

ACBAR POLICY BRIEF

NGOs concerns and recommendations on civil-military relations¹

Background

Over the past year, international military forces have helped stabilize the security situation in Afghanistan. ISAF has brought relative peace to Kabul, while the U.S.-led military Coalition has focused on military operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

In recent weeks, the Coalition has indicated its intention to change its strategy, forming Joint Regional Teams to be deployed outside Kabul to enhance security and to promote better coordination and delivery of assistance to the people of Afghanistan. NGOs welcome this shift in Coalition focus to the establishment of a more secure environment in which reconstruction can take place. We are concerned, however, that using military structures to provide assistance and reconstruction support will both prematurely deflect attention from Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation and also engage the military in a range of activities for which others are better suited.

This brief first compares NGO objectives in the delivery of assistance with those of the military; then it summarizes ACBAR concerns with respect to military engagement in assistance and reconstruction. Finally, ACBAR makes several recommendations that, if implemented, will help to address our concerns.

A. Comparing objectives of NGOs and the military in the delivery of assistance.

NGO Perspectives

Most NGOs are committed to the principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. In practice, this means our decisions regarding the recipients, the type and the quantity of aid are based solely on our assessment of needs, without discrimination and without aiming to promote a particular political agenda or outcome. We are obliged, therefore, to maintain our independence from the agendas of both the donors that fund us and the governments and local authorities that allow us to operate in their territory. Ultimately, everything we do should be driven by the objective of ensuring the best outcome for the people we serve, helping them over the long-term to meet their own needs.

¹ This is a working document. The role of the military in assistance and reconstruction in Afghanistan is evolving. Not surprisingly, therefore, NGO perspectives on this reality will also evolve over time. This working document will be shared with the military and the United Nations not as a comprehensive statement of our positions, but in order to raise awareness of our *current* concerns. We hope it will stimulate debate and discussion at an early stage in the evolution of civil-military relations in the coordination and delivery of assistance in Afghanistan. We will continue to update it as the situation evolves.

Military Perspectives

Military forces engaged in assistance activities are driven by political and security objectives. In the Afghanistan context, these include (1) force protection and the promotion of security generally, (2) hearts and minds campaigns to win over local populations to the military's political or security objectives, (3) intelligence gathering, (4) strengthening sympathetic local political actors and marginalizing regional actors perceived as dangerous to the new Afghan administration, (5) building the credibility and the legitimacy of the central authorities in Kabul, and (6) public relations in the United States, Europe and elsewhere for the proponents of this military strategy.

B. NGO concerns

While NGOs share the hope with the military that Afghanistan will become more secure and politically stable, we have a number of concerns regarding military engagement in the coordination and delivery of assistance. Those concerns are summarized as follows:

Will adequate attention be given to security?

Donors have chosen not to fund the expansion of peacekeeping forces beyond Kabul. The internationally supported training program for the Afghan National Army is in serious trouble.² The US-led Coalition has not committed to providing peacekeeping troops around the country. Consequently, when ACBAR hears that the US military is shifting from provision of direct security protection to the provision of assistance, we are concerned that this shift is driven more by domestic and international needs for the appearance of progress, rather than the real security needs of the Afghan people.

What will be the long-term impact of assistance driven by military or political considerations?

Using military or political criteria to determine the recipients, the quantity or the quality of assistance response may undermine the long term positive impact of assistance. Specifically, ACBAR is concerned that (1) long term impact will be sacrificed for short term political and military dividends, (2) communities that oppose the current government may get different levels of aid than those who support the government, (3) communities in conflict areas may receive different levels of aid than those in areas considered stable and (4) the military will aim to use NGOs as "force multipliers" to achieve political or security-related ends. These concerns are compounded by the fact that no transparent accountability mechanism exists to assess the long-term impact of military led assistance.

Will military-provided assistance be unnecessarily costly?

The average cost of keeping a US soldier on the ground in Afghanistan is \$215,000 per year.³ The average cost of an aid worker in Afghanistan is less than a tenth of that cost, largely because the vast majority of aid workers are Afghans, not expatriates. ACBAR is concerned that (1) military expenditures on assistance activity could go much further

² At most, 3,000 have been trained (See, Washington Post, Wishful Thinking on Afghanistan, Nov 25, 2002). After desertions, only 1,400 remain in the army (USA Today, US Helping Train an army in Afghanistan, Nov 26, 2002) Many of those who do graduate are returning to work for their regional commanders. Those that remain behind disproportionately represent the Tajik ethnic group.

³ Estimate from Washington-based think-tank, The Stimson Center (see www.stimson.org).

in the hands of assistance professionals, and (2) because those expenditures will be counted as a contribution to assistance on Afghanistan rather than as an internal expenditure of the military, this commitment will substitute for, rather than supplement the commitments that the donors have already made to help rebuild Afghanistan.⁴

Will military personnel be appropriately experienced to determine the real needs of communities and appropriate interventions?

We understand that Civil Affairs Teams (“CATs”) will be made up of personnel with expertise in various sectors such as law, health, education, and infrastructure development. However, we also understand those individuals will be US military reservists with limited language skills, low knowledge of Afghan community dynamics, and limited exposure to Afghanistan generally. Assessments and coordination designed by such individuals may be undermined by their lack of “ground-experience” in Afghanistan, and solutions informed by their analysis will be sub-optimal as a result.

Will local communities be put at physical risk?

Communities that accept assistance from the military may be put at risk. In the past months, newly built schools have been burned simply because of who built them. There remains in Afghanistan a powerful radicalized constituency that will not only consider military-provided assistance as a direct target, but may also turn on the communities that accept that assistance.

Will civilian humanitarians be put at physical risk?

Local populations on the ground often cannot or will not distinguish between soldiers and civilian aid workers engaged in humanitarian and reconstruction activities. Military participation in assistance may significantly enhance antagonism towards humanitarian professionals and the risks that those professionals are forced to take in the execution of their duties. Whenever the military chooses to disengage from its reconstruction efforts, NGOs will be required to take over and will be perceived as agents of the larger political and military strategy as a result. While military led assistance may be short term, the impact on community perceptions of civilian humanitarians may be lasting.

C. Recommendations:

Based on these concerns, ACBAR recommends the following:

1. The International Military Coalition should focus its efforts on creating a secure environment throughout Afghanistan, deploying the proposed Joint Regional teams without further delay. Specifically, they should focus on (1) accepting, in the absence of ISAF expansion, de facto responsibility for peace-keeping outside of Kabul, (2) appropriately resourcing the recruitment, training and maintenance of an ethnically-balanced Afghan National Army (ANA) that will be fully functional within two years, (3) arms collection and destruction, (4) demobilization of armed factions outside of the ANA, (5) bringing to justice all regional leaders that terrorize or commit human rights abuses against local populations, and (6) cessation of all direct payments to individuals commanding regional forces outside of the central government’s security apparatus.

⁴ For example, policy makers in Washington have repeatedly included military provided assistance (e.g. the dropping of HDRS last winter) as part of the US’s overall contribution to assistance efforts.

2. The military should not engage in assistance work except in those rare circumstances where emergency needs exist and civilian assistance workers are unable to meet those needs due to lack of logistical capacity or levels of insecurity on the ground.

Should the military elect to engage in general assistance and reconstruction work over the objections raised above, ACBAR stress the following:

3. All such work should fall under civilian leadership. This is essential to ensure that (1) it is founded on the knowledge and experience of the assistance community in Afghanistan, (2) it integrates effectively with existing civilian-led assistance coordination efforts, and (3) it is driven primarily by the aim of achieving long-term positive impact for Afghan communities.
4. The military should agree to a transparent accountability mechanism against which the impact of its engagement in assistance and reconstruction will be measured. All military engagement in assistance should be transparent and accountable to a code of conduct agreed upon between the military and representatives of the civilian assistance community, including NGO representatives.
5. The military should take the necessary steps to ensure that communities, policy makers and the general public do not confuse military- and civilian- implemented assistance. In this regard, (1) any civil-military coordination should take place in civilian-managed demilitarized locations (no arms etc) separate from existing NGO-only coordination locations and (2) the military should be transparent with respect to its security and political objectives in particular assistance interventions and should demarcate its assistance accordingly (soldiers should wear uniforms at all times etc). At no time should the military refer to its engagement in assistance as "humanitarianism" or to NGOs as "force multipliers" as both such misnomers blur the distinction between civilian- and military-led interventions.
6. The military should articulate their rules of military engagement in circumstances where they are also providing assistance.