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**Losing Ground on the Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team Mission
and Recommendations for Regaining It**

by

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Abstract

Foreign language skills are a critical enabler to the success of military operations in Afghanistan focused on reconstruction. Specifically, the current lack of language training for U.S. military personnel assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) has made U.S. military members reliant on a cadre of interpreters who have little to no formal training in interpretation or translation skills, and in some cases may not have the most adequate language skills. This paper was based predominantly on the personal experiences of the author who served on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan from April 2006 to April 2007 and substantiated with publicly posted job listings for Dari/Pashto linguists. This paper is not intended as a critique of the dedicated and courageous cadre of self-motivated interpreters doing their best to further the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. It is a critical review of the limited selection criteria and lack of training and resources which place an overwhelming burden to self-teach in an environment where mistakes can cost lives and waste millions of dollars in resources.

Losing Ground on the Afghanistan PRT Mission

Introduction

Foreign language skills are a critical enabler to the success of military operations in Afghanistan focused on reconstruction. Specifically, the current lack of language training for U.S. military personnel assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) has made U.S. military members reliant on a cadre of interpreters who have little to no formal training in interpretation or translation skills, and in some cases may not have the most adequate language skills. In addition, cultural practices can further limit the effective use of local national interpreters. This overall severe gap in language capabilities and limited interpretation capabilities limits effective communication which is essential for establishing and maintaining the working relationships with Afghan leadership vital to the success of the PRT mission. The lack of effective communication stymies progress by creating miscommunication of goals and intent, prohibits the establishment of trust and mutual respect, and can ultimately lead to manipulation and misapplication of valuable resources.

Background on Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan

The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) program has been operating for nine years in Afghanistan. In 2002, Operation Enduring Freedom formed 10-12 man teams, called Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells, with the task to identify humanitarian needs of the local population. These teams were authorized to build small projects in an effort to establish trust and positive relationships with the Afghan population in contentious areas. The next year, U.S. civilian agencies joined the effort and together formed the first PRT, which was placed in Gardez¹. Also

adding security elements, the PRT was able to provide civilian government experts access to areas considered too dangerous for their parent agencies to access on their own, thus providing a means to stimulate the establishment of local governance in areas previously inaccessible. Their mission, originally to facilitate “security and reconstruction by helping the central [Afghan] government extend its authority to the provinces”, has expanded to include a more active and direct role of “strengthening local governance and community development”². In other words, the military isn’t just the escort to safely get civilian experts out to ungoverned spaces; the military is actively guiding, mentoring, training, and ultimately shaping the security and political landscape of Afghanistan.

Today, there are a total of 28 teams under the leadership of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), covering all but six of the 34 Afghan provinces. Each team is hosted by one³ of the 48 nations participating in ISAF. The U.S. leads 13 of these teams, while the remaining 15 are led by Australia, Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom⁴. This paper will focus on the U.S.-led PRTs.

Each U.S.-led PRT has an average of 85 military personnel and up to three civilians. The core military members include the PRT commander, engineers, and civil affairs personnel. The core team is supported by medical, communications, supply, security forces (military police), and administrative personnel. Finally, the U.S. Army National Guard provides infantry forces to direct the military convoys and provide security for the entire team⁵. The three civilian positions are one each from the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).⁶ In addition, each team may have four

to five assigned interpreters⁷, which can be a mix of local Afghan citizens (local nationals) and U.S. citizens, usually Afghans who emigrated to the U.S. in the late 1970's and on.

The PRT, in collaboration with the provincial governor and his staff, is responsible for identifying new reconstruction projects designed to improve “health care, water and sanitation, transportation, and education”⁸ such as roads, bridges, schools, and clinics. These projects are funded by the U.S. Department of Defense⁹ and contracted out to local Afghans, who employ local nationals for the actual construction. The civilian team members will initiate their own capacity building projects within their respective areas of expertise. For example, one USDA team member concentrated his efforts on training district level Agriculture officials on how to analyze soil composition using new test kits which in turn would allow them to determine what type of fertilizer would yield the best results for their respective area. This small but impactful project was the result of the USDA team member's initial observations of farming techniques in the area and early interviews. Because of the security element, PRTs have the unique “capacity to complete projects in contested areas” which similar civilian organizations currently lack¹⁰.

Malkasian and Meyerle argue that,

While other agencies remain needed for long-term economic and political development, the PRTs are best suited to conduct reconstruction in ways that create stability in the short term.¹¹

A typical week for a PRT can consist of meetings with local provincial and district level leaders to discuss the status of ongoing projects and review proposal for new projects, inspecting project construction sites for quality control, reviewing and awarding contracts for new projects, making incremental payments for work completed to date, ribbon cutting ceremonies for completed projects, delivery of humanitarian aid, and mobile medical and veterinarian clinics¹². These PRT activities are integral aspects of the overall counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan in what

Moyar describes as “among the more imaginative of the American initiatives in Afghanistan...intended to marshal the full range of counterinsurgency expertise in the U.S. government...”¹³. Paramount to any counterinsurgency is the need to win over the population’s support. The PRT does this through daily personal interactions. Therefore, next to security and reconstruction funds, the most imperative enabler for a PRT is language, more specifically the ability to communicate with Afghans, usually in Dari or Pashto, the two official languages of Afghanistan¹⁴.

Language deficiencies in U.S. led Provincial Reconstruction Teams

In spite of the instrumental role that communication plays in the PRT mission, U.S. military members assigned to PRTs in Afghanistan are not required to have any foreign language skills prior to selection. Military members are, however, required to complete a 45-day combat training prior to deploying for their nine to twelve months of PRT duty, which in 2006 was conducted at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In 2006, members underwent training with the teams they would belong to for the next year in Afghanistan¹⁵. Although the training was designed to prepare the PRTs for a realistic environment, the priority of training was to ensure each member was qualified on weapons handling and convoy operations, both essential combat skills for survival in non-permissive areas which all teams would likely encounter. This was not a simple task considering that all members, with the exception of the infantry, were either US Air Force or US Navy personnel who had very little experience handling weapons by the nature of their specialties. For example, a communications technician in the Air Force will most likely handle an M16 once a year, at most, for annual to bi-annual training requirements. This is conducted in a very controlled environment, and a weapon is never actually issued to the individual. Now all

PRT members would be issued weapons, which they would be required to have on their person at all times for the next year, and more importantly be able to safely and proficiently use if necessary. Weapons qualification and safety training was therefore time-consuming. The constrained time remaining was dedicated to “tactical training, combat training, communication skills, checkpoint set up, guarding perimeters and providing security”¹⁶. Of these, communications skills received the least amount of time on the training schedule.

Communications training included language familiarization, negotiation techniques, and interpreter-interaction training. Language familiarization consisted of a crash course on common greetings and basic introductions. Members were then given pamphlets with these phrases and basic commands to serve as self-study tools. Self-guided learning was intended to “use down time to reinforce language training”¹⁷. However, with a schedule that covered 15 hours a day, seven days a week for nearly a month and a half, “down time” was nearly non-existent. Only the most determined and disciplined members learned anything beyond “hello” and “my name is”. Most didn’t retain even these common phrases.

Negotiation skills received a little more attention. Bilingual civilians fluent in either Dari or Pashto were hired to assist in simulation training. Simulation training recreated a typical PRT mission to include convoy movement to a mock Afghan village. Once the team arrived at the mock Afghan village each member practiced their respective role. For the PRT commander and the civil affairs officer, this meant conducting a face-to-face meeting with a “local leader” typically in a negotiation or conflict resolution scenario. “Local leaders”, played by the bilingual civilians, only spoke Dari or Pashto. Another bilingual speaker would role play the “team interpreter”. In this manner the PRT commander learned techniques on how to best use the

“team interpreter”. These techniques addressed nonverbal communication, speech length, and tone of voice.

Nonverbal communication instructions highlighted eye contact, general body language, and gestures. PRT commanders were instructed to make eye contact with the “local leader” when speaking, not the “team interpreter”. Body language should be friendly and confident while avoiding signs of anger or frustration, such as avoiding arm crossing. Gestures addressed cultural customs, such as placing one’s right hand on over the left chest while greeting someone, and avoiding taboos such as showing the soles of feet when seated. Training also emphasized that body language and gestures should be directed at the “local leader” not the “team interpreter”.

PRT commanders were instructed to keep their speech length to short phrases with natural breaks in order to allow the interpreter to conduct consecutive interpretation. For several commanders, this would be the first time they communicated through an interpreter. Deliberately pacing speech length was one of the more challenging tasks as it required self-monitoring and forced breaks during which it was easy to lose one’s train of thought if not properly focused. It was very common for PRT commanders to forget to pause, overwhelming the “team interpreter”. It would take practice to get into a natural rhythm in which both the PRT commander and the “team interpreter” felt comfortable.

PRT commanders were also instructed to keep their tone of voice at a natural volume and avoid raising their voice. Raising one’s voice in anger, especially in public, is considered a lack of self-control in Afghanistan and viewed with extreme prejudice. Losing one’s temper in public is a deal breaker and a quick way to lose credibility and cordial relations. Therefore, one should

avoid raising one's voice at all costs to avoid ruining the conflict resolution at hand and potentially placing all future engagements at risk.

Such scenarios were realistic and provided valuable training, especially for the PRT commander and civil affairs team. However, there were two significant drawbacks. The first is that the individual serving as the "team interpreter" was not the actual team interpreter. This training could be just as valuable to actual team interpreters as it to the U.S. military members, especially those recently hired. An additional benefit of including the actual team interpreters is that it would allow for the team members to build a rapport with them during the forming stages of the team.

The next drawback is the fact that the interpreter-interaction training was restricted to the PRT commander and civil affairs personnel. While they are indeed the PRT members who will have the most vital use of the interpreters, other PRT members also have extensive need for an interpreter. For example, the medical personnel host mobile clinic while the security forces personnel conduct security training, both requiring extensive interpreter assistance. In addition, every PRT member who goes on a convoy is apt to employ the interpreters sooner or later. When a convoy reaches a destination, every team member has an active role that places them in an opportunity to directly engage local citizens. Those not directly involved in a planned event, such as a meeting, clinic, inspection, or ribbon cutting ceremony, are responsible for security. This involves standing at a designated location and actively monitoring the surroundings for any unusual activity. In this situation, it is very common for curious citizens, especially children, to approach the individual. The interpersonal exchange that ensues from this interaction can be just as powerful to the mission success of the PRT as the official function underway. It is an opportunity to interact the child whose school may soon be built or the gentleman who will soon

have a road that opens access to new markets. Whether it's providing information or dispelling negative propaganda, these impromptu opportunities for communication can pay off dividends for the PRT and the counterinsurgency efforts. The first step, when lacking direct communication skills, is to be comfortable and know how to use the team interpreters.

Role of Provincial Reconstruction Team interpreters

Due to the lack of language proficiency among the U.S. PRT military members, as well as the fact that local leaders and residents typically have little to no English speaking skill¹⁸, the task of communicating is accomplished through interpreters. The PRT interpreter becomes the sole means for PRT members to verbally communicate with Afghans in nearly all interactions. In their main role, that is, converting one spoken language into another in an accurate and meaningful way, the PRT interpreters are required to conduct consecutive interpretation. In consecutive interpretation, the interpreter waits until speaker A completes an "utterance" before interpreting what was said to Speaker B. An utterance can range from a single word, a sentence or sequence of sentences¹⁹. Speaker B responds and at the end of his utterance the interpreter relays that utterance back to Speaker A. This pattern continues for the duration of the discourse. In contrast, simultaneous interpretation would require the interpreter to listen and speak at the same time that Speaker A is speaking, providing a shorter discourse pattern, but requiring far greater degree of concentration and technical skill²⁰.

A PRT interpreter's role is not limited to interpretation. PRT interpreters also have written translation responsibilities, which require them to convert English documents into Dari or Pashto, and vice versa. These texts are primarily business contracts, contract bids, and itemized lists of goods but can also include training material in subjects that can range from agriculture to

law enforcement. On occasion, they will also be tasked to translate the text of a speech that will be delivered at a public event and provide the verbal interpretation during the actual event.

Required skills for Provincial Reconstruction Team interpreters

Based on these roles, PRT interpreters require a plethora of communication skills to meet their responsibilities and enable the PRT to accomplish its objectives. At a minimum, interpreters require native-speaker level proficiency in speaking, writing, and reading. They also need to know important technical terms in the military, political, medical, engineering, architecture, business, financial, and agricultural disciplines. Attention to detail, analytical and editing skills are also fundamental, especially for translation requirements in which inaccuracy can lead to expensive mistakes in contracts. Miscommunication with contractors can cost time and money to remedy or lead to a breach of contract when both parties are unable to agree on a settlement. Accuracy is crucial, both in interpretation and translation. In a worst-case scenario misinterpretation can place the lives of the PRT (and the interpreter) at risk.

In the U.S., interpretation and translation are considered two distinct fields of work, as each requires distinct skills sets. Interpretation relies on listening and speaking skills, while translation requires strong writing, analytical, and editing skills. A person skilled and experienced in both fields is uncommon. In the case of the PRT, interpreters are responsible for both and for a far greater variety of subject matters than what their counterparts in the U.S. would typically handle.

In addition to meeting technical requirements, an interpreter needs to be highly trustworthy. Their duties give them privileged access to sensitive information such medical histories, budget limits, convoy mission details, and internal political matters. Lack of

trustworthiness and integrity can quickly break down the cohesion of a PRT at best and can make interpreters highly vulnerable to common corrupt practices at worst. Finally, the need to remain professional, courteous, and impartial under pressure is pivotal, as the reputation and credibility of the entire PRT rests on the messages conveyed by the interpreter, and in the manner which he or she delivers them. The following provides examples of the more common scenarios in which PRT interpreters play a central role.

Assisting the PRT Commander. Interpreters play a mission essential role in serving as the voice of the commander during leadership engagements with provincial and district level Afghan leaders. PRT commanders meet with the provincial governor on a regular basis, as often as once a week. These meetings may include provincial level officials, such as the local Afghan National Police chief and ministers from such sectors as education or agriculture. An interpreter joins the PRT commander, sitting immediately next to him towards the of the head table. The interpreter becomes an active proxy participant in these important administrative meetings, interpreting both for the PRT commander and up to several dozen attending members.

These meetings provide a forum to discuss current PRT projects, approve future projects, and receive feedback on the impact to the community from completed projects. They also serve as a venue to discuss security issues hindering the progress of projects, placing both the PRT and contractors in danger. Contract disputes which remain unresolved at the PRT level may also be discussed at these meetings. Like the scenario simulations from the pre-deployment training, these meetings often involve conflict resolution, along with relationship building and exchange of critical information. Through these meetings, the Afghan government plays a key role in the executive direction for reconstruction within its jurisdiction. Through these meetings, the governor and his staff are enabled to meet the basic needs of the local population, create jobs,

and address security concerns, earning the credibility and legitimacy vital to countering the ongoing insurgency.

The commander will also meet with the district level leadership, though not as frequently. District level engagements often focus on feedback on both the progress of existing projects, to include quality and pace of work, along with inquiring on any threats posed as a result of reconstruction efforts. In addition, PRT commanders will solicit ideas and recommendations for future projects. As at the provincial level meetings, the interpreter stands or sits immediately next to the commander and serves as an intermediary among all participants.

Ribbon cutting ceremonies are a standard event for a PRT commander. These ceremonies are used as a means to publicly praise the accomplishments of the local leaders and residents who collaborated to complete the project. They also serve as an opportunity to inform the local residents of the new services and instill trust in the continued efforts of the local government. The PRT commander will often prepare a speech which the interpreter translates. The PRT commander may also be interviewed by Afghan media attending the ceremony, with the interpreter being responsible for what will actually get published or broadcast.

Assisting with Civil Affairs. Interpreters assist the civil affairs both in manners similar to that of the commander (face-to-face engagements) and with the contracting process. In addition to their active role in mentoring local leaders, the civil affairs members are responsible for the administrative management of PRT projects. Duties include reviewing contract bids, leading negotiations, awarding contracts, and providing payments. This requires assistance with interpersonal engagements with contractors, drafting of contracts, translation of contract bids and translation of final contracts prior to signature.

Assisting with Training. In addition to the construction projects, PRTs are authorized to launch training projects. The USDA-led project to train Afghan agriculture officials on how to test local soil samples required interpreter assistance in a classroom environment for weekly training sessions over a period of several months. In addition, interpreters provided extensive translation of written training materials for the technical equipment. This is just one example. Training projects vary from PRT to PRT.

Assisting with Medical Teams. PRT-hosted mobile medical clinics provide free health care to hundreds of residents in remote rural areas which lack health facilities. Ailments can range from dehydration and malnutrition to gunshot wounds. Patients range from infants to elderly citizens. In some cases this may be a first medical encounter. Interpreters make it possible for the local citizens to share their symptoms with the PRT medical team and gingerly guide them through the examination/treatment process. Teams with access to veterinarians host similar free clinics, equally valued in rural communities whose livelihood rests on their livestock.

Assisting with Humanitarian Aid Drops. Another common activity for PRTs is to organize what is referred to as a humanitarian aid drop. A humanitarian aid drop consists of as many PRT members as possible assisting in the loading of trucks with humanitarian goods, such as food, clothes, blankets, or hygiene kits. These goods are delivered to remote rural areas with the greatest need. Hundreds of residents congregate at the pre-designated drop location in the hope of receiving these goods. Interpreters can make or break these events by providing instructions to the crowd on how to form themselves in an orderly, manageable fashion, and by helping maintain this system. Neither is an easy challenge, the latter nearly always falling into chaos after residents become impatient or fear the team will soon run out of goods. In fact, one

PRT commander decided to forgo further drops in favor of delivering the materials to the locally managed Red Crescent office and allowing the provincial or district leadership to distribute goods, an approach which in the past had been avoided due to potential corruption and mismanagement.

Assisting with Perimeter Security. Interpreters assist the PRT security element responsible for monitoring the local area when convoys reached their destination. Here, PRT members often find themselves in impromptu exchanges with local residents. Such exchanges can shape the opinions of the very community which the PRT is tasked to support. The impression left on a young boy or girl creates a positive or negative perception. This perception is shared in turn with family members who then pass it on to other village members. If the village is located in a remote area, the PRT may be the first American encounter, so this perception is then projected not just on all U.S. military forces but also on the U.S. as a whole. As a result, each and every PRT member has the potential to serve as an unofficial ambassador with long term strategic impact.

Interpreters also assist security elements with investigating suspicious activities. Interpreters assist with tactical questioning, which is an overt and non-coercive form of requesting information from locals on matters that appear suspicious. The information gleaned from these encounters can either save the PRT from peril or places the team in harm's way if vital information is misinterpreted. In addition, as the only cultural experts on the team, the interpreters can play a key role in identifying things out of the ordinary which can signal a possible threat.

Challenges with Provincial Reconstruction Team interpreters

While the Afghan interpreters are often dedicated, hardworking, and determined to rebuild their nation, several challenges exist which hinder the progress of this very goal. Alarming accounts of service members returning from Afghanistan and news reports indicate that many interpreters in Afghanistan are not properly qualified. The selection process lacks screening for experience or aptitude in either interpretation or translation. Formal training is neither required nor provided. Additionally, administrative and cultural roadblocks can lead to mistrust and miscommunication.

Selection. As of September 2010, Ohio based Mission Essential Personnel (MEP) employed “the majority of linguists in Afghanistan”²¹. Based on MEP’s online posting for full time “Pashto/Dari Linguist” jobs in Afghanistan, the selection criteria for the U.S.-hired interpreters is focused almost exclusively on language proficiency and U.S. citizenship²².

Job Description

Mission Essential Personnel is actively seeking Pashto, Pashto/Dari and Pashto/Dari/Farsi linguists to perform the following functions:

- Provide operational contract linguist support to U.S. Army operations in Afghanistan
- Provide general linguistic support for military operations and interpret during interviews, meetings, and conferences
- Interpret and translate written and spoken communications
- Transcribe and analyze communications
- Perform document exploitation
- Scan, research, and analyze foreign language documents for key information
- Translate foreign language documents
- Identify and extract information components meeting military information requirements
- Provide input to reports

Minimum Qualifications

- Must be a U.S. citizen
- Must be willing to obtain a security clearance
- Must be proficient in reading, writing, listening and speaking in Pashto, Dari and English
- Must be willing to travel overseas, in this case, Afghanistan

Figure 1. MEP Online posting for full time Pashto/Dari Linguist positions in Afghanistan

There are no stated requirements for prior interpretation or translation experience, nor any other data point that would serve as evidence of having already demonstrated the ability to interpret or translate. This may be an inferred requirement which applicants are expected to provide within the resume they are asked to submit; however, no guidance is provided, and therefore these expectations are not identified. Nor is there any evidence that an applicant is expected to show these qualifications through the “comprehensive language testing and pre-deployment screening”, which consists of a “phone test”, “written test”, and “integrity test that occurs by video conference or in person”²³.

In their defense, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “there is currently no universal form of certification required of interpreters and translators in the United States”²⁴. As a result, the eligibility requirements and requisite supporting evidence can vary widely from organization to organization. However, a quick review of the U.S. Department of State’s application and selection process for similar interpreter and translator jobs will highlight the severe deficiency with the MEP posting.

To apply for a part time interpreter or translator position with the U.S. Department of State, applicants are asked to give their educational background, living abroad experience, relevant work experience, three letters of reference, and a sample of translation work if applicable. Applicants who indicate they meet eligibility requirements and successfully pass an initial telephone screening then undergo an in-person interview and complete either an interpreting aptitude test or the LS translation test²⁵. The interpreting aptitude consists of “two passages per level of skill tested”²⁶. The LS translation test is a four-hour exam requiring the applicant to translate three sources of various types of test, each roughly 250-300 words²⁷.

The emphasis on demonstrating in-depth aptitude and abilities for the U.S. Department of State is in stark contrast to MEP's simplistic requirements to speak, read, write a language and have U.S citizenship. Based on a whistleblower action and a subsequent lawsuit in 2010, there is the possibility that at least a quarter of MEP's U.S.-hired interpreters did not even meet the minimum language proficiency requirements²⁸. A former MEP employee responsible for oversight of the screening process for the Afghan linguist candidates claimed that "someone -- and I didn't know [who] at that time -- was changing the grades from blanks or zeros to passing grades"²⁹. According to the allegations,

... the company allowed unqualified translators to be sent to the battlefield to work alongside American troops. [The former employee] alleged that some translators cheated on oral exams, while others fell short of proficiency requirements but were sent to Afghanistan anyway³⁰.

In addition to potential falsification of test results, the lawsuit claimed that prospective applicants were submitting blank written exams then possible using cheat sheets when they were reexamined. While the lawsuit was settled out of court³¹, in July 2011 another lawsuit was filed against MEP. A wrongful death lawsuit has been filed against MEP for "negligence and breach of contract for failing to look into [an Afghan interpreter's] background and not properly testing him to ensure he was psychologically sound before giving him a job". The interpreter in question killed two service members after he was informed he was being transferred due to poor job performance and strange behavior suspected to be drug induced³². This new wave of scrutiny has revealed a possible further degradation in overall management of MEP-hired interpreters.

It should be noted that MEP is a relatively new company, founded in 2004 by veterans "after seeing poor treatment of linguists by other companies. Their express intent was to provide fair and honest treatment and good benefits to all workers, including local nationals"³³. MEP

should be commended for their emphasis on security of Afghan employees who remain prime targets for Taliban insurgents. The sparse MEP selection requirements is likely in response to the extremely thin pool of Pashto and Dari speakers currently residing in the U.S. However, this does not excuse the continued acceptance of low selection and training standards.

Training. There is no evidence the local Afghan PRT interpreters undergo any formal training prior to or as a result of selection³⁴. All training is self-conducted or occurs as informal on-the-job training through fellow interpreters. Interpreters learn the skills of their trade as the go. The less than optimal results are clearly evident when many interpreters are seen without any note-taking materials, a basic tool for consecutive interpretation, or dictionaries, a must-have for translation, especially when dealing with technical and legal documents.

Team Building. The first time the PRT meets its interpreters is when the former arrives at the PRT base in Afghanistan. This places the interpreters at a disadvantage, as they were not part of the 45-day pre-deployment training where the team first forms and establishes team dynamics and builds rapport. Given that trust is such a critical element of the relationship between an interpreters and the team, this places interpreters at a severe disadvantage in the beginning. Their ability to overcome this challenge is further complicated when interpreters do not live with the team³⁵. Not only does this further deprive them of opportunities to bond and build relationships, it can also place them at risk in high-threat areas where insurgents have been known to target Afghans supporting U.S. military forces. As a result, the fragile relationship between interpreters and PRT members can quickly dissolve in situations of extreme tension and physical threat. In one example, a PRT fired nearly all of its interpreters at the first sign of hesitation and refusal to go on a mission to a high-threat area where the team had been previously ambushed. The interpreters were given an ultimatum, requiring an instant decision to

go on the mission or face removal from the team. All but one of the Afghan interpreters opted to risk job loss rather than return to the high-threat area. While the interpreters' removal from the team may have been justified, the fact it occurred in a matter of minutes with practically no discussion made it evident that mutual trust had quickly eroded in the weeks following the original ambush.

Cultural Aspects. Deeply embedded cultural norms in Afghanistan can also challenge the effectiveness of PRT interpreters, particularly the younger, local Afghan interpreters. Afghan culture places a high value on honor and respect for elders. This is embodied both linguistically and socially through a style of communication and language that is deferential to elders. As a result, young, inexperienced interpreters are more likely to paraphrase than to provide linguistically accurate interpretations, especially when interpreting for conflict resolution. Rather than being the voice of the PRT member they are assisting, interpreters are likely to provide a more diplomatic version which does not truly convey the full intent of the original statement. This can be a severe setback, leading to further miscommunication that can undermine sensitive relationships and stunt overall progress.

Cultural norms may also explain how it is possible that potentially unqualified U.S. hires from MEP have been able to continue their employment. Local Afghan interpreters tend to be in their early to mid-twenties, while U.S.-hired interpreters tend to be older. If the local Afghans notice mistakes or inferior proficiency of their U.S.-hired counterparts, they are not likely to share this information willingly. The same can be said for documents that have been mistranslated. Unless the interpreter who made the mistakes is no longer part of the team, or unless anonymity is guaranteed, the younger, local interpreter, still immersed in the deferential

culture, will almost never point out another's mistakes, especially those of someone senior to him or her in age or social status.

Recommendations

With the lack of a single, standardized certification in the field of interpretation³⁶, the opportunity to provide quality, accurate, and trustworthy services are based on self-imposed requirements and standards. MEP's currently insufficient requirements and low standards could be remedied by incorporating several modifications.

The first recommendation is to improve the selection process. For the pre-screening process, MEP can adopt the U.S. State Department's practice to require reference letters and corroborate the initial phone interview with an in-person interview. In addition, MEP can require evidence of experience and sample translation work. Lack of experience need not be a disqualifier if MEP is willing to establish an intensive training program. This training program should hone listening, speaking, writing, vocabulary, analytic, and note-taking skills. The program could be geared to helping applicants or employees pass an interpretation aptitude test and translation test similar to the examinations given by the U.S State Department. All PRT interpreters should be required to pass such tests. Both the training and exams could be sub-contracted to a university or language center already experienced with existing certification programs that can be tailored to the needs of PRTs and other Department of Defense missions. Finally, all PRT interpreters should be provided with the relevant resources, to include continued vocabulary training, technical dictionaries, and a network of Afghan engineers, architects, doctors, and civic leaders who can provide phone assistance when text resources do not give the information they are looking for.

To overcome team-building challenges, all PRT interpreters should be fully embedded with team. Ideally, PRT interpreters would join the U.S. military members in the pre-deployment training, even if only for a few weeks. In addition, they should live in the same quarters as PRT members and be given access to the same dining facilities³⁷. This will improve the opportunities to build the rapport and trust that requires time and shared experiences.

These steps could vastly improve the use of PRT interpreters and enhance mission results. However, the ideal solution would place equal, if not greater, emphasis on training U.S. military members to have at least basic level speaking and reading skills. While this would be the most time- and cost-intensive solution, it would also have the greatest payoff. There is no substitute for being able to communicate directly, and in a mission that is built on relationships and rapport, the ability to converse directly is invaluable. It would also assist in reducing other obstacles. Even basic level skills are sufficient to quickly identify seriously ineffective and inaccurate interpreters, or at a minimum raise suspicions which can be further investigated and corrected. It is important to highlight that language training should be accompanied with cultural training. This training can continue once in country. If PRT members are armed with at least basic speaking skills, they can continue to increase their capacity through the vast cultural knowledge that their local Afghan interpreters clearly have. In combination, these modifications could create a mutual learning in which PRT members gain proficiency and the value and quality of the interpreters' services quickly improve.

Afterthoughts

The personal caliber of the young local Afghans working with the PRTs is astounding. They risk their lives daily, often keeping the true nature of their work secret from all but their most trusted confidants as the Taliban continues to execute citizens which the Taliban find guilty of collaborating with foreign forces. In spite of the obstacles, Afghan interpreters deeply care about their country and are open to new ideas. They are committed to bringing their nation forward. The more cynical observer may argue their devotion is inspired by the relatively high salaries they receive, which certainly is a factor in their retention even under heavy threat of insurgent reprisal. However, this author witnessed interpreters put their heart and soul into their work in a way typically reserved for those intrinsically motivated which leads one to conclude they genuinely *believe* in the reconstruction mission. Where they lack in formal training they make up for with ingenuity, passion, and pure determination. Given the opportunity for higher education in the field of their choice at a reputable university, this author's intuition is that the current cadre of interpreters would outperform the existing government officials. Their language skills and exposure to operational planning processes, coupled with an education and further experience and powered with their optimism, would make them ideal candidates to revamp civil society and establish the foundation for a self-sustaining nation.

Citations

- ¹ GAO-09-86R. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*. 3.
- ² GAO-09-86R. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*. 1
- ³ Tarin Kowt PRT, in Uruzgan Province, is the exception, co-led by more than one nation as a Joint PRT.
- ⁴ NATO. *ISAF Placement 18 Oct 2011*. 3.
- ⁵ Malkasian and Meyerle. *PRTs: How do we Know they Work?* 5.
- ⁶ GAO-09-86R. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*. 2. As of Apr 2008, when there were 26 teams, there were a total of 1021 military personnel and 34 civilians (from State Dept, USDA, and USAID) assigned to the 12 U.S. led PRTs.
- ⁷ GAO-09-86R. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*. 8.
- ⁸ GAO-09-86R. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*. 11.
- ⁹ GAO-09-86R. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams*. 11. Department of Defense funds the *Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP)* which is the source of funds for PRT projects.
- ¹⁰ Malkasian and Meyerle. *PRTs: How do we Know they Work?* ix.
- ¹¹ Malkasian and Meyerle. *PRTs: How do we Know they Work?* ix.
- ¹² USDA example from author's personal experience while assigned to a PRT in Afghanistan in 2006 to 2007.
- ¹³ Moyer. *A Question of Command*. 200.
- ¹⁴ CIA. *The World Factbook*. Online.
- ¹⁵ Locke. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams Training for Afghanistan*. Online.
- ¹⁶ Locke. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams Training for Afghanistan*. Online. Training also included a brief cultural orientation, but this was limited to the PRT commanders and select team members.
- ¹⁷ Locke. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams Training for Afghanistan*. Online. Quote from U.S. Army Colonel David Boslego, the 4th Brigade, 78th Division commander. Col Boslego was responsible for the content and structure of the training.
- ¹⁸ Rare exceptions can be found in government officials at the provincial level or higher. The author worked in two provinces, of which only one had an English speaking governor.
- ¹⁹ O'Grady. *Contemporary Linguistics*. 455
- ²⁰ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Online.
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- ²⁸ ABC Nightline. Exclusive: Whistleblower Claims Many U.S. Interpreters Can't Speak Afghan Languages. 8 Sep 2010.
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- ³² Lardner, Richard. Families Sue After Soldiers' Deaths. 12 July 2011.
- ³³ Mission Essential Personnel. *Setting the Record Straight*. 5 Aug 2010.
- ³⁴ In a statement before the Commission of Wartime Contracting on 26Jul2010, MEP CEO, Chris Taylor, asserted that U.S. hired linguists undergo pre-deployment training that includes how to work with the military "how to be an effective interpreter", though no further details are provided and the same is not claimed for the locally hired Afghan linguists. See [http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/hearing2010-07-26_testimony_Taylor_\(MEP\).pdf](http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/hearing2010-07-26_testimony_Taylor_(MEP).pdf)
- ³⁵ Local nationals seldom live with the team, remaining at home and commuting to work.
- ³⁶ The strong exception is that of Sign Language Interpreters, court room interpreters, and medical interpreters, all of which have standardized certification processes, some national some state based.
- ³⁷ This may already take place with some PRTs.

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