Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought

Relinquishing and governing the volatile: the many Afghanistans and critical research agendas of NATO's governance

Bojan Savić [a]

[a] Research Fellow, School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, National Capital Region , Alexandria , VA , 22314 , USA
Published online: 07 Jun 2013.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ESSAY

Relinquishing and governing the volatile: the many Afghanistans and critical research agendas of NATO's governance

Bojan Savić*

Research Fellow, School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, National Capital Region, Alexandria, VA 22314, USA

This article invites academics and policy analysts to examine the mechanisms and legacy of NATO's security and development governance of Afghan social spaces by using critical theory concepts. It argues that such scholarly endeavors are growing in importance as the United States and NATO gradually pull their troops out of Afghanistan. Thus, the article suggests a broad twofold research agenda. First, it points out that researching social spaces such as towns, villages, marketplaces, and neighborhoods beyond the realm of intergovernmental politics can lead to thick descriptions of how such places have been governed from *within* by agents *external* to them. Second, the study argues for a multifaceted examination of instruments, strategies, and institutions of security governance, its conduct and social effects by deploying critical and Foucauldian concepts such as the *rationality* and *apparatuses* of power relations. Thereby, it proposes an inquiry into Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Afghan National Security Forces as spatially and temporally specific apparatuses of surveillance and security.

Keywords: NATO; security and development governance; critical theory; Provincial Reconstruction Teams; Herat

Nearly two years into the gradual drawdown of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, most current debates on the subject remain roughly bifocal. To the extent that they are ostensibly about Afghanistan itself rather than US politics, their two tightly related foci are the level and quality of a future 'Western' military, economic, and financial 'commitment' to Afghanistan (Obama 2009), as well as the perils of a Taliban insurgency untethered by over 100,000 US, NATO, and non-NATO troops (Jones 2013). As nation building is dismissed as futile, expensive, or even counterproductive (Katzman 2013; Cordesman 2012a), it has become tempting to 'pack up and leave' as US House Representative Mike Pompeo described the withdrawal. However, critical scholarship needs to continuously scrutinize the United States' and NATO's interweaving of security and development practices in Afghanistan. This article is an attempt to outline directions of possible research agendas with such critical outlooks. In spite of NATO's gradual withdrawal, this endeavor is crucial if the legacy of external governance of the country is to be exposed as more than a binary between 'honest' and 'imperialist' efforts that have failed due to the 'tribal', 'corrupt', or 'volatile' nature of Afghanistan.[1]

It is argued here that such practices are best understood if the level of analysis is shifted to the 'local'. Thereby, sweeping generalizations about Afghanistan can be disaggregated into social venues and contexts such as towns, marketplaces, military bases,

*Email: b.savic@vt.edu

airfields, and villages where quotidian circulations of life, trade, agriculture, death, architecture, or events of political resistance can be zeroed in on, experienced, and interpreted in more depth. Thicker descriptions of social spaces thus facilitate academic and policy debates that go past the government's offices in Kabul and provincial capitals, and go beyond the few notable civilian, military, paramilitary, tribal, or religious figures that have become the conventional sociology of the many Afghan wars since the late 1970s. Describing and understanding social spaces as 'eventful' (Barthes 1987; Lefebvre 1969) venues disassembles the narratives of one Afghanistan or of many tribal and volatile Afghanistans as ungovernable, medicalized, and sick (Gregory 2012).

In that sense, provinces and cities such as Herat, and towns such as Shindand, lend themselves to a study of effects of external governance for a methodologically salient reason. The communities of the Herat Province, as a whole, have been exposed to a relatively lower degree of violence (compared to provinces such as Kandahar, Helmand, or Uruzgan) involving the coalition forces, the Taliban, and the regional warlords. This has enabled the local Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to devise a more ambitious development agenda. On the other hand, repeated acts of violence across the Province and the presence of high-value military assets make Herat and Shindand peculiar cases of development work. International development practices are thus embedded in an environment where conflict is simmering and roadside bombs, suicide attacks, and frequent – even though scattered – clashes between the coalition forces and the insurgency are regularly reported.[2] An interagency study conducted by the Department of State, Department of Defense, and USAID describes such environments as those 'where instability precludes heavy NGO involvement, but where violence is not so acute that combat operations predominate' (Morris et al. 2006, 23). Thus, this contingency of insecurity brings out a full spectrum of governance apparatuses from heavily armed military units to development experts and agencies. This broad display of governance instruments and strategies thus allows for a more comprehensive account of how social spaces of transnational contention are governed. Provinces such as Herat or Kunduz are particularly telling of the potentials and strategies of NATO's contemporary governance as they are deemed stabilized by the Alliance, yet still prone to outbreaks of violence and armed conflict.

This article suggests a critical examination of the conduct and unfolding of NATO's International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) 'politics of persuasion' in Afghanistan's provinces such as Herat. Ranging from school and hospital construction to establishing agricultural training centers, successive US and Italian-led efforts within ISAF to 'win the hearts and minds' of Herat's local communities have crisscrossed the Province. According to the US government, and ISAF's military and civilian officials in Herat and Shindand, such measures are directed at dissuading the locals from engaging in poppy production or supporting the Taliban insurgency by offering improved infrastructure and incentives to pursue alternative sources of income (GAO 2005; *Cable 09KABUL159* 2009). While such policies seem to rest on the mechanisms of persuasion, and are said to involve a range of international and local actors working in cooperative security governance frameworks, this brief article invites shedding light on their more controversial underpinnings.

A framework of analysis

The argument put forward here is that the setup, tools, strategies, and tactics of the external governance of Afghanistan are more complex than the policies and politics of 'hearts and minds' would suggest. Besides being intertwined with ISAF's and Operation Enduring Freedom's (OEF) coercive power – such as the installation and deployment of

drones, conduct of night raids and air strikes – they define *how* and *for whom* Afghanistan is to be secured and developed. Undoubtedly, coercive force affects the exact communities that are said to be peacefully convinced not to support the Taliban or engage in illicit economic practices. However, beyond the lives lost is the problematic of how and where lives are lived. Training and equipping security forces and instilling an understanding of their tasks and mission, fostering a national economy based upon specified modes of production are all tools used to invent, homogenize, and shape Afghanistan in the long run.

In other words, a complex set of institutions and policies implemented in Shindand and Herat by the international coalition have decisively shaped and constrained the choices and lives of the local communities before any visible attempt at winning their hearts and minds is even made. How this setup has operated (and has been operated) can be viably dissected by focusing on its predominant *rationality* (Foucault 2009), its specific *apparatuses* (Foucault 1977, 194–228), *strategies*, and *technologies* (Foucault 2009) used to sustain pre-conceived types of security and economy. This brief discussion outlines a research agenda focused on the rationality that underlines PRTs, as well as how the role and place of PRTs in the external governance of Afghanistan can be critically understood if they are studied as surveillance and security apparatuses.

The rationality of external governance

First, drawing on the discourse of international and UN-mediated legitimacy (Rynning 2012, 44–52), ISAF has instituted a specific type of rationality – of reasoning, framing, mental designation, and mapping – in the governance of Afghanistan. Thereby, efficiency in reaching externally pre-defined types of stability, security, economic growth, and development guides the United States and NATO's specific policies and tactics (CALL 2007), oftentimes at the expense of the very locals that they are said to support. Numerous communities endure night raids, drone attacks, and cross fire between the coalition forces, warlords, and the Taliban in the name of operational efficiency and security that is purportedly pursued for them, but is not designed by them. This is because the type of rationality, the calculus that ISAF is based upon is largely inward-oriented and 'private' to NATO and its allies. Its quest for efficiency is concerned with appropriate and desired levels of deployment of financial, technological, and human resources committed to ISAF by the participating nations, with how the political capital of their governments is put to use, as well as with the interoperability of different agencies that PRTs encompass (Szanya et al. 2009; Abbaszadeh et al. 2008). This calculus is almost entirely intra-organizational, as it is calibrated on the basis of what is considered best for troop and aid contributing nations (Perito 2005), as opposed to the indigenous individuals and communities that are said to be secured. The rationality of ISAF and PRTs, the mode of reasoning and logic that frames their tasks and missions and underlies their principles, is one of aggregate and project, time and space-specific inputs and costs, and projected and actualized outputs and benefits (Abbaszadeh et al. 2008, 14–18). However, the way that costs and benefits are conceived of is reflective of *for whom* utility is sought. The narrative of utility maximization (via ISAF) seems to be limited to the international coalition and the cobweb of transnational actors present in Afghanistan – from private security contractors to large food corporations. NATO's framing of economic or security risk, a crucial analytical tool in an environment seen as unstable, ignores questions such as '*whose risk?*' or '*risk for whom?*', tacitly assuming that political subjects to be protected and shielded from peril and want are ISAF (and OEF) troops,

civilian government experts, Afghan government assets and officials, often leaving out even officials of international organizations, development, and aid workers (Perito 2005, 7, 9).

Efficiency in 'expanding stability' across Afghanistan or in implementing development projects has been often criticized as vague and lacking clear criteria and metrics (Cordesman 2011), but that does not rebut that ISAF operates on the basis of such notions – regardless of how imprecise they may appear. The calculus of efficiency has been translated into a system of quantitative indicators and targets, a methodology of 'ISAF's progress' (US Department of Defense 2012), and for all the criticism that can be raised against their elusiveness or exaggerated optimism, critical theory needs to go beyond the debate on how the system may be optimized. One of the questions it needs to explore is how ISAF's 'success' and 'benefits' are understood and distributed socially. Success according to whom and benefits for whom? The language of ISAF's and PRTs' mission, tasks, and principles reflects a self-enclosed system that takes into account the attitudes and needs of its target populations very generally, almost anecdotally. While it is not always clear what efficiency in security, development, and economic reforms means, it is a common trait of its discourse that it does not include societal, indigenous perceptions of safety in locales such as Shindand or Herat, or how ordinary people understand their own well-being. Security definitions, rarely if ever, include violent deaths of indigenous individuals and communal crime and, when they do, this variable is not central to the calculus of risk and ISAF's success, and features only sporadically and incompletely (US Department of Defense 2012, 31–32). NATO's under-standing of security in Afghanistan is narrowed down to a longitudinal and spatial calculus of the death toll among the coalition troops, and to the rates and counts of insurgency and terrorist attacks against them. The social cost of the Afghan war is framed as private to NATO and its allies, and its biopolitical focus is on the dead and injured from troop contributing nations. If there is a life count that affects the calculus of whether 'Afghanistan is worth it', it fails to factor in the lives and deaths of Afghans.

As far as economic reforms go, they rely on the portrayals of Afghanistan as a 'sub-subsistence economy' that suffers from opium and foreign aid dependency, 'market fragmentation', and the absence of an integrated and competitive national economy (Cordesman 2012b; Buddenberg and Byrd 2005). As rectifying these deficiencies in a market-driven way is taken for granted and assumed to be economically beneficial – as well as ethically justifiable – modes of production and trade are introduced and imposed on a level and scale that attempt to create a 'national economy' competitive internally and internationally. This is done without much regard to the realities of production and trade practices across villages and towns and many micro-communities that did not always pursue competitiveness in Kabul or on a 'national scale'. However, such practices have been dismissed as 'inefficient' and as reinforcing the problems of Afghanistan's putatively fragmented sub-subsistence economy. What goes unquestioned is the rationality that operates from a hierarchical-vertical birds-eye perspective that can conceive of a 'national economy' in the first place as it assumes that there should be one. The notion of market-oriented efficiency disregards what many studies have shown – that aspects of subsistence farming (a cornerstone of Afghanistan's pre-Soviet economy) tend to be understood as beneficial to the well-being of self-designated communities, and that introducing commercial farming practices abruptly can have adverse social effects (Mitchell 2002).

Apparatuses of security and surveillance

Second, institutions such as the Herat PRT and the local outposts of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are imposed on the indigenous people as distinct security and

surveillance apparatuses which Foucault understood as 'ensemble(s) of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' (Foucault 1977). In distinguishing security apparatuses from discipline and public law, Foucault suggested that their *differentia specifica* is that they 'respond to a reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality to which it responds – nullifies it, or limits, checks, or regulates it' (Foucault 2009, 69). He concluded that 'this regulation within the element of reality is fundamental in apparatuses of security' (Foucault 2009, 69). In that sense, PRTs and ANSF have not simply outlawed terrorism and insurgency mobilizing their resources to fight them in all-out wars. Those measures alone would not have much effect in absorbing the destructive power of the Taliban and the numerous warlords across Afghanistan. Instead, NATO and the government in Kabul recognized the pervasive presence of armed groups throughout the country, upon which they devised a multifaceted system embodied in PRTs and ANSF to weaken the insurgency.

First, they established a network of continuous surveillance of roads, marketplaces, private homes, mosques, schools, government offices, crops, and other venues of social circulation that could be made available to the insurgency as resources or chosen as targets of their attacks. In other words, besides ordinary citizens, the surveillance apparatus has covered individuals and groups of particular interest to NATO and Kabul, and, in addition to those with a criminal or militant past, it has included religious leaders, tribal elders, distinguished politicos, and oligarchs. They are typically framed as variably important to the expansion and preservation of 'stability', whereby the narrative of blurred lines between criminals, deserving individuals, US enemies, public officials, and 'power brokers' is reinforced in US and NATO officials' statements, and both public and classified documents (Eide 2012; Felbab-Brown 2013). Thus, the population monitored through PRTs and ANSF is understood as contingent and its behavior aleatory – oscillating between a political constraint, a threat, and an opportunity. NATO has deployed PRTs as acting apparatuses to work within this uncertainty and normalize it through an effective use of warlords as allies in maintaining security and suppressing poppy production, or by pitting warlords and/or local Taliban leaders against one another in order to control general levels of violence. To effectively work within the dynamics of violence, NATO has used PRTs and ANSF to oversee, monitor, and gather information about the general populations and governance structures of different villages, towns, and communities, as well as to gather intelligence about their specific pockets. To give but one example, an anonymous high-ranking US official at the Herat PRT described his mission from September 2004 onwards as 'watch[ing] the new governor' appointed after the removal of Ismael Khan from power in March that year (interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 22 March 2005). This, as he acknowledged, entailed monitoring the relationship between the new governor, other provincial government officials, the local military leaders, warlords, and Khan's close associates in Shindand and Herat, as well as unofficially mediating among them in situations of conflict (interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 22 March 2005).

Second, PRTs and ANSF are deployed to operate within the dynamics of instability and uncertainty by recruiting locals into the Afghan National Army and the Police. Thereby, NATO and the government in Kabul knowingly compete with the Taliban insurgency and local warlords for manpower in the recruitment process. NATO commanders and provincial governors do not always know the individual criminal or paramilitary histories of their recruits. However, they do know that a portion of what they have framed as an eligible population might have, in the past, engaged in practices incompatible with

NATO's goals in the country. Oftentimes, ANSF recruits or employees of private security companies sub-contracted by US companies include individuals who simultaneously pledge allegiance to a warlord or are insurgency fighters (McCain 2010). Having seen a number of iterations of deadly attacks, NATO commanders have learned that there is a probability that some ANSF recruits might be taking their weapons up against NATO or the central Afghan government. Even though some ANSF training programs were temporarily discontinued (US Department of Defense 2012, 37), the logic of how PRTs and ANSF engage with this probability and uncertainty, i.e., how they operate as security apparatuses, goes beyond such total solutions. The crux of their security functions is to learn about the profiles and patterns of the insurgent and criminal 'infiltration' into the ANSF (Katzman 2013), as well as to determine the root causes of why Afghan men join or actively support the Taliban insurgency and criminal gangs. This has, in turn, led to attempts to design broader counterterrorist and counterinsurgency strategies based on 'lessons learned' – and for lessons to be learned, a level of risk and uncertainty needs to be factored into the calculus. Certainly, the aleatory dynamics of the ANSF recruitment and training remain perilous for NATO and life threatening for its troops. However, as the risk is managed and governed through PRTs and the ANSF themselves, it becomes a calculated part of the broader strategy to weaken the insurgency in the long run. Thus, surveillance, intelligence gathering, and the more narrow functions of physical security provision and training become intertwined in a blend of applied counterinsurgency strategies and techniques that draw upon the knowledge generated about the eligible population of recruits.

Finally, scrutinizing the process of social legitimation of apparatuses such as PRTs is the key to understanding their continued operation. PRTs, one of the crucial structures in the external governance of Afghanistan, and the Afghan security forces that they train, were instituted after the fall of the Taliban government without a prior social consensus – formal or informal. Currently, important tools of PRTs' post-factum legitimation are financial incentives given to ANSF recruits and their families in the form of competitive wages. They are intended to convince them that the presence of the international coalition in the country is beneficial to their well-being and household economies, while also being an insurance policy against the locals' involvement with the insurgency, poppy production, or drug trafficking. Scholars, pundits, and journalists all too often replicate the discourse heard among the NATO member states' politicos on how individuals and communities financed by the United States and NATO end up turning against them (Felbab-Brown 2013, 218–219). That is why research anchored in critical (development) theory or anthropology has the potential to address the questions less heard. How is the well-being of ANSF recruits and their families affected by foreign funds funneled through ISAF without viable economic and financial alternatives in the long run? What social pressures and security risks do the recruits themselves and their families experience?

Conclusion

In governing local security in Herat and Shindand, ISAF and NATO have veiled coercive practices such as night raids and drone attacks by using financial incentives to build networks of opposition to the Taliban and disobedient warlords. Thereby, it is not the locals who have been being secured and protected – they have been framed as a population, a resource used to support NATO's counterinsurgency goals. The object of protection has been the Herat PRT itself and other NATO-supported institutions, as well as the outposts of the central government in the province.

In inviting a study that would unveil and scrutinize the controversies, contradictions, and social tensions of NATO's security and development practices, of its technology of external governance of Afghanistan, this article has suggested a broad twofold research agenda. First, it has been suggested that researching social spaces such as towns, villages, marketplaces, and neighborhoods beyond the realm of intergovernmental politics can lead to thick descriptions of how such places have been governed from *within* by agents thought of as *external*, yet increasingly merging with them. Second, the article has argued for a multifaceted study of instruments, strategies, and institutions of security governance, its conduct and social effects by deploying critical and Foucauldian concepts such as the *rationality* and *apparatuses* of power relations.

Notes

1. For an extensive example of this discourse, see Foreign Policy's discussion *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan* from 4 March 2013 at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/04/what_went_wrong?page=0,0.
2. For instance, George C. Marshall's Marcus Gauster (2008) ranked Herat as 'not calm and not stable', or coefficient 5, on his 1–10 instability scale of Afghan provinces.

Notes on contributor

Bojan Savić is a Research Fellow at Virginia Tech's School of Public and International Affairs in Alexandria, where he teaches courses on global governance, security, development, and nation building. His research examines governance discourses and practices, in particular NATO's security and development agenda in Afghanistan as embodied in Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

References

Abbaszadeh, Nima, Mark Crow, Marianne El-Khoury, Jonathan Gandomi, David Kuwayama, Christopher MacPherson, Meghan Nutting, Nealin Parker, and Taya Weiss. 2008. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons and Recommendations*. Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Willson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

Barthes, Roland. 1987. "Writing the Event." In *The Rustle of Language*, edited by Roland Barthes, 149–156. New York: Macmillan.

Buddenberg, Doris, and William A. Byrd. 2005. *Afghanistan's Drug Industry: Structure, Functioning, Dynamics and Implications for Counter-Narcotics Policy*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Cable 09KABUL159 US Embassy in Kabul. Herat: Development Needed in Shindand District. 2009. Accessed October 15, 2012. http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/01/09KABUL159.html

CALL (Center for Army Lessons Learned). 2007. *PRT Playbook: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: CALL (Center for Army Lessons Learned).

Cordesman, Anthony H. 2011. *Afghanistan and the Uncertain Metrics of Progress*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Cordesman, Anthony H. 2012a. *Afghanistan: The Death of a Strategy*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Cordesman, Anthony H. 2012b. *Afghanistan: The Uncertain Economics of Transition*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Eide, Kai. 2012. *Power Struggle Over Afghanistan: An Inside Look at What Went Wrong – And What We Can Do to Repair the Damage*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Felbab-Brown, Vanda. 2013. *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State Building on Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. "The Confession of the Flesh." In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, edited by Colin Gordon, 194–228. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 2009. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

GAO (United States Government Accountability Office). 2005. *Afghanistan Reconstruction*. Washington, DC: Diane Publishing.

Gauster, Marcus. 2008. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Innovative Instrument of International Crisis Management Being Put to the Test*. Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

Gregory, Derek. 2012. "Dis/Ordering the Orient." In *Orientalism and War*, edited by Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski, 151–176. London: C. Hurst & Co.

Jones, Seth G. 2013. *After the Withdrawal: A Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Joint Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa and Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific)*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Katzman, Kenneth. 2013. *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1969. *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

McCain, John. 2010. *Inquiry into the Role and Oversight of Private Security Contractors in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: Diane Publishing.

Mitchell, Timothy. 2002. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morris, Sharon, James Stephenson, Paul Ciminelli, Donald Muncy, Tod Wilson, and Al Nugent. 2006. *Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development.

Obama, Barack. 2009. "The Way Forward in Afghanistan." *The White House: President Barack Obama*. Accessed April 30, 2013. http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/defense/afghanistan

Perito, Robert M. 2005. *U. S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

Rynning, Sten. 2012. *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Szanya, Thomas S., Derek Eaton, James E. Barnett, Brooke Stearns Lawson, Terrence K. Kelly, and Zachary Haldeman. 2009. *Integrating Civilian Agencies in Stability Operations*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

US Department of Defense. 2012. *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: US Department of Defense.