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A Whole-of-Government Approach: Why Is It So Hard?

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A Whole-of-Government Approach: Why Is It So Hard?

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1. A whole of government approach will require longer timelines and processes based on the number of actors involved. Moreover, as no two crises are the same, there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution, but there is room for improved understanding for what each government department is responsible and the role it could play within any given crisis.

INTRODUCTION

2. Since the fall of Afghanistan and the subsequent evacuation, government committees have been called and reports have been written outlining ‘lessons learned’ that have amounted to much criticism of government action (or a perceived inaction). This paper will examine reports from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (U.S.), and Canada all of which call for a more systemic ‘whole of government’ approach with broad recommendations that amount to little more than ‘try harder, do better’. To criticize these governments without accounting for the inherent difficulties and obstacles that are built into the system in which they have to operate does a disservice and creates an unrealistic expectation for future action. While each report has criticism specific to its government’s approach, there are commonalities. Three criticisms will be further examined: a failure to anticipate the return of Taliban-rule to Afghanistan, a failure to plan, and a failure to facilitate financial aid to an Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

DISCUSSION

Foreseeing future events

3. The criticism of the UK foreign office was that “British Embassy staff in Kabul were overly focused on Kabul and should have had a better understanding of the whole country.”¹ By not travelling around the whole of Afghanistan, the report opined that officials were unable to have an informed picture of the threat and failed to “see how quickly things were moving while the Taliban reached Lashkar Gah, Kandahar and Herat. They were in their ivory tower.”² For the Americans, the criticism was particularly harsh:

“The Biden Administration squandered precious time, ignored intelligence and recommendations from people on the ground, and refused bipartisan support to give them the resources to succeed. In the process, the botched withdrawal has tarnished America’s reputation and credibility.”³

¹ “Afghanistan: UK Support for Aid Workers and the Afghan People,” House of Commons International Development Committee (House of Commons, March 4, 2022), <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9140/documents/159549/default/>, 9.

² *Ibid.*

³ “A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration’s Strategic Failures during the Afghanistan Evacuation,” United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Report (United States Senate, February 2022), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Risch%20Afghanistan%20Report%202022.pdf>, 33.

The Canadian report acknowledged that the government was “slow to react . . . despite clear and vocal calls that came from numerous experts, veterans, and non-governmental organizations.”⁴ It also states that “there were failures of intelligence”⁵ and that the “government ignored other calls for urgent action.”⁶ The report further called out the relationship between the Department of National Defence (DND) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC) stating that despite their “supposedly working together, both were completely taken by surprise about the declining situation the ground.”⁷

Look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow and which will not

4. Criticism of these countries inability to accurately predict the fall of the Afghan government and the Taliban resuming power ring hollow when one considers that there were varying predictions being made by different agencies, and other non-state actors who had their own opinions of what would happen with accompanying timelines. The US report acknowledged that “military commanders overestimated the will of the Afghan forces to fight for their own country and underestimated how much the American withdrawal would destroy their confidence.”⁸ The UK paper stated that government representatives in country needed to “take steps to better identify and assess the particular risks facing aid workers so that it can respond more effectively . . . staff in embassies in such countries should better communicate any signs of a potential deterioration in the security situation”⁹ Canada’s committee noted that it had received “conflicting information regarding whether the fall of Kabul-and, thus, Afghanistan-to the Taliban was the culmination of a political and security situation that was clearly unravelling, or a surprise.”¹⁰ As Avril Haines, the American director of national intelligence noted, “. . . this unfolded more quickly than we anticipated, including in the intelligence community.”¹¹ And while military officials, both current and former, have made public statements about an inability for governments to plan, it is noteworthy that some of the confusion can be attributed to the military:

. . . the can-do attitude of the military frequently got in the way of candid accurate assessments of how the Afghan security forces were doing. Though no one was blind to desertions or battlefield losses, American commanders given the task of training the Afghan military were reluctant to admit their efforts were failing.

⁴ “Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan: Responding to the Humanitarian Crisis and Helping People Reach Safety,” House of Commons (Canada House of Commons, June 2022), <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/AFGH/Reports/RP11826943/afghrp01/afghrp01-e.pdf> , 91-92.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration’s . . . , 12.

⁹ “Afghanistan: UK Support for Aid Workers and the Afghan People,” 10.

¹⁰ “Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan: . . . , 15.

¹¹ Julian E. Barnes, “Intelligence Agencies Did Not Predict Imminence of Afghan Collapse, Officials Say,” The New York Times (The New York Times, August 18, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/politics/afghanistan-intelligence-agencies.html>.

Even those in the military skeptical of the skills of the Afghan security forces believed they would continue to fight for a time after the Americans left.¹²

5. As with many events, the end result itself may have been foreseen (i.e. a return to Taliban rule), but the speed, scale and second-effects were missing; key elements when trying to accurately predict any event, let alone plan for it.

Lack of Planning

6. Lack of planning is a common criticism across all three government reports; specifically the executive branch that reportedly failed to adequately direct and coordinate government efforts throughout the evacuation. The UK report states that “any contingency plans that the Government had for evacuating aid workers were neither apparent to the aid sector nor scaled adequately.”¹³ For the Americans, they believed the Biden administration “failed to conduct worst case contingency planning in the months leading up to the U.S. military withdrawal.”¹⁴ The U.S. Senate report acknowledged that while blame could not be placed solely at the doorstep of one agency, “it is shared across the senior leadership of the Biden Administration who repeatedly failed to heed interagency warnings, refused to imagine worst-case scenarios, and neglected to coordinate with our partners and allies”¹⁵ The Canadian report stated that,

when it comes to Canada’s machinery of government, . . . Canada has the capacity to act and systems to coordinate efforts once a situation reaches a level of a full-fledged crisis. . . what was less clear is if the government is equipped, structured, and instructed to act in the same cohesive and timely manner in response to situations that require foresight and action over longer time horizons, before a worst-case scenario has taken hold.¹⁶

To Plan or Not to Plan

7. Frustrated with the amount of time it took all three governments to coordinate their own specific response, one has to consider that several other countries were also involved, e.g. NATO countries who had deployed personnel to Afghanistan and had relied upon Afghan nationals for assistance over the years. The evacuation of both foreign nationals and Afghan citizens was undertaken by a variety of different state actors, each of whom had its own domestic citizens, non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and UN bodies to which they had to listen and respond. One can quickly deduce that neither the UK, the US nor Canadian approach was done in isolation, involving only their own government. Several factors were unforeseen: the Afghan government’s decision to bar Afghan nationals without national identity cards from getting on

¹² Mark Mazzetti, Julian E. Barnes, and Adam Goldman, “Intelligence Warned of Afghan Military Collapse, despite Biden’s Assurances,” The New York Times (The New York Times, August 17, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/us/politics/afghanistan-biden-administration.html>.

¹³ “Afghanistan: UK Support for Aid Workers and the Afghan People,” 3.

¹⁴ “A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration’s . . . ,” 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan: . . . ,” 26.

planes out of fear of accelerating a ‘brain drain’;¹⁷ all countries would have access to only one functioning runway at one airport that was surrounded by Taliban forces. It was also just as unlikely to know exactly how many Afghan nationals would seek asylum, what would the criteria be and how could it be validated? How does one plan for something in a region where nothing had gone according to plan?

8. The reports often make contradictory recommendations. There are calls for a more systemic approach or as the Canadian report recommended “there is a need . . . for there to be one minister who has the pre-eminent authority and responsibility to manage across the departments that are involved in getting people to safety.”¹⁸ However, this flies in the face of how democracies work – they are known to be inefficient forms of governing. Since they seek broad collaboration and input, the more opinions to consider necessitates more time required. “In time of crisis, help can be delayed because policies and procedures are subjected” to a consultative process.¹⁹ The U.S. report stated,

a successful [non-combatant evacuation operation] NEO is only possible through a rigorous interagency policy coordination (IPC) process that aligns policy objectives with lines of effort across all U.S. government departments and agencies. At its best, a good IPC process ensures policy coherence alongside measurable outcomes on the ground, while incorporating feedback and de-conflicting views from different agencies.²⁰

9. How realistic is it to expect that any evacuation planning requiring consultation with so many different segments of society (federal government, international organizations, allies, charities / non-governmental organizations) residing in different countries, speaking different languages and in different time zones can be done? In addition, as the situation unfolded in Afghanistan, governments came under pressure to expand the criteria for those eligible to immigrate, which expanded the scope and scale of the evacuation. How would having a plan for 50 evacuees help when the reality was having to plan for an evacuation of more than 114,000²¹?

Financial Aid for a Taliban-Controlled country

10. The UK report is particularly harsh in its criticisms of its government’s failure to find ways to ensure the flow of money into Afghanistan to support humanitarian efforts after the Taliban returned to power. It condemned the UK government for being “far too slow to work with its international counterparts to find ways to help unblock the banking system in

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹ Louise Gaille, “12 Pros and Cons of Democracy,” Vittana.org, March 22, 2020, <https://vittana.org/12-pros-and-cons-of-democracy>.

²⁰ “A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration’s . . .”, 22.

²¹ Person, “Factbox: Evacuations from Afghanistan by Country,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, August 30, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/evacuations-afghanistan-by-country-2021-08-26/>.

Afghanistan”²² and cites this as a reason for the deteriorating humanitarian suffering. The report goes on to recommend that the UK government,

take more urgent steps to collaborate with its international counterparts, economists, representatives of the banking sector and aid organizations to find ways to help address more rapidly the banking crisis in Afghanistan to ease the humanitarian suffering of, and enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance to, the people of Afghanistan.²³

11. Criticism regarding the U.S. handling of financial aid came from the Centre for Strategic International Studies who stated the U.S. froze “aid money in ways that have crippled the Afghan economy and banking system, making the Afghan immediate economic crisis far worse. . . .”²⁴ For Canada, its actions were characterized as being “out of step”²⁵ with the UNSCR 2615 which had been passed to specifically address the giving of humanitarian aid to the Taliban government. UNSCR 2615, passed in December 2021, decided

that provision of humanitarian assistance . . . does not constitute a violation of paragraph 1 (a) of resolution 2255 (2015), and permits the processing of payments of funds, other financial assets, economic resources, and provision of goods and services needed to support humanitarian aid and delivery.²⁶

As the Committee pointed out, UNSCR 2615 did not mitigate other legal risk to which charities are held to account, namely the Canadian charities law and the Canadian Criminal Code.

Neither a borrower nor lender be

12. Once again, the difficulty of the task before the governments was complicated and multifaceted. Yes, Afghanistan was a country that had relied heavily on humanitarian aid from outside donors and there would still be a need for it once the Taliban took over. Governments are not immune to the suffering of people, but they had spent the better part of the previous 20 years putting checks and balances into place to ensure that regimes like the Taliban would not benefit from international aid. When the Taliban went from being a listed terrorist entity, as it is in Canada, to a government in power, it caused problems (a vast understatement).

13. The Canadian report highlighted that the relevant sections of Canada’s Criminal Code (e.g. terrorism) that had been drafted shortly after the 9/11 attacks were now interpreted in such a way that it “has created a situation where organizations cannot provide any form of indirect aid to the Taliban.”²⁷ While frustrating the efforts in providing aid to the Afghan population, in a democratic society such as Canada, the judiciary is independent; the Executive

²² “Afghanistan: UK Support for Aid Workers and the Afghan People,” 21.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, “Reshaping U.S. Aid to Afghanistan: The Challenge of Lasting Progress,” Reshaping U.S. Aid to Afghanistan: The Challenge of Lasting Progress (CSIS, February 23, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reshaping-us-aid-afghanistan-challenge-lasting-progress>.

²⁵ “Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan: . . .”, 38.

²⁶ S/RES/2615(2021) Security Council, United Nations Security Council (United Nations, December 22, 2021), <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/sres26152021>.

²⁷ “Honouring Canada’s Legacy in Afghanistan: . . .”, 39.

branch's only option is to draft new legislation, which in itself, takes time. As referenced in paragraph 10, the UK report recommended that its government work faster with a variety of actors to find solutions, but fails to consider that there are possibly hundreds if not thousands of people who would fit those descriptions. Finding the right people with the right set of expertise for any particular situation is not something one has on a shelf to dust off and use. When one has to rely on others from outside their organization, a commitment to relationship building and maintenance is required to ensure that the touch points one has developed are still in position. If those touchpoints have moved on, they need to then have connectivity with a willing substitute.

CONCLUSION

14. As stated earlier, while the three reports differ slightly in the focus of their criticisms, none provide any meaningful recommendations. All call for the broadening of referrals, consultations, partners, etc., whilst simultaneously streamlining processes, acting faster, and predicting outcomes earlier. Among the UK recommendations was for the government "to take a broader, more holistic view of its duty of care to people working in the aid sector."²⁸ This recommendation fails to account for the fact that the very reason governments rely on aid organizations is because aid organizations are often nimble and are able to do things that governments cannot. In addition, aid organizations often prefer to work without strong ties to a government with the goal of appearing impartial to gain the trust of the local population. Stronger ties between a government and an agency may be counterproductive in achieving that goal.

15. Another UK recommendation was that "government should have worked faster to disburse the UK aid it pledged to Afghanistan."²⁹ This type of recommendation shows little consideration or understanding of UK's role within the coalition, the UN and the broader international community. The UK was in no position to act unilaterally. The intervention into Afghanistan had been an international effort and it remained up to the international community to agree to a consensus on a way forward that was consistent with strategic objectives.

16. For the Canadian report, it made recommendations such as when another crisis looks to be emerging,

. . . the Government of Canada [should] quickly establish a structure of interdepartmental coordination, communication, and planning, as well as streamlined leadership and decision-making authority across departments, with one person responsible, to ensure a coherent and timely response. That, to facilitate such crisis management efforts in the future, the Government of Canada confirm the roles and responsibilities of each department and minister, as well as the way in which allied and partner governments and non-governmental actors are to be engaged.³⁰

²⁸ "Afghanistan: UK Support for Aid Workers and the Afghan People," 8.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

³⁰ "Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan: . . ., 27.

This presumes that every crisis will involve the same government departments. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that authorities for each government department and minister are already clearly outlined in existing legislation (usually in that which created the department). Writing new legislation to account for each new scenario is hardly a recipe for securing faster decision-making. Add to the fact that democracies are in a position to change leaders every four years and cabinet members are subject to shuffle and change; there will be a significant learning curve every time a crisis occurs depending on the nature, location and actors involved.

RECOMMENDATION

A foregone Conclusion

17. Reaching a consensus on the way forward using a ‘whole of government’ approach is going to take longer; there are several actors involved, each with a set of mandates and constraints. What is needed is for Cabinet ministers to make clear to their departments that working with other government departments during periods of non-crisis is required. That way, when a crisis does occur, there is already an informed understanding on which decision makers need to be at the table from the outset.

18. Dedicated assignments / exchanges between various departments year over year is one way to facilitate understanding and awareness. This type of exchange has several advantages: it allows for the transfer of skills and knowledge, offers a networking opportunity; boosts creativity; and provides a bigger perspective.³¹ This may lead to ‘better’ collaboration but is still unlikely to achieve the kind of timelines the critics aspire to see. It would help if the critics keep in mind that too effective a government is indicative of a dictatorship, not a democracy.

19. There are inefficiencies and delays with whole of government approaches, but to paraphrase former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, democracies are the worst form of government, except for all the others. Instead of conjuring up mythical leviathans to run things in times of crisis, setting and maintaining reasonable expectations and implementing dedicated assignments / exchanges would better equip governments for any number of scenarios.

³¹ Rajeshwari Ogirala, “Job Swapping at Work - 8 Fundamental Benefits. Learn How to Make It Effective,” Managers Orbit, March 12, 2018, <https://www.managersorbit.com/job-swapping-benefits/>.

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