

Lessons Learned Record of Interview

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Afghanistan Overview

(b)(3), (b)(6), (b)(7)(C), (b)(7)(D)

Most Americans hold the view that the strategy in Afghanistan has not succeeded and the rest believe that there are many other places much more dangerous than Afghanistan; it is an uphill battle to the U.S. Overall, it seems that security assistance is less vulnerable and slower to temper – likely because it is structured differently and now under Overseas Contingency Operations.

Observations and Examples with Oversight Mechanisms

What surprises me is that you are talking to National Security Council (NSC) people and not with people from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The NSC is supposed to track implementation ensure that resources are going toward the intended objectives. While we are tasked to track this

Lessons Learned Record of Interview

implementation, we must get our information from the relevant agencies. There is no independent stream of information and our job is to hold them accountable. It is obvious that there is a disconnect between the strength of our core investments and our desired affects. We must give people a discount that has not been afforded to them. For example, we question USAID on a program they are implementing, but should we even be doing that program in the first place? There is a bigger question here – why does the U.S. undertake actions that are beyond its abilities? This question gets at strategy and human psychology, and it is a hard question to answer. It [Afghanistan] is not government-in-a-box or nation-building. The military is equally as guilty too of biting off more than they can chew. Development is more criticized, in part, due to the SIGAR mandate but the Department of Defense (DOD) Operations and Maintenance (O&M) costs are not under equal scrutiny. USAID is over-scrutinized.

USAID and the DOD have different barriers to scrutiny. While it is true there is a lot of scrutiny, it is grossly insufficient regarding the DOD O&M and conflict. We just don't question the DOD in the same way as we question development agencies in conflict zones. ***"We don't scrutinize DOD fuel costs because we have institutionalized it and adopted a "that's how it goes" notion."*** We have formalized \$100 per gallon as normal for the DOD. This is potentially a bad way of warfighting.

There have been some people in the Pentagon who are looking at this, but they have been doing it is private or semi-private. If we look at the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) program [vehicle]. We had a surge of MRAPs into Afghanistan to protect against \$300 improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Now we have cut those [MRAPs] into razor blades. Is this just the cost of doing business? The full burden of the MRAP program seems to be just how we do business and not in support of the military or even in support of COIN.

When we look at COIN as economic assistance (digging wells or building school) and not as military tool, it looks like our spending was wasteful and ugly. One of [General] McChrystal's hardest lessons was his government-in-a-box program which typified the American wartime machinery and he thought you could simply wave a magic wand and POOF!

Necessary Introspection

Why did it get to this point? The answer is much broader than SIGAR and is about human psychology and national security policy making – the complexities will take a long time to unravel. Our entire post-9/11 response is all subject to question because of this increasing complexity. Why did we make the Taliban the enemy when we were attacked by Al Qaeda? Why did we want to defeat the Taliban? Why did we think it was necessary to build a hyper-function state to forgo the return of the Taliban? In fairness the people I know in government believed we were guilt of nation-building.

If the civilians are not doing their part, on rule of law or governance for example, is all this for not? Should we even do it? If this [rule of law and governance] is what the military needs, then the military may be forced to do it or contract it out.

"Ashraf Ghani was the original SIGAR." Ghani [then Minister of Finance] said, early on, that the methodology the U.S. had for building roads in Afghanistan was flawed and will have unintended consequences. USAID and State, said that we can't do it Ghani's way because we are not structurally equipped to do so. Ghani said that the U.S. should just give the money to the Afghans and they will build the roads and will likely do it at 1/10th of the cost but that is just not how we do economic assistance. We are not comfortable just writing a check and saying, go forth, do it.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) and Logistics

PRTs would have been on Ghani's hit list. ***"Administering aid through PRTs made sense on one level to synchronize efforts between the embassy and ISAF. It sounds good and works on PowerPoint."*** It was really about coordination of strategy, a whole of government approach and wanting control.

Lessons Learned Record of Interview

“We have institutionalized the dysfunction because we want control of a synchronized strategy.”

The MRAP is a prime example of this and so is the fuel distribution process – we transport fuel with helicopters to the provinces! Soldiers get pizza and ice cream while out in the provinces instead of getting food from local vendors. This is all happening because that is just the nature of the military logistical system.

Current Critiques of Strategy and SIGAR

Isaiah Wilson has written on the point that COIN has failed in the modern era. COIN forces today are disconnected from their area of operation and resupply is thousands of miles away. Instead of seeking security from the community, they hide in MRAPs; instead of sourcing food locally, they have it imported. ***“The modern COIN forces are like aliens parachuting in and staying only for short rotations with no sense of the landscape.”***

Economic development efforts have not been just wasteful but have been institutionalized within COIN in unique ways which need to be re-examined. Really, both the military and the civilian side need to have their structures re-examined. [Ambassador] Eikenberry also wrote a good critique, despite it being a bit personal, which hit many of these same themes.

It is understandable that it has been hard get at the ineffective or dysfunctional narrative. The hard question is how does this dysfunction happen? Most will eventually conclude that we should not have implemented the strategy that we did. There is a lot of noise over this disagreement because of SIGAR and how what SIGAR says is often seen as cheap shots at agencies just wasting money. But in the conflict zone and in the bureaucracy that is within, there is a larger infection and structural dysfunction. People are quite defensive because there often is no context [to SIGAR’s reports] and the reports are seen in an accusatory way.

People have said and continue to say that Afghanistan has improved despite all of these mistakes. When authors are making this claim they run through a long list of metrics about mortality, education, nutrition etc.

I would argue that it is all similarly and structurally handicapped. Like how COIN is grossly ineffective because of the complicated environments. That said, it is less a target since the inefficiencies in the DOD O&M far exceed civilian agencies waste during peak war. For example, there is \$120 billion for DOD O&M, \$12 billion for security assistance and \$2.5 billion for civil development. The focus seems to be on the \$12 billion or the \$2.5 billion and never on the \$120 billion for the DOD. The DOD is not just a job program for the U.S. Army and the affects may be more adverse than most know (care for wounded, costs of PTSD etc), but this critique is missing.

Overall it was our assumption that security would improve from 2008 to 2012 as we increased resources and that we would see a return on our investment. Generals Petraeus and Allen had faith that what happened in Iraq would happen in Afghanistan, but that never materialized. In terms of the big picture, there were many questions that were not uncovered because there was no reason to look at certain issues and also SIGAR came into being. ***“We were just moving too fast, with too many people and too many resources.”*** The big picture question is also about what are we doing here [in Afghanistan]? What did we get for this \$1 trillion effort? Was it worth \$1 trillion? These conversations are only happening in private.

After the killing of Osama Bin Laden, I said that Osama was probably laughing in his watery grave considering how much we have spent on Afghanistan. Tom Donnelly always was asking for cost comparisons to other programs [both domestic and international].

Collectively the system is incapable of taking a step back to question basic assumptions. Again, I point to human psychology as to why this is difficult. [This resistance to introspection] is hard wired in us and part of our evolution.

Lessons Learned Record of Interview

International Perspective

Most people, even in Europe offer criticism and those we should take seriously but still they believe that some response [to the attacks on 9/11] was warranted. They also say that the U.S. response exceeded what was necessary. This includes the over-aggregation of the enemy to include the Taliban as part of our response to al Qaeda. Why, if we were focused on al Qaeda, were we talking about the Taliban? Why were we talking about the Taliban all the time instead of focusing our strategy on al Qaeda?

Micah Zenko recently wrote about the myth of terrorist safe havens and this question about why al Qaeda was connected to the Taliban through this safe haven defense. **Chris Fair** also just published an article about how Pakistan is really the big problem and that it is time we take the kids gloves off.

We have tied ourselves in a Gordian knot. The knot is that while the C. Fair article makes sense, it was not true for most of the period as we did have an al Qaeda-focused strategy and we had to get in bed with and acknowledge that Pakistan was a state sponsor of terrorism, but the Taliban was not as high on the list of priorities for us. We had to work with Pakistan to get to al Qaeda despite Pakistan helping the Taliban. Al Qaeda was a higher strategic objective. Maybe C. Fair's argument is better received now, but that was not always true; we can't sacrifice our top priority.

Lessons

1. Choose your enemies wisely. I recently wrote a piece on this for Foreign Policy (they changed the title however).
2. Don't over-aggregate the enemy.
3. Militarizing a response to criminal attack will lead to a host of problems (terrorism is a criminal act, not an act of war).
4. The process for monitoring and implementing strategy lacks introspection. There is too much momentum and not enough reflection.
5. Staying the course is a costly fallacy.
6. National pride and politics matter as they did in the 2003 invasion and the 2008 [U.S.] elections – both contributed to the problem. Obama simplified the narrative into a good war (Afghanistan) versus bad war (Iraq) theme. It was a useful narrative for the 2008 elections and then it all fell apart and became a liability.