



briefing

[#06/1]

Afghanistan: Toward counter-insurgency by other means

Ernie Regehr
January 2006

Election campaign attention to Canada's growing military commitment to Afghanistan did not get beyond the briefest controversy over whether Canada was abandoning its peacekeeping tradition in favour of war-fighting. That's a pity because a variation on that question will still need to be answered by the new Government: Is Canada going to Afghanistan to help protect vulnerable people and create security conditions conducive to humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, or are we entering the fight on one side of a civil war?

At issue is the military-centred counter-insurgency effort in Afghanistan. The Americans lead it under Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) but are anxious to hand it off to the UN-mandated and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The currently deploying Canadian battle group to Kandahar will initially come under OEF, but will shift to ISAF. Until now, ISAF has been careful not to get into a direct war with the insurgents, and as a British spokesman for ISAF recently told the *Washington Post*, ISAF will continue its focus on security patrols and protection functions rather than on pursuing and attacking insurgents: "If you think of a policeman, who is armed but he doesn't go out looking for a fight, that's along the lines we're looking at."

European NATO states seem determined not to budge on the issue. While the Dutch are now the core of European wariness, discontent with NATO's being called on to clean up after a war the Americans started is much broader.

Washington is obviously not pleased with ISAF's approach being adopted in the particularly unstable conditions around Kandahar, and, surprisingly, neither are some humanitarian agencies. Some NGOs say that if ISAF concentrates on patrols and protection operations, along with some humanitarian initiatives, and avoids aggressively pursuing the spoilers, the Taliban, warlords, and drug traffickers will continue to have the run of the countryside.

On the other hand, the mainly US OEF has actively taken the fight to the insurgency only to see it get worse. The effort to capture or kill insurgents at a faster rate than they can be recruited is generally not a winning strategy. Indeed, Canadian military officials have made the point that lethal force must be a last resort, repeating the familiar truism that "for every young man you kill, ten more are recruited."

In other words, four years of US-led counter-insurgency efforts in Afghanistan, some of them involving Canadian forces, should prompt Canadian military and peacebuilding planners to consider whether a combat-focused counter-insurgency effort actually enhances the security of people, or whether it does more to enflame the insurgency, as it has in Iraq, and drag the country back into escalating civil war. The Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty concluded that protection operations must "find tactics and strategies of military intervention that fill the current gulf between outdated concepts of peacekeeping [by which it meant monitoring ceasefires between belligerent

states] and full-scale military operations that may have deleterious impacts on civilians.”

While military operations to protect people certainly face heavily armed and unrestrained adversaries that, like the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, concentrate on attacks on civilians, they are analogous to policing in the sense that the armed forces are not employed to ‘win’ a conflict or defeat a regime or an insurgency. They are there to bring what protection they reasonably can to people in peril and to maintain some level of public safety while other reconstruction, peacebuilding, and diplomatic initiatives—through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, for example—pursue solutions to underlying problems. The point is not to abandon the effort to defeat the insurgency; the point is that to be successful it has to be done by other means.

A specialist in the failed Vietnam counter-insurgency effort made the same point about Iraq: “rather than focusing on killing insurgents,” the effort needs to be on providing security and opportunity to people in their homes and communities and thereby denying insurgents the popular support they need. Neither in Iraq nor Afghanistan can patrols provide security throughout the country. Rather, the focus must be on gradually expanding regions of relative stability.

As the benefits of gradually expanding security and extended public services and safety are felt, support for the insurgency will decline. This long-term strategy is measured in decades rather than years. Successful counter-insurgency is ultimately a political and social-economic struggle to build confidence in public institutions, to develop alternatives to the current dependence on opium production, and to marginalize the warlords and insurgents as spoilers that

increasingly are rejected and estranged from the local population.

Of course, arm-chair generals back in Canada should have the grace to acknowledge that in the field it won’t be as easy to distinguish between military-policing operations designed to protect communities, bring the perpetrators of violence to justice, and create space for peacebuilding activities, on the one hand, and counter-insurgency operations that put the population at unacceptable risk and threaten to drag the country back into civil war, on the other. But evidence suggests that military and diplomatic professionals should pursue and respect such a distinction.

Both courses of action come with risks—risks of failure, of course, and risks to those on the front lines. As Canada has tragically learned, in the age of suicide bombers security patrols are no less dangerous than search and destroy missions against insurgents. The question is: Which serves the objectives of the mission more effectively?

Canada acquired an obligation to the people of Afghanistan when it imprudently decided to join the United States in its 2001-2002 war to unseat the Afghan Government. Part of Canada’s current role in Kandahar is to facilitate the transition from OEF to ISAF. That should not simply mean the transfer of a military-centric counter-insurgency war from one operation to the other. The transition must also mean a review of strategy and focus —away from the self-defeating attempts to crush the insurgency, and toward enabling multi-dimensional peacebuilding efforts to deny it oxygen.

Ernie Regehr, O.C., is Senior Policy Advisor with Project Ploughshares.

Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches that works with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict.
“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4)