

Analysis

The last man training

Transitioning Afghanistan

Michael Martin

The growing momentum around the United States 2014 timeline for withdrawal in Afghanistan has unified the ISAF/NATO community as they investigate the best method of creating capacity and transferring that capacity to Afghanistan. The process of transition is a nascent concept that has become the catch-all term to describe the process that will enable the international community to successfully exit Afghanistan. Australia is steadily progressing through the process of transition in Uruzgan Province and this experience provides some insight into lessons learnt that are readily applicable to the broader ISAF/NATO community. This paper will establish a working definition for transitions derived from the Australian transitional experience in Uruzgan, and a common lexicon relevant to this area. Finally, this paper will provide an insight into key principles, planning considerations, risks, and mitigating strategies related to transition in Afghanistan.

Intervention into weak and failing states is an evolving trend in the post-Cold War period. The Afghan intervention is indicative of these post-Cold War interventions that have a nation-building agenda and are readily entered into, but increasingly difficult to exit. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and NATO's strategy in Afghanistan highlights the complexity of working towards an operational-level, conditions-based transition when a strategic-level withdrawal timeline threatens the delicate and time consuming capacity building efforts that need to be undertaken for the process of transition to be successful. When NATO took over control in Afghanistan in August 2003, its mission was limited to reinforcing security and embarking on reconstruction activities in Kabul. However, the ISAF/NATO mission was expanded by the end of 2003 to include all of Afghanistan¹ and ISAF member states were given responsibility for the sub-national transition process as part of NATO's 'Phase IV' operations: the transitional phase.² Australia assumed responsibility for the process of transition in the conflict-ridden southern Uruzgan and has proved a steadfast ally to NATO through its continued support to the Afghan war effort as the leading non-NATO troop contributing country.

Transition in theory

Despite a void in the extant literature and existing military doctrine on executing the process of transition in a conflict affected society, transition has become popularised within the wider NATO community and is used by a variety of actors without a pragmatic understanding of what it is, what is required to achieve it, and how it can be achieved without risk of regression. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) and other Australian agencies conceptualised transition as a catch-all term to describe either the end state of a military operation or the point within an operation where military forces can move from one phase to another. The term transition has seen increased usage for many ADF operations in which an intervention has taken place to end conflict and rebuild a stable, sustainable state. Some examples include Australian interventions in Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands.

Transition: an idea whose time is yet to come?

While the notion of transition (*inteqal* in Pashtun) evokes images of smooth, linear change, the reality is more one of intermittent progress in one or more geographical regions and spheres of activity, and, potentially, regress in others.³ A transition is not just a single event that transpires at a particular moment in time and at a specific place; to the contrary, transitions are ongoing processes that can occur in a variety of geographical locations simultaneously within the territorial boundaries of a state. The duration of transitions can vary given that they are governed by a number of internal and external political, economic, security and social factors, in addition to the interactions between numerous actors and stakeholders.

The range of actors involved in transitions is diverse and can encompass any number of international, national, local and individual state and non-state actors. Although the term transition is widely used, there is no Australian definition for the process of transition in conflict affected societies, hence, the following definition is provided as a general definition:

“A transition is the progressive transfer of power, property and legitimacy for key tasks, functions and responsibilities from intervening actors to host nation actors required to achieve a durable level of capacity in the host nation.”

ISAF's transitional model

The model agreed upon and adopted to facilitate the assessment for *inteqal* is a gradual four-step process used by ISAF and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). The four steps include Support, Mentor, Enable, and Sustain. The process of transition is deemed to be an irreversible condition-based process that is undertaken from the bottom up through the transfer of security leads for specific geographic areas, institutions and functions. It is stated by ISAF that this will result in an irreversible transition.⁴

The purpose of Phase IV operations is to facilitate the incremental transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) first at the district level, then at the provincial level. However, it must be understood that no transition is irreversible. The act of transferring responsibility to the host nation can be reversed, particularly if the host nation lacks the necessary capacity and resilient institutions to effectively manage its responsibilities. The United Nations and Australia learned this painful lesson recently in Timor-Leste.

A lack of capacity, or a lack of understanding of the necessary capacity?

Australia and ISAF run the risk of transitioning to the ANSF despite an inadequate level of capacity being reached based on current progress.⁵ The question that needs to be asked is what type and level of capacity does the ANSF need to function effectively as a combat force against an insurgency throughout the transitional process, and at its conclusion? There are two different levels of capacity that need to be considered. The first must take into account the presence of foreign troops during the transition process and the deterrence factor that this has. There is a physical deterrence factor as foreign troops are a known quantity, however consideration must also be given to any capability that a host nation is utilising.

Does the ANSF expect to maintain any of these capabilities, or be able to access a similar capability in the future? What happens when the ANSF lose access to a particular capability as foreign troops reduce their footprint through each of the transitional phases?

The second question needs to grapple with the threat that the ANSF will face once transition is complete. What will the disposition of the insurgents be after 2014 and does the ANSF need to be capable of proactively targeting and destroying the insurgents, or does it need to be capable of effectively responding to the insurgents?

The ANSF is not the only weak link in the transition process in Uruzgan or the wider Afghanistan. The Provincial and District governments are weak and often corrupt, relying heavily on the ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) to ensure that essential services are delivered to the population and security is maintained. The ADF faces the risk of transitioning to GIROA despite an inadequate level of capacity being reached within the ANSF, exasperated by the looming strategic deadline of 2014. However, this is not a unique situation as all ISAF partners are facing similar problems with identifying and creating the necessary capacity in the ANSF and sub-national governments, particularly those in the more troubled southern provinces. The lack of capacity in the Afghan government and ANSF is a key concern of policy makers because it threatens to extend beyond the strategic timeline articulated by the US and slow down the transition process.

Furthermore, capacity building efforts need to work with the individuals and institutions that are present, rather than those that ISAF wish they had. Holding off on engagement and capacity building until the host institutions have established recognizable counterparts to the structures the international community is used to operating with, may not only delay engagement indefinitely, but may also miss the opportunity to co-opt existing influential figures, who are likely to turn to insurgents who may acknowledge their authority. This has been previously observed in Macedonia where an important lesson learnt was that creating plans is unproblematic, and for the international community almost a default position, but implementing them is a difficult proposition. Many think these plans also replicate a western approach to nation building as the intervening forces linger while local institutions are formed rather than become accustomed to local conditions.⁶

Selecting the beneficiaries of transition is likely to cause ripples in the relationship between the intervening forces and the host nation. The host nation's agendas and ISAF member states each with individual agendas will be competing directly against the political and military objectives of the intervention and transition phase itself. Determining how these agendas interconnect at the strategic and operational levels and work towards a single clearly defined end state is problematic. The government of the host nation will be viewing any potential selection of a beneficiary through a political and power lens. However, the intervening forces will likely view the selection of a potential beneficiary through a combination of lenses that incorporate domestic political considerations, international political considerations and the ability of the beneficiary to function effectively in a particular role. The real issue for ISAF and the ADF is figuring out how a compromise solution with a host nation government can be reached with the minimum degree of impact on bilateral and multilateral relationships.

Transition in practice: Afghanistan

Incremental handoffs

A series of incremental handoffs to the beneficiaries of a transition is envisioned to be the most effective way of transferring the responsibilities from ISAF to Afghanistan and managing issues relating to Afghan capacity. This requires a degree of consideration as, on the one hand, there is a need to ensure that the amount of responsibility transferred to Afghanistan does not exceed its current capability. It will take time for Afghanistan to develop a sophisticated level of competence and transferring too much responsibility too soon as a result of domestic or international political pressure may result in a failed transition.

However, on the other hand, there are political considerations when creating the timeframes for the series of incremental handoffs. The salient point to remember is that the level of power and responsibility handed over should be gradually increased to ensure that Afghanistan is able to remain functional throughout the transitional stages. One potential issue with a gradual transition such as district by district is that it can create tension between district level bureaucrats and Special Forces elements that are being bolstered to hasten transition and provincial or national level power holders who would see their influence reduced as district dependency on them decreases.

Measuring progress

Measuring progress is an important element of any post-Cold War intervention and should be conducted during each incremental handover that takes place in Afghanistan. It is possible to measure the deterrence effect ISAF is having by virtue of its presence in the different provinces and districts in Afghanistan. However, constructing measurements and finding indicators for this type of measurement would require a greater engagement by the ISAF member states on the ground to facilitate surveys of the population and undertake a deeper analysis of all available intelligence. Policy makers need to be prepared to risk losing operational momentum in order to step back and test the security environment and capacity of the ANSF after each of the incremental handoffs are completed. Testing the security environment would provide adequate proof of the capacity of the ANSF to adequately handle any situation that may arise.

Threat assessment and planning

The current assessments of threat used to determine host nation capacity for the transitional processes are solely based on the current assessed threat against ISAF. Yet, the insurgent threat will evolve in direct response to the situation on the ground as the different stages of transition change ISAF's force structure. The insurgents will reassess the way in which they engage with the ANSF as they adapt to the new force structures when ISAF is gradually removed from direct combat into positions of overwatch. Likely scenarios for each transitional phase and how an evolving Taliban threat could undermine, or negate ISAF's capacity building efforts should be identified.

Furthermore, the type of capacity which would be of the most utility for the ANSF through each of the transitional stages should be identified. Given the changing nature of the

insurgent threat, each stage of transition will likely result in a different type of threat emerging, and this evolving insurgent threat should drive the type of capacity that ISAF builds within the ANSF.

Ascertaining the triggers

Establishing the triggers for transition can become highly politicised as the need for clear progress in Afghanistan escalates and the strategic timeline looms in the not so distant future. Ascertaining the most appropriate triggers for transition and exit out of Afghanistan is not just a problem for Australia, but every ISAF member state. Of the three possible triggers for transition, utilising an Afghan capacity-based trigger for a transition to begin is the most practical of all the available triggers. If Afghanistan does not have the capacity to maintain control of the key tasks, functions and responsibilities, then there is little utility in undertaking a transition.

The use of a domestic political time frame to trigger a transition is another method that can be used by intervening forces. However, it is easily politicised and hijacked to serve domestic political needs of the intervening forces, not the needs of Afghanistan. This can arise when the government of the intervening forces loses its domestic political goodwill and is forced to execute the necessary transitions to facilitate an early exit from Afghanistan. This is a particularly ineffective method of undertaking transitions as Afghanistan is unlikely to be able to effectively deal with the responsibility thrust upon them.

The most prevalent method of transitioning at present is based on the third method of triggering a transition which is best described as 'ad-hoc'. The ad-hoc method is an accumulation of all the factors that coalesce at a particular point in time and a decision is made based on the existence of these factors to enact a transition. The justification for such a transition may be political, with reference to the domestic politics of the intervening forces at any point in time, or it may be a judgement call by a commander on the ground deciding that they believe this is the best time to transition based on their personal observations and assessment of the situation. The real issue with an ad-hoc method of triggering a transition is that it is not based on the ability of Afghanistan to deal with the consequences of transition. Ideally, the trigger selection points would be made in consultation with Afghanistan. However, at the early stages of planning when these decisions were made Afghanistan lacked the relevant capacity and expertise. The key challenge for ISAF now is determining how Afghanistan can be brought into the process and how it can make a meaningful contribution.

Transitional dividend and reinvestment

ISAF planning for reinvestment needs to take into account civilian counterparts that will continue to operate within the area being transitioned, and the likely impact that a reinvestment of military assets into a different geographical area may have on these civilian groups. While this will also impact the planning of any ISAF contingent that will be involved in the transitional process, there are immediate strategic consequences to any likely reinvestment. ISAF coalition partners will also need to make difficult decisions based on how

much risk they are willing to expose their military and civilians to once the transitional dividend is recognised and assets need to be moved.

Government agencies need to coordinate their activities during transition to ensure that their programs do not extend beyond the strategic timeline. Moreover, they need to guarantee their security while operating outside the wire. This could prove difficult as military forces will be continually reducing their footprint at the sub-national level and some countries will not operate in a kinetic environment without the support of their own military to assure their security.

Determining the end state

The end state is often seen as the end of a set of transitions; yet, an end state is also a *process* of transition.⁷ It is during the transition out of a district or province that the real test of the capacity of a host nation is conducted. Exit strategies are specifically designed transitions that enable intervening forces to exit from a geographical area, while ensuring that the host nation's government is not undermined by such an action. The host nation dynamics is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects to appreciate when trying to define the aim of any particular transition in a conflict affected society.

There are a number of different aspects of the host nation dynamics that will actively shape and determine the success of any form of intervention including; the societal structure, level of modernisation, existing political system(s) and, in some situations, its history. These dynamics will ultimately determine if the intervening forces are able to successfully execute a transition, or series of transitions to achieve a desired end state. The multinational nature of transitions can have both positive and negative consequences as the inclusion of so many actors and different political agendas creates a multifaceted situation. The host nation's priorities, in this case Afghanistan, for transition are not always going to align with ISAF's such as the current focus from ISAF on the security variables of transition, which neglects GIRoA's focus on governance.⁸

Conclusion

It is evident that the process of transition remains an embryonic idea that requires more engagement from the international community. Australia's experience in Uruzgan highlights an issue with NATO's definition of transition as an irreversible process and articulates an alternate definition, one that encapsulates the challenges faced by Australia while undertaking transition in Uruzgan. The challenges experienced by Australia are not unique and are applicable to the broader ISAF/NATO community, particularly if a successful transition process in Afghanistan is their key consideration. Contemplation of what type and level of capacity the ANSF needs to function effectively as a combat force against an insurgency throughout the transitional process, and at its conclusion should be paramount. Moreover, whatever level of capacity is determined to be necessary, there must be a way to accurately measure that capacity to enable an accurate measurement of progress to take place. This measurement of capacity will also enable forces to accurately assess when the triggers for transition, based on the capacity of the host nation, can be enacted. This removes the likelihood of ad hoc transitions taking place because of the lack of a viable alternative to commanders on the ground.

Michael Martin is a PhD candidate at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia.

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Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

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