



Rethinking the Civilian Surge

Lessons from the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan

By Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela

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On the cover: U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Robert Neumann, center, Nuristan Gov. Tamim Nuristani, left, and NATO Commander in Afghanistan British Gen. David Richards cut a ribbon opening a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Nuristan, Afghanistan, in 2006.

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Introduction and summary

In 2009, the United States announced a civilian surge¹ to provinces across Afghanistan, sending thousands² of U.S. civilian representatives from 2009 to 2014 from agencies including the U.S. Department of State; the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID; the U.S. Department of Justice; the U.S. Department of Agriculture; and others.³ These civilian representatives expanded on the already several hundred⁴ U.S. civilian representatives who had worked across Afghanistan since 2002 as part of the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs. This surge deployment to Afghanistan—which saw the largest surge of civilian representatives in U.S. history—built off several previous deployments throughout U.S. history, including in Vietnam in the 1960s and immediately prior in Iraq in 2006.⁵

In these particular conflicts where the U.S. government has concluded that there is “no purely military solution,” U.S. policymakers have justified the deployment of civilian representatives as capable of addressing the political and economic drivers of a conflict.⁶ In turn, this justification has heightened expectations that civilian representatives can and will resolve the deeply complex, long-term political, social, and economic needs driving conflict. If history is any indicator, the United States may again consider deploying civilian representatives to conflict zones, perhaps to provide U.S. support in Syria, Yemen, or other countries transitioning from conflict. Feedback from these past civilian deployments, however, has often been absent from decision-making. The unique opportunity offered by the recent withdrawal of most civilian representatives from Afghanistan’s provinces provides a critical moment to take stock quantitatively and qualitatively of civilian representatives as a foreign policy tool.

The results from civilian representatives’ most recent and largest deployment in Afghanistan show a mixed record of achievements. Overall, civilian representatives generally achieved small albeit significant changes in confined areas—a functioning school, a capable bureaucrat—but not systemic changes that established self-sufficient systems of governance, economic growth, or social development, all of which underpin security in Afghanistan. Perhaps more concerning is that the

sustainability of the political and economic changes that civilian representatives supported in Afghanistan remains in doubt. Recent polling suggests that many of the issues that U.S. civilian representatives sought to improve remain nascent: Improving but still low levels of public confidence in the Afghan government, increasing concern over employment and economic opportunity, and a growing sense of insecurity about—and actual increases in—insurgent attacks continue to plague Afghans. If the United States considers a role for civilian representatives in future efforts, policymakers must have a better understanding of what civilian representatives can and cannot achieve; how they can support U.S. national security; and what, if anything, the United States can do to enhance their effectiveness.

This report outlines the results from a qualitative and quantitative review of the U.S. civilian representative effort in Afghanistan, in which more than 2,000 civilians deployed from 2002 through 2014. First, the report identifies the objectives that the civilian representatives were charged with achieving. Second, the report evaluates civilian representatives' successes and failures against those objectives, discusses overall findings, and offers recommendations to guide future deployments of civilian representatives in conflict zones.

Afghanistan is the most recent case study for the deployment of U.S. civilians, as well as the largest, providing an illustrative example for any future conflict. Afghanistan, however, remains in conflict, limiting research access and leaving significant questions for the future. To compensate for the difficulty in accessing locations in Afghanistan, the authors conducted an online survey and interviews, both in person and by phone, with U.S. civilian representatives and past and present Afghan officials. These interviews and survey results rely on self-reporting by U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan officials; as such, the research team compared these results with secondary-source data about Afghanistan's development, security, and political expectations.

Summary of findings

Data collected from civilian representatives and their Afghan counterparts reveal a fundamental misalignment between the objectives set out for civilian representatives and the tools—whether policy, financial, or bureaucratic—provided to achieve those objectives. Frustration among many of those surveyed reflected this misalignment; one civilian representative described the mismatch between

his objectives and his resources as “set up to fail.”⁷ While this report does not find that U.S. policymakers intentionally undersupported civilian representatives, it does find that policymakers underappreciated the misalignment between civilians’ objectives and their tactical support.

In the short term, civilian representatives in Afghanistan played a critical role in reducing grievances that fueled local conflicts in the provinces and districts where they were deployed. Reconstruction projects developed by civilian representatives often encouraged communities to resolve local disputes, reducing grievances that the Taliban could exploit. With the civilian surge in 2009, civilian representatives took on a greater role in advising the U.S. military. Kael Weston, a former civilian representative in Afghanistan, described the civilian role in 2013 as showing Afghans “that the Americans were not just a military force, that we were a partner that [the Afghans] wanted to keep over the long term.”⁸ Indeed, other empirical studies conducted throughout the surge period have shown that these short-term relationships and reconstruction projects were integral to reducing short-term grievances.⁹

These successes, however, do not appear to have produced sustainable, nationwide progress, potentially undermining the utility of the civilian representatives as well as longer-term U.S. objectives in Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s trajectory is still unfolding, but among both Afghans and Americans there is a palpable sense of disappointment about what the civilian surge achieved. The sense of disappointment stems from the deep political, economic, and social challenges in Afghanistan after three decades of war, as well as a U.S. approach that provided insufficient or inappropriate resources to fundamentally address those challenges.

Combined, the report’s findings from Afghanistan provide a clearer picture of what civilian representatives in Afghanistan and future conflicts can and should be expected to achieve for U.S. policy. In light of these findings, the report offers several recommendations for future deployments of civilians, including: prioritizing objectives; evaluating and re-evaluating assumptions about local environments; investing in people, both in the United States and in the region; acknowledging the full span of resources and risk mitigation efforts needed; improving and expanding the policy feedback loop; and, finally, rethinking evaluation at all levels.

One fundamental lesson, however, underpins all of the recommendations for U.S. policy in future deployments: U.S. agencies must do the upfront work of acknowledging and defining the strategic rationale and purpose for civilian representatives

in a particular conflict. This report does not evaluate the merits of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan; rather, it examines the lack of prioritized and achievable objectives for civilian representatives within that strategy. Its conclusion—that civilians’ work often created pockets of success that were ultimately undermined because they were not connected to larger, systemic political and economic shifts—is a caution to future policymakers. To create nationwide, systemic shifts, civilian representatives in Afghanistan needed to be incorporated into nationwide efforts that linked their work with the Afghan national government. Instead, they were left to develop their own localized plans with limited resources, even as policymakers articulated publicly much broader objectives for Afghanistan’s future.

History of civilian representatives in Afghanistan

The deployment of civilian representatives to Afghanistan evolved over time as it adapted to the unique context of the country. Afghanistan was unlike Kosovo, a previous post-Cold War conflict zone. Not only was Afghanistan's political, economic, and social fabric frayed after three decades of war, but the United States also had relatively less knowledge of the country after years of policy neglect. This environment led to a particular set of challenges for U.S. civilian representatives.

How the role of civilian representatives evolved

U.S. civilian representatives began deploying to Afghanistan's provinces in 2002 on Provincial Reconstruction Teams, the first of which was established in the city of Gardez, in eastern Paktia Province, in January 2003.¹⁰ (see Figure 1) PRTs were initially organized as multidisciplinary teams of 60 to 100 military personnel; one to four representatives from one or all of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State Department, and the Department of Agriculture; and a representative of the Afghan government—usually Afghan police from the Ministry of Interior.¹¹ As the PRTs expanded from Gardez—reaching a total of 28 PRTs¹² across Afghanistan in 2011—the role of the civilian representatives also expanded, moving from military support staff to military counterparts and from project managers to political advisors.

At the outset in 2002, the civilian role on U.S. PRTs was vaguely defined. As part of the military-centric PRTs—a typical ratio was 4 civilians to 84 military personnel—their expertise was in supporting the PRTs' military commanders to expand the influence of the new Afghan government. (see Figure 2) In 2007, President George W. Bush described the mission of PRTs as “helping the Afghan government extend its reach into distant regions, improve security, and deliver reconstruction assistance. They will also undertake new efforts to train provincial and local leaders so they can be more effective in delivering real improvements in the lives of their citizens.”¹³ As military-led teams, PRTs drew most of their reconstruction funding from the Defense Department's Commander's Emergency Response Program, or CERP; for civilian representatives, “there was no actual PRT budget for projects, [which] placed me into an almost purely observe role,” according to one civilian representative.¹⁴

FIGURE 1
Map of regional commands and PRTs in Afghanistan

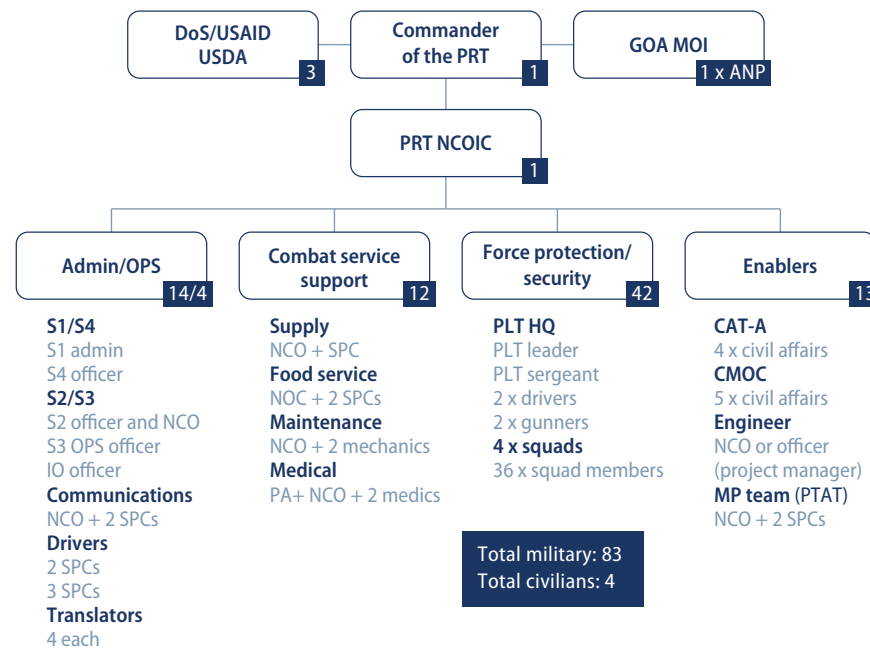


Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "U.S. Civilian Uplift is Progressing but Some Key Issues Merit Further Examination as Implementation Continues" (2010), figure 2.

The limited funding reflected the policy intent, where reconstruction and projects were only part of a more general role of overseeing Afghan officials in the provinces. Assuming that Afghan political and administrative capacity was merely undersupported, the original PRT mission included “monitoring” and “assist[ing] ... coordinating bodies” and “facilitat[ing] cooperation.”¹⁵ At a PRT in the south, the civilian representative in his written survey response listed his projects in rough priority as “security, transportation (roads), water (wells, irrigation, flood mitigation), communications (cell service), education.”¹⁶ As members of the PRTs, then, civilian representatives contributed particular skills to a military-led mission, such as assisting the Afghan government with physical construction and capacity building.

By 2006, with the dramatic rise in security incidents across Afghanistan, civilian representatives became increasingly central to combating the expansion of Taliban influence in the provinces. Civilian agencies, citing information gathered by the civilian representatives, focused on the need to increase the visibility of the Afghan government and economic opportunities for Afghans. USAID civilians, for example, became more entwined with the Afghan government as “an effective tool for stabilization in Afghanistan, strengthening provincial and district-level institutions and empowering local leaders who support the central government.”¹⁷

FIGURE 2
PRT core task organization in 2006



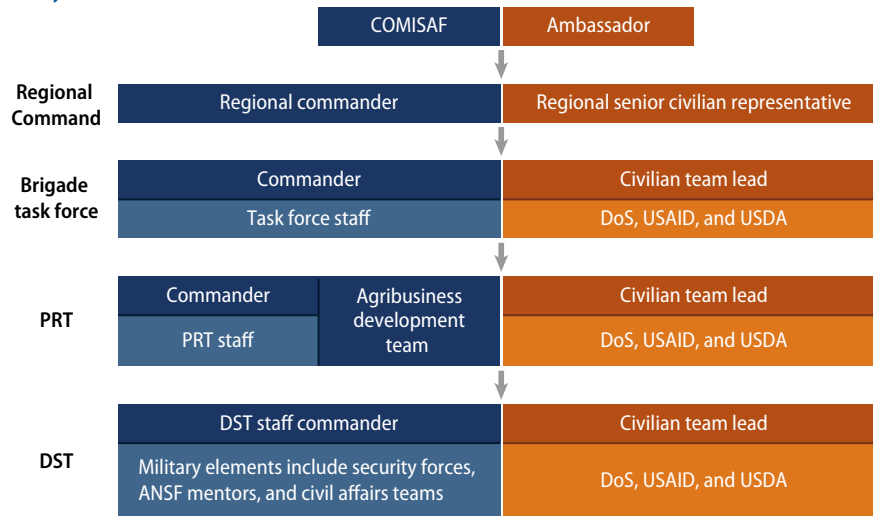
Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "U.S. Civilian Uplift is Progressing but Some Key Issues Merit Further Examination as Implementation Continues" (2010), figure 1.

In addition to the military's CERP funding, USAID established provincial-level programs centered on reconstruction and development. Civilians, now backed by their own funding through USAID rather than the Defense Department, took on an increasingly important role in building government institutions. These tasks would become increasingly explicit as the war deteriorated, and PRTs offered an existing platform for new policy approaches.

With the advent of counterinsurgency doctrine in Afghanistan in 2009, the Obama administration elevated the role of civilian representatives by increasing emphasis on their political and economic work and tripling their numbers to "advance our military and political objectives."¹⁸ Publicly, the administration noted that there was no purely military solution¹⁹ in Afghanistan, referencing economic and political disenfranchisement as underlying drivers of insecurity. As a result, civilian representatives were recruited not just to advance security goals but also to win the "hearts and minds" of Afghans in major population centers.²⁰ Civilians now had two explicit roles: to coordinate with the military units and to provide, as the State Department outlined, "civilian expertise out in key districts that will allow our locally focused strategy to succeed."²¹ (see Figure 3)

FIGURE 3
U.S. mission in Afghanistan field structure in 2010

Unity of effort



Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, "Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment, Appendix C" (2006).

The evolution of civilian representatives' role in Afghanistan mirrors overall changes in U.S. policy. With the military drawdown in 2014, civilian representatives—long linked to military strategy—also drew down.²³ This was not always the plan. As late as 2012, the Obama administration intended to continue the civilian representatives with consulates at two locations in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif. Heralded at the time as evidence of U.S. commitment to Afghanistan, only the consulate in Herat remains open, an arrangement whose future remains unclear after U.S. forces draw down.²⁴ 2015 marks the first full year without PRTs operating in Afghanistan, with all U.S. government civilians working in Kabul or the Herat consulate. While civilian advising still occurs as part of traditional embassy work, the specific role of living, working advisers to Afghan district and provincial governors is no longer a U.S. or international community function.²⁵

The unique Afghan context

U.S. involvement shared many similarities with past conflicts in which civilian representatives were previously deployed. First, the core of the insecurity was seen as political, driven by the Taliban government seeking to re-establish its authority, much like Ho Chi Minh's communist forces fighting in Vietnam. Second, the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan reached 100,000 U.S. troops at its height in 2011, for

both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions.²⁶ As in past conflicts, the civilian representatives were able to use the U.S. military for security, logistics, housing, transportation, and other daily operational needs that otherwise would have required contractors to fulfill. Third, and finally, the United States saw the appeal of the Taliban, and of local warlords, as linked to economic and social services—jobs and courts—that created at least tacit support for insurgency and terrorism.

At the same time, Afghanistan's conditions were unique. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan was impoverished in many human, economic, and political indicators. The amount of resources required to address even basic needs in the provinces would prove daunting for many civilian representatives. One civilian noted that “we wanted to establish a clinic, but we found that they needed something even more basic: hand-washing before handling children or food. It was that basic.”²⁷ Civilian representatives, already on the ground, were quickly forced to adjust their expectations and rethink their assumptions about the economic, developmental, and physical feasibility of their work.

Similarly, the traditional governance and economic structures had broken down as the Taliban sought to eliminate potential opposition throughout its time in power. Relationships and trust among and within tribes was therefore weak, leading to numerous microconflicts between villages and tribes unrelated to broader insurgency or terrorism. Nonetheless, these microconflicts created the very instability that the United States and the new Afghan government sought to resolve.

Afghanistan's poverty was all the more jarring because the United States had very little engagement with Afghanistan or Afghan officials after the 1979 communist coup. When the United States, other countries, and international organizations such as the United Nations arrived in Afghanistan in early 2002, the central Kabul government was considered weak and to be in a state of collapse.²⁸ By 2004, once the World Bank and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit were able to identify the existing Afghan government institutions, they found that despite the political collapse, the administrative government functions were continuing, with “a coherent management and accountability framework.”²⁹ By 2004, however, U.S. policy and civilian representatives had spent two years developing relationships and providing reconstruction in the provinces, largely unaware and therefore independent of this existing Afghan administrative network.

On the security front, the Taliban's resiliency stemmed in part from its access to safe havens in Pakistan. While safe havens for insurgencies are not unprecedented—Iraq, Vietnam, and other conflicts have seen similar regional access—Afghanistan's dependency on economic resources through Pakistan, the very country that harbored the insurgency, made building economic and transportation more difficult.³⁰ Further, the tribal underpinnings of the Taliban insurgency and tribal links between those in Afghanistan and Pakistan challenged the basic premise that a Kabul-based Afghan government could compete with these more localized relationships. Indeed, the ability of the Taliban to survive and grow from safe havens continually meant that civilian representatives focused on short-term security efforts rather than more strategic and sustainable development.

U.S. policymakers approached Afghanistan based on their past conflict experiences. The Bush administration's frame of reference was Vietnam, which led to a preference for small, military-led intervention. The Obama administration, meanwhile, made decisions with Iraq as the primary reference point, which led to an adoption of counterinsurgency tactics but with limited time and resources. As the conflict evolved, however, these approaches were unable to adjust, complicating the achievement of U.S. national security objectives and profoundly limiting the ability of civilian representatives to achieve their objectives.

Background of the study

During conflict, government and policy debates are often focused on immediate objectives: fixing the latest failure or responding to the recent media revelation. This study takes a longer view, assessing the U.S. civilian representative program over its entire duration. This approach presents challenges but generates more comprehensive findings, which can inform the next deployment of U.S. civilian representatives in a conflict zone.

Purpose and timing

The United States has consistently deployed civilian representatives from U.S. civilian agencies to conflict zones, including large-scale military efforts such as Vietnam,³¹ Iraq in 2003,³² and Afghanistan. There is mixed evidence and widespread disagreement, however, both within and outside the U.S. government, over whether civilians can, should, or do effectively address the political and economic drivers of conflict. For many Americans,³³ the increase in violence and political instability in Afghanistan in 2015 indicates that U.S. policy was futile in its effort to aid Afghanistan's postconflict transition. This popular conclusion, which labels deploying civilian representatives as a failed policy option, increases the political difficulty of utilizing civilians in future conflict zones.

By contrast, the U.S. government—namely the Department of Defense³⁴—regards the use of civilian representatives as increasingly important, claiming that the military requires more support from civilian agencies. This viewpoint is partially due to a desire to offload responsibility for medium- and long-term stability but also to a recognition that conflict has many nonsecurity drivers. These differing perspectives will become embedded within the American public, its congressional representatives, and U.S. government agencies, influencing policy arguments and decisions regarding civilian representatives in the next conflict.

Amid these differing conclusions, the time for a comprehensive, empirical assessment of civilian effectiveness in Afghanistan is waning. Politically, the attention of the United States and the international community is shifting away from Afghanistan. Civilian agencies must move personnel to focus on the next crisis rather than assessing the last. Nongovernmental organizations, including research institutions, face security concerns in Afghanistan, making an already significant task more expensive and time consuming.

Functionally, 2015 marks the first year in which U.S. civilian representatives—now consolidated in the U.S. Embassy and the regional office in Herat—are not in the provinces and districts of Afghanistan.³⁵ The personnel that have worked on, with, and for Provincial Reconstruction Teams are rapidly dispersing. As U.S. and international civilians move to new positions, and as the time since their work in Afghanistan increases, their memories and sense of contribution fade. The Afghans who were involved are also leaving. With the election of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the majority of both provincial and district Afghan governors—who were politically appointed—are being replaced. As U.S. forces commence withdrawal from Afghanistan, it has become more difficult to connect with Afghans in areas once easily visited and which hosted U.S. civilians and military.

These factors make 2015 the optimal time to examine the role and contribution of civilian representatives in Afghanistan. After 13 years of deployment—from 2002 through 2014—civilian representatives have accumulated a breadth of experiences and deep knowledge of their work. Their experiences hold invaluable lessons for U.S. policymakers concerning the use of civilian representatives in both Afghanistan and future conflict zones.

Past evaluations

A number of past studies and assessments have examined civilian representatives' role in Afghanistan, some of which have focused on the bureaucratic support structure. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, mainly evaluated the civilian program's inputs during the surge: costs and bureaucratic recruiting by the State Department. SIGAR found that the slow bureaucratic procedures, such as hiring difficulties coupled with congressional budget processes, limited PRT civilian deployments during the initial surge from 2009 through 2010.³⁶

In another set of studies, conducted by government agencies and think tanks midway through the PRT program from 2007 to 2010, noted PRTs shared lessons learned and identified best practices primarily aimed at improving current operations. For example, the U.S. Institute of Peace, or USIP, surveyed several PRT civilians midway through the PRT program in 2007 and noted lessons learned and best practices aimed at improving PRT operations at that time.³⁷ Similarly, the Government Accountability Office, or GAO, reviewed the structure and funding of PRTs for congressional committees.³⁸ Other, firsthand account of PRTs in Afghanistan³⁹ also emerged, offering lessons and recommendations. Some of the suggested recommendations were adopted by U.S. policymakers, while others—such as recommendations for civilian leadership of PRTs⁴⁰—proved too bureaucratically difficult to implement.

Other U.S. and international officials took issue with the PRTs' concept as a policy tool, criticizing their mixing of civilian and military roles and responsibilities. As early as 2002, Barbara Stapleton, then a political advisor to the Office of the European Union Special Representative for Afghanistan, disagreed with the move to implement PRTs. Stapleton thought that PRTs' stated focus on physical reconstruction fundamentally overlooked the Afghan insurgency's political roots, and she raised concerns over PRTs providing humanitarian and reconstruction services normally provided by apolitical, nongovernmental organizations. Similarly, in 2009, Matthew Hoh, a U.S. civilian representative from PRT Zabul and one of the few to resign over the war, publicly criticized the PRTs for narrowly focusing on supporting the Karzai government's often corrupt personnel.⁴¹

Several U.S. and Afghan surveys have managed to obtain quantitative data, much of which inform this study. From 2009 to 2013, several scholars sought to measure statistical correlations between aid and security. The Strategic Studies Institute⁴² and the National Bureau of Economic Research⁴³ both determined that increases in funding for reconstruction—much of it implemented by civilian representatives—had a positive impact on short-term security; a 2011 Tufts University/USIP study, however, argued that increased funding decreased security in the long term.⁴⁴ Other, more general data on development was and continues to be annually developed and compiled in The Asia Foundation's annual survey of the Afghan people and the Afghan government's Central Statistics Organization's "National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment."⁴⁵ Ultimately, this quantitative information gives context to the qualitative assessments provided by past scholars and the data gathered from civilian representatives in this study.

Methodology

Research for this report was conducted through a large-scale online survey of U.S. civilian representatives, Afghan PRT employees, and non-PRT Afghan officials and civilians. This online survey of 48 questions was supplemented with in-depth interviews from both U.S. and Afghan survey participants who indicated a willingness to participate in more detailed discussions.

Among U.S. civilians, we conducted a blind quantitative survey of civilians from the Department of State, USAID, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. More than 120 civilians were contacted based on databases from the Department of State and the authors' professional experience. Seventy-six civilians provided full responses, which resulted in a sixty-three percent response rate to the online survey request. These civilians served in all 12 U.S.-led PRTs from 2005 to 2014; three non-U.S. PRTs, Badghis, Ghor, and Kunduz; and two District Support Teams. Despite the different roles among these civilians—USAID civilians generally focused on development, while State Department civilians generally focused on improving government—the survey results reflect the contribution of civilian representatives as a whole. This approach allowed the research to reflect how civilian representatives are considered in conflict zones—as a composite civilian tool to match the military.

The survey questioned the process of civilian representatives' relationship building, service delivery, and violence reduction efforts. Civilian representatives also were asked to provide recommendations and evaluations of the civilian representative program as a whole. Given the challenge of contacting civilians who served early in the PRT program—notably, before 2004—we also drew on nine transcripts of interviews with PRT civilians—recorded by USIP—in order to gather data from those who served in U.S.-led PRTs from 2002 to 2004. Together, these data cover the full time period of U.S. civilian representatives in Afghanistan.

Among Afghan civilians, we conducted 10 combined in-person surveys and interviews, due to the difficulty in distributing and receiving surveys. Those Afghans surveyed had served in the Afghan government, receiving direct support from and interacting with the PRTs. The survey was also modified and distributed to community members in two Afghan communities where PRTs had operated.

Both the U.S. and Afghan participants were contacted from May to September 2015, at a time of growing insecurity in Afghanistan. During the conduct of the survey and the interviews, the situation in Afghanistan was marked by reports of Taliban offensives in Kunduz, Badakhshan, Kunar, Helmand, and Kandahar. The outcome of the security situation remains in flux. Similarly, the political situation in the provinces and districts was in a state of transition as the newly elected government of President Ghani appointed new provincial and district governors.

The report uses the survey and interview responses to draw conclusions about the program of civilian representatives in Afghanistan. To ensure that these responses reflected facts in Afghanistan as much as possible—and not merely frustrations against U.S. standards or overly positive response biases of Afghans driven by personal welfare concerns—these results were compared with and supplemented by secondary-source data from Afghanistan. These data included the Afghan government’s “National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment”; the Department of Defense quarterly report on “Security and Stability in Afghanistan”; The Asia Foundation’s annual survey of the Afghan people; media articles; and a variety of published reports, all listed in the References.

This breadth of data allowed for trends to emerge and, in some cases, explained contradictory conclusions in previous reports. Overall, however, when compared and contrasted, the survey results from the three groups—U.S. civilians, PRT Afghans, and non-PRT Afghans—over the 13 years of U.S. civilian deployment in Afghanistan, as well as the secondary-source data, were surprisingly consistent.

These data were then used to evaluate whether civilian representatives achieved the objectives set by U.S. policymakers. Originally, the survey and interviews were used solely to determine the contribution of civilian representatives on three specific and publicly stated objectives for Afghanistan: increasing security; reconstruction; and promoting effective governance. Over the course of the survey and interviews, however, U.S. and Afghan participants continually referenced implicit objectives that demanded equal time and obscured their ability to achieve these three original objectives. These challenges became so central to the evaluation that the researchers widened the scope of the survey to include implicit objectives as well. As a result, this report takes into account both explicit and implicit objectives for civilian representatives and uses survey responses—along with independently collected data—to evaluate whether these objectives were achieved.

In addition to examining the achievement of explicit and implicit objectives, the report presents 10 findings, which fall into three broader categories: timing; resources; and policy support. Based on these findings, alongside evaluations of objectives set for civilians, this report provides recommendations for deploying civilian representatives in future conflict zones.

The report purposefully does not cover the military's role in the PRTs or other military units operating in the area. Given the structure of the PRTs in Afghanistan, which were military led, many civilians highlighted how civilian-military relations affected their ability to achieve objectives.⁴⁶ This study chose to exclude the military objectives and achievements to narrowly define the purview of the civilian representatives and their achievements. Likewise, issues of logistics, management, and daily living were excluded. While important to the daily functioning and objectives, many of these issues have been previously examined by internal agency and congressional reviews.

Additional information on the survey can be found in "Annex A: Methodology."

Research findings

To assess the work of U.S. civilian representatives in Afghanistan, researchers first had to identify goals against which achievements could be measured. This report identifies seven objectives—three explicit and four implicit—and assesses whether U.S. civilian representatives achieved those objectives. It then identifies 10 broader trends that emerged when the data was compared to those objectives.

Identifying objectives: What were civilian representatives trying to achieve?

As the conflict in Afghanistan evolved, U.S. policymakers used civilian representatives to achieve a variety of security and political objectives. The following seven objectives are distilled from explicit government sources; personal interviews; implicit assumptions in U.S. policy statements; and from previous civilian representative deployments, including to Vietnam and Iraq. The first three objectives are explicit, derived from government statements. The following four are implicit; although several government sources allude to these objectives, civilian representatives noted in interviews and survey responses that they believed these objectives were of equal importance to those stated explicitly.

Improve security

The first and foremost objective for civilian representatives was to improve security. Civilian representatives brought several non-military tools to the security effort, including diplomatic negotiation, dispute resolution, and reconstruction and governance advice. The State Department's 2010 "Afghanistan and Pakistan

Objectives of U.S. civilian representatives in Afghanistan

1. Improve security
2. Implement reconstruction
3. Professionalize government
4. Build trust among and with Afghans
5. Promote democratic principles
6. Provide oversight, intelligence, and reporting
7. Demonstrate commitment to the Afghan government and buy political time

Stabilization Strategy” explicitly confirmed the use of governance and economic development as tools to improve security: “The provinces and districts are where our most consequential programs will be delivered, where we must help the Afghan government provide economic opportunities that increase stability and reduce the strength of the insurgency—and where we are most visibly expanding our civilian commitment.”⁴⁷

This objective, however, was unclear on whether such security objectives were short term or longer term. The distinction matters for civilians: Funding weekly garbage pickup may reduce short-term daily unemployment, while building a mosque or school may take longer but create lasting institutions and long-term jobs. The objective was therefore deeply dependent on how U.S. military commanders believed security in their area could be best achieved. For some military commanders, especially in highly insecure areas, short-term security measures—such as targeted operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban members—took priority. Paradoxically, emphasis on short-term security sometimes hampered efforts at enhancing long-term security: One 2008 civilian representative recalled that the U.S. military’s focus on short-term operations, including operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents, left local Afghan leaders unwilling to meet with her at all, even on economic or reconstruction issues that were in their interest.⁴⁸

This advising also included the facilitation of conversations between the military and Afghan government leaders such as governors or village elders. Civilian representatives report serving as the “intermediary” between military and local Afghans, building Afghan understanding of military objectives.⁴⁹ Likewise, the civilian representative became the credible communicator to the military about Afghan objectives and needs. For many civilian representatives, this objective to advise the military made them into the “conscience” that could help military units integrate both political and security effects into their operations.⁵⁰

The direct civilian-military collaboration on Provincial Reconstruction Teams—a function of their objective to improve security—also provoked intense criticism from humanitarian assistance groups.⁵¹ In their view, PRTs violated the political neutrality of humanitarian assistance by combining military forces with traditionally neutral humanitarian assistance and reconstruction. Over time, however, some organizations came to see the PRTs as filling a gap, able to provide humanitarian and civilian assistance using military support in areas that the independent nongovernmental organizations could not reach due to security concerns.⁵²

Implement reconstruction

The second explicit objective from U.S. policymakers was to use civilian expertise to reconstruct—and in some cases, construct—physical buildings, governing skills, and processes for Afghanistan’s government at the local level. Reconstruction was designed to highlight the government to its constituents through physical displays of government functions. Indeed, then-President Hamid Karzai specifically requested in 2002 that the name change from Joint Regional Teams to Provincial Reconstruction Teams, stating that “warlords rule regions; governors rule provinces.”⁵³

In some locations, reconstruction was primarily about physical infrastructure as an end in itself: rebuilding a deeply poor country after extended conflict. In a district of Nimroz Province, for example, reconstruction improved lives: “There was no health clinic either, and the governor wanted one. I went to Kabul, got USAID and got a meeting with the Ministry of Health and the World Bank, and we convinced them for the need for a clinic,” explained the first civilian representative to Nimroz Province in 2009. “This effort—renting a building, hiring a doctor, a midwife, and a vaccinator—established a clinic that allowed the doctor to see 2,500 patients a month.”⁵⁴

After the civilian surge in 2009, however, reconstruction focused largely on delivering services as a means for the Afghan government to strengthen its legitimacy. In 2009, U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and U.S. military commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal established a new civilian-military plan, which used civilian funding to promote local cooperation, build jobs to “provide a viable alternative to violence or criminality,” and “outbid’ the Taliban and promote a sense of progress to counter insurgent propaganda.” The plan also utilized civilian resources to “provide access to justice and enhance agricultural opportunity and market access.”⁵⁵

By 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was able to testify that, “Economic growth is up, opium production is down. Under the Taliban, only 900,000 boys and no girls were enrolled in schools. By 2010, 7.1 million students were enrolled, and nearly 40 percent of them girls.” The secretary told Congress that, “Hundreds of thousands of farmers have been trained and equipped with new seeds and other techniques. Afghan women have used more than 100,000 microfinance loans. Infant mortality is down 22 percent.”⁵⁶ Reconstructing the kinds of economic and government services that could lend credibility and legitimacy to the Afghan government became a critical tool in countering the insurgency and the grievances that it exploited.

Professionalize government

The third explicit objective of civilian representatives was to build the capacity of the Afghan government, primarily of governors and legislative councils at the provincial and district levels. Initially, this capacity building was intended to provide support to existing government structures—for example, holding shuras, described as meetings of local leaders, often elder men, for decision-making or dispute resolution. Amid the civilian surge, however, President Barack Obama expanded this charge of civilian representatives to include “helping the Afghan government serve its people.”⁵⁷ This broadened mandate was designed to expand effective, representative, and accountable governance; support electoral reform; counter corruption; and improve access to justice.⁵⁸ As the State Department laid out in its 2010 strategy, “Our governance efforts will help develop more responsive, visible, and accountable institutions in Kabul, particularly at the provincial, district, and local level, where most Afghans encounter their government.”⁵⁹ In a country where formal government structures and processes had broken down over decades of war, civilian representatives were now charged with a significant and strategic effort to improve Afghan institutions systemically—working from the local to the national level.

As U.S. personnel began to withdraw in 2012, achieving this governance objective required sustainability to ensure that the achievements outlasted the civilian representatives’ deployment to the provinces. At the 2012 NATO summit, Afghanistan and the United States had agreed to draw down the military and civilian surge by 2014.⁶⁰ In preparation, the State Department announced a shift in governance efforts, moving from “short-term stabilization projects to longer-term sustainable development.”⁶¹ Governance objectives became less about creating short-term security and more about responsive, corruption-free, and accountable government officials who could sustain government functions without U.S. civilian representatives.

Build trust among and with Afghans

U.S. civilian representatives had the objective, often implicit, to influence Afghan leaders and their constituents to support U.S. efforts. Gaining local support for security operations was one element of that support. Another element was through elections. For Afghanistan, elections served as strategic inflection points that provided Afghan affirmation of both the democratic process and the existing Afghan government that U.S. military and civilian investment deeply supported.⁶² Consequently, in 2004, 2005, 2009, and 2014, civilian representatives in the field urged, promoted, and facilitated elections and associated events.

Similarly, civilian representatives understood their objective to build support for a formal government among the Afghan population. Civilian representatives were not only tasked with professionalizing the Afghan government but also were integral to communicating that professionalization to the Afghan people. Civilian representatives used their stature in provinces or districts to join radio shows, shuras, and other events where they would explicitly highlight the local Afghan government work.⁶³ As one civilian representative explained in 2009, “Our goal was to meet the basic needs of the province, and credit the Afghan Government, so that people would know that the Afghan Government was relevant. We built schools, wells for water, and medical clinics, and told everyone that this was the work of the Afghan Government.”⁶⁴ Using their political influence, civilian representatives saw themselves as integral to establishing and maintaining the credibility of the formal Afghan government among the Afghan people.

Civilian representatives also influenced the Afghan government and built relationships that allowed U.S. policymakers to understand Afghanistan’s political terrain. Civilian representatives quickly came to understand that Afghan governors were appointed from Kabul and therefore had variable local influence and support. Consequently, many district and provincial Afghan governors were focused on managing up to Kabul rather than down to constituents. Civilian representatives could leverage their relationships with the governors to develop their local support base. At the same time, civilian representatives understood that their support often enabled Afghans to make politically difficult decisions, such as supporting the reconciliation or reintegration of fighters who had rejected the Taliban and rejoined their local Afghan community. An Afghan leader could overtly or covertly draw on support from U.S. civilians to pursue local reconciliation objectives that ultimately would feed into national U.S. objectives for Taliban reconciliation.

Promote democratic principles

From the outset of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, promoting democracy was a pillar of U.S. policy. President Bush consistently referred to building a “new and democratic” Afghanistan and supporting the “institutions of democracy.”⁶⁵ By the time of the surge, however, feedback from interviews with the civilian representatives noted a shift—these surge civilians focused more on professionalizing governance than on promoting democratic principles. Nonetheless, civilian representatives pursued projects and programs that supported democratic principles, such as providing support for elections, throughout their deployments from 2002 through 2014.

For example, projects around “improving the status of women,”⁶⁶ such as developing entrepreneurship and business training programs or expanding girls’ schools, elevated democratic principles of equal opportunity. Although these opportunities fit within the ideal of a democratic and more stable society, they often conflicted with local norms, forcing civilian representatives to grapple with whether to create local conflict in pursuit of democratic principles. Indeed, civilian representatives often had to choose between conflict and principles, with little indication from U.S. policymakers about which should take priority.

Provide oversight, intelligence, and reporting

The reporting and oversight functions of civilian representatives became increasingly important for U.S. policymakers with the locally focused counterinsurgency approach adopted in the 2009 surge. Civilian representatives provided a wealth of information about local politics, attitudes, economic growth, and other status reports on their objectives. This reporting then fed into U.S. policy discussions on the progress of military and civilian developments. In 2015, absent the breadth of civilian reporting, the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development have had to develop new methods of collecting information—particularly about U.S.-funded projects in areas where civilian representatives previously operated.⁶⁷

While in the provinces and districts, civilian representatives had the objective of overseeing U.S. assistance funds from USAID and the Department of State. For example, civilian representatives from the State Department had the legal oversight function to account for, report, and track State Department assistance funds.⁶⁸ USAID civilian representatives in the provinces and districts, however, explicitly lacked a legal oversight function for most projects. Instead, USAID program management was consolidated in Kabul for most projects,⁶⁹ leaving day-to-day management in Kabul rather than with USAID civilian representatives in the field. USAID civilian representatives noted in the survey that this lack of direct oversight meant that they had little control or ability to adjust planned reconstruction projects in their respective provinces.

Less emphasized, but perhaps equally important, was the inherent ability of civilian representatives to report on the actions and decisions of Afghan officials, essentially overseeing their work. Such oversight was an important factor in what then-Secretary Clinton highlighted in 2010 as another objective for civilian representatives: “raise the standards of the Afghan counterparts.”⁷⁰ In Helmand⁷¹ and Kandahar,⁷² for example, the reporting of U.S. and U.K. civilian representatives provided sufficient

evidence of corruption and incompetence in some provinces, leading to pressure on Afghan President Karzai to remove the governors of those provinces. Similarly, civilian representatives who could send reports to civilian counterparts serving in Afghan ministries could urge coordination between the ministry and the local level. This ability of international civilians to oversee and communicate across the Afghan government may have made it more difficult for Afghan officials to pursue corrupt practices. The ability to report independently on Afghan counterparts created pressure for Afghan counterparts to at least minimize bad practices.

Demonstrate commitment to the Afghan government and buy political time

In 2002, U.S. policymakers initially saw PRTs as a way to bridge a gap in government functions, providing services that the nascent Afghan government in Kabul was incapable of providing. Bolstered by PRTs from other NATO allies such as Germany and Italy, the U.S. PRTs were, in essence, designed to buy time until Afghan government officials were meeting the U.S. goal of providing “effective and accountable government services” in the provinces, including security, education, health care, and economic growth.⁷³

By the time of the surge in 2009, civilian representatives and their reconstruction and government capacity-building abilities had become another tool for the Kabul government to combat the influence of the Taliban insurgency. The surge, with its tripling of civilian representatives, acknowledged the need to support the Afghan government in as many provinces and districts as possible—particularly those heavily targeted by the Taliban in the south and east of Afghanistan. These civilian representatives’ objective essentially was to keep the Afghan government functioning as a visible alternative to the Taliban; without such support, the Taliban could gain influence, making it more difficult for Kabul to contest alone.

Such a commitment of civilians, particularly with the surge in 2009, further aimed to demonstrate U.S. political commitment to the new Afghan government’s survival. The deployment—at a significant cost and risk to the United States—was designed to reassure the Afghan government and undermine the Taliban. U.S. civilian representatives were closely aligned with Afghan government officials, often living and working on or next to the provincial governor’s compound. While this arrangement bolstered the physical and political alignment of the U.S. and Afghan governments, it forced civilian representatives to become advocates for Afghan government employees. Many of these employees, however, did not consistently believe or espouse U.S. democratic principles, rule of law, or accountability.

These objectives were both the goal and justification for deploying more than 2,000 U.S. civilian representatives to Afghanistan. The support provided by civilians to the military and Afghan government was essential to U.S. policy. Yet as many civilian representatives learned over time, objectives often conflicted with one another, and each one presented fresh challenges.

Assessment: What was achieved?

One of the most powerful justifications underpinning the use of civilian representatives in conflicts is the belief among policymakers that civilian representatives are able to address the drivers of conflict: political, economic, and social factors that contribute to insecurity and insurgency. Using survey results, interview responses, and past publications from both U.S. civilian representatives and Afghans from 2002 through 2014, the table below aligns the reality of what was achieved with stated objectives. (see Table 1)

TABLE 1
Reported achievements and challenges of civilian representatives aligned against their 7 objectives

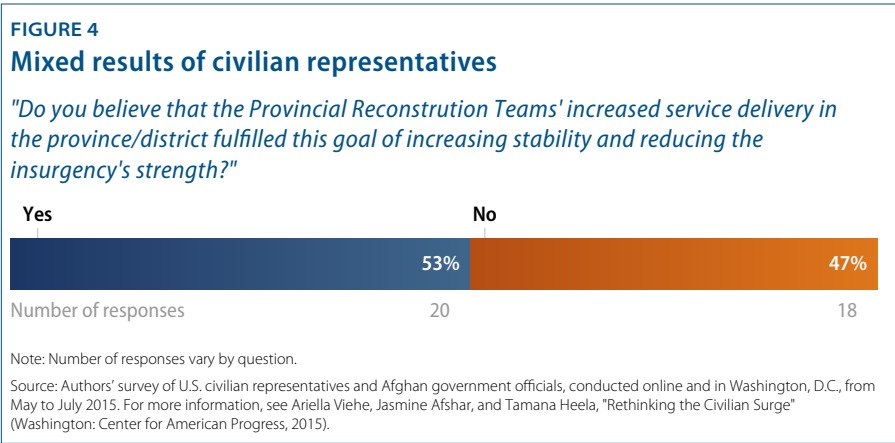
Objective	Indications of achievement	Complications to achievement
Improve security	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shaped some military operations.• Assisted military spending of the Commander's Emergency Response Program.• Provided some oversight to military-funded projects, as possible.• Communicated and advocated for Afghan concerns during U.S. military planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Struggled to pursue civilian objectives independently of military objectives.• Relied on military commander for resources.
Implement reconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved some Afghan quality-of-life indicators, such as education and health.• Provided short-term political and security support through quick-impact projects.• Projects and programs sometimes used as access to powerful Afghans; projects enabled civilian representatives to have a role in dispute resolution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Had few resources—financial or personnel—to oversee projects.• Inconsistently focused on sustainability of projects.• Contributed to increased Afghan desire for more long-term, large infrastructure.• Focused security-linked projects on insecure areas at the expense of secure areas.• Long-term development now minimal.• Faced funding requirements that created disincentives to development and fueled corrupt practices among Afghans.• Unable to develop effective alternative to services provided by the Taliban, notably justice and courts.• Provided skills training to Afghan counterparts that often went underused.

Objective	Indications of achievement	Complications to achievement
Professionalize government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicated military actions and priorities to Afghans. Built trusted relationships with Afghans, often due to specific skills or traits of the representative. Provided disincentive for bad behavior and mitigated overt corruption. Began localized reconciliation programs to address fundamental political grievances. Built some government capacity, primarily with existing technocrats. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faced time constraints so that time spent advising Afghans reduced time spent advising military; objectives conflicted. Faced too few resources and were spread too thin to build system of governance; minimal contact with civilian representatives in ministries or U.S. Embassy. Faced unclear policy on support to formal government—Afghan governor—and informal local officials—shuras. Unable to adjust the Afghan power dynamics often relied on by nontechnocrats. Had limited time, incentives, or resources to address micro-conflicts or to disaggregate them from the larger counterinsurgency.
Build trust among and with Afghans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoted Afghan government publicly to Afghan constituents. Urged Afghan leaders to pursue U.S. objectives, often military. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raised expectations from Afghan constituents for Afghan government capability. Afghans disillusioned with government unable to deliver like the United States did. Discredited by some Afghan constituents solely due to alignment with Afghan officials.
Promote democratic principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported elections, the results of which Afghans generally accepted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alienated some conservative Afghans with democracy promotion programs, such as women promotion programs.
Provide oversight, intelligence, and reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasingly developed civilian-military campaign plans. Reported weekly through U.S. government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Struggled with few resources to develop metrics and measurements or to gather data. Received minimal guidance or policy feedback from embassy or Washington agencies.
Demonstrate commitment to the Afghan government and buy political time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Galvanized international partners to increase civilian representatives and civilian programs in Afghanistan. In the United States, demonstrated civilian agencies' commitment to national security objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewed by Afghan government as creating a parallel government.

Source: Aggregated responses from authors' survey and interviews with civilian representatives and Afghan officials, May to September 2015.

Based on the data gathered from U.S. civilian representatives and Afghans, the chart above lists the seven objectives identified in the previous section alongside the achievements and complications related to each objective. Overall, the results are mixed. As they related to each U.S. policy objective, the achievements of civilian representatives are primarily short term; the complications they faced largely prevented these short-term achievements from continuing into the long term.

Like the results in the above table, civilian representatives expressed a conflict between short- and long-term achievements within almost all objectives. When asked whether PRT civilians met even the three explicit objectives of security, reconstruction, and government, civilian representatives were evenly divided.⁷⁴ (see Figure 4)



This nearly even split indicates that civilians representatives achieved some but not all of their objectives. In particular, achievements made in the short term did not generally last into the long term.

For overall U.S. policy in Afghanistan, however, this short-term achievement was perhaps the most important contribution that U.S. civilian representatives could have made. Because of their work, Afghans' quality of life improved, and security gains allowed time for U.S. military to build security while the United States and NATO developed separately the Afghan National Security Forces. Civilian representatives also made short-term progress in governance and reconstruction that positioned the Afghan government as a viable alternative to the Taliban insurgency.

Critically, civilian representatives joined the United Nations and the international community to support and implement four nationwide elections that underscored and built momentum behind democratic governance. Democratic elections were strategic inflection points in the mission shared by the United States, NATO, and the government of Afghanistan: building a sustainable, democratic national government in Kabul. As one PRT civilian recalled in 2013, "[T]he PRT [wa]s the node for interaction with provincial government leaders dealing with government formation and security issues. For example,

the election crisis of 2014—which in some respect continues—was by far the most significant issue we dealt with and our work on that (which was constant and intensive) was far more important to policymakers than the status of any [development] project.”⁷⁵ The recent transfer of power to new President Ghani is another step toward cementing democratic practices and values.

Yet the objectives articulated for the civilian representatives were so expansive and strategic that even these small, albeit essential, gains appear insufficient for long-term success. One reason is that the PRT program as a whole has few metrics by which to demonstrate its impact. A second, and more important, reason is that the U.S. government did not set up the civilian representatives to have specific effects as an integrated, nationwide system, from the national level in Kabul down through the provincial and local governments. As a result, significant accomplishments with Afghan officials, with specific communities, or on particular development issues remained relatively localized and did not contribute to a sustainable nationwide shift.

Several civilian representatives noticed this missing systemic approach; they saw the limited outcome of their work on the ground. For them, this missing step was due to limited policy feedback between the strategic and the deeply local levels. Without it, neither civilian representatives in the field nor policymakers in Washington were consistently assessing changing circumstances on the ground and adjusting policy accordingly. For policymakers considering civilian representatives in the future, then, it will be critical to understand not only the above chart on what civilian representatives did and did not achieve in Afghanistan but also how these achievements affected overall trends evident in Afghanistan today.

Overall trends

To clearly understand why this difference between short- and long-term achievements emerged, the research distilled data collected from civilian responses into 10 cross-cutting trends. These 10 trends fall into three general categories: short-term gains; resource challenges; and policy support limitations. Combined, the 10 trends illustrate how, why, and when civilians were able to make short-term progress but largely unable to produce fully sustainable economic, political, and social systems.

To arrive at these trends, researchers focused on those that cut across the time span or became more acute over the 13 years of U.S. civilian representatives. Even when data were broken down by agency, the research revealed minimal difference between civilian responses. The one difference that did emerge was between the responses of surge and presurge civilians—likely a reflection of the bureaucratic and policy shifts that came with the surge’s later focus on counterinsurgency and promotion of civilian skills. Despite these shifts and the surge’s tripling of civilian representatives, the trends identified below continued due to the unchanged, underlying assumption that civilians could achieve fundamental political, social, and economic shifts in Afghan society and government.

Short-term gain; long-term weakness

Projects were useful in galvanizing rebuilding, whether political, economic, or social

After 13 years of reconstruction, training, and development, Afghans reported that they had improved access to services and viewed economic growth as improving and increasing happiness.⁷⁶ Although press and reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction have found many instances of abandoned and unused infrastructure, there are no nationwide data on what U.S.-built infrastructure continues to be used. As a small sample, according to the 10 Afghan officials surveyed, much of the local infrastructure built by civilian representatives in their areas of Afghanistan continues to be used.⁷⁷

While comprehensive research needs to be undertaken by those who are able to travel around Afghanistan today, several anecdotes from this research indicate that some U.S. investments continue to be critical to Afghan economic and social development in 2015. For example, in Kunar Province, seven bridges now span the Kunar River, reducing the travel time from Asadabad to Kabul from 6 hours to 1.5 hours.⁷⁸ Truck traffic continues to increase, taxing the roads and bridges in the area. Eight of the 10 Afghans interviewed for this research reported that schools that civilians supported continue to function as schools, as do hospitals, in their Afghan communities, though they are concerned for their quality.⁷⁹

Those surveyed noted that, on the local level, small projects were instrumental in re-establishing political systems of governance, both formal and informal. Instead of simply reconstruction, civilian representatives reported improved stability in villages and communities when they tied political objectives to their reconstruction work, using reconstruction as a tool rather than simply as an output for its own sake. (see Figure 5) One Afghan mayor related how he used projects funded by U.S. civilian representatives to improve his political standing:

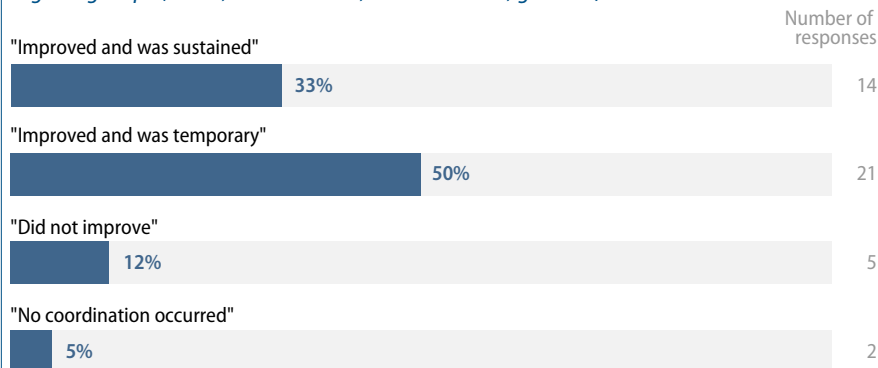
[The PRT] built numerous buildings like: Attorney General Office's building, Education Department building, clinics in central and suburbs of Farah, roads and asphalted highways. A big road project is building the 75-kilometer road connecting central [part of the province] to other part of [the province]. Inside the city, we had great development projects; for example, we established a park in the city. Almost 5,000 people had job for one year with the projects of PRTs and USAID. Also, PRTs built a canal for flooding and water 2–3 kilometers; three bridges were built on that canal. The municipality did not have a lot of money, so all these work was impossible for the government; we could not meet their expectation, and we received a big help from PRTs in all areas. In the assessments of 1390 (2010), I was praised and named as the best mayor of the year at country level.⁸⁰

Generally speaking, projects alone did not resolve local conflicts driven by complex factors and past incidents. But civilian representatives did report that projects provided an opportunity for parties to a local conflict to come together and restart political discussions.

FIGURE 5

Short-term gains were temporary

"Please rate the effect of PRT project implementation on the coordination among Afghan groups (tribes, communities, line ministries, genders)."



Note: Number of responses vary by question.

Source: Authors' survey of U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan government officials, conducted online and in Washington, D.C., from May to July 2015. For more information, see Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela, "Rethinking the Civilian Surge" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

Building Afghan government functions was unsystematic

Over 13 years, civilian representatives reported different focuses: The civilians focused on infrastructure and general development in the presurge years, shifting to stabilization projects in the early surge years of 2009 to 2011 and finally to capacity building in the later surge years of 2011 to 2014. The shift stemmed from both improved understanding of needs within Afghanistan and recognition of the impending drawdown of U.S. civilian representatives from the provinces in 2014. As one civilian noted, “We finally started to get it right towards the end: focusing on budgeting, linking the Afghan government to do its own projects” as the drawdown approached.⁸¹

In 2015, as Afghan government at the national, provincial, and district levels operates without civilian representatives, confidence in Afghan government ministries is the lowest out of all institutions at 47.3 percent.⁸² This is lower than in 2012, at the height of the surge, when confidence measured around 56 percent; levels are more reflective of 2007, prior to the surge of civilian representatives, when confidence hovered at around 48 percent.⁸³ The drop-off in confidence suggests that the drawdown of civilian representatives has brought on a period of uncertainty regarding central government capabilities.

Many civilian representatives also expressed concern that their work had raised expectations of local Afghans—expectations that local government could not meet given the more limited capacity and financial resources following civilian withdrawal. (see Figure 6) One Afghan interviewee described⁸⁴ this development in his provincial capital:

In 35 years of war, we lost everything and now, while we reached a period that people are familiar with modern and high quality living systems, they expect a lot from the government. A lot of immigrants that returned from other countries have seen all the improvements abroad, and now their expectation is raised up; they want best schools for their children, clinics, roads, parks, electricity, and agriculture mechanisms—they want to kind of increase their living standards to their neighboring countries’. Afghans are poor, so without the help of PRTs we would never be able to do anything in Afghanistan.

It remains to be seen if the capacity of the Afghan government will be able to maintain Afghans’ political support in the coming months and years.

FIGURE 6

Afghans may have had heightened expectations due to civilian representatives

Perception among U.S. civilian representatives

"At the end of your tour, did you believe Afghans had an increased demand for service delivery based on PRT/DST projects/programs?"



Note: Number of responses vary by question.

Source: Authors' survey of U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan government officials, conducted online and in Washington, D.C., from May to July 2015. For more information, see Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela, "Rethinking the Civilian Surge" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

Civilian-led projects provided some short-term, but rarely long-term, security gains

As other studies have shown and as this assessment found, there was a minimal correlation between governance, projects, and reductions in violence or increases in stability.⁸⁵ Data compiled by other research teams have shown that projects and engaged governors have managed to reduce violence in the short term, supporting particular U.S. military operations.⁸⁶ For other areas, primarily in the east, PRT civilians reported that "violence increased where projects were implemented because the Taliban saw them as a threat to their influence."⁸⁷ Both U.S. civilians and Afghans reported that projects were more successful and sustainable in cities and communities that were already less violent.⁸⁸

Over the medium to long term, however, these governance and service delivery improvements do not appear to have made a sustainable difference in the perception of local Afghans or their political behavior. As one U.S. civilian who worked in both Iraq and Afghanistan noted, "I have not seen development alter security without political grievances being met. Restoration of a political order is what is needed. Buying off local leaders will work for a short time, but it is not sustainable and any 'gains' made in this manner will disappear as soon as the money does."⁸⁹ The assessment of the World Bank-funded National Solidarity Program, or NSP, reached a similar conclusion, finding that NSP-funded projects had little, if any, long-term impact on political, economic, or governmental stability.⁹⁰

This lack of long-term security gains from civilian activities is evident in the most recent developments in Afghanistan. Responses to the 2014 Asia Foundation survey indicated that “a majority of Afghans (65.4%) report always, often, or sometimes fearing for their safety or security or that of their family.”⁹¹ This fear has steadily risen among Afghans since 2006, even as they report seeing and using more reconstruction in their communities. Unemployment also increased significantly, from 6.6 percent in 2013 to 10.7 percent in 2014.⁹² More concerning, perhaps, is Afghans’ outlook on the future. Already the worst in the world in 2013 according to Gallup polling, Afghans’ ratings of their lives declined even further in 2014. More than 6 in 10 Afghans evaluate their lives poorly enough to be considered “suffering,” meaning that they have “poor ratings of their current life situation and negative perception of the next five years.”⁹³ This is the highest figure ever recorded for any country since Gallup started tracking life evaluations in 2005. As of 2013, no Afghans rate their lives highly enough to be considered “thriving.”⁹⁴ These downward trends so quickly following the drawdown of U.S. and international support to the provinces underscore the short-term impact that such international support had on the security, governance, and development of the country, as well as its inability to increase security in the long term.

Sustainability had many definitions and was pursued intermittently

Eighty percent of U.S. civilian representatives surveyed reported that the projects they pursued were not sustainable.⁹⁵ (see Figure 7) This lack of sustainable projects was likely due to conflicting objectives for civilian representatives. For those civilians who pursued the objective of improving security, sustainability or sustainable impact was not the primary purpose of a project. For example, civilian representatives in high-violence areas used PRT projects to achieve quick-impact results. Some projects, such as cash for work or monthly shura⁹⁶ gatherings, were designed and funded less in terms of the sustainability of the projects themselves and more in terms of contributing to sustainable reductions in violence and economic growth.

Secondly, and more importantly for U.S. long-term objectives, civilian representatives’ efforts to professionalize Afghan government officials—whether through budget, administrative, or other training—were not contributing to a systemic change in government. Civilian representatives at the provincial and district levels focused on training particular Afghan officials in governance skills with some success but not necessarily as part of a sustainable system of governance, development, or security.⁹⁷

FIGURE 7

Sustainability was lacking

"Do you believe that the PRTs/DSTs sustainably increased service delivery in the province/district after your tour?"



Note: Number of responses vary by question.

Source: Authors' survey of U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan government officials, conducted online and in Washington, D.C., from May to July 2015. For more information, see Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela, "Rethinking the Civilian Surge" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

Capacity building among local officials did occur, however, largely from 2012 to 2014 as civilian representatives were planning to draw down. In that environment, civilian representatives reported working increasingly with local officials to build the capacity to sustain security, governance, and development improvements. For one 2012 civilian representative, building the capacity of the local Afghan governor and mayor required a system of support based around daily interaction: "We detailed civilian representatives to work within their offices," recalled the representative. "We took guidance from them on when, where, and how to execute projects. We saw them regularly—and as frequently as possible, went to their offices rather than asking them to come to [us]."⁹⁸

This same civilian representative also recognized that discussions alone were insufficient; the Afghan officials needed to join important conversations about the future of their communities. As a result, the representative "empowered the Governor and Mayor on security issues, helping them build relationships with senior U.S. military officials and increasing their understanding of security issues. This helped their overall leadership and credibility, reducing the potential for excessive influence by Afghan security officials."⁹⁹ Such leadership, relationships, and credibility were one important component of ensuring the sustainability of government-run services.

Yet there was minimal support or reform at the central ministries that could connect these increasingly capable Afghan officials at the local level with national-level systems.¹⁰⁰ Afghanistan's governors required resources such as budgets and personnel to flow from the central government in Kabul. But as one civilian representative reported, the lack of support from Kabul-based ministries increasingly hampered the capacity to respond to citizens at the local level:

It was a misconception on the part of USAID and ISAF [the International Security Assistance Force] that we've got to teach [Afghan officials] capacity. They know how to do it; what they don't have is the money they're supposed to be getting from the central government. My frustration was that we were always pushing the provinces to reach up to Kabul, but there was no one pushing Kabul to reach down to the provinces.¹⁰¹

Similar frustrations about the lack of response from Kabul were echoed by those who had some success locally but then hit a wall when looking to transfer to Kabul-based ministries.

This lack of connection between levels of government was rooted in an assumption behind U.S. policy: that there naturally would be a central government with which to connect.¹⁰² Although rhetorically both the Afghan and U.S. governments promoted the need to develop local government, capable local officials either met resistance or incompetence inside their own government.¹⁰³ At the national level, too, U.S. civilian representatives did not have the same relationship or access that they had at the local level. The United States and other nations provided personnel to advise several ministries, but they were often only a few, appended to particular ministerial divisions. Unlike the civilian representatives in the PRTs, those at the ministerial level often struggled to have influence due to short tours and skepticism among Afghan counterparts.¹⁰⁴ As a result, there was minimal opportunity for U.S. civilian representatives to link between the local and national levels, leaving successful work at the local level unsupported by a larger, holistic governance system.

Lastly, the lack of focus on such sustainable government systems may have undermined Afghan perception of U.S. policy and the civilian representatives. Afghan officials noted their frustration with the current lack of capacity of the local Afghan government. For several Afghans, the civilian representatives did not focus enough on long-term processes, such as education and job training,¹⁰⁵ or on large economic engines, such as factories and markets. These long-term developments require complex economic, governance, regulatory, and security systems that can communicate horizontally—meaning at the local level—or vertically—meaning between the local and national levels. This frustration, coupled with the reduction in positive outlook mentioned above, provides a worrying trend for even capable local Afghan officials. While civilian representatives may have improved local capacity, it is unclear to Afghans whether that capacity is sustainable inside an Afghan government.

Resources

Civilians had some, but not sufficient resources to build relationships with the Afghan government

Many if not all of the civilian representatives' objectives rested on relationships with Afghan counterparts, which included the governors, ministries, local council members, and community or tribal leaders. In building those relationships, the civilian representatives and the Afghan interviewees both cited the need for more of the resources that civilian representatives were able to provide, including "leadership," which this research defines using the six attributes discussed below.

- **Daily interaction.** Civilians indicated proximity to the governors and transportation for the governors as the two most important factors in building a relationship of influence. (see Figure 8) When asked which factors most contributed to trusting relationships with Afghan counterparts, the most common answer—reported by 40 percent of interviewees—was the frequency of interaction.¹⁰⁶ This need for frequent interaction was reinforced when several PRTs moved their living and working quarters to the governor compound to ensure proximity.¹⁰⁷ For one Afghan official, lack of proximity was cited as a core problem: "[S]ecurity of staff was the main problem; the commute between [Afghan officials] and the PRT staff was very hard, so one of the disconnections between PRTs and [Afghan officials] was the distance."¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the survey of U.S. civilian representatives indicates a strong correlation between the amount of time spent with the Afghan counterpart in decision-making and reported levels of trust.

FIGURE 8

Daily interaction matters

Frequency of engagement compared with frequency of agreement on projects

		“How many times a week did you typically engage with Afghan counterparts (in any format)?”				
		“Every day”	“Four to six days a week”	“One to three days a week”	“Other”	Total
“How often do you believe that your Afghan counterpart accepted and followed PRT advice for implementing projects?”	“Never”	0	1	0	0	1
	“A few projects”	1	1	4	1	7
	“About half the projects”	3	9	2	1	15
	“About three-quarters of the projects”	5	3	0	3	11
	“All projects”	6	1	0	0	7
	Total	15	15	6	5	41

Source: Authors’ survey of U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan government officials, conducted online and in Washington, D.C., from May to July 2015. For more information, see Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela, “Rethinking the Civilian Surge” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

- Confidence building.** This daily interaction built a trust and confidence for making difficult but important governing decisions. As one civilian highlighted, this frequent interaction developed a relationship that allowed the Afghan governor to have confidence when making difficult decisions that ultimately contributed to U.S. security objectives: “The governor’s growing confidence was particularly noticeable in 2009 and 2010, as he went from a fairly new and weak governor with little leadership experience—he was an academic—to a more assertive leader willing to make tough decisions and do regular outreach to constituents. In 2010, he surprised many of us when he ordered Afghan military—with U.S. military support—to conduct an offensive.”¹⁰⁹
- Transportation.** Similarly, several civilian representatives reported that secure transportation—provided by the U.S. military—was a critical component of convincing their Afghan counterpart to visit a remote village after a security incident or natural disaster or as part of an election promotion strategy. One civilian recounted using transportation to enable the governor to travel the entire province to inspect reconstruction projects and attend local shuras and to allow the governor to bring firsthand knowledge to negotiate with Kabul for increased funding for development.¹¹⁰

- **Funding.** The presurge civilian representatives reported a dearth of funding and projects, minimal flexibility to draw on reconstruction resources, and general logistics challenges behind reconstruction, such as security for sites. With the surge, however, civilian representatives and their military units had increasing access to funding through resources from the departments of Defense and State. This increase in resources was often justified by its counterinsurgency merits,¹¹¹ meaning that the ability to provide goods and services opened a conversation with Afghans. This justification was supported by the 10 Afghan interviewees, 5 of whom were Afghan government employees. All 10 independently cited funding as the critical contribution of the civilian representatives.¹¹² As described further below, in the “Civilians needed more appropriate resources” section, the type of funding and approach to using it were increasingly important for its effectiveness in changing security, political, or economic outcomes.
- **Quality and length of tour matters to Afghans.** Afghans reported that one of the key challenges in dealing with civilians was their frequent rotations: 2 of the 10 Afghans stated that, over time, they had increasingly less trust in each successive civilian representative.¹¹³ Afghans reported high levels of trust with the initial civilian representative, but trust decreased with subsequent U.S. civilian representatives as the civilians rotated posts. One of the Afghan officials in southern Afghanistan described the experiences as follows: “Trust was built and then with the new teams, new assessments started and they were not much familiar with the project background, so that caused disruptions.” This led the official to expend less effort in building relationships when he knew civilians were departing.¹¹⁴
- **Personality.** The personality and skills of the civilian representatives also mattered to Afghans. Those representatives who were given high marks for traits such as “[local] language,” “engaged,” “accountable,” “transparent and honest,” “understanding [Afghan] interests,” “[part of a] united U.S. position,” and “a clear ability to bring rewards from Kabul” had far better relationships with Afghan counterparts and greater ability to motivate them to implement projects. One PRT civilian described a successful project engagement under a dedicated staff judge advocate from the U.S. military, who was “trying to push the [Afghan officials] to do more and to be accountable. There was good cooperation between the district prosecutor and the police. They were conducting evidence-based operations. They were properly pushing cases to the provincial capital. The Huqooq, the sort of traditional justice actor in the district, was resolving cases in a pretty frenetic pace, like 10, 15 cases a day.” Yet once this personality rotated and the Afghan officials lost his engagement, “we saw [that] the rule of law [actors] really started engaging in pretty significant corruption.”¹¹⁵

Even in instances where resources were more readily available, civilian representatives and Afghans reported relationships that were more defined by the values and experiences of each Afghan in an official position. Strong Afghan-U.S. relationships—defined as those ranked above 75 on a 0–100 scale—developed among those who shared their counterpart’s objectives. Of the Afghans, most of those were technocrats and expatriates who had existing administrative skills. Their experiences outside Afghanistan, almost exclusively in Western countries, also may have contributed to the shared understanding of values such as accountability and transparency. For example, Gov. Gulab Mangal of Helmand, who was largely trained by the Soviet Union and made clear that “he would not tolerate incompetence, absenteeism or graft,” became so indispensable to the security effort in Helmand that British Prime Minister David Cameron personally intervened with President Karzai to prevent his removal in 2009.¹¹⁶

Relationships had more influence on security and projects than money

Building relationships and consulting with local communities was a core tenant of the civilian representatives, and their importance increased throughout the program. Civilian representatives in the presurge years reported building local relationships but emphasized a greater focus on development linked to a specific Afghan counterpart, such as the governor. Afghan interviewees complained that many civilian representatives did not consult with the local officials on projects. Instead, they complained that projects were pursued based on what U.S. representatives thought was most appropriate.

By the time of the surge, however, civilian representatives highlighted the shift to a more intensive process of local consultation. The counterinsurgency theory that accompanied the surge stressed the need to win the support of the Afghan public. This meant that civilian representatives needed to understand the Afghan political and social landscape outside the Afghan officials they spoke to daily. U.S. civilian representatives reported triangulating opinions and political perspectives among different communities, Afghan officials, the U.S. military, and the Afghan security forces.

This effort to develop a more nuanced understanding of local Afghan desires indicated a heightened understanding of the complex Afghan political and social environment, the result of three decades of war and susceptible to tribal and local disputes that the Taliban then exploited. Civilian representatives then reported working to overcome the very localized political and economic competition driving nationwide insecurity. This approach required civilian representatives to understand the local environment, balance competing tribal interests, clearly plan projects, and consistently monitor their implementation.

This process was time and energy intensive, but it appears to have been instrumental in reducing violence, at least in the short term, and laying the foundation for long-term sustainability. In service delivery, a consistent theme appears in the responses of civilian representatives and Afghans: Local knowledge and relationships were critical to producing projects that not only reduced violence but did so in a sustainable manner over the long term. The civilian representatives themselves highlighted best practices that included the development of strong relationships and the willingness to understand local power dynamics. Three of the four civilians interviewed who served in Afghanistan's violent southern provinces cited USAID's Community Development Program, or CDP, as an example of how relationships and intensive local engagement produced improved security and sustainable projects. As one interviewee recalled, "CDP were much better because they put a staff guy in the district, who listened [to Afghans]. It was a much slower process and massive amount of money to do it that way, but ... [it was] as effective as anything we did, as far as I could uncover."¹¹⁷

Two civilian representatives who served in the south also highlighted the intensive relationship building process of the Village Stability Operations, or VSO, program. The VSO program was an initiative that used Afghan and ISAF personnel embedded in the community full time to help improve security, governance, and development in more remote areas of Afghanistan.¹¹⁸ One of these interviewees, who served in the southern part of Afghanistan during the surge, told interviewers that the "trick is to be intensely local. [You] only know what is changing by being out there." He described this intensely local effort as the best way of understanding change in a community: "If we start the VSO ... to work with a [governor] who has zero contact, no one [in the community] is coming to see him. And then, 6 months later, he has 100 people a day visiting him, something is happening. But you don't know that unless you know that in Afghan culture traditional dispute resolution with the Taliban is used" as a way to bypass the Afghan government. With 100 constituents per day coming to see him, this local governor was discrediting the Taliban in his community—and doing it without military operations. But as this civilian representative noted, "This [approach] is labor intensive," and requires a large commitment of resources to achieve shifts within a community.¹¹⁹

Demonstrating this understanding and building a diverse set of local relationships was also important to the objective of oversight. Civilian representatives, by their very presence, were new and independent centers of power in the province of a district—a power that could be the source of oversight. For example, civilians reported that Gov. Gul Agha Sherzai's behavior became less overtly corrupt once he moved to the eastern Nangarhar Province in 2004 and was forced to contend

with the Jalalabad PRT.¹²⁰ Indeed, in March 2008, listeners of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Free Afghanistan, or RFA, even voted for Gul Agha Sherzai in the first-ever nationwide "Person Of The Year" contest.¹²¹ Sherzai was credited with establishing the rule of law in the province, keeping the peace, eradicating poppy fields, and building an important highway between the capital of Jalalabad and Torkham, on the border with Pakistan.¹²²

The relationships that civilian representatives built with their Afghan counterparts also were essential for mitigating corrupt or criminal behavior. One representative described the influence of his position as "this independent channel that the Afghans couldn't influence and so it made them nervous." He attributed this nervousness to the fact that Afghan officials had "heard that a PRT had reported bad behavior of another governor and gotten him removed so that spread," perhaps influencing other Afghan officials to carefully limit the corrupt or criminal behavior they pursued. Still, according to this civilian representative, this mitigation of bad behavior may not have been fully honest; he believed that the removal of other officials for corruption only "caused them to be more clever. [U.S. oversight] helps on the margins of negative behavior maybe, but it's unlikely to cause positive behavior."¹²³ This tempered conclusion underscores the effect that strong relationships with local counterparts can have on both mitigating negative actions and promoting positive actions.

Similarly, a civilian representative focused on rule of law development at another PRT in the east of Afghanistan noted that his oversight role created pressure for more engagement from his Afghan counterparts: "I was effective in influencing them because I understood the power of my position as a representative of the coalition in the midst of an active conflict." He used that position to push for public trials "to introduce basic elements of due process and universal legal principles, and generate pressure to support those [trials]."¹²⁴

Because the Afghan officials were urged to start public trials, these trials became self-reinforcing, as "a platform in which the Afghan public's disgust with endemic corruption placed pressure on Afghan officials to do the right thing."¹²⁵ The PRT reported that violence against these Afghan justice officials eventually overwhelmed their efforts; two were killed in 2014, and the justice provision in the province appears to have been unsustainable.¹²⁶ The return of violence targeting Afghan justice officials underscores the depth of change—spurred by the relationship that the civilian representatives built with their Afghan counterparts using the power of their outsider position—that these public trials created in the local community.

The importance of relationships and local understanding underscores the need for particularly qualified civilian representatives. Those with language skills, a willingness to work and live at the local level, and political astuteness appear to be most likely to establish relationships that can influence local power to support U.S. objectives.

Civilians needed more appropriate resources

The amount and type of resources that civilian representatives needed changed over the course of 13 years. Presurge civilians expressed a desire for increased funding—particularly for civilian assistance rather than military assistance. The surge civilians, however, reported the exact opposite challenge: The rapid influx of funding saturated the Afghan market and created perverse incentives. Spurred on by U.S. budget incentives to spend all appropriated funds, projects were executed with less regard for their impact in Afghanistan than for their political impact in Washington, D.C. One USAID civilian noted that focusing on creating jobs and services for Afghans—a common demand from Washington—was too simple and tended to offer a short-term job, instead of actually addressing the deep economic and political factors that initially limited job creation.¹²⁷

Both presurge and surge civilian representatives cited a need for increased personnel and oversight resources to provide quality control for funding and projects. Some civilian representatives suggested limiting funding or projects in order to ensure that civilian representatives could personally oversee each one. Others, however, suggested expanding resources to ensure that funding and projects were appropriately implemented.¹²⁸ Doing so would have required increased transportation, security, and likely, personnel.

Civilian representatives' inability to perform quality control undermined projects and credibility and promoted corruption. Civilians representatives from both the State Department and USAID reported the logistical and policy difficulty in prioritizing quality control of projects and programs as the second-most reported negative impact of the PRTs.¹²⁹ Ten of the 50 surge civilians interviewed cited their shortage of personnel to get out to see projects frequently and their shortage of secure transportation to access areas where projects were underway, both of which were driven by pressure to produce many projects quickly.¹³⁰ This lack of quality control then became one easy avenue for corrupt contractors to continue their practices.

One civilian representative in the presurge period noted a similar challenge: He did not have the secure transportation to monitor a microhydro project.

Consequently, the process he established for monitoring its use was “photos provided by the Afghans. So there would be photos of the Afghans carrying things up the hill from the microhydro, of them building the input channel into the microhydro.” But after his year of service, his successor received the same photographs, and the United States “realized these were the same pictures every time. The Afghans were just gaming the system. There is the challenge of [monitoring and evaluation] in an environment like this.”¹³¹ Other civilian representatives reported projects completed poorly or not at all.¹³² Poorly run projects also reflected poorly on local Afghan officials who ostensibly supported them.

In response to the need for quality control, civilian representatives reported attempts at setting up processes “like in the state of Wisconsin, they do surprise state inspections to keep the companies honest.” But the civilian admitted that even that approach “was always such a hit and miss. There wasn’t the quality control out there during the initial and finishing construction stages.” For example, “the ring road [around the entire country] was supposed to have 3–4 inches of asphalt, but in many places that were too hard to get to, the road was falling apart because it only had 1 inch,” presumably due to poor quality work by the Afghan firm used to build that section.¹³³ With limited resources to provide consistent, even creative, efforts at quality control, U.S.-funded projects were susceptible to corruption and poor quality that undermined Afghan perceptions of the U.S. efforts in the provinces.

For Afghans, the enduring perception of U.S.-funded projects was even more discouraging than their poor quality. For those interviewed, the lack of U.S. quality control meant that politically connected companies not only won the bids but also performed work that has proven unsustainable. Three of the 10 Afghans interviewed also reported that U.S. civilians in both the presurge and surge periods misunderstood the impact of contracting with local Afghan businesses.¹³⁴ The result is that Afghans are both disappointed in U.S. civilian representatives, who they perceive as naïve, and in fellow Afghans, who they perceive as corrupt and impervious. This perception matches what other analysts of corruption have pointed out—U.S. reconstruction often created perverse incentives.¹³⁵ Afghan interviewees recommended that U.S. civilian representatives increase their understanding of the local environment.

U.S. civilian representatives, however, reported that they were in many cases aware of corruption or poor quality on projects—or at least the potential for it, given minimal quality control resources. For the civilian representatives, the problem was less a lack of understanding or awareness and more the lack of resources to act. They did not have enough personnel or secure transportation or time to monitor projects, nor was it—in their understanding—a priority policy imperative.

Policy adapted too slowly to on-the-ground circumstances

Objectives conflicted and undermined each other

Consistently, civilian representatives reported that their objectives conflicted and that it was not clear which objectives took priority. For example, some civilian representatives reported prioritizing the objective to “build trust with Afghans” over the objective to “professionalize the government.” This prioritization was not incorrect, but it led civilian representatives to work closely in support of corrupt local Afghan officials.¹³⁶ For many of these civilian representatives, the local official with whom they interacted was the designated Afghan government interlocutor. While other authors have highlighted how channeling U.S. resources through corrupt officials undermined U.S. objectives,¹³⁷ for some U.S. civilians, “my job was to make the district governor a rock star.”¹³⁸ Other civilian representatives opted to work independently of corrupt officials, not informing them of reconstruction and military operations or seeking to influence their standing in the community. Both approaches had a direct effect on whether U.S. civilian representatives achieved their objectives even when civilians were unclear as to which objective took priority.

For example, in allocating their time, civilian representatives reported choosing between advising the military or spending time with Afghan counterparts.¹³⁹ On reconstruction, civilian representatives grappled with the conflicting impact of short-term, quick-impact projects that would support a specific military operation or longer-term reconstruction projects that would contribute to decades of development. To make decisions, civilian representatives reported often defaulting to supporting the military, whose own clear objectives were easier to support than object to.

As a result, civilian representatives cited the role of the military in the PRTs as detrimental to the PRTs’ overall objectives, pointing to the differing prioritization between military and civilian personnel of their objectives in achieving U.S. national security goals in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰ Frustrations stemmed from the reliance of the representatives on the military for a range of activities—from transportation to Internet connectivity—that often dictated a civilian representative’s capability to meet or respond to Afghan counterparts. For example, secure transportation to meetings or projects was dependent on military-provided convoys. These convoys could be used instead for military operations, leading civilian representatives to forgo their meetings. The result was civilian representatives who believed that military objectives—often short term and security focused—“trumped civilian work.”¹⁴¹

In addition to an overall lack of prioritization, the objectives for civilian representatives did not have a clear timeline, which affected how Afghans perceived U.S. contributions. Afghan expectations were raised by the rhetoric around the civilians—most notably, around the civilian surge. One Afghan identified civilian representatives' objectives as “focused on better governance, rule of law, agriculture alternatives, and creating jobs,” but noted that “their priorities were in the right place, but the approach was flawed and not tailored to local needs” because “they empowered local partners to the point of corruption and abuse of power.”¹⁴² For this Afghan interviewee, the deterioration in governance is the fault of the United States.

The larger concern is that without clear objectives and prioritization, civilians were greatly limited in their ability to make progress toward all of the objectives and failed to achieve any of them fully.

Metrics were poorly suited to assess civilian objectives, complicating assessment

The development of metrics and assessments to measure progress was ad hoc, especially prior to the surge from 2002 to 2008. For example, one U.S. civilian noted that in his PRT, “We never really set up our [monitoring and evaluation] system to properly account for correlation between projects and violence.”¹⁴³ In other cases, PRT civilian representatives devised their own metrics, some of which were remarkably innovative. One civilian described his PRT's approach as such: “If we chose a spot, and the governor was able to travel to that spot without security, and the community was welcoming of government officials to talk about [the] project ... it was a good indicator we could complete the project. Then we looked at whether we were able to get workers ... We set a contract guideline that about 70% of all unskilled labor had to come within [a] 5 mile radius. If we hit that number then we knew we would get local buy in. If we couldn't get that number then we knew there was underlying resistance.”¹⁴⁴

Two other civilian representatives note that they sent weekly reporting on certain programs and funding, which was a form of measurement, but that they never knew whether any fulsome assessment was completed. As one interviewee described his reporting frustrations with U.S. Embassy Kabul, “There was never follow-on feedback verifying that the information had been useful or even read.”¹⁴⁵ The lack of response not only left civilian representatives feeling underappreciated in policy discussions but also left them to decide independently on priorities when objectives conflicted in the provinces.

The 2009 surge did galvanize an effort to apply metrics and measurements to the work of civilian representatives. The 2009 Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan, or ICMCP, between the U.S. Embassy and U.S. military, followed by an updated version in 2011, laid out 11 “transformative effects,” each with priority objectives and supported by a set of integrated civilian-military working groups.¹⁴⁶ From Washington, the civilian agencies too had developed the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework, or ICAF, which provided a “first step ... to inform the establishment of [U.S. government] goals, design or reshaping of activities, implementation or revision of programs, or re/allocation of resources.”¹⁴⁷

For civilian representatives, whose objectives needed both quantitative and qualitative results, the ICMCP and ICAF overvalued quantitative results. Using staff and resources to provide measurements against these plans led to a “tendency to want to analyze problems to death. Some folks during the surge felt like they spent so much time on the ICAF that they didn’t have any time to actually implement anything.”¹⁴⁸ In part, this difficulty in completing assessments was due to limited staff and resources to constantly research results, leading some to complete ICAF based on the opinions of fellow U.S. officials without input from Afghan officials or locals.¹⁴⁹

Perhaps more importantly, both the ICMCP and ICAF analyses were focused on short-term, localized security results. This approach inhibited the civilian agencies from understanding nationwide progress on the above policy objectives. Pursuing objectives requires many course corrections as understanding is gained over time. In Afghanistan, a number of the civilian representatives recall flagging the need for prioritization of objectives early on and receiving no response from embassy or agency leaders.¹⁵⁰

Others highlighted the correlation between U.S. funding and growing corruption. Limited to working with metrics that were poorly suited to assessing their objectives, the civilian representatives had little perspective on what impact their work had nationally or whether they should focus on other issues. More importantly, Washington policymakers were unable to link clearly the work of civilian representatives to developments in Afghanistan or use them to achieve U.S. objectives fully.

The policy feedback loop was slow for civilian representatives

Like the conflict between objectives, the agencies conflicted both horizontally, between the State Department and USAID, and vertically, between the field and headquarters. Other authors and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction have reported extensively on the conflict between agencies,

including between the civilian and military components.¹⁵¹ As these reports have argued, multiple agencies—often with different priorities at the local level—prevented clear policy coordination between the U.S. military and U.S. civilians, allowing Afghan officials to shop around for U.S. support rather than adjust their behavior to U.S. goals.¹⁵² Less has been reported, however, on the lack of vertical, intra-agency coordination and guidance, particularly between those civilian representatives in the provinces and those at the embassy or Washington headquarters. This challenge in coordination limited the ability of civilian representatives in the provinces to gain a nationwide perspective on trends, build on other successes, and ultimately achieve their objectives.

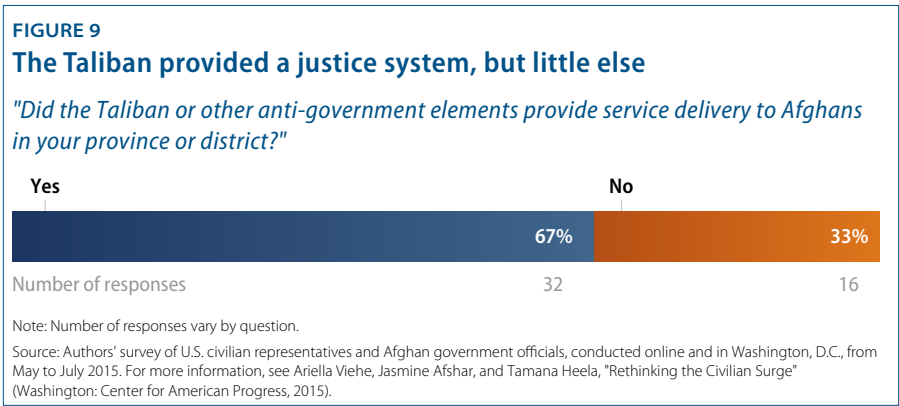
Like many of the other findings, this lack of guidance differed between the presurge and surge periods. One reason for the tension between the provinces and the embassy may have come from the tendency for bureaucracies to adjust to new processes and structures slowly to accommodate new field components. Presurge civilians, for example, were a new bureaucratic layer for an embassy to support. These civilians believed that the embassy provided few resources and left them “on their own.”¹⁵³

With the surge in 2009, Embassy Kabul responded to this sense of isolation by establishing the Interagency Provincial Affairs, or IPA, office to coordinate with civilians in the provinces. The office was specifically tasked with ensuring uniform logistical support, staffing, and travel needs. The IPA office was also responsible for compiling reporting from the field into digestible reports for Embassy Kabul and Washington agencies. Even so, civilian representatives noted that the IPA office was more focused on administrative rather than policy support. Policy guidance, particularly prioritizing objectives or connecting them with other representatives, remained a constant challenge for civilian representatives.¹⁵⁴

During the surge period, one civilian representative suggested that the lack of coordination may have been the tendency of agencies to see the civilian representatives as largely military advisers rather than an equivalent civilian policy tool, even though their objectives were civilian policy objectives. As Figure 3 (see p. 8) illustrates, senior civilian representatives at the Regional Command level¹⁵⁵—a position created during the surge for civilians from the State Department or USAID—were specifically established to create a civilian equivalent at the military Regional Commands. Other civilian representatives—such as those from USAID, for example—largely considered themselves a “development conscience”¹⁵⁶ for the military. By advising their military counterparts,

both positions were drawn into the military chain of command. In Washington, too, the military efforts dominated U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, encapsulated as disrupting, dismantling, and defeating Al Qaeda and leaving civilians as “diplomatic wingmen” to the military efforts.¹⁵⁷

When the civilians in the provinces did get policy guidance, it often conflicted with what they saw occurring in communities. One specific area of conflict between the field and headquarters was how to develop the rule of law, which was the one service that both Afghans and the U.S. civilian representatives reported the Taliban as “providing.” (see Figure 9) According to the 10 Afghans surveyed, justice and courts were the only “service” that the Taliban provided.¹⁵⁸ According to civilian representatives, 80 percent of respondents—those who answered either “yes” or “no” below—cited justice and courts as either the only or one of several services provided by the Taliban in their area.



U.S. civilian representatives reported unclear or conflicting U.S. policy and mismatched resources toward establishing rule of law and justice in Afghanistan over the course of 13 years. Certainly, establishing rule of law was and remains a complicated effort, seeking to merge traditional, often tribal, dispute resolution with formal constitutional and court-based justice. According to SIGAR, the United States spent more than \$1 billion on rule of law programs over the course of 13 years.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, many civilian representatives cited the inability of the United States and the Afghan government to provide courts and justice as a critical flaw that compounded the political divisions in the country.

According to one civilian in the south, U.S. agencies' perspective on rule of law was overly focused on launching formal government institutions at the expense of developing local solutions. For example, following military operations in 2010 and 2011 to push the Taliban out of local villages, U.S. civilian representatives reported that district governors, newly appointed to these villages, would initially try to build local support in their communities through dispute resolution. This action made the governor increasingly important for both political and economic business as he resolved local issues. In reports to Kabul, however, the civilian representatives reported that Embassy Kabul asked the district governor to stop dispute resolution because that was the purview of the Ministry of Justice.¹⁶⁰ Yet the Ministry of Justice had no representatives in the district or community.¹⁶¹ In this case, the U.S. Embassy's policy appeared too wedded to formal structures and overlooked the underlying stabilization and anti-Taliban sentiment that could be developed through local dispute resolution.

While civilian representatives succeeded in developing a court and justice system aligned with the Ministry of Justice, they struggled to obtain support from Kabul. In the east, for example, the civilian representatives worked several years to set up public trials and justice processes. One PRT civilian representative believed that rather than training and infrastructure—for which he had money—the lack of technical skills “were not the problem in a dangerous environment. [Effectiveness] all depended on political approval and political legitimacy [from Kabul].” To spur the political support for the local Afghan justices, the civilian sought to build the relationships necessary with Kabul. He developed “personal links with the supreme court in Kabul and the Attorney General's Office, and [the civilian representative] would arrange for people [in the province] to get congratulations, and he would get [Afghan officials] from Kabul to come down for the trials.” This attention from Afghan leaders in Kabul created a reinforcing system for more public trials and a justice process. As the civilian representative explained, “the Afghans would then host public trials on media and radio and created a reputation for justice officials and increased the incentives for them to pursue convictions.”¹⁶² Yet all of this was done without help from Embassy Kabul or U.S. agencies, which the civilian representative reported were either nonresponsive or outright obstructive to the program developing in this eastern province.

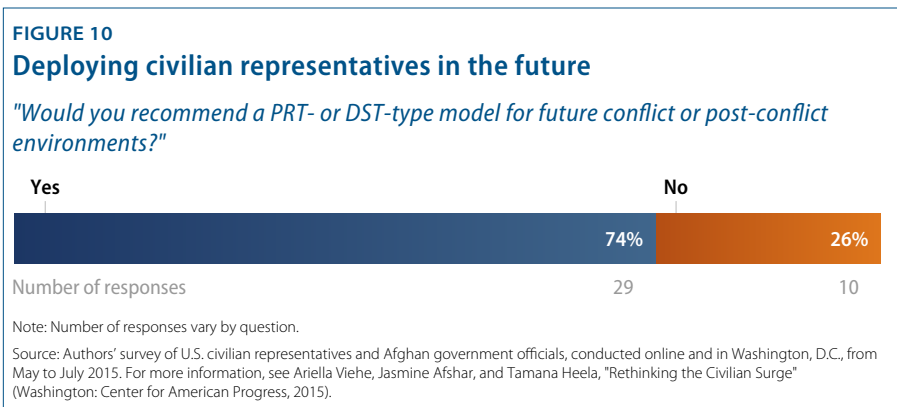
In terms of guidance from Kabul or Washington, civilian representatives consistently noted the need to improve the integration of field experience into both policy and implementation. As these anecdotes on attempts to establish the rule of law illustrate, the experiences of the civilians in the field did not appear to resonate with policymakers in Kabul or Washington. As one civilian representative noted: “We did weekly reporting, but we were limited to just two sentences. How can you capture the nuance of the field in just two sentences?”¹⁶³

Another civilian representative recommended developing “a report of the PRT issues and needs through the embassy offices ... who would aggregate ideas and proposals to the ambassador’s channel to raise with [President] Karzai and the ministries.”¹⁶⁴ For many civilian representatives, reporting was a source of significant frustration because they believed that they shared significant local knowledge that was never integrated into policy decisions. The tension between the policy imperatives and the local context was perhaps natural, but the inability to accommodate field reporting and knowledge almost certainly undermined the achievement of stated U.S. policy objectives.

Recommendations for future deployment of civilian representatives

Based on the findings, it is clear that civilian representatives in Afghanistan accomplished some but not all policy objectives. Those they did accomplish were primarily short term, and in some cases, they may have undermined long-term development efforts. As a whole, from the provincial to the national level, Afghan government officials are today perceived as less capable than the departed civilian representatives of providing or managing projects, programs, or expectations. Locally, that lack of ability undermines their utility to and support from Afghan citizens, the very citizens whose support U.S. civilian representatives were first deployed to win.

Facing crises in the Middle East that have no military solution, Washington may again turn to U.S. civilian agencies and their representatives to support security objectives by resolving or at least responding to the political, economic, and social drivers of insecurity. Including civilians is a step toward bringing all aspects of U.S. expertise to bear upon crises. However, Washington policymakers often assume that short-term civilian work can have the same strategic effect as military campaigns. Indeed, the civilian representatives surveyed largely recommended the future use of U.S. civilian representatives. (see Figure 10) Seventy-four percent, however, noted the need for significant overhaul of the program.



Suggestions for improvement ranged from the quality of personnel, which should “be more selective with teams,”¹⁶⁵ to staggering personnel so that there is “a cadre of local experts on government and security deployed in the first stages.”¹⁶⁶ Other suggestions noted that the policy focus needed to shift to “build Afghan leadership and capacity”¹⁶⁷ and have “fewer and better projects,”¹⁶⁸ and so forth. Based on the suggestions of civilian representatives and the authors’ analysis of their experiences, the following six recommendations should inform the decisions of policymakers regarding the use of civilians in future conflict zones.

Prioritize objectives

As many civilian representatives and the findings of this report underscore, civilian representatives were given a multitude of objectives, many of which conflicted during implementation. The result was that, due to their dependence on military forces, civilian representatives were often used to support tactical efforts by the military rather than to support strategic shifts in governance or development. Although these objectives may not have seemed initially to be in conflict—the military was also seeking to reduce violence and foster governance and development—the reality of time constraints and policy pressures from Washington created a constant short-term focus. Even when civilian representatives raised the conflict of objectives, little clear guidance was forthcoming.

While it may have been difficult for Washington and the civilian agencies to determine a prioritized order of objectives that applied over all 13 years or across every province and district, there could have been a clearer assessment of the trade-offs among policymakers. Or as one civilian representative suggested, policymakers might have established a division of responsibility among the civilian representatives, so that some focused on short-term, perhaps more military-oriented goals, while others tackled the long-term objectives.¹⁶⁹ A lack of prioritization may assume that flexibility exists among the objectives, but in reality, it reduces the likelihood of all, or at worst, any objectives being met.

Set and reset realistic objectives that account for the local environment

As objectives are prioritized, their feasibility should be constantly evaluated in the context of each local environment. Civilian representatives in the field can provide a wealth of information about the host country; their reporting allows for quick assessments of the extent of local need and the depth of commitment of the host

government to U.S. objectives. Review of objectives in localized contexts requires a clear-eyed assessment of the assumptions that make U.S. civilian representatives successful. In the case of Afghanistan, these assumptions included that:

- The host government would support the same policy as the United States
- The Afghan government officials would want and agree to U.S. civilian advice to achieve that policy
- The influence of civilian representatives would be bolstered by physical proximity to Afghan counterparts
- Security would allow for quality control, monitoring, and outside evaluation
- Insecurity would be resolved by improved economic or social opportunities

If, as was frequently the case for Afghanistan, one of these assumptions changes—such as President Karzai withdrawing public support for civilian representatives in the field in 2008¹⁷⁰—policymakers will need to consider whether civilian representatives can achieve their objectives.

For the United States in Afghanistan, the original objective set in 2002—building a new democracy after decades of conflict—proved unachievable, as local communities struggled for basic security as late as 2008. Sticking to this objective forced U.S. policymakers—and the civilian representatives—to find and highlight small successes that proved democracy was taking hold. The result was a perversion of incentives for civilian representatives’ work. Many civilians felt pressure to highlight success stories—even small, localized changes within a community.

While important, these successes did not add up to overall progress. In fact, reporting constant success stories obscured the lack of realism inherent in the original objectives. With the surge in 2009 and the shift to counterinsurgency strategy, U.S. policymakers did reset objectives, focusing on developing local political, economic, and social changes that resolved violence. As two civilian representatives noted, however, this shift came “too late,” and the U.S. effort was “always playing catch up” because U.S. policy had not kept pace earlier with a changing Afghan local environment.¹⁷¹

Invest in people: Quality and quantity matter

In future deployments, both U.S. civilians and their foreign counterparts must invest in human capital. All of the 15 U.S. civilian representatives and the 10 Afghans interviewed suggested a greater focus on personnel quality rather than quantity when deploying civilian representatives. If relationships mattered more than money with regard to influencing Afghan counterparts, then quality—the personality, skills, and relationship building ability that a civilian representative can bring—is the single most important attribute.

The impact of high-quality U.S. civilians—as defined in the “Overall trends: Resources” section—is borne out by the marked success of several intensely local programs in Afghanistan. These include several—such as the Village Stability Operations program, the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Community Development Program, and the World Bank-funded National Solidarity Program—that have worked to build local relationships as the foundation for sustainable security, development, and governance. These programs serve as examples of how to design a program. In recruiting quality U.S. personnel to implement them, civilian representatives offered two suggestions.

The first is to find U.S. personnel already familiar with the host country—academics and State Department and USAID personnel who have backgrounds in the culture and language and in conflict-type environments. Those personnel are likely very few in number. As a result, the U.S. agencies would need to develop a predeployment training program. All of the surge civilian representatives participated in one or more predeployment training programs, and many highlighted their merits. When asked for suggestions, however, 45 percent suggested the need for even more training, particularly in cultural norms, language, and Afghan government policies and processes¹⁷²—in essence, better understanding of the environment in which they would be asked to operate.

The quality of local counterparts—in the case of Afghanistan, governors and officials—is also deeply consequential. Initial quality, such as technocratic skills, in local counterparts can lead to greater results in their provinces or districts purely because they know the steps to accomplish governance, development, or security objectives. Technocratic locals often have less need to rely on local power structures. This makes them less susceptible to corruption but also, at least at the outset, less connected to their constituents.

Even if the local counterpart lacks technocratic skills, investing in developing quality skills—such as budget management, public speaking, project oversight and management, and other government administrative tasks—early can prove essential at later stages. Building these types of skills relies on the local counterparts to have the political will to engage in the associated training process. In Afghanistan, several civilian representatives reported a lack of interest by Afghan counterparts in such training until it became clear that U.S. civilian representatives would be drawing down in 2013 and 2014. Others were able to identify individuals or groups of local counterparts who were open to skills training and invested in them.

One suggestion for improving the quality of host government counterparts would be to link capacity building as a prerequisite to releasing funds and projects. Similarly, civilian representatives suggested using U.S. funds only as a match to local funds, which would ensure that local counterparts use their own funds and, through that process, complete their local budgetary steps. Both these suggestions are geared toward improving skills. But that assumes that Afghan officials would have wanted such skills—an assumption that U.S. policymakers could no longer make once President Karzai called for the end of the PRTs.

Acknowledge the full span of resources needed to achieve objectives

The resources available to civilian representatives in Afghanistan changed and largely improved over the course of their 13-year involvement. Access to secure transportation and funding enabled U.S. civilian representatives to better achieve their objectives. With these resources, civilian representatives were able to work toward their daily objectives, such as getting to meetings or implementing reconstruction.

Yet the frustrations over resources continued: 90 percent of U.S. civilian representatives in the surge period said that the massive quantities of U.S. funding were the primary negative effect of their role in Afghanistan. The amount of money that civilians spent on projects encouraged corrupt practices on the part of Afghans. Similarly, some civilians felt political pressure to meet targets on spending money, which led to rushed projects with reduced quality. This large amount of funding created the desire—expressed by both U.S. and Afghan interviewees—for more resources to oversee and ensure quality in how the funding was spent. For example, greater ability to complete quality control, to understand

local contracting, or to enhance anti-corruption efforts would have been efforts to mitigate the risk of spending significant amounts of funding in a country characterized by deep poverty. In essence, the increased funding that came with the surge should have been matched with increased resources for risk mitigation.

Improve and expand the policy feedback loop for civilian representatives

Perhaps the most important and critical recommendation for any future civilian program in a conflict zone is to establish a greater connection between the field and the policymakers. Issues with U.S. policy in Afghanistan noted by previous studies—such as the problem of corruption—were issues that PRT civilians raised early on in their field tours. Yet their reporting did not appear to translate into policy adjustments. Over the course of 13 years, U.S. policy on PRT civilians appears to have been relatively static, according to both Bush and Obama administration policy statements and speeches.¹⁷³ Perhaps more concerning, U.S. civilians indicate that they had relatively little ability to influence U.S. policy on civilian issues—namely, governance and economic development. Establishing a greater connection between the field and policymakers implies the need for U.S. policy agencies—the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and USAID—to accept feedback and learn over time. In particular, it highlights the need for these agencies to become more adept at integrating the field experience gleaned by civilians in the conflict zones into policy objectives, and vice versa.

That 74 percent of the U.S. civilians surveyed reported the need to have some sort of civilian role in future conflicts indicates that civilians likely will be considered as an option for achieving U.S. policy objectives in future conflicts. One presurge PRT civilian in the east suggested that the PRTs establish a central office or team, probably within the U.S. Embassy, that would aggregate PRT reporting, tease out trends, compare programs with policy, and provide guidance to PRTs.¹⁷⁴ The localized nature of PRTs was important for obtaining local acceptance of PRT projects and influence, but projects and influence needed to contribute to a larger effort. In fact, the elections process is one example that this nationwide, systemic approach is possible, but it was only used for that singular event. Such a central office is an important addition and could contribute to the policy conversations by developing a monthly memo of issues for the embassy or ambassador to raise with the host government. Such an office and such input to the policy process would reinforce the clout and influence of PRT civilians in the field.¹⁷⁵

A central office solely responsible for civilians in the provinces would bridge feedback between the field and the embassy. It could provide greater oversight and responsiveness when civilians' objectives conflict. For example, as one PRT civilian reported, he "had to work with the corrupt officials because my job was to make the government work," while other civilian representatives said they went around the corrupt officials, working unilaterally.¹⁷⁶ Both approaches have pros and cons, but when pursued by different civilians—especially civilians who work in the same province—the resulting incentives and messages confuse Afghans and undermine the credibility of future U.S. civilians. Similarly, the State Department's 2015 "Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review" acknowledges a need for the Department of State and USAID to "enhance the use of data, diagnostics and technology" to analyze and manage knowledge and link it to the agencies' strategies.¹⁷⁷ Such an office aimed at integrating data, reporting, and strategy can bridge the gap between experience in the field and policy in the embassy, linking developments to policy and enabling policymakers to use civilian representatives effectively and efficiently. U.S. policymakers should consider these options now, not when the conflict is well underway.

Rethink evaluation efforts at all levels

Widely accepted evaluation procedures seek to measure changes over time, using baseline data—in this case, from Afghanistan in 2002—and comparing it with later data. This report, for example, utilized quality-of-life indicators over time, such as The Asia Foundation survey¹⁷⁸ and World Bank development data. These data sources show that, over 13 years, quality of life in Afghanistan has improved markedly. Health, education, and employment statistics have risen steadily, as has access to public goods and services. According to the U.N. "Violence against Civilians" report, however, violence trends continue to worsen, with the highest civilian casualty rate reached in 2015.¹⁷⁹ These developments indicate a mixed state of development for Afghanistan compared with 2002.

Yet between 2002 and 2015, U.S. policymakers swung between the two extremes in gathering first too little and then too much data in locations where U.S. civilian representatives worked. Both cases made evaluation extremely difficult. Civilians gathered little data from 2002 to 2004, except anecdotally. According to the research team's interviews, the U.S. Embassy did not establish a standard data gathering or evaluation process in those early years.

After the surge, the infusion of personnel and funding demanded a significant data gathering effort. In fact, some civilian representatives complained of too much data, the gathering of which consumed their time and staff.¹⁸⁰ Even with the surge period's focus on data, however, there was little effort to synthesize, analyze, and triangulate the volumes of data flowing back to the embassy and to policymakers.

As a result, the legacy of PRT civilians is largely based on their own impression of their work. These impressions are subject to self-reporting bias, selective reading by policymakers, and overreliance on anecdotal evidence. Without sound data gathering and evaluation practices, these informal impressions will continue to shape the decisions of policymakers in the future.

In any future deployment of civilian representatives, USAID, the Department of State, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, and other agencies should prioritize standards of measurement, data gathering, and evaluation from the outset of a deployment. This early work would enable sound, empirical evaluation and adjustments. The results should feed back into policymaking, making strategy more agile and civilian representatives more effective in their work.

Together, all of these recommendations underscore the fundamental need for policymakers and their agencies to consistently acknowledge and evaluate the strategic rationale for and purpose of civilian representatives. Even if the civilian agencies and their representatives in Afghanistan had undertaken each recommendation in this report—prioritized objectives, tailored them to the local environment, and fully supported them with policy and resource adjustments along the way—it is likely that adjustments would have been needed to adapt to the changing conflict.

If civilian representatives are once again deployed in a conflict or postconflict zone, they are likely to be charged with both tactical and strategic objectives, with misallocated resources, and certainly with some, if not many, incorrect assumptions about their local environment. The challenge will be for U.S. policymakers to consistently keep in mind the strategic effects of civilian representatives, deploying them in a manner and with sufficient resources to begin to make progress toward prioritized, realistic objectives. Recognizing the strategic need for and use of civilian representatives can also reduce the mismatch between objectives and resourcing, hopefully minimizing the sense of being set up to fail.

Conclusion

Even after the drawdown in Afghanistan, use of civilian representatives remains an important tool for furthering U.S. policy objectives abroad, particularly in conflict zones. Current conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and across Africa may one day require the skills, tenacity, and perspective of civilian representatives—deployed with or without the military. The experience in Afghanistan—the largest-ever U.S. deployment of civilian representatives—faced a plethora of political, policy, and bureaucratic challenges that now risk overshadowing what civilian representatives did and can accomplish.

Policymakers must understand how their objectives for civilian representatives did and did not align with financial, policy, and bureaucratic resources. It is equally important that policymakers acknowledge the unique context of Afghanistan—its deep poverty and fractious social and political atmosphere—and how that context necessitated different objectives and amounts of resources. Not acknowledging these two issues has exacerbated a sense among U.S. agencies and policymakers that either civilian representatives in Afghanistan were set up to fail or were not worth the cost. Both of these conclusions, however, limit the options available to future policymakers and shortsightedly undermine U.S. national security interests.

In order to improve the use and deployment of civilian representatives in future conflicts, policymakers must undertake the upfront work of acknowledging objectives that are implicitly set and clearly prioritized. Because objectives will likely conflict over the course of a civilian deployment, policymakers need to adjust the policy feedback loop so that, during deployment, bureaucratic and policy responsiveness keep up with the pace of civilian representatives' work. Throughout, policymakers also need to be willing to recognize the significant resources that are needed to make even small progress on objectives. Civilian representatives need improved access to resources, whether those are financial, personnel, or policy.

These efforts will have minimal impact, however, unless policymakers grapple with the strategic rationale for deploying civilian representatives. Only within the framework of a clear strategic understanding can policymakers properly identify the objectives and resources necessary to equip civilian representatives. Getting the most impact from our foreign policy tools is an imperative for U.S. policymakers. Appreciating, resourcing, and supporting the role of civilian representatives is another step toward ensuring that the entirety of the United States' capabilities can be utilized to achieve our national security objectives.

About the authors

Ariella Viehe is a former Council on Foreign Relations Fellow with the National Security and International Policy team at the Center for American Progress. While at the Center, Viehe's research focused on postconflict lessons learned, the future of U.S. policy in the Middle East, and the potential for U.S.-China collaboration on the Silk Road. Prior to her fellowship, Viehe served at the U.S. Department of State, covering developments in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia. Viehe holds a bachelor's degree from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

Jasmine Afshar is a former National Security and International Policy intern at the Center. She is completing her master's degree in peace and justice studies at the University of San Diego. Her focus in the program has been on human security and development in postconflict societies. Afshar's thesis examines the role of external actors in a sustainable process for building peace and legitimacy in the transitional Afghan state. Before attending graduate school, she was the assistant director of the English Language Center in Santa Barbara, California. She also holds a bachelor's degree with concentrations in global studies and global peace and security from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Tamana Heela served as a translator for this project. She is a human rights activist and former journalist. She is now an executive board member of the Women's Initiative for Support and Empowerment—a nonprofit organization working to advance women's rights in Afghanistan by involving men—where she works on a national campaign called “We Through You” that is inspired by the U.N. Women's #HeForShe women's rights campaign. Prior to that, Heela worked as an editor and editorial staff member for the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs of Afghanistan; she also worked as press and public information officer and communication officer for the European Union and United Nations in Afghanistan. Heela holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Kabul University and a master's degree in human rights from Birkbeck, University of London.

The views expressed in this report by Ariella Viehe are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government.

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Annex A: Methodology

The research team conducted surveys and interviews with 76 U.S. government civilians and 10 Afghan officials. (see Figures A1, A2, and A3) The research team initially contacted 109 civilians who were identified in two ways: 1) through a list of civilian representatives provide by the U.S. Department of State and 2) through references by other U.S. civilian representatives and the authors' professional experience. The 76 civilians who responded met the criteria of having served in every region of Afghanistan. None of the originally identified 109 had served prior to 2005, so the research team reviewed in-depth interviews conducted by the U.S. Institute of Peace with civilians who served on PRTs from 2002 to 2004.¹⁸¹

The survey was sent via Qualtrics online software to 109 U.S. civilians, who were asked to complete the survey within four weeks from April 26 to May 21, 2015. Participants were told at the top of the survey that responses were voluntary, that their responses and personal identities would be kept confidential, and that they could review any quotes or material used in this publication in advance. The survey contained 48 questions that proceeded from basic information on dates and locations of deployment in Afghanistan, to details on how civilians approached their objectives, and finally, to their opinion of the civilian representative program. The survey concluded by asking for any further information or comments and offering contact information for the research team should further questions arise. The online survey had a 36 percent dropout rate, with 76 civilians out of 109 responding.

Of the 76 survey respondents, 38 agreed to be contacted for an in-depth interview. The research team conducted 15 in-depth interviews via phone and Skype, with responses recorded in writing during the interview. In-depth interviews were chosen by the research team to reflect different provinces and time periods for the 13 years that U.S. civilian representatives served in Afghanistan.

For the Afghans, online communication was difficult, and many did not respond. The research team identified 25 Afghan officials and local Afghans, and 10 responded to requests for survey participation—eight Afghan officials and two local Afghans. Due to the difficulty with online access in Afghanistan, the 10 were read the survey by phone, with answers recorded in writing from June to September.

Eight of the 10 Afghan phone surveys were conducted by the research team translator in Pashto or Dari; two phone surveys were conducted in English.

The Qualtrics online software, available at www.qualtrics.com, allows for quantitative analysis and is the source for all quantitative percentages quoted in the report. For qualitative research data, the research team used Dedoose online software, available at www.dedoose.com, for coding and qualitative analysis.

The original research plan was to conduct an impact assessment of the civilian representatives as a program. However, during the first month of research and data gathering, it became clear that a traditional impact assessment was not possible, primarily because neither the U.S. government nor any other partner government or organization had set out criteria for evaluation or impact in 2002. As a result, any data or information on the program could not be assessed against existing U.S. government criteria.

It also became clear that an impact assessment would be inappropriate for the complex environments in which the civilian representatives operated. Typically, impact assessments seek to reduce the variables in order to draw a direct correlation between input—the civilian representatives—and a set of outcomes—in this case, change in Afghan government, economics, or social stability. Given the number of other actors, the United Nations, other U.S. allies, and partner military and civilian forces, as well as nongovernmental and humanitarian organizations doing similar work across Afghanistan, any correlation between the work of U.S. civilian representatives and changes in Afghanistan would be extremely difficult to isolate.

The research team also originally planned to visit Afghanistan to conduct additional interviews in Kabul and potentially by phone to other Afghan officials in the provinces. The difficult security situation as well as the difficulty in raising funds for a short-term research team made such travel impossible. The research was then tailored to reflect the perspectives of U.S. and Afghan officials, creating a foundation for future research on the U.S. role from 2002 through 2014. The most negative consequence of this inability to visit Afghanistan was the significant drop in planned Afghan participants. Initially, the research goal had been for participation from Afghan officials from each of the 14 provinces where U.S.-led PRTs, and therefore U.S. civilian representatives, had served.

Note on responses

Research on perceptions, particularly on politically charged issues such as service in Afghanistan, must acknowledge the potential biases in the response pool and in the responses themselves. The response pool of participants—given the voluntary nature of the survey—may have led to overreporting by those frustrated by or emotionally tied to their work in Afghanistan. Further, research asking about achievements may have raised suspicion of “gotcha” reporting, leading to defensive responses or justifications for actions and decisions. The research team’s dedication to confidentiality and prepublication review sought to diminish this tendency. The consistency of responses across the majority of respondents also reinforced the fact that the methodology elicited key trends and findings.

Demographics

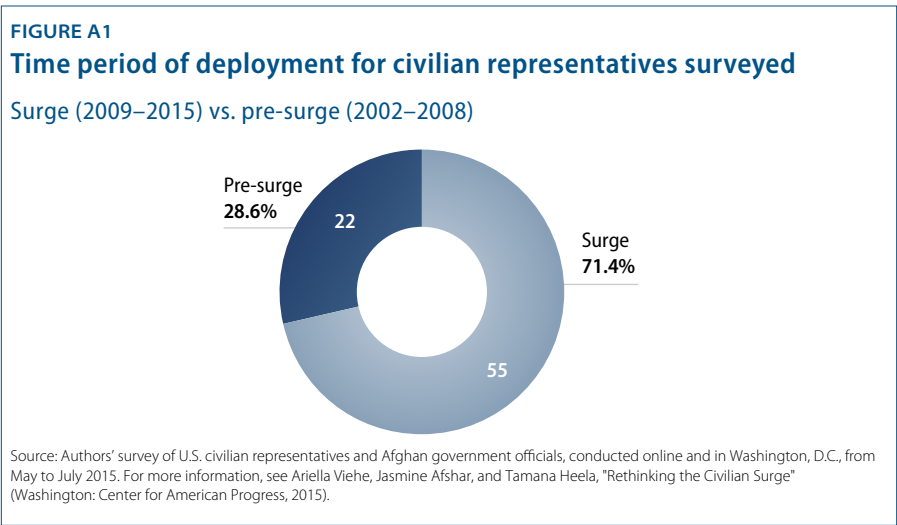
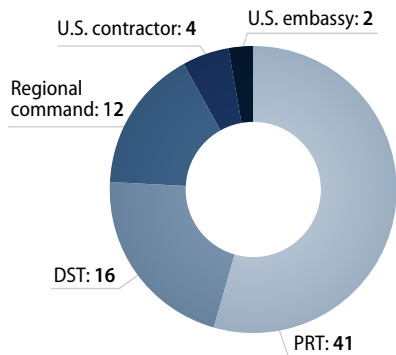


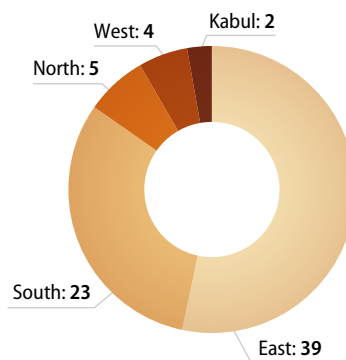
FIGURE A2

Where civilian representatives served in Afghanistan

Breakdown by platform



Location in Afghanistan

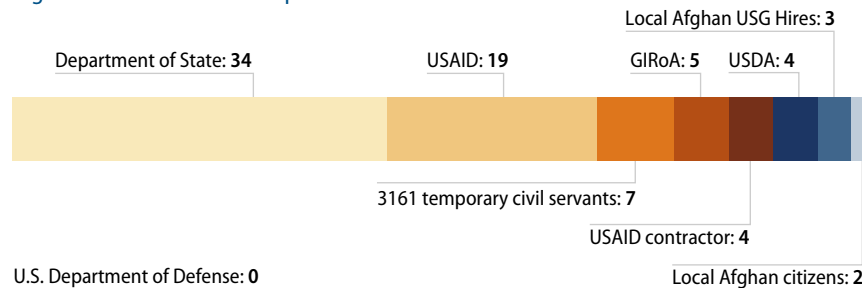


Source: Authors' survey of U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan government officials, conducted online and in Washington, D.C., from May to July 2015. For more information, see Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela, "Rethinking the Civilian Surge" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

FIGURE A3

Agency position of survey participants

Afghans and U.S. civilian representatives



Authors' note: "3161" refers to the primary statutory provision—Title 5, Section 3161 of the U.S. Code—that was used for employing civilians who were not already U.S. government employees. The provision was first used in Iraq and later extended to Afghanistan hiring.

Source: Authors' survey of U.S. civilian representatives and Afghan government officials, conducted online and in Washington, D.C., from May to July 2015. For more information, see Ariella Viehe, Jasmine Afshar, and Tamana Heela, "Rethinking the Civilian Surge" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

Annex B: Definitions

This research referred to terms used by the U.S. government and the press that have become shorthand for complex and multiyear efforts, notably the military and civilian “surge” and the development process of “capacity building.” These terms were used because the surge was a key inflection point to the U.S. civilian representative program, while capacity building was a key effort referenced in several U.S. policy statements under the objective of professionalizing the Afghan government. Definitions for both are provided below.

Surge: A term coined to describe the rapid influx of personnel for a defined period of time. Originally used to refer to the significant increase in U.S. military forces in Iraq in 2007, the term has come to encapsulate an effort to quickly increase personnel and resources. The Obama administration adopted the term “surge” in March 2009, with the president’s first policy directive on Afghanistan that included a 17,000 troop increase in U.S. military forces and an increase in civilian personnel from 356 to roughly 1,000, a threefold increase.¹⁸² In December 2009, President Obama ordered a second surge of 30,000 more troops.¹⁸³ The surge in military forces was time limited to draw down in July 2011.¹⁸⁴ The civilian surge timeline was not as definitive but did peak in 2011.¹⁸⁵

Capacity building: A term used so consistently that neither the Department of State nor the U.S. Agency for International Development provides a definition. Relying on the U.N. Development Programme, or UNDP, “capacity building” is similar to capacity development, which “is the process by which individuals, organizations, institutions and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives.”¹⁸⁶ In this document, capacity building refers to specific government functions for which civilian representatives targeted capacity building: budgeting and financial management, political party development, and public administration.

Acronyms

ANP: Afghan National Police	NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ANSF: Afghan National Security Forces	NCO: Noncommissioned officer
CAT-A: Civil Affairs Team-Alpha	NCOIC: Noncommissioned officer in charge
CDP: Community Development Program (USAID)	NSP: National Solidarity Program
CERP: Commander's Emergency Response Program	OPS: Operations
COIN: Counterinsurgency	PA: Physician assistant
CMOC: Civil-Military Operations Center	PLT: Platoon
CAT-B MOC: Civil Affairs Team-Bravo Military Operations Center	PRT: Provincial Reconstruction Team
COMISAF: Commander of International Security Assistance Force	PTAT: Police Transition Assistance Team
DOS: U.S. Department of State	RC: Regional Command
DOD: U.S. Department of Defense	RFE/RFA: Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Afghanistan (United States)
DST: District Support Team	S1: Administration personnel
GOA: Government of Afghanistan	S2: Intelligence personnel
GIRoA: Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	S3: Plans, operations, and training personnel
HQ: Headquarters	S4: Logistics personnel
ICAF: Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (United States)	SIGAR: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
ICMCP: Integrated Civilian Military Campaign Plan (United States)	SPCs: Specialists
IO: Information operations	UNAMA: U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
IPA: Office of Interagency Provincial Affairs (U.S. Embassy Kabul)	UNDP: U.N. Development Programme
ISAF: International Security Assistance Force	USAID: U.S. Agency for International Development
MOI: Ministry of Interior	USDA: U.S. Department of Agriculture
MP: Military police	USIP: U.S. Institute of Peace
	VSO: Village Stability Operations (United States)

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