



PKSOI Book Review

Review of The Government Assistance Center: A Vehicle for Transitioning to the Host Government by Raymond A. Millen and Carolyn Pruitt

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Review by Mr. David J. Katz

DoS Advisor to PKSOI

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Mr. Millen and Ms Pruitt offer an elegant operational and substantive concept for stability operations. They do not claim to make specific prescriptions for the current transition underway in Afghanistan, but set out ideas that merit debate and discussion in order to build more effective ways to operate in circumstances where foreign entities seek to intervene in situations of state failure or weakness.

The paper rightly recognizes the varying interests and approaches of organizations that intervene in such situations and the compulsions to bring coherence and unity of effort. But I see no evidence that this problem can be overcome despite the overwhelming reasons that it should. Certainly, the Afghan experience offers no grounds for optimism.

Even within the United States Government (USG) it proves nearly impossible to bring coherence and collaboration among the civilian agencies and organizations implementing government-funded projects. In Afghanistan, for example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) could not supply timely information that detailed pending activities in a single province, much less compile a comprehensive record of its interventions in a province over the several year course of its involvement. Systematic planning and collaboration among the various USAID

implementing entities falls far short of what it should be. These organizations tend to be sensitive about sharing information about their activities with that sensitivity accentuated by the difficulties tied to operating in an insecure environment. Even if they are working in different sectors, such organizations see themselves as competitors and strive to ensure that they manage the perception and assessment of their activities, not their competitors.

We see this distressing situation within a single funding agency. Introduce other USG civilian agencies such as the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and its Public Affairs and then the U.S. military Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), maneuver units, and Special Forces - which are all doing interventions and the problem becomes even more grave. [1] Then, when there are other donors, both bilateral and multilateral, who are reluctant for reasons, legitimate and otherwise for not sharing and cooperating, it is unrealistic to expect that there can be the coherence and unity of effort proposed for the GAC organization described.

Recognizing the gravity of such a situation in Afghanistan, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recruited a well-regarded former senior USAID official in order to try to bring order to what donors were doing in Afghanistan. He met with scant success in that endeavor and has moved on. Despite the universal recognition that the situation is unacceptable and screams out for change, nothing has been done.

Recently a USAID official remarked that she personally knew of at least 23 different, stand-alone databases containing information on projects and activities in Afghanistan. Despite repeated pleas and high-profile efforts over the years to amalgamate these into one or a handful of

databases, it has not happened. And, chances are slim that it ever will.

Simply put, the donors and international community will not agree to a coherent, integrated decision-making apparatus, information repository, or single leadership body. And then, many host government officials and organizations at both the national and sub-national level will resist having such a coherent, unified counterpart. Playing donors off against one another at all levels is a time-honored reality of recipient countries. Countries see it as in their national interests to do so. That cannot be willed away.

When he was Afghan minister of finance, Ashraf Ghani pressed for all foreign assistance organizations operating in Afghanistan to register with the Afghan government as a small but vital step to give the Afghan government awareness of what was happening in the country. Ghani, who is a no-nonsense guy, was adamant in this and sought to make clear that the foreign organizations would have to comply. But President Karzai removed Ghani and the Afghan government has been unable to enforce this requirement. Many foreign donors offer reasons, legitimate or otherwise, to keep some distance from the host nation government and to avoid accommodating collaborative efforts. For any operational approach to be effective it must accept this reality, as distressing as it is.

It makes perfect sense to have integrated decision-making and cooperation among donors at the national and sub-national levels, but that represents the gold standard for international intervention. Perhaps attention should be directed at what management arrangements can be established that offer marginally improved collaboration and integration than has been the case to date.

Millen and Pruitt's Government Assistance Center (GAC) concept posits centers at the national-level and at a subsidiary, regional level. They suggest that GACs are an evolutionary step building on the lessons learned from PRTs. In Afghanistan, a basic problem accounting for PRT ineffectiveness is that PRTs are intended to be a counterpart to the host country's administration at the major, most important sub-national level, the *welayat* (province). But the administration at that level lacks the competence and mandate to be an effective counterpart for the PRT.

Like it or not, Afghanistan is a unitary state as spelled out in Chapter I, Article I of its constitution. The sub-national administrative entities have no executive authority to make decisions and to act on many of the matters that PRTs and GACs would aim to become involved in. Even when a provincial or district-level administrator seeks to cooperate with a foreign counterpart, there's nothing that prevents that cooperation from being derailed by officials at the national level who decide to wrest authority and decision-making away from the sub-national official. Reasons for doing so may be malevolent or justified, but that is the reality and it happens frequently.

In Afghanistan, many outsiders frustrated by the difficulty of getting anything done at the sub-national level because of the lack of executive control Afghan officials there can exercise, argue that the Afghan government needs to devolve authorities and capacity to the sub-national level in order to "bring the government closer to the people" and to deliver basic services, but this is a highly charged, contentious political matter about which there are fundamental and profound political disagreements among Afghans. Any effort to devolve power to sub-national administrative structures will be met with fierce

resistance as much as it will also find vehement proponents. And as outsiders, when we advocate for such devolution based on pragmatic concerns, the Afghans will see us as taking sides in a matter that is only for them to decide.

To establish a competent, efficient and energized foreign entity with a mandate to engage (at either the national or sub-national level) with a host country counterpart that is not empowered to do anything, risks catastrophic failure, especially if the host nation government interprets the two-tiered structure that we are promoting as an effort by outsiders to impose de facto a devolved structure in line with their views about the proper way to manage and administer the state.

In light of such sensitivities, a GAC structure must be designed and established in a way that mirrors the realities of the host country's administrative organization; not what we think that it should be, rather what it is (as messy, cumbersome and inefficient as it is).

In Afghanistan, the Independent Directorate for Local Government (IDLG) which was established in 2007 has been tasked to strengthen and rationalize the sub-national administrative structure. But it is overwhelmed and has limited capacity. Only in 2010, did the Afghan parliament approve the "Sub-National Governance Policy" but this supplies only a conceptual framework. The many detailed laws that are needed to actually make changes and the administrative procedures that will be set up based on those laws lie years in the future. Based on experience in other sectors, many aspects of this policy may never be implemented.

Much of what PRTS and their scions, the District Support Teams (DSTs), have been doing in Afghanistan is ad hoc and relies on the personal relations that are established between the provincial and district administrators and their foreign counterparts. Most of these joint efforts are ephemeral, do not conform to the procedures and programs of the line ministries and seldom endure beyond the tenure of the individuals, both the Afghan officials and the foreigners at the PRT or DST, involved. Such efforts allow the incumbent foreigners to claim success and progress (and get strong evaluations written) and for their successors to come in with the opportunity to start with a clean slate and repeat the same projects. The consequence is that the massive and costly foreign presence yields little in the way of what can be described as fundamental progress or changes to the lives of the people.

Another question about transition and the character of the international role post-transition outside the nation's capital is whether the international presence should be maintained at the level of Afghanistan's provinces. Many knowledgeable individuals have suggested that it makes absolutely no sense for Afghanistan to have 34 provinces and 365+ districts given the lack of capacity and the fact that these administrative divisions were, in many instances, set up for reasons that have little or nothing to do with administrative or managerial efficiency and effectiveness.

Thomas Barfield and others have argued that the international community should be supporting sub-national administration in Afghanistan that is based on efficiency, geography, economic constraints, and which fosters national solidarity. As such, they suggest that many administrative functions could best be provided - not at the provincial or district level - but at a regional level. Such suggestions

meet with stiff resistance from those Afghan interests that are keen to capture the resources, most of which are coming from foreign sources, that are disbursed on the basis of extant provinces and districts.

Evidence suggests that there will be determined opposition to arrangements that bring administrative consolidation aimed at being sustainable, efficient and in line with contemporary administrative and management models. [2] While foreigners are not in a position to direct Afghans as to how they should structure their sub-national administration – no more than they should be pressing for devolution of power – they certainly need not give carte blanche to the Afghans to use their funds to consolidate a ponderous and unsustainable sub-national administrative structure that the central authority created using foreign resources for a politically expedient but archaic sub-national administration.

As such, careful consideration needs to be given to how the international community structures its post-PRT capacity in Afghanistan. It should avoid options which will result in the PRT replacement that sheds the military aspects but perpetuates a foreign presence that strengthens Afghan administrative structures which should not be strengthened. The provinces and the people will fight to keep their foreign presence, not because of great affection for the foreigners, but in order that they can continue to receive the resources that are or they expect will be accessible to them through the successor to the PRT.

The international community should weigh whether its post-PRT presence outside of Kabul should be on a more rational regional basis (possibly paralleling the multi-province model that the Afghan army and police have adopted for organizing themselves at the sub-national level).

To simply rebrand the current PRTs as GACs may reinforce an administrative structure that the Afghans cannot sustain as donor funds dry up.

The current transition in Afghanistan affords a great opportunity to nudge the Afghans to move towards restructuring some aspects of their sub-national administration and government presence. However, given that most donors and foreign entities are most focused on their exit strategy, it is not likely that they will muster the will, initiative and commitment to do so.

Millen and Pruitt also devote attention to the myriad operational aspects of a quick, effective and uniform deployment. This is a topic that merits more attention. Some outstanding work has already be done as evidenced by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and what they have done to put in place procedures and resources that allow them to undertake quick, uniform deployments that are effective yet do not foster a permanent dependence relationship.

It is difficult to be optimistic that USG civilian agencies will be able to develop the capacity and means to do this in post-conflict situations, especially given the fundamentally different philosophies and approaches of organizations within the USG as well as the international community at large. Still, these are matters that merit more deliberation. Certainly, a key consideration strictly from the perspective of the USG is where the responsibility, authority and executive leadership will be and what political support and resources that organization will have to implement.

In conclusion, this paper offers up much that merits

much more discussion. I can see parts of it as being useful in our efforts to build our readiness for other interventions.

Monograph link provided below.

<http://pksoi.army.mil/PKM/publications/papers/paperreview.cfm?paperID=20>

[1] As soon as the military becomes involved, even in exclusively civilian-focused projects, another set of security concerns impedes information sharing and cooperation.

[2] In their recent paper, "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 Pathways to Stability," (Middle East Policy, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Winter 2010) Barfield and Nojumi suggest that some devolution may be possible without changing the Afghan constitution or basic laws, but this would require a measure of political will and direction on the part of the Afghans that is lacking.

Authors Biography

Dr. Katz was assigned to PKSOI in July, 2011.

A career member of the Senior Foreign Service, U.S. Department of State, with the rank of Counselor, he recently completed an 18-month assignment as the Deputy Director, Force Reintegration Cell, at ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan. Before that he served a two-year detail as a professor in the Strategy and Policy Department and State Department Advisor at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He received his PhD in Anthropology (UCLA 1982) based in part on two years of ethnographic research he conducted in Nuristan, eastern Afghanistan during the mid-70s. Since joining the Foreign Service in 1984, he has had assignments in Iceland, Afghanistan (during the Soviet Occupation), Yemen, Estonia, Pakistan, and Eritrea. He also served as a Civilian Observer with the Multinational Force and Observers based in the Sinai, Egypt.

Dr. Katz has spent over 10 years in positions both in Washington and abroad dealing with Pakistan and Afghanistan. He served as the Principal Officer at the U.S. Consulate, Peshawar, Pakistan (1999-2002) and as Deputy Director, Office of Pakistan and Bangladesh, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (2004-6). Dr. Katz also served as the first State Department Representative at the Provincial Reconstruction Team for Afghanistan's

Nuristan Province (2006-7).