

BREAKING DOWN THE SILOS: MANAGING THE WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT EFFORT IN AFGHANISTAN

by Gavin Buchan



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Introduction

Civil-military coordination in the context of a counterinsurgency is both essential and very difficult to achieve. Canada’s “whole of government” approach in Afghanistan has been described as a way of meeting this challenge. It has been touted as a best practice, and is claimed to be more effective than previous mechanisms for coordinating departments engaged in international issues. For example, David Mulrone, the Deputy Minister of the Afghanistan Task Force, said in a December 2008 interview:

“We’ve made changes to how we coordinate the various Ottawa-based departments and agencies engaged in Afghanistan. This shift has helped us to move beyond the old “3D” approach of defence, development, and diplomacy, to a truly coherent whole-of-government approach.”¹

The clear message is that the government believes Canada has developed a better way of doing business – one

that will be a model for the future. It is, however, a message that must be taken with a grain of salt. Canada’s Afghanistan effort constitutes the first time in 50 years that Canadian soldiers have been engaged in sustained combat operations, and the scale of Canadian diplomatic and development engagement is, if not unprecedented, certainly of an order of magnitude greater than most deployments of the past decades. These factors have resulted in a remarkable degree of political attention and oversight. That being the case, the obvious question is whether the whole of government approach being taken in Afghanistan can really offer a template for Canada’s future, more modest whole of government operations in other parts of the world. And if the model as a whole is not applicable, are there at least elements that merit being replicated?

Discussion

Much of the innovation in the management of the Afghanistan mission has come in the form of machinery of government, and the two most notable mechanisms are the Cabinet Committee on Afghanistan (CCOA) and the

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Parliamentary Committee on Afghanistan (PCOA). At one level, it is clear that these cannot represent a template for future missions – for the simple reason that only an issue of truly exceptional national importance merits this degree of dedicated parliamentary and cabinet focus. Indeed, it is doubtful that even Afghanistan would have enjoyed this special status had the recommendations not come from the Manley Panel (or, as it is officially known, the “Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan”), and had the Panel report not formed the basis for bipartisan agreement on the extension of Canada’s mission. However, even if the chain of events that led to creation of the two committees would be hard to replicate, there are still the questions of whether the specific functions they served were important and could be met in another form.

There have been at least three advantages to the CCOA. The first is that departments enjoy direct, priority access to Cabinet on Afghanistan issues, which means a high volume of policy and programming issues can be considered without either queuing behind, or displacing, regular Cabinet Foreign Affairs and Security (FAS) business. The second is that by virtue of meeting regularly on a single issue, concerned Ministers are offered a common whole of government view of

the evolving situation, which, in principle, should foster a unified perspective. The third benefit, and perhaps the most subtle, is that CCOA was originally chaired by the ‘neutral’ Minister of International Trade, rather than one of those most directly engaged in Afghanistan.² That meant that no single department could use the position of chair to impose its will on the others.

The first of the three advantages – rapid and secure access to the Cabinet agenda – is obviously an asset, but is of only limited relevance to the civil-military dynamic. Moreover, in principle, this goal is already achievable within the existing Cabinet system in cases where the issue is a political priority.

The second benefit of the CCOA – helping harmonize Ministers’ perspectives – was partly a function of the frequency with which Ministers met, were briefed, and discussed Afghanistan issues. In this context, one notable element was the way Ministers from civilian departments were given an opportunity to understand the operational challenges the Canadian Forces (CF) is facing. The frequency of discussion around the Cabinet table would be hard to replicate for an issue that enjoyed a lower degree of political priority and public profile. That said, all the Ministers from core departments that are part of the CCOA are also members of the FAS enclave. This suggests that the existing system should be capable of achieving much the same harmonizing effect among international departments. In cases where an issue does not come before Cabinet often enough to breed familiarity, meetings among concerned Ministers outside the Cabinet structure could achieve the same end.

The third advantage – the neutral chair – is one that did seem to represent a qualitative change from past practice. Structurally, it meant that neither of the traditional departmental leads on complex missions (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade [DFAIT] and Department of National Defence [DND] /Canadian Forces [CF]) could control the process, ensuring instead that they collaborated on an equal footing. This limited the likelihood of either the civilian or the military viewpoint being imposed, encouraging instead compromise and accommodation. In a counterinsurgency, where the military account for the vast majority of resources employed but the ultimate objectives are non-military in nature, this appears to be an approach possessing merit.

By contrast with CCOA, the PCOA has been, first and foremost, an accountability mechanism – it ensures that opposition members have an opportunity to probe government handling of the mission on a regular basis. In theory, it could also have enabled Parliament to help inform evolving policy, and could perhaps even have been a forum for synthesizing civil and military perspectives. However, the Committee was slow to produce substantive documentation – only publishing its first formal reports



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policy development and integration [and] coordination of the Government’s activities and operations in Afghanistan,”³ was a significant institutional innovation – albeit one slightly less potent than the Manley Panel proposal to create a body tasked with “...directing the activities of all departments and agencies.”⁴

The intent behind creation of the PCO ATF is underscored by the fact that this was not the first effort to set up a coordinating body. In February 2007, David Mulrone, then the Foreign Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister, was

in June 2009, by which time, the key policy decisions that set the tenor for the mission in Afghanistan through 2011 were already long established. Given PCOA’s limited productivity, it seems evident that its activities could have been absorbed within the pre-existing committee structure.

One interesting feature of Parliamentary engagement has been the Quarterly Report to Parliament – a document that presents a fairly detailed account of the Government’s engagement in Afghanistan, including the tracking of progress towards established goals. This is a public communications tool that includes considerable detail on individual benchmarks and efforts to meet those benchmarks, offering significantly more transparency than is normally the case. It is, however, heavily focused upon the government’s six priorities for Afghanistan, and, as such, contains little information on military activities, other than the training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). ANSF training is one of the six priorities; managing the security situation is considered a means to an end, rather than a priority. That being the case, while the transparency the Quarterly Report provides is desirable from the perspective of democratic process, it has minimal effect on civil-military coordination.

Dedicated Cabinet and Parliamentary committees represent a significant commitment of political time and resources. As such, they are clearly not a realistic option for management of ‘run of the mill’ international missions. However, creation of a dedicated central coordinating unit within the bureaucracy does, at first blush, look like something that could be replicated. The decision to establish a dedicated 25-person Afghanistan Task Force within the Privy Council Office (PCO ATF), with a mandate including “...strategic

moved back to Foreign Affairs to head DFAIT’s Afghanistan engagement and serve as Interdepartmental Coordinator for Afghanistan. At the time, the explicit expectation was that DFAIT would be able to exercise this coordinating function: “PCO has been returned to its prime functions of challenging views of departments, and providing high-quality advice. But policy gets done in departments.”⁵ This position was reversed in February 2008, on the grounds that the arrangement was not succeeding in imposing coherence upon interdepartmental engagement in Afghanistan. Even with an explicit mandate from the Prime Minister, it appears departmental fiefdoms, civil and military, were resistant to being coordinated by a peer. As the Manley Panel articulated:

“Separate departmental task forces are not the answer to inadequate coordination of Canadian activities. These coordinating efforts would have stronger effect, and achieve greater cross-government coherence, if they were led by the Prime Minister, supported by a cabinet committee and staffed by a single full-time task force.”⁶

This reflected the reality that other departments – and, in particular, the CF, which was dominant on the ground, protective of its area of professional expertise, and under the leadership of a particularly dynamic Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) – was not meekly accepting the DFAIT coordinating mandate. This demonstrates the extent to which departmental ‘silos’ are robust. There are, of course, many approaches to addressing this challenge, but the most certain way to break down silos is to impose coherence from above. That does not, however, necessarily mean that the best solution is to create a strong PCO secretariat capable of manag-

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ing files directly. One criticism levelled against the PCO ATF within the government bureaucracy has been that by becoming directly engaged in developing policy, it has lost the objectivity it needs to exercise PCO's traditional 'challenge function.' Another has been that because it draws the majority of its staff from DFAIT, it is itself driven by foreign policy considerations. However, if the model as adopted has flaws, it nonetheless seems clear that when departmental differences are impeding collaboration, it is important for central authority to take a leadership role. Whatever mechanism is created needs to be able to exert meaningful pressure upon departments to align activities, and its authority will be more readily accepted if it is seen as reasonably impartial. Interestingly, creation of a stand-alone 'stabilization' agency, which is one solution occasionally advocated for ensuring coherent participation in complex missions, would not have these advantages. Such an agency would lack the leverage to enforce coherence, and would inevitably develop its own institutional interests.

In addition to the machinery created at the centre, implementation of the Afghanistan commitment has also relied heavily upon core departments building up large dedicated task forces. DFAIT and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), in particular, have each set up units in the 60 to 80 person range, each led at the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) level. The significant growing pains of these task forces, however, highlighted that, unlike the military, civilian departments lack a rapidly accessible reserve of personnel to deploy into such bodies. The task forces interacted extensively not only with their traditional counterparts within DND, but also with the Strategic Joint Staff and the Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command (CEFCOM). Their relationship with the latter was of particu-

lar importance, due to the need for close coordination on operational issues. The planning process, however, was intermittently a source of friction – CEFCOM's desire to produce a detailed whole of government operational plan was seen by civilian departments as a military effort to impose its own way of doing business, and was met with a combination of suspicion and reluctance to engage. The lesson, as with the experience of the DFAIT coordinating mandate in 2007, would seem to be that efforts by an individual department to exercise leadership are more likely to generate resistance than efforts originating from the centre.

While the scale of the departmental bureaucracies established for Afghanistan is substantially greater than for past engagements, the practice is not in itself innovative – crisis task forces are a well-established element of the bureaucratic repertoire. The sheer size of the task forces has, however, bred a cumbersome structure of regular interdepartmental meetings, from working level all the way to Deputy Ministers and the Chief of the Defence Staff. While not inherently efficient, this does highlight a key operational requirement – regular interdepartmental coordination on missions needs to take place at all the levels at which decisions are actually being made. Good working-level cooperation is important, but policy coherence also requires higher-level engagement to bridge the gulf between the directorate level and Cabinet decisions affecting all departments.

These, then, were the key Ottawa-based institutional components of Canada's whole of government approach in Afghanistan. Viewed from the perspective of civil-military coherence, perhaps the most surprising aspect is the limited extent to which the whole of government coordination mechanisms regulate civil-military dynamics as such, as

distinct from interdepartmental coordination. That superficial impression, however, may be misleading. Looking at how events unfolded, there is a plausible argument that the reluctance of the CF to accept the coordinating role of the DFAIT Task Force in 2007, and the strong leadership exerted by the then-CDS, were key factors in driving the government to create a stronger mechanism for central direction. From that perspective, the whole of government approach can, indeed, be seen as a step toward ensuring greater civilian control of the military.



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Returning to the original question posed herein, there do appear to be lessons that can be drawn with respect to future missions requiring intensive civil-military coordination. One is that additional Parliamentary engagement does not appear to significantly enhance efforts to improve coordination, and the existing mechanisms appear capable of meeting accountability requirements. A second lesson, albeit a very obvious one, is that issue-specific structures (i.e., interdepartmental coordinating committees focused upon a particular mission) that promote frequent engagement across the civil-military divide can help foster a unified perspective. To have maximum effect, this regular contact needs to occur at all the levels at which decisions are being made, up to and including Ministers. The most significant conclusion, however, is that strategic level civil-military coordination is enhanced when the coordinating mandate is given to a person or body that has both meaningful authority and a degree of impartiality, be it a Prime Ministerial appointee, the Privy Council Office, or some other mechanism. The Afghanistan experience has been that when core departmental issues are at stake (i.e., mandates, longer-term budgets), leadership by individual departments does not have a strong track record of producing effective

coordination or eliminating departmental 'stovepipes.' This principle applies to some extent at the Cabinet level as well, where the initial use of a neutral chair of CCOA helped to balance competing departmental interests.

Conclusion

In summary, at the strategic and political level, the whole of government approach being taken with respect to Afghanistan does not offer a real template for future civil-military missions, but it does highlight the need for leadership from the centre, and it indicates some ways in which the coordination potential inherent in existing mechanisms can be exploited.

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NOTES

1. Government of Canada Afghanistan website, <http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/speeches-discours/yir-1.aspx?lang=en>.
2. This changed in January 2010 when the Minister of Foreign Affairs was appointed Chair of the Cabinet Committee on Afghanistan.
3. Privy Council Office website, <http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/index.asp?lang=eng&page=secretariats&sub=Afghanistan&doc=index-eng.htm>
4. John Manley *et al*, *Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan* (Ottawa: Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2008), p. 37.
5. David Mulroney, "Canada in Afghanistan: From Collaboration to Integration," speech to the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (May 2007), at <http://www.canadianinternationalcouncil.org/download/nationalca/pastevents/afghanistan/davidmulro>.
6. John Manley *et al*, p. 28.