



## AFGHANISTAN: Donors seek to coordinate activities

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**SUBJECT:** The coordination of international aid in Afghanistan.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** The increasing intractability of the conflict in Afghanistan points to the lack of coherent strategy among those multinational agencies engaged in security and reconstruction. Some countries are responding by developing integrated frameworks for coordinating their military, diplomatic and humanitarian activities in the country.

**ANALYSIS:** While it has won many tactical successes, the international coalition has struggled to develop an effective strategy to counter the Taliban in Afghanistan. Several factors have been at work here, including rotating coalition leadership, occasions when the Afghan government has acted counter to coalition goals, and rifts among coalition contingents (see [AFGHANISTAN/NATO: Operation is in need of change - July 2, 2008](#) and see [AFGHANISTAN/NATO: Insurgency fight lacks focus - May 13, 2008](#)). Likewise, lack of direction on the means of achieving success has resulted in conflicting outcomes. These include:

- civilian casualties, undercutting 'hearts and minds' investments; and
- the appeasement of regional warlords, weakening good governance.

**Policy coherence.** In 2005, the OECD published its draft 'Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States'. The document emphasised that coherent policy across politics, economics, security and administration, or a 'whole-of-government' approach, was important for effective donor intervention. This approach involves the coordination and integration of military and civilian aid under a centralised, focused political mandate.

Pilot projects are underway in Burundi, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau where the UN Peacebuilding Commission is testing its effectiveness in improving post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada are the donor countries most concerned with applying the approach in Afghanistan. Canada is spearheading its implementation in line with the recommendations of the January 2008 Manley report into the future of its involvement in Afghanistan (see [CANADA/AFGHANISTAN: Manley urges renewed commitment - January 25, 2008](#)).

**Political roots.** A whole-of-government approach is designed to ensure that donor country investments pursue a coherent policy. This kind of clarity can make a mission undertaken amid the 'fog of insurgency' more streamlined. Focusing resources on well-defined goals can improve the prospects of mission success. Yet the approach depends on centralised definitions, and on the enforcement of mission objectives by donor governments. Several problems can arise:

- **Priorities.** Domestic opinion can weigh heavily when the public opposes engagement, and pressure the coordinated mission into the achievement of rapid, media-friendly benchmarks.
- **Field realities.** Decision-making has limited local planning or field mission input. Objectives are more likely to be designed for simplicity and managing public expectations than the complex realities of implementation.
- **Flexibility.** A longer and more political chain of command can slow feedback and reduce flexibility in responding to the rapidly changing insurgency.
- **Bureaucratisation.** The political processes and centralised command involved can raise the stakes in monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

**Implementation tensions.** It is difficult to define mission objectives that are compatible with long-term needs for good governance, judicial reform and economic development while securing urgent goals such as combating terrorism, narcotics and a cross-border insurgency. Implementing a united approach to those objectives is a further challenge:

- **Horizontal integration.** Within governments, defence, diplomatic and development agencies tend to have widely divergent approaches and terminologies, and in some cases a history of suspicion or misunderstanding. A whole-of-government approach requires close cooperation and compromise in working towards politically driven objectives, and thus often encounters resistance.
- **Vertical coordination.** Change in established practices would have to occur vertically within the donor government, its agencies and their field offices. Different institutions have evolved different structures for funding and monitoring processes, and careful management of change would be necessary.

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- **Harmonisation.** The whole-of-government approach is a channel for the delivery of bilateral aid defined by a donor country for its operations in a fragile state. A systemic means of harmonising the approach of one donor with other local, international and multinational strategies in such a state has yet to be devised.

**Aid 'militarisation'.** Analysis shows that the military would tend to be the lead agency in a whole-of-government approach. This is due to its strong command and control structure, rapid and efficient response capacity and greater discretionary funding. Development, in contrast, is bound by strict accountability that hampers operational flexibility. Coordination of military and development functions can offer development agencies greater flexibility, resources and entry to insecure areas. However, the whole-of-government approach also poses serious institutional challenges for development:

- **Neutrality.** The blurring of military and development functions undermines humanitarian principles of impartiality.
- **Access.** Linking development with the military increases security risks for development workers and can change relations with the local population. Provincial reconstruction teams (military teams engaging in reconstruction work) have been criticised for increasing the vulnerability of aid workers in Afghanistan. A whole-of-government approach would further institutionalise civil-military linkages, and increase the risk that civilian workers would become soft targets.
- **Focus.** In insurgencies, development objectives risk being subsumed under military priorities. For example, in an effort to implement a whole-of-government approach, the Canadian International Development Agency is facing pressure to promote rapid and visible 'hearts and minds' projects in Kandahar and set aside its discreet, long-term approach to improvements across the whole of Afghanistan.

**Further obstacles.** A whole-of-government approach can focus and coordinate bilateral investments, but it does not address other weaknesses of international aid in Afghanistan. These include:

- lack of coordination between donors, inter-governmental organisations and national actors;
- limited integration of local knowledge and culture in strategy and planning;
- poor investment in local buy-in of donor-defined efforts;
- extremely high security restrictions confining the international community to compounds, hampering their ability to understand the local context;
- a high turnover of field staff that ruptures implementation knowledge and expertise;
- the limited focus on building sustainable local institutions and capacity, and in some cases even further undermining the weak and corrupt central government by creating parallel structures for faster service and more certain delivery; and
- a lack of acknowledgement of Afghanistan's sovereignty -- one of the most resonant justifications for the insurgency -- and operating in a manner that hampers Afghans from taking the lead in the reconstruction of their own country (see [AFGHANISTAN/NATO: Opinion polls do not signal progress - December 14, 2007](#)).

**CONCLUSION:** A whole-of-government approach is well-intentioned but is not a panacea. At best, it can limit political damage by defining the terms of success in a mission which otherwise lacks such. At worst, it can provide an illusion of control and expend energy on developing infrastructure for integration at the expense of building a grounded and effective strategy. In Afghanistan, a consequence could be a shift in the focus of attention from problem-solving to maintaining the credibility of multilateral intervention and of NATO.

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