



Prepared Remarks of
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“Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan”

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Thank you for that kind introduction. I indeed am honored to be hosted here at DFID, because I believe the key to success in any reconstruction and stabilization effort is to fully implement a “whole of government” as well as “whole of governments” approach, which requires incorporating diplomatic and development professionals along with the warfighters from not only the United States but also our coalition allies.

The U.K. has long been a leader in the area of development assistance, and both of our countries have sacrificed a great deal of blood and treasure in the effort to secure and stabilize Afghanistan, a mission now in its 16th year. Neither country has a monopoly on success or failure and both can learn from each other’s experiences.

As many of you may not be familiar with SIGAR, my little agency with that tobacco sounding acronym, let me speak briefly about my agency before I discuss our observations regarding stabilization efforts in Afghanistan.

Introduction to SIGAR

My agency, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, was created by the U.S. Congress in 2008 to combat waste, fraud, and abuse of U.S. taxpayer dollars supporting the Afghanistan reconstruction effort. To date, the United States has expended over \$120 billion on reconstruction alone, more than on any similar effort in U.S. history, including inflation-adjusted costs of the Marshall Plan. Recognizing the amount of assistance as well as the difficulties unique to Afghanistan, Congress created SIGAR as a special office devoted solely to oversee its expenditures.

Because Congress recognized that the reconstruction effort had to be a “whole of government” exercise, it created SIGAR as a new, fully independent oversight agency, something not done easily or often. As a result, SIGAR’s oversight jurisdiction extends over every U.S. agency that disburses funds in support of the reconstruction effort.

SIGAR's traditional work focuses on auditing U.S. projects and programs, as well as investigating civil and criminal offenses. But because of SIGAR's unique jurisdiction and the length of the coalition effort in Afghanistan, I, with the support of several high-ranking U.S. military and diplomatic officials, established our lessons learned program in 2014. I did so because few U.S. federal agencies conduct lessons-learned exercises, and to the extent they do, they only examine activities within their own agency. But, as I noted, SIGAR has the authority to look at the entire reconstruction effort.

In 2016, we released our first lessons-learned report, which focused on anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan. This past September, we issued our second report, which focuses on security sector assistance efforts in Afghanistan. Our lessons learned project, I'm gratified to say, has resulted in legislative changes made by the U.S. Congress, and our findings helped inform the team that developed the new U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan.

Reports underway focus on private sector development, counter narcotics activities, and stabilization efforts in Afghanistan.

Because our report on stabilization efforts is not yet complete, I unfortunately am unable to share our exact findings and recommendations – which we hope will be issued this spring – but I can tell you the report has been over a year in the making, with extensive research and interviews with many current and former U.S. and coalition senior officials.

Nevertheless, fear not, I do have some general observations on reconstruction that may be relevant to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan that I would like to share with you today.

What Is Stabilization?

But first, let's start with a few definitions of terms. The terms reconstruction and stabilization mean different things to different people. In fact, the "reconstruction" of Afghanistan may itself be a misnomer, since there wasn't much construction in Afghanistan to begin with. Some of you may recall the tongue-in-cheek comments at the beginning of the military campaign in 2001, about how all coalition airpower could hope to accomplish in Afghanistan was to turn big rocks into smaller rocks.

As you all know, the stated rationale for the coalition's continued engagement in Afghanistan is to ensure that it never again becomes an ungoverned safe-haven from which terrorist attacks can be launched. The neighborhood around Afghanistan hasn't improved much, if at all, in that regard – the U.S. government estimates that as many as 20 terrorist groups operate either in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or both.

For today's purposes, I'm going to refer to stabilization activities as efforts to build

governance and provide services in the immediate aftermath of coalition military activities in Afghanistan. I will discuss three seemingly simplistic, but ultimately critical, areas that policymakers and planners need to focus on when developing stabilization plans: people, money, and time.

People

First, the matter of people. We all refer to the “civ-mil framework” as if both sides are on equal footing. They’re not. A nation’s military has to be prepared for any number of contingencies that can arise at any given moment at time, often without warning. This requires them to have an excess capacity of almost everything. Historically, governments have not thought of diplomatic and development agencies in the same way – as I’m sure many of you can attest, civilian agencies often have a surplus of virtually nothing.

This applies to personnel numbers as well as expertise. In Afghanistan, when stabilization became a major priority under the Obama administration’s strategy, the State Department and USAID didn’t have the capability to ramp-up the same way the U.S. military did. The “civilian surge” rounded up 250-300 people per year at its height, many of whom had no training in stabilization activities. Pulling someone into Afghanistan required pulling them off of something else, and if the agencies didn’t or couldn’t do that, they had to contract out to someone who probably had very little idea of where Afghanistan was, let alone what they were getting into, or know how to do what they were being paid to do.

Another problem, is that the “mil” portion of the “civ-mil framework” is the proverbial 600 pound gorilla. When the military has the keys to the helicopters and the armored vehicles, the civilian agencies are really at their mercy. This is not to absolve the civilian agencies of responsibility – SIGAR has uncovered numerous instances where, because of bureaucratic cultural differences, civilian agencies didn’t make an effort to coordinate with the military any more than the military was making an effort to coordinate with them. But most U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams had perhaps 1-3 civilians compared to 80-100 military personnel. If you’re one of those civilians, that’s not a good ratio to try and influence strategy and planning.

Another problem we’ve observed is what I have coined the “annual lobotomy.” Most U.S. Embassy and military personnel are in Afghanistan for a year or less, which means there is a continual loss of institutional memory. As has been said many times before, we haven’t fought one 16-year war in Afghanistan – we’ve fought 16 one-year wars. Each new team comes in, looks at what their predecessors were doing and decides it was stupid, ineffective, or both, and creates its own plan, complete with PowerPoint

slides, and executes it for the next nine to twelve months until they leave and a new team comes in and the process starts all over again.

Money

Second, money. I don't know if money is indeed the root of all evil, but it certainly created its share of problems for stabilization activities in Afghanistan. Usually, in government service, the problem is not having enough money. But Afghanistan is anything but normal. Rather than not enough money, international donors, led by the United States, put too much money, too fast, into too small an economy with too little oversight.

The generally accepted range of aid saturation is 15 to 45 percent of a country's gross domestic product, or GDP. As our first lessons learned report on corruption noted, by 2004, aid to Afghanistan consistently exceeded this range, and totaled more than 100 percent of Afghanistan's GDP in both 2007 and 2010.

This created significant distortions in the Afghan economy. It fueled corruption, filling up bank accounts in Dubai, and made money the main leverage point in negotiations as the coalition was trying to improve governance in key areas by winning over local powerbrokers.

With that much cash sloshing around, it inevitably found its way into the hands of local warlords who used it to consolidate their power. This put the coalition in the position of picking winners and losers in a society where very complex ethnic and tribal considerations needed to be taken into account to ensure equity and keep factions from turning to the insurgency to ensure their own security.

Local institutions also became more corrupt. Unfortunately, local institutions are the ones that Afghans were most likely to have day-to-day interactions with. With corruption endemic, many local government leaders and police became predatory, which further drove the local population into the Taliban's arms, whose capriciousness was at least more predictable.

Time

Time is the third area that needs to be taken into consideration when planning stabilization activities. Many of you have worked on development projects, which are often designed as long-term initiatives. If you're supporting the development of a legislature in a nascent democracy, for example, you don't expect results overnight, or often even within half a decade or more.

The timelines imposed on the military and civilian missions in Afghanistan placed the

military under extreme pressure to deliver results overnight, and they, in turn, pressured their civilian counterparts to deliver even faster than the military could.

The Obama strategy demanded enough progress be made in 18 months to allow for a near-complete withdrawal within three years. Military commanders and civilian leadership in country were forced to press the offensive at the same time they had to plan for a massive disengagement. Aside from any message this sent to the Taliban, it was also a counterproductive way to try and achieve the objectives that had been given to coalition officials in Afghanistan.

First, it exacerbated the problem of the military taking the lead – they needed to meet their objective and if their civilian advisors or partners couldn't keep up – they simply got left behind, metaphorically or sometimes, physically. The second problem was that the military surge precipitated the largest inflow of donor funding at the same time the accelerated timeline reduced the ability to ensure that funds were spent effectively.

As the head of an oversight agency, I place great stock in the ability of both our military and civilian agencies to oversee the taxpayer dollars they spend to ensure that the objectives for those funds are achieved. But in a situation where you have a massive influx of funds that you're told have to be spent, but you have very little time to spend it, something has to give, and suddenly everything you could possibly spend money on seems like a fantastic idea.

The term "burn rate" took on new meaning, as in many cases, the coalition may have been better off just burning the money than spending it on some of the projects and programs it chose to.

Both the military and civilian agencies were put in a position where the only metric they were judged on was how fast they were spending money, as policymakers believed they could spend their way out of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, in this misguided attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, no one stopped to think about what would happen to these programs or projects when the money stopped flowing.

As the coalition prepared to withdraw, it often handed over the keys to programs and projects to an Afghan government that did not have the means, resources, or will to sustain whatever it was the coalition had just given them. And so when local citizens inevitably showed up to a coalition-built hospital or school expecting services the Afghan government couldn't deliver, it eroded popular support for the government in Kabul. Perversely, in an effort to quickly stabilize Afghanistan, the coalition actually created conditions that ran the risk of undermining the Afghan government.

The Path Forward

As the President's new South Asia strategy and the U.S. military's four-year plan for Afghanistan begin to be implemented, the question is, how many of these lessons have we learned?

I do believe the coalition has learned that throwing unlimited resources into this fight can be counter-productive. SIGAR has documented a number of unwise, and sometimes, just plain stupid, decisions that were made with U.S. taxpayer dollars and I believe there is now greater scrutiny, particularly by the U.S. Congress, over how funds are spent.

There is also greater awareness of the danger that corruption presents to the viability of Afghanistan's democratically-elected government. President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah are more willing partners than was their predecessor, but combating corruption will be key to ensuring popular support for the current government and whatever government emerges after the 2019 elections. As General John Allen, the former U.S. commander in Afghanistan, has said, corruption – not the Taliban – is the existential threat to Afghanistan.

I hope that many of these observations will be taken into account the next time we engage in reconstruction and stabilization activities in some foreign land. As much as we say we never will do this again, history demonstrates that it is virtually inevitable that we will. When we do, the failure will be not be in choosing to do so, but in failing to apply what we've learned in Afghanistan and elsewhere to inform those efforts.

Thank you very much and I look forward to your questions.