EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Participant’s Understanding of the PRT Mission

The participant believed that the American conception of the PRT mission was a “holistic approach,” looking broadly at security, governance, Rule of Law and development issues, and that the mission was to work with the local Afghan government in those four areas.

The Spanish-led PRT in Badghis province to which the participant was assigned defined their mission much more narrowly, limiting it to doing reconstruction and development. In addition, they were averse to activities in insecure areas.

Relationship with Local Nationals

Observations: Relations were daily and excellent and facilitated by a highly competent Afghan political assistant. Relations were with Afghan intelligence, the provincial and district governors, Provincial Council members, local prosecutors, and the chief judge.

Insights: The Afghan political assistant hailed from the province where the PRT worked.

Lessons: A willingness to venture out of the Spanish PRT’s security cocoon enabled the PRT member to forge and maintain a wide network of host-country officials.

Did the PRT Achieve its Mission? (Impact)

Observations: Security in the province deteriorated over the course of the year. In the relatively secure environment to which they limited their activities, the Spanish carried out some development projects in the provincial capital. They implemented a project at the local prison, but did not build a privacy wall for women prisoners. Using personal funds, interviewee spent $1,800 to pay for this wall and some ancillary furnishings.

Interviewee successfully carried out two week-long Rule of Law workshops, six months apart, for Afghan officials. She helped to secure the recall of a corrupt governor and
police chief, and a dozen other corrupt local officials. Afghan officials turned to interviewee as a source of unbiased advice.

Insights: PRT members are much less effective without Afghan language skills. PRT members at foreign PRTs lack access to significant development funds and are greatly limited in what they can achieve. NATO members unwilling to incur risks in their work will very likely be limited in what they achieve. Americans assigned to NATO-led PRTs should have near-fluency or better in the language of the NATO unit in charge.

Lessons: Once the PRT member and her USAID colleague decided to give up relying on the risk-averse Spanish for security protection, and went out on their own, relying on Afghan National Army or police for their security escorts, they became much more effective in their work.

**Overall Strategy for Accomplishing the PRT Mission (Planning)**

Observations: The Spanish had plans on paper but failed to execute them. Their efficacy was greatly limited by four-month tours. Their interpreters were Spanish-citizen Iranians, not Afghans. The Spaniards did not coordinate their planning with NGOs or others.

Insights: The Afghan political assistant was crucial to securing situational and cultural awareness. Personalities and Spanish-language ability affected the extent to which Americans were invited to participate in the Spanish-led planning activities. Pre-deployment State-side training with military units was extremely valuable in preparing interviewee for the assignment. Such training should be mandatory for civilians.

Lessons: Hire Afghan interpreters, not foreigners. Find a good Afghan assistant.

**What Worked Well and What Did Not? (Operations)**

Observations: Establishing personal relationships was the key to achieving anything in Afghanistan. This was far more important than any institutional mechanisms in place, which, in any case, were not well established. Not all NATO-led PRTs welcome or support American members.

Insights/Lessons: PRT members able to operate independently in the environment may be those who achieve the most.

**Other Comments:**

The U.S. military modus operandi was usually top-down and often came with preconceived notions. They need to give more emphasis to listening to what the Afghans say and want.
$\text{THE INTERVIEW}$

$Q$: Tell us what your assignment was and what period of time it covered.

A: I was a political officer assigned to the provincial reconstruction team led by the Spanish military in Badghis province in western Afghanistan and I served from August 2008 until September 2009.

$Q$: Did you have any previous experience in the area?

A: No, I had never served in south Central Asia.

$Q$: What level of local language proficiency did you have when you began your PRT assignment?

A: I had four weeks of Dari through the Foreign Service Institute.

$Q$: And you were with Spanish forces, so how’s your Spanish capability?

A: I am a near native speaker of Spanish.

$Q$: Was that important in your work? Did you use it?

A: It was absolutely vital and I made that very clear to my boss, who was responsible for hiring my successor, that they should not send anybody who did not have my level of fluency to the PRT, that they would not be an effective interlocutor and partner with the Spanish without that fluency.

$Q$: I will get to questions about your successor farther on, but I hope your advice was followed. What is your understanding of the PRT mission?

A: My understanding of a PRT mission that’s headed by U.S. military differs vastly from my understanding of a PRT mission undertaken by a team led by a NATO partner.

I served in a NATO-led PRT and their understanding of our mission was that they were to do reconstruction and development in the province.

My understanding, based on my interaction with U.S. forces in Afghanistan and my knowledge of U.S. PRTs and colleagues who worked for U.S.-led PRTs is that we had a more holistic approach. “We” meaning Americans serving there, and that we looked more broadly at security, governance, Rule of Law and development issues and that was the mission, to work with the local Afghan government in those four pillars.

$Q$: Did this differing interpretation cause you any problems?
A: Yes, I experienced numerous problems, as did my USAID colleague, with whom I worked very closely over the course of the year. He is still serving at the PRT and has been in contact with me and has expressed his continuing frustration with the level of cooperation he receives from our NATO colleagues at the PRT.

Q: I hope we can get some of the details. Let me ask you, for starters, how did you fit into your particular PRT?

A: When I arrived at the PRT I replaced a gentleman who, although he had a former military background, saw his role vastly differently from my understanding of what our role as the State Department representative to a PRT was.

He was thinking of a very traditional diplomatic role for himself within the PRT and did not see himself as an equal player with the Spanish colonel and the local director of the Spanish development agency. Whereas when I came on board, perhaps because of the level of my Spanish fluency and my really just keen interest in learning everything there was to learn about the province and the different dynamics involving security development and Rule of Law and governance, I asserted myself and wanted to be more of a political advisor to the military and work with them, as opposed to just being a reporting robot back to the embassy.

With the first Spanish colonel that I worked with, he didn’t have a Spanish political advisor there that was assigned from the Spanish ministry of foreign affairs, so he was all too happy to co-opt me and have me serve as his political advisor. We worked very closely and were actually very successful in a number of the endeavors that we worked on.

Q: You said “the first colonel.” Did that change with another colonel?

A: Yes. The biggest problem with the provincial reconstruction teams that are led by NATO forces is the minimal number of months that they spend on the ground. The Spanish had four month rotations, so every four months every Spanish military member of the PRT turned over and every two months there was a reconnaissance team coming from the next rotational group to spend a week learning what they were going to do.

The people that were teaching them had only been on the ground two months and most of them had never had any prior experience in Afghanistan, they didn’t speak the local language, and really they had no interest, other than to just check a box and say that they had completed x, y and z.

They didn’t have a long-term vision. They weren’t focused on governance. They weren’t focused on Rule of Law. They did not work well with their Spanish development colleagues, the Spanish civilians. There was a lot of animosity among the Spanish. It was not a very collaborative environment.

Q: How would you characterize your relationship with local host country nationals?
A: It was excellent, and actually I still am getting feedback. In fact, they reached out to me here, while I’m in my current post, because they were afraid that the governor who we had worked so well with and who was doing such a good job was going to be replaced, because the Spanish didn’t like him because he pushed them to move beyond their secure PRT bubble, to go into the more insecure districts. And because I had good reach back in Kabul, they asked me, still, to lobby on his behalf, so that Karzai would not replace him.

So I developed excellent relationships with Afghan intelligence, with the provincial governor, with the Provincial Council members, with the local prosecutors, with the chief judge.

I traveled frequently, so I stayed overnight in insecure districts. I knew district governors; they greeted me openly when I went to their communities and hosted me at their offices for lunches. So I had really extensive and outstanding contacts, at all levels.

Q: How frequent would you say your contacts with Afghans were and elaborate just a bit on the reasons for your contacts with them?

A: I had contacts with Afghans every day, daily. Not only did I have a political assistant who was an Afghan from the province where I worked with whom I was in contact seven days a week, because we never stopped working and he never stopped passing information, but almost every day I either went to an Afghan office or some Afghan official or representative from an NGO or political party would come and meet with me.

I organized, with my political assistant, several training sessions, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice, for the police, for the prosecutors, for the judges in my area on anticorruption and ethics training. And we did those twice; they were week-long training sessions.

And I also worked closely with the United Nations Rule of Law specialist who was based in Herat province, just south of me and he would come up and we would host provincial-wide justice sector meetings that would bring in all different players in the province responsible for Rule of Law issues.

Q: I’m supposed to ask you about outcomes resulting from your interaction. It sounds like you just named a couple, these training or discussion sessions.

A: The other outcomes were more “strategic.” I’m a former prosecutor and I practiced law for eight years and so when I got to my province and realized that nothing had been done in Rule of Law by the State Department representative who preceded me I made it a priority, because governance and Rule of Law had to be the cornerstone. Through that is how you’re going to tackle the issue of corruption, which immediately when I got there I understood to be one of the biggest problems that we were facing - that that was actually contributing to the worsening security situation.
And so I worked with the prosecutor and members of the Afghan National Directorate of Security, which is their intelligence wing, to gather information about corrupt individuals. Working with Department of Justice attorneys in Kabul, and through their connection with the Attorney General, the newly created anti-corruption unit in Kabul sent the first-ever group of prosecutors and an official from the National Directorate of Security from Kabul to conduct a week-long investigation into corruption, which led to the arrest of 14 people. It was only after the former governor interceded on their behalf - because he had been involved and was imminently going to be questioned and perhaps arrested as well - he asked President Karzai to release them, and they were released.

Q: That’s a question that’s not on my list, but it interests me a great deal, the whole idea of corruption and how we deal with it in that society.

A: I’d just like to add as a follow up to that is these allegations that were well documented were brought to the attention of the embassy and nobody wanted to touch it. There was no standard operating procedure for how we dealt with these types of corruption issues, and it was when I raised it when I was leaving that the new political counselor actually worked with the new ambassador to implement an SOP for that.

Maybe I was ahead of the game in a way. Had this corruption investigation gone down now, instead of then, maybe those people would still be in jail, but unfortunately it was a different ball game back then.

Q: Since it’s a new team of people coming into the embassy in Kabul it’s hard for you to speculate, I suppose, but do you have any reasons for thinking that our response might be more forceful in the future?

A: Well, I’ll tell you, right before I left I was the control officer for the ambassador’s visit to my province and I briefed him on this and he had me brief his special assistant and give him all the information, so they were very interested in following up on it.

That had never been the reaction by anybody at the embassy before, so I took it as a good sign that the ambassador personally took an interest, followed up, and tasked people when he got back to Kabul with it.

Q: Good! During your time on the PRT, did you conclude any agreements with Afghan nationals, any kind of written statement of work or list of procedures to be followed, anything that might embody mutual obligations?

A: No, other than a wall that was built at the women’s section of the prison in the province. I donated the money and contracted with a local contractor.

Then I wrote up a list of the items that were donated to them, so that they had an inventory, again, to ward against corruption, so that people couldn’t remove the items for their personal use.
Q: What do you think could have made your interaction with Afghan officials more productive?

A: Language. Absolutely, I was hampered by the inability to communicate directly with most Afghans. The relationship that I developed that was strongest, other than with my political assistant, because he spoke English, was with the Afghan governor, who spoke fluent English, who replaced the corrupt governor in March of 2009. It was because of our ability to communicate that I think we accomplished a lot together.

So definitely, I think Foreign Service officers that are serving there that don’t have any language skills have a hand tied behind their back.

Q: In what ways would you say the U.S. government’s objectives coincided with those of the local leadership?

A: Quite honestly, the local leadership was on board with what our mission was, in terms of providing security and trying to identify who the insurgents were.

At the same time, I also realized that our interests were not the same as those of our local Afghan contacts, in that they saw us as a means of lining their pockets. And so when they saw the opportunity for projects and contracts, there was a great level of corruption and that did not coincide with what our understanding of what our mission was there.

Q: During your time, did you hand over any programs to local nationals for their direction?

A: I did not, but my colleague, my USAID colleague, worked on several programs that were administered by Afghans, some through the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, programs in capacity building, and those were all Afghan run.

Q: Let’s talk about the impact that the PRT had in its area. To what extent would you say that the PRT achieved its mission?

A: It did not. The Spanish mission’s understanding, as I said, was different from what the U.S. understanding was of what our mission is in Afghanistan.

But the Spanish, if their mission was to do reconstruction and development, because they had a lot of caveats restricting where they could go and the level of engagement that they could have, level of engagement meaning the extent to which they could undertake kinetic activities, i.e., armed force, they were not able to go to a lot of areas.

And so they spent a lot of money on the provincial capital city where we were, which was very secure, though it became less so as the year progressed. That was really the only area where they made a visible impact.
So no, during my year, the security situation deteriorated to such a degree that we could barely move outside a particular security bubble.

Q: And the work that they did do, whose money were they using?

A: There was a very small amount that was actually from the Spanish military, and the majority of funding came through the Spanish equivalent of USAID, which is the Spanish Cooperation Agency.

Q: What would you see as your short-term achievements, those that you saw to fruition during your time?

A: The Rule of Law training I did. We had great feedback on that. We did one in the fall and one in the spring.

Through the small budget that I had I paid for, when the World Food Program would not deliver food to a very remote district that was at risk of thousands of people starving, I paid for trucks, with the Spanish. We sent a convoy, and when the World Food Program saw that it got through and wasn’t attacked, they then sent the remaining several tons of food to this community. That was a good precedent.

I helped get rid of, through lobbying and reach back to Kabul, and replace several corrupt officials, the former corrupt governor, corrupt police chief, and some local line ministers.

The Spanish had done a project at the prison. It was the only thing that they did for women during my year there. But the military didn’t build a privacy wall and so the project was never implemented, the women could never move into the prison building that they built.

And so, before I left, with my own funds, I built the wall and donated all the beds and tables and armoires so that the women could have that facility.

Q: And what was the fund you were drawing on?

A: My own personal funds.

Q: Your personal money?

A: Yes, I paid $1,800.

Q: I wonder how common that kind of dedication and commitment is. Not very, I would guess.

You mentioned the language problem, how that would hamper your effectiveness. Aside from language, is there anything else that you could have done that would have improved your impact?
A: Yes, and I said it again and again: we had no money. We only had grants, small, couple-of-thousand-dollar grants, that came from our public affairs office within the PRT Division at the embassy and that was de minimis.

Here you had U.S.-funded PRTs that were like drunken sailors, with the spending that they had, and then the State Department reps at these NATO-led PRTs, we had no money, we had nothing.

And so really, what did they expect us to be doing, when we would go and we would talk to Afghan colleagues about what types of things we could do to help improve situations there and we had nothing going for us, nothing.

Q: Do you think that’s going to change under the new ambassador?

A: I think he would like for people to have that funding, but it’s a bureaucracy. I didn’t understand, because I had colleagues that served in PRTs in Iraq. They didn’t have that problem and I don’t know what the difference was between the two missions, that they were given the leeway to have spending and we were not. I didn’t understand that.

Q: Did you have an opportunity to give advice to your successor and if you did, what was the advice?

A: Actually, my successor was somebody who didn’t want advice. She actually said to me, “You can stop with your opinions, I don’t want to hear them. I’m going to make my own evaluation about things.”

So the advice that I gave she didn’t take and that’s something I don’t speculate on. I know that from my colleague, my USAID colleague who still serves with her, and said she’s completely lost the seat at the table that I had made for the State Department rep and is not an equal player and is not effective.

Q: And did she have the Spanish that you recommended?

A: No, not at all.

Q: What is the most critical component involved in enabling a positive transition to the host nation? This assumes that we’re phasing out. You’ve already said that security deteriorated markedly during your time there, so in some ways I think the question is almost impossible to answer.

A: Yes, the most critical element is first of all that there is a semblance of governance and Rule of Law, which there were not, and that there was a modicum of security, meaning that the security forces were trained and were not just reactive to security incidents that would occur, but actually were able to develop plans to do policing and to do outreach to
communities and in communities develop those relationships that were necessary to engender trust.

There were complaints when we would go out to the districts that the police were shaking them down for bribes and that they trusted the insurgents more than they trusted the police or the army.

So that’s what’s critical, to have credibility, and they only can do that through having a transparent and accountable government. At this point and from what I witnessed during my 13-month tour in this province, the second poorest in the entire country, the situation is not yet at this point, and it’s not going to be a year from now, two years from now, even five, at a point where we can feel good about handing the keys back over to them.

Q: Did the Spanish have an overall strategy for accomplishing their PRT mission?

A: Oh, the Spanish had a lot of Power Points and strategies on paper, absolutely. It was the execution of those strategies that was lacking.

And just the nature of their rotations. Who comes to a place for four months and thinks that they’re going to get anything accomplished, when it’s such a steep learning curve? Even their translators were not Afghans; they were Spaniards who were Iranian as well and spoke Farsi and that’s who they had as the people that were their interlocutors with the local Afghans.

So I don’t know how you could have a plan that you could actually execute when that’s what you were using and the Afghans pointed that out to me time and time again.

Q: How did you personally get the situational information and the political awareness that you needed to work in your region?

A: My most trusted source was the Afghan political assistant who was hired by my predecessor’s predecessor. I would thank him until I’m blue in the face, because not only did he allow me to have situational awareness, he actually gave really critical, crucial information to our military counterparts, U.S. military, Spanish, Italian, and to the embassy on the release of insurgents by the Karzai government into our province, on a host of issues and cultural awareness, just on what would work, what would not work. I got that almost exclusively from him, but he had many sources.

He had a very good source within the provincial office of the National Directorate of Security, that’s the Afghan intelligence branch, with members of the Provincial Council, local leaders, the local mullahs. You name it, we had access to everybody.

No one wanted to talk to me when I got there because I was the American woman and it’s a very conservative province. By the end of my tour they came to me, senior leaders, and they wanted to talk to me, because they knew that we could get things done and we had
reach back and that was thanks to my political assistant, the credit really goes to him. It
doesn’t go to me.

Q: As an American, did you have an opportunity to contribute to or to influence the
Spanish planning process?

A: It depended on who was in charge. If we had a colonel who valued us and didn’t feel
threatened by us and didn’t feel like, “Who are these foreigners in my PRT telling me
what to do?” If he could see our value added and the reach back that we had, then, yes,
we were included. And if not, no, we were completely shut out from their planning
process and we were never given heads ups on things.

Q: Who were the other civilian members of the PRT?

A: The Americans were my USAID colleague and myself. There were two DynCorp
employees that were funded through the State Department at the PRT.

There were two police mentors from EUPOL, i.e., the EU Police Mission to Afghanistan
that stayed for a year and then two who were actually Guardia Civil, from the Spanish
national gendarmerie, and they were non-military.

And then we had I think 10 members of the Spanish development agency. Then in
November 2008, the Spanish ministry of foreign affairs assigned a political advisor to the
Spanish military, but he was only on the ground three months the entire time that I was
there and he basically did nothing.

Q: Did any civilian members of the PRT have an opportunity to contribute to the
planning process?

A: We had what we called an integrated command planning session. We tried to meet
once a week, where we’d talk about what we were working on. But the planning was
done by the military and it was going through the motions to have those planning
sessions, but very little was accomplished at them.

Q: Did the military coordinate their planning with NGOs or with any other international
organizations that were in the area?

A: No, they did not. It was only towards the end of my tour when the Regional West
Command, the Italians were responsible for that - they came up a lot and saw the kind of
work that my USAID colleague and I were doing and the contacts that we had - they
brought us down for planning purposes. Before they were going to do a mission in one of
our districts, they brought me down to do an extensive intelligence briefing for them on
the different tribes and they brought my USAID colleague down as well and we gave a
series of briefings to the U.S. Special Forces people and to the Italian military command
staff.
Q: So this weekly meeting that happened, you say it was more pro forma?

A: Yes, totally pro forma.

Q: Your advice or recommendations, proposals, didn’t really get regarded seriously?

A: No, they did not, no. My USAID colleague and I regarded it as basically a waste of time.

Q: To what extent did any training that you received before you reached your post adequately prepare you for the job?

A: I spent three weeks at Fort Bragg and I received a week of classroom training and there I was assigned to a U.S. PRT that was going to be deploying. Because I was to be at a NATO-led PRT, they at least wanted me to have experience of doing the emergency planning sessions. And we did two weeks actually in the field, doing mock shuras and meetings.

And that was actually really helpful. I became a certified combat lifesaver, I fired weapons, did a humvee rollover, slept in a tent, all the things that prepared me for what I was going to encounter when I went in the field, conditions that were very similar to what I confronted, and that was invaluable.

Once in Afghanistan I lived in certain situations in very spartan circumstances, no showers, just a cot, basically, with nothing else. I was on a helicopter ride where I was supposed to just go for two hours and I ended up having to stay for four days and I only had the clothes on my back.

So in that regard the Fort Bragg experience was really essential, invaluable, and I was very surprised when my successor was not required to take the similar training at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, but it was optional that year and not mandatory, as it was for all of us. Yes, it was shocking to me.

Q: Would you have any recommendations for improving the training?

A: I actually went back to Atterbury and helped the instructor and I was there for two or three weeks and I had already seen the improvements, so what I voiced to people was that “You’ve improved this training and you’ve done a good job of including a lot of new elements. Why are you not making it mandatory? Why is everybody not going through it?” So that was the thing. How to improve it, I don’t know how much more it could be improved, but I do know that it should be mandatory.

My successor was allowed to opt out of it for two or three more weeks of home leave. She was coming from a European post. As a Foreign Service officer, I find that just really difficult to swallow.
Q: What worked well and what were the major impediments to accomplishing the mission in your day-to-day activities? I think we’ve talked all around this already, but if you have anything else to say

A: What worked well, in the end, when you had a colleague like I did, a USAID colleague, he and I were just completely on the same page. I think I was just lucky and he said the same thing.

We had one of the best partnerships I think probably at any of the PRTs and our bosses said that. We were very collaborative and always tried to help each other and that wasn’t always the case.

A lot of it is personality-driven, frankly. We finally came to an understanding, he and I, that we would be our own mission within the PRT and that the Spanish really weren’t appreciating what we brought to the table and we didn’t need them anymore.

We then just went out ourselves, in our vehicle, our armored Toyota and we would use the Afghan National Army as our escorts or the police and we didn’t use the Spanish convoys and we accomplished a lot doing those things.

Or we went out to districts where there was a forward operating base, where there were Italians and Americans who were really on board with what we were doing and really wanted us there and then they would take us out in their armored convoys and we got a lot accomplished that way.

So I think once we established the relationship that we had, the information flow that we needed in order to know where we needed to target our efforts, because we had such a small resource pool, that’s when we became the most effective and that, unfortunately, happened right as my tour was ending.

And I was going to stay a second year, I had verbally committed to it, but unfortunately my political assistant was really mistreated and abused by the Spanish. We repeatedly made the command staff aware of that and it fell on deaf ears with one of the commanders, and so he quit. He said, “I’ll stay with you until the end of your initial year,” but he just didn’t want to work with them again. So I got him a job at the embassy and my boss helped facilitate that and that’s where he is now.

Q: How do you explain the Spanish attitude towards him?

A: The Spanish attitude is consistent with how they treated the Afghans. It was funny that they were there on this mission, because they spoke so negatively about them and with such disdain. So it was not a surprise to me that they treated my assistant like a terrorist.

He worked there for two and a half years, there was no reason to believe he was anything but loyal and they treated him basically like a common criminal, the way they’d pat him down and humiliate him in front of people.
That is totally consistent with how they treated the Afghans in the local community. They had a horrible reputation in the province where we served. Local Afghans basically felt they’d lost the NATO lottery: that the east and the south were lucky, because they got the Brits and the Americans, and they got the Spanish.

Q: Do you have anything to say about the handover of responsibilities at the beginning of your tour, from your predecessor, in other words?

A: My predecessor set up a nice schedule. He at that time had been splitting duties between where I served and another province north of us. That actually was probably a disservice because I ended up never going back there. I made a good contact with the political adviser through that trip, maybe obviating the need to ever go back there.

There was so much going on in our province that it probably - the time he and I had to overlap together - probably would have been better spent focusing more on things in our province.

But as my political assistant, who worked with him for a year, pointed out, my predecessor’s focus was much different from mine. He didn’t have one contact in the National Directorate for Security, no Afghan intelligence contact. Whenever I wanted to I met with the local head of Afghan intelligence and could get any information that I needed to give to the U.S. military or back to the embassy.

My predecessor stayed for a week with me. He was very polite, set up some nice introductory meetings with some Afghans, but, again, maybe the best advice he gave me, he said, “I did nothing with Rule of Law and very little with governance. You might want to focus on that for your tour,” so that’s what I did. So in that regard he was very self-aware about what he did and didn’t do.

Q: Could you point to any processes, any structures or mechanisms that were in place that helped you in any way to achieve your goals while you were there?

A: This is going to sound like I did everything myself, but it was really just on the basis of the relationships that I developed and insisting on certain meetings that really the embassy PRT office didn’t even try to help facilitate.

The best contact I made was the deputy director for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and I made that contact through the USAID governance officer at the embassy. She set that up for me.

And had I not made that contact in November of 2008, I hate to think what my year would have been like, because he was so instrumental in helping me to get rid of the old governor. And he was somebody who I always could go to. He would also call me. On election day he was calling me, wanting my updates.
So it was a mutually beneficial relationship. I also developed a relationship with a general in the ministry of the interior from a fact-finding mission he did to my province, and he wanted my take on things. He said, “You’re the only objective person here. Everybody else has a personal interest involved and you don’t seem to have one.”

And that was how, working with him, that I got rid of the police chief. It wasn’t my personal desire to get rid of the police chief. All my Afghan contacts said, “He’s a problem. We can’t do anything with this guy. He is thwarting any efforts to improve the system. No one listens to us. Can you help us?”

I let people I knew to be honest and who I think had sincere interests in improving Afghanistan use me as a conduit to reach out back to Kabul and try and develop relationships. My relationships that I developed with Regional West Command staff facilitated a lot of things as well as the Special Operations people in Herat. And the RC West commander as well was a very good friend of mine.

So really a lot of it was personality-driven and the relationships that you build. So mechanisms in place? I can’t tell you that there were any great mechanisms. It was just, I think, the willingness to absorb a lot of information and to be outspoken and to not be intimidated by my military counterparts. Because I felt that I had just as much if not more to offer as they did and I think that is something that maybe is lacking in the training that we receive at the State Department, that we’re supposed to be strictly diplomats.

Well, it’s not. It’s transformational diplomacy and you need to have some sharp elbows if you’re going to get things done in Afghanistan and in the end, the Afghans, that’s what they want and respect. They don’t respect somebody who just sits around and makes a lot of promises but doesn’t follow through on any of them.

So in the end, I didn’t want to ever make a promise that I couldn’t keep to the Afghans. I told them that I would do everything I could to get that wall built in the women’s prison, and when the money did not come from the embassy when I had made requests to get funding, I didn’t want to look like I had not followed through on a commitment, so I paid for it myself.

If you don’t have credibility going in there with the Afghans, as the military, as the State Department, or as USAID, you have nothing. If you lose that, you’ve lost the mission.

Q: What was your communication system like? How did you talk to Kabul, or anybody else that you needed to talk to?

A: On my cell phone.

Q: It worked?

A: Not always, no. I would text. There was a whole week when we didn’t have any cell phone service.
Q: Were you able to access in any way embassy or State Department reporting on developments inside Afghanistan?

A: Nothing, nope. I used gmail. That was how I communicated all my reporting to the embassy.

We had a satellite dish on top of a container that, when it snowed – there are horrific snowfalls in the winter - my Afghan political assistant would have to climb up on a ladder that I would hold and he would have to brush off all the snow. Otherwise it wouldn’t work.

Q: We’ve pretty much covered my list of questions, but I wouldn’t want to leave without offering you the opportunity for any last comments, anything that you think would make this whole system better for those who are coming after you. That’s the objective of the study. Do you have any advice you’d like to pass on?

A: Yes, I guess my parting advice would be that I think that there is a genuine intent to work together. On paper there are a lot of things that people say, this coordinated approach and the civ-mil effort, but in practice I didn’t really see that that was the case. Unless, again, it was personality-driven and you just had somebody who was enlightened and could understand after months of being there that, “Hey, I don’t know everything and let’s work together. You share what you have, I’ll share what I have.”

But going forward, if the military is serious about this civ-mil approach, they have to give us a space at the table. I have enormous respect for the military and am so grateful for what they did for me and for keeping me safe in some really dire situations.

But I had a lot to bring to the table and so did my political assistant. What I saw the military doing was imposing things from the top down instead of getting the information and listening to it and really evaluating what the local Afghans wanted and then based on that planning and implementing things.

They too often came with preconceived notions and already wanted to hit the ground running without having the necessary background information to go forward. If we’re to have a modicum of success in Afghanistan, the people who are in leadership positions need to have a team approach instead of a me, me, me approach.

And from colleagues of mine who served with the U.S. ambassador in Iraq, he was the type of leader that inspired people and led to people working together and that was unfortunately not the case in Afghanistan. We did not have inspired leadership at the embassy in Kabul and we were very much ignored and did not get the resources and the attention that we needed in the field.
You don’t send people out to live in places where they’re attacked and were under constant threat and then don’t give them any resources, but that’s what I faced for 13 months.

So I don’t want anyone else to be in that position and to be at the mercy of a NATO partner who didn’t want us there and didn’t want to give us anything. If you opposed them in any way, shape, or form they wanted to cut you off.

Q: How typical of other NATO-led PRTs was your experience, do you think?

A: My colleague at the Italian PRT had a similar experience with the Italian colonels. They really marginalized him. He was a fluent Dari speaker, so he didn’t care because he could go and do whatever he wanted. He was a very senior Foreign Service officer, but without his skills that person would have been a lame duck.

It varied at each NATO-led PRT, depending on who was there. The British, for example, are phenomenal. A colleague and friend who served with them, they saw his worth and value added and he’s now in his third year there. And they gave him a huge budget, I think a half a million dollars of their money, to spend. That’s just not something that I had, that experience.

Q: Where’s the decision made on where to place American PRT members? Is that an embassy decision or a Washington decision?

A: That’s a Washington decision, in consultation with the embassy, because the PRT director when I was there personally signed off on everybody that was sent out to the field. And the woman that replaced me was somebody that she had worked with in the Operations Center, so that’s how she got the job.

Q: It just sounds like, from what you’ve said, that there might be better places to put good people. You might have achieved more if you were either with an American team or even with a British team. It sounds like some yellow or red flags should be sent up when people consider assigning Americans to Spanish or Italian teams.

A: I think you have to have people like my colleague, who’s currently serving his second year with the Italians, that are able to be independent. My successor now has attached herself to the Spanish I think, because she doesn’t want to be as independent as I was.

I saw myself there first and foremost as aligned with the Afghans, not with the Spanish. I didn’t care if the Spanish didn’t like me. To be brutally honest, that wasn’t who I was trying to develop a great relationship with. I was there for the Afghans.

I wanted to develop a good relationship with the Spanish. When I realized that they didn’t want to and my USAID colleague and I both realized that, then we jumped over the Spanish and we went to the Italians, because we saw that they were the ones who had the resources.
They were in charge of Regional Command West and they were the ones that gave us helicopters and got us out into the field. So when the Spanish wouldn’t help us, we went to those people that would help us, Americans or the Italians.

But yes, you’re right, they’re sending really good officers to work in places where they can’t do much.

*Q:* I thank you for taking an hour of your time on what’s obviously been a busy day. It’s quite an education for somebody sitting back here.

*A:* It was truly the greatest professional experience in the Foreign Service and even in my prior career. I wanted to stay a second year and I miss actually being there, but if I can’t have a political assistant who will work with me because of the NATO partner and I can’t feel secure because the NATO partner doesn’t see our value added, I’m probably better off here helping American citizens who I think appreciate the efforts that we make on their behalf.

I hope I didn’t sound so negative. I have very strong feelings, because, again, it’s asking a great sacrifice for people to take these PRT assignments and I feel like our policy should be equal to the sacrifice that people are making.

*Q:* Of course.