sectarian, but no sense of national identity. The processes of institution-building at all levels of society can transcend the divisive nature of localism or communalism, such as ethnic or sectarian divides. This institution-building, which must be sensitive to tradition and cultural values within societies, can take many forms, such as local and regional government entities, community development organizations, local education and health committees, agricultural and marketing cooperatives, or water user associations. Institutions reflect the accepted rules of the game, clearly defining individual rights and responsibilities within the broader community of interests.



Afghan man holds voting booklet at polling site during presidential election

The processes that lead to the creation of a viable, sustainable nation-state cannot be short circuited. It is a long-term process that must demonstrate sensitivity to, and understanding of, basic fundamentals including but not limited to:

- ❖ the creation and maintenance of institutions that reflect broad societal ownership
- ❖ the building of multi-institutional states that have multiple points of political access to address and solve problems
- ❖ effective long-term problemsolving at multiple levels that focuses on building political solutions from solid social and economic foundations
- ❖ strong and active citizenry to design local institutions and coproduce public goods and services
- ❖ commitment to dialogue, participation, competition, and compromise from the local to national level.

Within this context, the role of external actors should be one of partnership, encouraging an enabling environment so rich systems of governance can be developed. The choices are not between small and large systems, but between systems of governance that are locally rooted, which, in time and turn, are tied to regional and national systems. This is the principle of self-rule through shared rule. Establishment of basic and effective security is critical to the peace-building process. However, what is often overlooked is a commensurate focus on the need for dispersing power throughout society to ensure against the abuse of political and economic power from the center. Establishment

of the rule of law is also important. However, to ensure that law and justice are equitably and fairly applied, institutional accountability is critical. Institution-building at all levels of society that clearly spells out rules, rights, and

**despite lip service paid to local ownership, there is a disconnect between external priorities and (internal) national processes and priorities**

responsibilities around which there is a broad societal consensus is a critical component of establishing a rule of law regime.

Why has the international community been so ineffective in peace-building efforts? The answers are many. In November 2004, the International Peace Academy and the Center on International Cooperation held a symposium on the “Political, Institutional, and Economic Challenges of State-Building.” There were poignant observations that are particularly relevant.

Past attempts at state-building have been seriously undermined by a lack of strategic planning prior to intervention, particularly the failure to understand the local context in which it would be undertaken. In most cases, an overemphasis on short-term goals—largely dictated by external domestic politics—has resulted in no real foundations being laid for the transition. Little attempt has been made to reach out to the local community and manage its expectations for international interventions, let alone good faith efforts to properly consult with and involve locals in important decisions about the future of the state. The international community withdraws too early, leaving weak institutions not sustainable over the long term.<sup>1</sup>

It was noted further that “international actors have demonstrated a tendency to treat

state-building as a purely technical exercise of transferring skills and running elections.”<sup>2</sup> A joint War Torn Societies/International Peace Academy paper on postconflict peace-building, published in October 2004, raised similar concerns:

*One of the most persistent obstacles to more effective peace building outcomes is the chronic inability of international actors to adapt their assistance to the political dynamics of the war torn societies they seek to support. . . . economic and political liberalization are particularly ill suited and counterproductive in post conflict peace building since they promote economic and political competition at a difficult and fragile stage.<sup>3</sup>*

Mistaken assumptions on the part of the international community have also contributed to ineffective peace-building. For instance, Roland Paris’s *At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* argues for “a gradual and controlled peace building strategy,” emphasizing “institutionalization before liberalization.” In other words, it is critical to establish domestic institutions “capable of managing the transition from war, while avoiding the destabilizing effects of democratization and marketization.”<sup>4</sup> The War Torn Societies/International Peace Academy paper noted that there was strong agreement among conflict practitioners that, ultimately, local processes and institutions should play an important role in shaping the design, implementation, and outcomes of policy choices. Finally, the paper laid out key persistent problems in implementation of peace-building policies and programs, including the following:

- ❖ Donors channel support in the form of time-bound projects without a strategic framework and long-term commitment to peace-building.

- ❖ Despite lip service paid to local ownership, there is a disconnect between external priorities and (internal) national processes and priorities.
- ❖ External actors consistently neglect institution- and capacity-building, which are recognized as central to peace-building.
- ❖ In the absence of a strategic peace-building framework, external interventions are uncoordinated, fragmented, and incoherent.<sup>5</sup>

The bottom line of these two papers is a reminder that we should engage with the simple understanding that “[p]eace, security and stability cannot be imposed from the outside, but need to be nurtured internally through patient, flexible, responsive strategies that are in tune with local realities.”<sup>6</sup>

Within this context, how do peacekeeping forces foster social capital and reconciliation essential to sustained stability and government legitimacy? The key is to understand that social capital exists within any society and that peace-building is a long-term process—a reality historically ignored by U.S. policymakers. Iraq was no exception. What strategy existed was predicated on the notion that we needed to get in fast, spend large amounts of resources in the shortest period of time, and exit as quickly as possible. Almost every criterion for effective peace-building was ignored. Predictably, we dug a deep hole for both ourselves and the Iraqis. Six years later, it is impossible to identify institutions that are inclusive and clearly spell out the rules of the game for all Iraqis. Nearly 8 years later in Afghanistan, U.S. emphasis on large infrastructure projects and attempts to create Western-style national government

institutions have only further alienated rural populations, weakening the state and creating safe havens for insurgent groups.

Afghanistan is a conundrum of diverse geography, a plethora of ethnicities, strong local tribal governance and allegiances, and warlordism. This reality requires a different strategic paradigm that incorporates an understanding of the history, traditions, and culture of Afghanistan. We continue to focus on creating a strong central government rather than facilitating local processes that lead to an evolving consensus on the nature of institutions of governance that best reflects Afghan culture and needs. The outcome of this process would not be a Western model of governance, but one that reflects the Afghan reality and needs that, at minimum, would indicate some consensus on the basic rules of the game. This requires an Afghanization with a

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small international footprint, *particularly* on the civilian side. In other words, there should be an omnipresent Afghan face on civilian reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

Most conflict/postconflict practitioners have anecdotes that reflect what works and does not work in real world environments. However, if we want to effectively respond to the real world, we have to address the structural problems within our own foreign policy/national security institutions.

Since the end of the Cold War, succeeding U.S. administrations have struggled with the



challenges posed by what can be described as the new world disorder. We have confronted the need to reconcile the mandates of traditional national security institutions for managing government political, economic, and security relations that are often driven by short-term political considerations, with the necessity to deal with, and ameliorate, the fault lines within many societies. The goal of the latter is long-term stability through capable and legitimate governance. Yet despite recognition of the threats facing the United States, the bureaucratic responses have been ad hoc and carried out by institutions whose current structures are inadequate to deal with these challenges. While we have defined the threats facing us and the global community writ large, the U.S. Government still tends to look at global problems as a discrete and differentiated set of security, economic, and political issues, leading to segmented policy and programmatic responses based on narrow, short-term parochial interests.

### **Post-9/11: No Margin for Error**

The end of the Cold War did not herald the hoped-for *Pax Americana*. To the contrary, the United States and its international partners have struggled to deal with a set of foreign policy challenges made exponentially more complex by global terrorism and failed or weak states that harbor and nurture asymmetric global threats (for example, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and al Qaeda). Washington's ability to more effectively manage these challenges will require institutional restructuring of our national security apparatus, particularly the Department of Defense, Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Intelligence Community, as well as significant changes in bureaucratic cultures and an entirely new strategy of engagement.

An excellent starting point for serious reform would be the recommendations contained in Jeffrey McCausland's *Developing Strategic Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Dr. McCausland, former Dean of the U.S. Army War College, writes:

*It is crucial that we develop a system that places the right people in the right places in government at the right moment. The nation critically needs civilian policymakers who can manage change and deal with the here and now. This monograph examines the development of career civilian leaders for strategic decisionmaking in the national security policy process. Such development must include the recruitment of quality personnel, experiential learning through a series of positions of increasing responsibility, training for specific tasks or missions, and continuous education that considers both policy and process. Consequently, it requires people who are not only substantively qualified and knowledgeable regarding policy issues but also possess the leadership abilities to direct large complex organizations.<sup>7</sup>*

The U.S. Government does not have sufficient knowledge-based skills or quantity and quality of leadership to manage change. Nor do we have bureaucratic agility and flexibility in our current national security system to adjust to realities on the ground or to changing dynamics. Just as multilateral institutions were created after World War II to manage the global community and economy and prevent a repeat of the 1920s and 1930s—just as political and military institutions were created and restructured to manage the Cold War—we are now compelled to reevaluate our assumptions, develop new analytic tools and mechanisms, and recognize that these are essential components to

a new national security strategy to engage the world as it is today.

The sad truth is that there is still a multiplicity of departments, agencies, and offices involved in articulating and implementing U.S. policy abroad, often sowing confusion and even contradictory policy priorities. Just as the problems of failing states cannot be effectively solved by a set of discrete, isolated activities, the United States cannot project a coherent policy abroad through a series of discrete and differentiated tools with differing priorities. We need a strategic vision that recognizes how each of these sets of problems relates to the others. Unfortunately, we continue to be bogged down by a process preoccupied with individual boxes and the competition for resources among these boxes.

Above all, any international engagement dealing with a failed state has to focus first on peace- and consensus-building, and not nation-building. Peace-building is a bottom-up process that engages all segments of society in defining not only a common set of values around which there can be a working consensus, but also fundamental agreement on the systems and nature of the institutions to serve that consensus. Nationbuilding, as we have approached it, has focused too much on a top-down approach, writing constitutions that have little if no meaning for most societies, holding elections quickly, and focusing almost exclusively on constituting a central government. The end result all too often exacerbates existing tensions and conflict in society, leading to more violence. Such an approach denies a broad-based ownership of the processes and does not give the vast majority of the population a stake in the outcome. Certainly this was the case in Iraq, and may still be the case in Afghanistan.

As the United States struggles in developing a whole-of-government approach by

bringing all its tools (or boxes) into an integrated strategic framework, that effort will be undermined from the beginning if the Nation continues to attempt to remake Afghanistan in its own image. Unfortunately, we have been slow to learn from our past mistakes. While policymakers appear to be embracing more culturally sensitive strategies that endeavor to engage all levels of society in stabilization efforts, the means of implementing these strategies may not prove realistic.

### **The Wrong Fix by the Wrong People**

The Obama administration deserves much credit for scaling back U.S. objectives in Afghanistan from inventing a country with a secure, democratic, centrally managed government, a free-market economy, and secure borders to a viable state that does not harbor terrorists.

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To achieve this, more emphasis is to be put into bottom-up approaches, such as protecting local populations, empowering transparent local government, developing communities, and supporting agriculture. This “clear, hold, build” strategy is a welcome departure from 7 years of trying to create a strong central government where none has existed for millennia; but the tactical means to achieve this strategy are fatally flawed.

It is often quoted that the State Department and USAID—combined—have fewer diplomats than the military has soldiers in marching



bands. The Obama administration has laudably embraced increases in both agencies. However, even with proposed increases in personnel that will take several years, USAID's Foreign Service component will still be smaller than a single light U.S. Army brigade. The State Department will have about the strength of two brigades. To augment these, State and USAID are hiring temporary personnel through a variety of mechanisms to serve in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan—many with no relevant experience. This proceeds from a misperception that failures in Iraq and Afghanistan could have been avoided with less reliance on contractors and nonprofit private sector implementing partners. To remedy this perceived problem, it is proposed that a reliance on such implementing partners will be phased out to be replaced with a “surge” of U.S. direct-hire civilians to implement the soft side of counterinsurgency and win victory in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and future conflicts. These civilians—most with little experience or even knowledge of local language—will surge into Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan's most conflicted and deadly southern and eastern provinces. There, they will be housed on military forward operating bases (FOBs) from whence they will venture out—albeit in heavily armed military convoys—to meet with local government and tribal leaders to plan and implement local projects—the “build” part of the clear, hold, build strategy. It is a pipe dream—in Afghanistan and in future conflicts.

### **The PRT Myth**

There have been analogies drawn between the use of PRTs in Afghanistan and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program that operated in South Vietnam from 1967 to 1972. Like the PRTs in Afghanistan, CORDS provincial and

district teams were interagency and under overall military command. However, they lived and spent most of their time not on military bases, but in their respective districts, among the population they were trying to win over and protect. Both State and USAID personnel had extensive cultural training and spoke Vietnamese. Their effort at winning hearts and minds was also supported by the more clandestine but closely coordinated Phoenix Program, which targeted some 80,000 Viet Cong political cadres for assassination, arrest, or repatriation. USAID had 5,000 personnel in Vietnam, mostly serving in the field. Though there were casualties on the teams, they were not generally targets of the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese army. This is emphatically *not* the case in Afghanistan.

Today, USAID has barely 1,000 Foreign Service Officers to serve programs in 90 countries. PRTs in Afghanistan live and work in heavily defended FOBs and are generally staffed by a few State Department junior officers, a few USAID temporary hires, and a smattering of personnel from other agencies, all with little experience or knowledge of how foreign assistance works. Few know the local language. They are led by a PRT commander, usually a Navy commander or Air Force lieutenant colonel. The rest of the 60 to 100 PRT personnel are soldiers. While PRTs can provide a valuable platform for interagency coordination and incorporating “the ground truth” into policymaking, more often than not they are mismatched and sometimes bloated organizations that lack the capacity and resources to effectively carry out stabilization activities.

The PRT task is to increase the outreach of the Afghan government, enhance provincial security, and engage in reconstruction. Engagements at the community level are rare, given the need for armed convoys and heavy security at the sites visited and the en route threat of improvised

explosive devices and ambush. Sometimes, PRTs are unable to venture from their FOB for months. When they do, they arrive at a village in a convoy of armored vehicles and attempt to interact with local leaders for a few hours, surrounded by armed, vigilant U.S. soldiers. The “engagement” is observed and may even be attended by the Taliban, who are in the village every day, prepared to intimidate anyone who works with the coalition or accepts its aid. Furthermore, what the PRT sees as a friendly engagement, the average Pashtun sees as a deeply offensive invasion of his home by *feringhees* with the arrogance and temerity to point guns at him in his home and abuse *pashtunwali*—the way of the Pashtun.

Armed development does not work—particularly in the broad sickle of “Pashtunistan” that extends from Kashmir to Helmand. To paraphrase Lord Frederick Roberts about the Second Afghan War, the less they see of us, the less they will hate us. Moreover, fielding a PRT is enormously expensive for very little return. We do not need to surge more U.S. civilians to work alongside the military; we need a surge of the lighter footprint of trained *Afghans* to engage communities and build the security and trust that will enable the space for political and economic reconstruction. We can provide financial resources and technical assistance, but ultimately, *Afghans* will or will not rebuild their country in a manner consistent with their values. We cannot do it for them and cannot want it more than they do. In Afghanistan, we are repeating the early mistakes made in Iraq and ignoring hard lessons that we have not only known for 70 years, but many of which we inherited from the British Empire.

Effective counterinsurgency requires continuous security for, and engagement with, local communities. Ideally, the face of security and assistance should be of national and local government, but these have never been strong in

Afghanistan. Most *Afghans* have traditionally relied on village shura councils to deal with local problems, and still do. But the shuras have few resources and are often themselves the victims of the Taliban and corrupt local officials.

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The challenge is to empower the shuras in the absence of strong, honest local government, while giving local government time and assistance to gain effectiveness and transparency.

Community development and empowerment have been used as a tool of stabilization and reconstruction in failed or failing states since the mid-1990s. USAID and its Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) used it to great effect in the Balkans, Iraq, and Colombia. Those programs were dominated by local nationals, worked at the community level with nongovernmental councils, and eventually increased the reach of local and national government. Security began with community empowerment—from the bottom up—as communities began to grasp that their lot was improving and they had something to lose. National security forces and national government followed once communities had begun to enhance their own security, on their own.

All of these programs were run by private sector implementing partners employing a cadre of professionals experienced in conflict and postconflict environments with oversight from USAID, pursuing policies adopted by the extant administration through the interagency process. These private sector partners have been integral

to the success of the OTI mission as they have the capacity to rapidly mobilize teams of technical experts in response to a variety of political crises. In addition, contractors have not been subject to the same stringent security restrictions that U.S. Government direct hires are under. This advantage gives them more freedom to carry out their work with a lower security profile, making it easier for them to build trust at the community level. Working through implementing partners is often more cost efficient. For example, the cost of temporarily contracting services from a private sector organization that draws funding from a variety of donors is significantly lower than permanently housing the same capacity within a government agency funded only by the taxpayer. It is also a fact that in today's global threat environment, where diplomats work and often live in "imam compliant," fortified Embassies, ride in convoys of armored SUVs protected by personal security details, and require significant logistical life support, private implementing partners are, per capita, cheaper.

In spite of general protestations against the use of contractors, many of the successes in post-conflict stabilization over the last 20 years could not have been realized without them. They are still responsible for most of the work being done by the United States in Afghanistan in spite of all the rhetoric about a civilian surge. Finally, at a time of soaring budget deficits, it is fantastical to believe that the clock can be turned back 40 years to when USAID had a staff of 17,500. It would be wise for the administration to recognize that there is far more technical expertise in the private sector to implement foreign assistance programs and that the best use of State and USAID is making policy and overseeing its implementation. Even that will require increases in trained, experienced personnel, but it is a sustainable model. PRTs are an expensive, largely ineffective use of both military and civilian resources. Overstaffing them with more civilians will not make them effective. It would serve U.S. interests far better if the administration would heed what has served best—and worst—in recent similar environments and apply the best tactics with the best resources. Failing this, all the blood and lucre will serve for nothing.

Finally, we would hope that our ambitions in Afghanistan would be lowered to the goal of establishing stability—defined as enough security, governance, and economy to begin the process of Afghans reconstructing Afghanistan—and no more. Our strategy, tactics, and resourcing should reflect that goal. On the other hand, remaking Afghanistan in our own image is a prescription for failure. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "State-Building Policy Meeting: The Political, Institutional, and Economic Challenges of State-Building," Manhasset, NY, November 5–7, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Necla Tshigiri, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Revisited: Achievements, Limitations, Challenges," International Peace Academy Policy Report, October 2004, i, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Developing Strategic Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, February 2008).