



briefing

[#06/5]

Afghanistan: From good intentions to sustainable solutions

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August 2006*

If good intentions and serious effort were what it takes, Afghanistan would be a peaceful democracy today, but war on the Taliban regime starting in 2001, followed by a half-decade of security, democratization, and reconstruction effort, have left a frayed and fading vision of sustainable peace. When citizens of Kabul rioted in the streets in June 2006, it was not from anger at an out-of-control American military truck that had smashed into a row of cars and killed several people. They were also giving voice to their own dashed hopes. Elections, humanitarian programs, the prominent presence of foreign troops, and a growing toll in military and civilian lives have not produced the political inclusion, jobs, housing, services, or security Afghans were expecting.

In Canada, echoes of those fading hopes are heard through growing doubts about the effectiveness of Canada's military-centric Afghanistan mission. Are the tragic sacrifices of Canadians leading to a defined and achievable outcome? Gwynne Dyer (2006) describes current international military efforts there as just one more installment in a series of failed "foreign invasions," all of which were "doomed to fail." In the Spring 2006 issue of *The Ploughshares Monitor* we noted the broad assessment that the security situation in Afghanistan was steadily deteriorating. In late July the UN Security Council (UN 2006b) also expressed concern over worsening violence in Afghanistan.

In a sense, the real surprise would be if recovery from decades of war and attempts to implement the ambitious Afghanistan Compact¹ were accomplished without a hitch in a matter of a few years. Significant setbacks in the short term are a given. The question is, will these setbacks be a spur to more effective effort or simply lead to the conclusion that in Afghanistan good governance ambitions have to be permanently abandoned in favour of a series of temporarily expedient and shifting protection contracts with an assortment of armed war lords, drug barons, gangsters, and criminals – an outcome that Dyer does not prescribe, but does predict.

There is no virtue in abandoning good intentions; neither is there virtue in persisting in efforts that are demonstrably failing. The President of CARE Canada (Watson 2006) put it succinctly: "The truth is that our strategy for reconstituting failed states – military intervention followed by democratic elections – is failing." As former Foreign Minister Axworthy put it in the wake of the deaths of four more Canadian soldiers, the Afghan mission was to be a careful mix of diplomacy, development, and defence – portrayed as a 3-D approach – but "now it has become one big 'D'" (Schiller 2006).

A thorough re-evaluation of Canada's role and objectives in Afghanistan is long overdue.

This summer's transfer of the command of security operations in the Kandahar region from the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) to the UN-mandated and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was the time for a thorough review of the military operation, but at the time Canadian military officials were insisting that the changes would have no impact on the way forces in the region would operate.

Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor, in response to questions from the NDP's Dawn Black, made the same point in the House in the debate before the May 17 vote: "There will not be one iota of change except that we will be under NATO command instead of Enduring Freedom. Nothing will change. We are following the same tactics. We are following NATO tactics." But, if the ISAF and OEF roles and tactics are indeed identical, why bother with ISAF in the first place?

The Parliamentary debate and resolution² earlier this year, despite the best efforts of some Members of Parliament, did not constitute a thorough review and did not settle anything about Canadian involvement. The vote in support of a two-year extension of Canada's military commitment was not a binding decision (the vote was advisory) and it certainly didn't answer questions about the effectiveness of that deployment. The Government itself still bears the responsibility to monitor the current deployment, to be clear about its objectives, tactics, and effectiveness, and to change or terminate the deployment if it is deemed to be ineffective in meeting the needs of Afghans. The Government has made a political commitment to keep troops in Afghanistan until early 2009, but even the Security Council's authorization for the International Security Assistance Force is extended only one year at a time.

The switch from pursuing the defence interests of the interveners (the formal mandate of OEF) to the security interests of the host population (the formal mandate of ISAF) suggests a switch in military focus away from the effort to seek out and drive insurgents from their strongholds, with civilians inevitably caught in the crossfire, and toward supporting Afghan security forces in areas where the

government already has a foothold and seeks to demonstrate the advantages of extending governmental authority. Furthermore, such security efforts must be linked to serious efforts to restore the legitimacy of the Afghan Government through an inclusive political process.

NATO representatives acknowledge that, quite apart from attacks on civilians, "just killing the Taliban is not really the game.... What we need to do is establish governance and move the matter of space and that is what ISAF intends to do.... A lot of these spaces are effectively ungoverned" (Fisher 2006). But the key to stabilizing such space is not military prowess but winning the support of the local population for the Government that is to occupy the space, as well as support for the domestic and foreign forces sent to patrol it. Yet, some reports claim that up to 80 percent of the local population in Helmand in southern Afghanistan support the Taliban (Suri 2006).

The Senlis Council of the UK reports that there has been a disintegration of the confidence that Afghans had in the international community and the central government, in part because "foreign troops are perceived of as uncaring towards the value of the lives of Afghan citizens, with an increasing number of cases of civilian deaths or injuries at the hands of the coalition military" (Suri 2006).

That lost confidence should frame the central question about Canada in Afghanistan. Are Canadian troops in Kandahar primarily to engage in a counter-insurgency war that tries to defeat insurgents by military means and accepts significant levels of "collateral damage"? Or are they there to patrol communities in which they are welcome and where they support conditions that allow Afghans to pursue reconstruction in relative safety – with added stabilization efforts that include things like training Afghan police and military forces and mine clearance? Canada's civilian leaders, unlike some NATO/ISAF officials, have to date not articulated any clear distinctions between a counter-insurgency war and the kind of military support to stabilization and policing efforts that ISAF calls for.

Extending the authority of the Afghan Government into areas where the Taliban are strong, as experts attest, depends much more on negotiations to draw them into an inclusive political process than on attacks to defeat them (Weera 2006b). For the Afghan Government's influence to be effectively expanded, it must be further legitimized through a negotiation and reconciliation process that draws in at least the moderate or willing elements of the Taliban and other spoilers, and through redoubled efforts to expand governmental services. Prime Minister Harper's assertion during the May 17 debate that "Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are not interested in peace" clearly needs some nuances to open the political process to Taliban Afghans prepared to enter it. Seddiq Weera (2006a), an Afghan who is a Senior Associate at the Centre for Peace Studies at McMaster University and a Senior Policy Advisor to the Minister of Education in Afghanistan, calls on Canada to fund and promote a renewed diplomatic process designed to bring all stakeholders to the table, and others call for more effective international support for reconstruction (Rashid 2006).

But current stabilization efforts are premised on reinforcing the current political order, an order regarded by many Afghanistan watchers as intrinsically unstable inasmuch as it attempts to reward one side in Afghanistan's longstanding civil war. What was the Northern Alliance now dominates, while the regions and ethnic communities broadly linked to the Taliban are sidelined. Weera (2006c) describes the latter Taliban-linked communities as having genuine grievances which need to be recognized and addressed through the political process. As long as they are excluded from the political process they will act as spoilers.

Peggy Mason (2006), a former Disarmament Ambassador for Canada and currently an instructor at the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, adds that for foreign military stabilization forces to be successful, the key players have to want peace more than war; if that is the case, "individual spoilers can be effectively isolated and dealt with." But if significant stakeholders believe that peace will leave them

indefinitely marginalized, they will prefer war to peace – and, as Dyer reminds us, Afghans wrote the book on the futility of trying to militarily defeat determined spoilers who mount armed insurgencies.

Even in his March 2006 report on Afghanistan (UN 2006a), UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that he is "increasingly concerned that the insecurity that is poisoning the lives of Afghans in several provinces of the country and that denies them the ability to enjoy the benefits of the peace process, is whittling away at the support for the institutions that have emerged under the Bonn process." Since then insecurity has escalated, including in hitherto stable parts of the country, bringing the legitimacy of the Government into growing disrepute. And as the legitimacy of the still fledgling Government falters, the legitimacy of the foreign troops that are there to support it and help extend its influence is obviously also brought into question.

The Harper Government owes it to the people of Canada as well as Afghanistan to undertake a thorough, dispassionate, and ongoing review of the effects of its military and other involvements in Afghanistan – in other words, to frankly measure success or failure in some reasonably transparent way. The context for evaluating military strategy and measuring its effectiveness must be the fundamental reality, now widely recognized, that there is no military solution available in Afghanistan.

The question is not whether a military-driven counter-insurgency strategy can work, or whether alternatives, such as strategies that focus on reconciliation, political inclusion, and protecting civilians, should be pursued. Conflict resolution, peacebuilding, reconstruction, and humanitarian support are not an alternative strategy; they must in fact be regarded as the only strategy. There is only one (complex) game in town – only one solution – and that involves attention to the resolution of the civil conflicts – the social, economic, and political grievances – that are ongoing and obviously predate the 2001 invasion. Civilian development needs to address economic issues, not the least being the opium trade that sustains much of the economy and much of the opposition to the current government,

and other roots of conflict and widespread public grievance. The foreign military and police presence must give priority to training security forces to meet the security needs of people and communities where the government already has a presence.

These are the clearly articulated aims of the Afghan Government's Action Plan for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation. The challenge of the international forces in Afghanistan is to find ways of effectively supporting Afghans so that they can go about implementing that Plan.

As we have noted before, Canada certainly took on a special responsibility to Afghanistan when our Government joined the ill-advised war to overthrow Afghanistan's Taliban government, but that doesn't mean persisting in a military effort that is not working. To be in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan means being unrelenting in the search for ways to effectively support their security and viability as a stable country that respects human rights. While Canada has made major non-military commitments to Afghanistan, the primary commitment has been through the Armed Forces and questions about the impact and effectiveness of that effort now warrant a thoroughgoing public examination.

In the long run Canada cannot allow the 2001 decision to join the war against the Taliban to indefinitely trump other serious military obligations that might emerge. The Darfur region of Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Middle East are just some of the places where the international community has an obligation to help create security and protect vulnerable people. Canada, with the international community, continues to have a responsibility to the people of Afghanistan. Canada, having made a major military effort, can continue to meet its obligations through ongoing civilian and reconstruction efforts. To the extent that external military forces continue to be necessary the burden must be broadly shared, meaning that other states will need to take their turn in Afghanistan. Whether Canada continues its military role there should depend on the true nature and effectiveness of the current effort.

Notes

1. "... to overcome the legacy of conflict in Afghanistan by setting conditions for sustainable economic growth and development; strengthening state institutions and civil society; removing remaining terrorist threats; meeting the challenge of counter-narcotics; rebuilding capacity and infrastructure; reducing poverty; and meeting basic human needs" (Afghanistan Compact 2006).
2. "That...the House support the government's two year extension of Canada's deployment of diplomatic, development, civilian police and military personnel in Afghanistan and the provision of funding and equipment for this extension."

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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)*