



briefing

[#08/1]

A Peace to Keep in Afghanistan

*Ernie Regehr
February 2008*

The final report of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan (Manley Panel) (2008) reinforced a prominent misperception in the current debate over the role of Canadian forces in Afghanistan, namely that "there is not yet a peace to keep in Afghanistan." In large areas of the country, essentially the northern half, there is indeed a peace to keep. To be sure, it is a fragile peace, but if it is not protected, built upon, and genuinely nurtured it will yet be lost.

Security assistance forces in the north are critical to maintaining conditions that are conducive to moving from a fragile to a durable peace. International forces deployed in the north, unlike those in the south, follow the model of peace support operations intended to protect people in their homes, communities, schools, and places of work. Thus these regions of the country, which are relatively free of the insurgency that increasingly plagues the south, have the opportunity to develop and advance the human security of Afghans. The peace support forces operate under a UN Chapter VII mandate and can certainly resort to lethal force, whatever national caveats may be in place. However, this use of force is clearly distinguishable from counterinsurgency combat that seeks to defeat the Taliban on their home ground in the south.

The harsh reality is that the counterinsurgency combat operations in the south are repeating history in their failure to stem, never mind defeat, the insurgency. The growing danger is that while the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and

NATO focus on the south, the security, reconstruction, and governance challenges in the north will be neglected to the point that declining northern confidence in local and national government will lead to collapse there as well.

Accordingly, the military choice facing Canada in Afghanistan is not between combat and no combat; it is between counterinsurgency warfare and Chapter VII peace support, or peacekeeping, operations.

The search for winning conditions

The Manley Panel clarified and actually generated consensus on at least one element of a coherent Afghanistan policy, namely, that Canada should not be putting its soldiers at major risk in support of a military strategy that stands little chance of succeeding. That may seem obvious enough, but given that Canada took on the Kandahar assignment largely out of a misguided desire to curry favour in Washington and without a thorough understanding of the situation in Afghanistan's south,¹ overt recognition of this key principle—that for the use of force to be appropriate or justified there must be a reasonable prospect for success—is significant.

In his Foreword to the report, Chairman John Manley puts it this way: "Our Panel concluded that the sacrifice of Canadian lives could only be justified if we and our allies and the Afghans share a coherent, comprehensive plan that can lead to success...."

The Manley Panel also accepts the troubling, but well-documented, truth that under present conditions the counterinsurgency effort is not succeeding and will continue to falter.² Prime Minister Stephen Harper also acknowledged this reality when he accepted the Panel's report. The Manley-Harper acknowledgment is more than the oft-repeated statement that the Afghan insurgency cannot be defeated by military means alone. Rather, it is a recognition that even in the context of a 3D strategy (defence, development, and diplomacy), or whole-of-government effort, the military component of the Kandahar mission should not be continued as is.

Where Manley and the Harper Government part company with many critics of the mission is in their assessment of what is required to make the military component of the mission successful.

The Manley-Harper formula is set out in the Panel's most discussed recommendation, and repeated in the resolution to extend the mission that was tabled in Parliament on February 8,³ that making the military mission in Kandahar effective and worth continuing will require 1,000 more soldiers from a partner country, as well as additional equipment, principally helicopters and drones.⁴ The Panel did not claim that these adjustments would produce an early defeat of the insurgency, but it argued that they would set the insurgency back enough so that, with further training of the Afghan National Army, by 2011 the Afghans would be in a position to take over the lead responsibility for military security operations from ISAF in Kandahar province.

Critics of the military counterinsurgency effort argue that increases in foreign forces and equipment will not break the back of the insurgency, pointing out that several years of counterinsurgency warfare have actually seen the insurgency steadily gain strength. Some conclude that it is therefore time to pull Canadian troops out of Afghanistan. However, others say that Canadian and ISAF troops need to refocus on a mission to protect and stabilize those parts of the country (largely in the north and west) that are not heavily challenged by the insurgency.

Using the language of the "clear, hold, and develop" strategy, it is logical to argue that priority should now be given to holding and maintaining security (which can involve the resort to lethal force) and developing those parts of the country that are largely clear of insurgency. Those areas are in danger of slipping out of control, like much of the south, if residents don't soon see major improvements in their security and wellbeing and the performance of their government. Thus there should be, as the Manley Panel also says, redoubled emphasis on security sector reform and training, especially of a national police force that respects basic rights and that serves the welfare of, and gains the confidence of, the people of Afghanistan. Accelerated development and reconstruction would not only enhance the welfare of Afghans, but would discourage support for insurgent forces.

Still losing the counterinsurgency war

Neither the Manley-Harper formula, which focuses on intensified efforts to militarily "clear" more parts of the country of Taliban insurgents, nor the alternative, which focuses more on holding and developing those parts of the country that are already cleared, can *guarantee* success in Afghanistan. Neither can assure gradual and irreversible progress toward the safer future that Afghans want and need. But if our responsibility in the Canadian political debate is to identify the course of action with the better chance of success, experience tells us that the odds do not favour the Manley-Harper formula.

Scholars who study post-WW II armed conflicts and their ultimate resolution draw some telling conclusions.⁵

Insurgencies are for the most part deeply rooted in grievance and a sense of exclusion, not in a detached or apolitical fanaticism. In other words, insurgents pursue deeply held goals from which they are not easily deflected. An insurgency gains genuine staying power when it is able to draw on a large or core ethnic group for support (in this case, the Pashtun communities) and when it can access an independent income source (poppies) and safe havens (Pakistan). The Manley Panel (p. 14) seems

to agree, acknowledging that “few counter-insurgencies in history have been won by foreign armies, particularly where the indigenous insurgents enjoy convenient sanctuary in a bordering country.”

International military support tends to do little to improve the host government’s chances of prevailing over the insurgents. Instead, such support serves primarily to prolong the war because, with external support, governments take longer to face or own up to the disturbing reality that they are not going to prevail militarily. Put another way, external support tends to delay government recognition of a hurting stalemate, but does not ultimately avoid it.

Thus, wars against insurgents tend to be long wars, especially if foreign forces are involved. And the longer such wars last the more likely it is that they will be stalemated and require a diplomatic solution. Hence, the classic objective of insurgency is durability, not military victory. By dragging out the fight—often committing heinous crimes in the process—insurgents gradually force the government under attack to recognize that it must finally negotiate with the very people it once described as lawless perpetrators of atrocities who are utterly unworthy of civil discourse. Insurgents win if they don’t lose; governments lose if they don’t win.

By this account, the Afghan Government and its ISAF partners are losing. When combat operations manage to clear the Taliban out of certain areas of Kandahar Province, for example, neither ISAF nor the Afghan security forces have the capacity to hold those areas in ways that ensure sufficiently sustainable security to undertake significant development. The Manley Panel (p. 12) puts it more delicately, but there is no escaping the point: “security generally has deteriorated in the South and East of Afghanistan, including Kandahar province where Canadian Forces are based, through 2006 and 2007.” This conclusion is reinforced in much more categorical terms by a host of other studies, including a recent US study by Co-Chairs General James L. Jones (Ret.) and Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering (Afghanistan Study Group 2008) and the UN Secretary-General’s 2007 report on Afghanistan.

The Manley Panel (p. 28) recognizes that “no insurgency—and certainly not the Afghan insurgency—can be defeated by military force alone. The Panel holds strongly that it is urgent to complete practical, significant development projects of immediate value to Afghans, while at the same time contributing to the capacity and legitimacy of Afghan government institutions.” It correctly emphasizes more immediate-impact reconstruction and better coordination of the counterinsurgency effort, but refuses to acknowledge the need for political attention to the conflicts and grievances that fuel the insurgency. In the end, it turns to an intensified military effort (p. 35): “a successful counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan requires more ISAF forces.”

Chapter VII peacekeeping

One of the more wrongheaded, but still ubiquitous, complaints voiced in the current Canadian debate over Afghanistan is that the Germans and others with forces in the north are not doing any “heavy lifting” and thus are both undermining the fight against the Taliban and—which some seem to find even more disturbing—putting the future of NATO in question. Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier echoed the point when he told CTV News on February 1 that, in military circles, the question is regularly asked: “Can you move troops from the rest of the country into the south where the need is most definite?”

This short-sighted approach fails to recognize that international forces in the north are mounting credible and essential operations that could well turn out to be key to the long-term viability of development and good governance in Afghanistan. To cut back forces in the north and redeploy them to the counterinsurgency war in the south, where suspicion of the Kabul Government runs highest, would not necessarily or not likely improve the chances of suppressing the insurgency, but would definitely put the stability of the north in further jeopardy.

In November 2007, the BBC reported that in the north the always present violent crime is now being

exacerbated by growing political attacks: “Fighters loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—a former mujahideen leader who is battling the Kabul government independently from the Taleban—are known to be active in Baghlan.” Another November report, from Radio Free Europe, describes northern militia leaders as “exploiting Kabul’s preoccupation with the violence-ridden south and east in order to stake claims to their old fiefdoms.” Some are rearming to prepare for what they fear may be another war with a resurgent Taliban. A new Oxfam International (2008) report on development and humanitarian priorities for Afghanistan also warns that the focus on the south is leading to neglect of the north and increasing the danger of spreading insecurity.

To preserve stability and advance human security in the north, stabilization forces must continue to contribute to conditions that are conducive to peacebuilding, that is, to reconstruction, disarmament, security sector reform, and accountable governance. The Manley Panel (p. 32) says that “there is not yet a peace to keep in Afghanistan,” but in fact there is a fragile peace in the north that must be nurtured and built up or it will be lost.

Only in the north is there currently a realistic prospect of gradually shifting security responsibility from ISAF to Afghan forces, but only with increased attention to training local police who will be trusted and to building the kind of economic and social conditions on the ground that are conducive to political stability. In the “clear, hold, and develop” framework, the 2001 invasion by US and northern Alliance forces was able to “clear” the north of the Taliban because the latter had few roots there. Since then the north has been “held” by a combination of Afghan (Government and militias) and ISAF troops. However, the “develop” phase (reconstruction and governance, in particular) has been chronically under-resourced. Governance reform has been resisted by the central government and local officials and politicians (and militia leaders) in attempts to preserve their own advantages in a still corrupt system.

Much of the current debate is about whether Canadian forces should be engaged in combat operations. The real choice, however, is between counterinsurgency combat and a genuine post-conflict peace support and security assistance operation designed to stabilize the regions already largely under Government control. Both counterinsurgency-clearing operations in Taliban-held regions and security patrols in government-held areas are UN Chapter VII (use of force) operations involving the resort to lethal force. The former, however, takes the fight to the Taliban without, as experience is showing, effectively suppressing the insurgency, while the latter focuses on providing security protection in communities where the insurgents are not present in the same way—even though the presence of spoilers is and will continue to be a challenge.

The explicit rejection of a combat role in Kandahar should be understood as a rejection of counterinsurgency combat in favour of security patrols consistent with peace support operations in post-conflict areas of the country. In Afghanistan the latter is not a force of Blue Helmets with binoculars and radios, but an armed security force with a mandate to protect people in their homes, communities, schools, and places of work.

So, the general priority in the north now should be to focus on the “hold” and “develop” tasks to ensure a stable future for Afghans there. International military forces help to “hold” the fragile peace through stabilization or peace support operations that can be appropriately called Chapter VII peacekeeping. Efforts to “develop” that fragile peace into a sustainable peace are usually called post-conflict peacebuilding. Now is definitely not the time to shift forces from the vital peace support role in the north to join the unsuccessful counter-insurgency war in the south

To “clear, hold, and develop” in the south

But what about “clear, hold, and develop” in the south? The Manley Panel (p. 32) says that ISAF is “using military force to suppress a very violent insurgency that threatens international peace and the

survival of an elected Afghan government.” It would be more accurate to say that ISAF is *trying* to suppress the insurgency and is not succeeding. Counterinsurgency warfare regularly engages in military “clearing” operations—tactical victories that actually turn out to be strategic setbacks. The Panel (p. 13) acknowledges that “the insurgents do not need to win many battles” to be successful in shaking public confidence, and the Secretary-General (UNSC 2007, p. 2, para. 5) reports “multiple military successes” that nevertheless are part of a steady decline in official and civil society access to south and southeastern Afghanistan.

The Manley Panel and the Government resolution seem to support the idea that, rather than concentrating only on counterinsurgency operations, Canadian forces should increasingly focus on training Afghan security forces. However, the Panel tends to define training as mentoring Afghan soldiers in counterinsurgency combat situations. Its report (p. 24) notes that the ISAF Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams link to Afghan National Army units to assist in planning and carrying out field operations; “in reality, training and mentoring Afghan forces means sometimes conducting combat operations with them” (p. 30). But in another context the Panel emphasizes the distinction between combat and training. It says (p. 34), for example, that the report’s recommendations, if adopted, “would reorient Canada’s military mission in Afghanistan more systematically from combat to the intensified training of the Afghan army and police.”

The latter understanding of training is the appropriate one. Serious training takes place initially in training academies and then field exercises and should prepare both the Afghan National Army and, more importantly, the Afghan National Police to maintain order in the context of a political accord that embraces all elements of Afghan society. The Manley Panel’s primary view of training, however, seems to be on-the-job training in counterinsurgency warfare, and the primary expectation seems to be, not to end the insurgency, but to leave minimally trained government forces to their fate once foreign forces deem them ready to take over the fight.

Richard Nixon called a similar strategy “vietnamization.” The effort is aimed, against all odds, at the military defeat of the insurgency, in the hope that Afghans rather than international forces will eventually do the fighting. In reality, it is a formula for long-term war and such a chronic loss of the state’s monopoly on the resort to force defines a failed state. The Panel (p. 32) says that “the Canadian combat mission should conclude when the Afghan National Army is ready to provide security in Kandahar province.” But the general strategy of transferring security responsibility to Afghan forces will be possible only if there is a new political accord that ends the insurgency and drastically reduces the government’s security requirements. Without that, Afghan forces cannot hope or afford to acquire the capacity to keep determined insurgents at bay.

The alternative to permanent war must be to replace the military counterinsurgency strategy with a political counterinsurgency strategy. In the south the “clear” element of the “clear, hold, and develop” strategy must become a political operation that addresses the conditions that fuel the insurgency through inclusive and participatory negotiations and social reconciliation that will become part of a comprehensive peace process.

From amnesty to a peace process

The Manley Panel (p. 15) frankly concludes that “popular confidence in the capacity of ISAF or Afghan authorities to protect the security of citizens has declined between 2005 and 2007.” This perception is widely shared. The panel sees this loss of confidence as a deepening military challenge, but in truth it is primarily a police, governance, and reconciliation challenge. The Panel (p. 17) indirectly acknowledges the policing challenge in its focus on training, and points to the governance challenge in its conclusion that “Afghan authorities—in the central government and in Afghanistan’s 34 provinces—will only earn legitimacy and public confidence by demonstrating an improved capacity for accountable, honest and effective governance.”

However, the Panel fails to face the core diplomatic challenge. It does say (p. 17) that “Canada should contribute to Afghanistan’s better governance by facilitating, where possible, the difficult process of reconciliation,” but it doesn’t mean by that a broad comprehensive peace process. Rather, it means “a negotiated coming-to-terms between the present Afghan political leadership and some adherents of the former Taliban regime who renounce terror and repression and adopt the norms and practices of democracy” (p. 17). This is essentially the amnesty program that the Afghan government has been promoting all along, and it falls rather drastically short of a comprehensive political process designed to bring all Afghans together.

The need for such a process is in fact recognized in many other quarters, notably in the UN Secretary-General’s report (UNSC 2007, p. 3, para. 9): “If the trends of the past two years [deteriorating security] are to be reversed ... a more comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy will be needed to reinforce political outreach to disaffected groups....” The Secretary-General (p. 17, para 75) does not discount the need for military action to protect communities from insurgent attacks, but points out that “different goals and movements within the insurgency present opportunities for political outreach and inclusion that must be seized.”

That is not code for giving in to the Taliban’s demands and accepting a return to extreme human rights violations. A comprehensive peace process is required to address the fundamental conflicts and grievances that remain unaddressed in Afghan society. This is a process to build a relationship of trust between the southern Pashtuns and the rest of the country, in the context of respect for fundamental rights and addressing the conflict that fuelled the civil war that predated the October 2001 US-led invasion and is still fuelling the insurgency today.

The Manley Panel (p. 12) does acknowledge that the Afghanistan conflict is linked to a fundamental national conflict that remains unresolved: “in many respects the conflict in Afghanistan is a continuation of almost three decades of war involving many of

the same players, not all of which are Taliban, resulting in a combination of anti-government insurgents and self-interested ‘spoilers’ who, for reasons of personal power or economic interests, have no desire to see rule of law or central authority spread.” But the Panel’s recommendations are entirely silent on how to address this longstanding political conflict. The text of the report (p. 17) does make an important statement about the need for reconciliation: “Eventually, achieving a genuine and stable peace in Afghanistan will necessitate a more thoroughgoing political and social reconciliation among Afghans themselves—citizens who have been divided for generations on differences of tribal, regional and political identity.” Unfortunately, this observation does not drive any of the recommendations.

The most urgent requirement is not only to end Canadian participation in the counterinsurgency war in the south but to persuade ISAF and NATO to change their present course, which is widely agreed to be failing and is once again confirming history’s lesson that entrenched insurgencies are not generally amenable to military defeat. To consolidate and keep the fragile peace that is now possible in areas of the country not engulfed by the insurgency, ISAF needs to focus its peace support operations on protecting Afghans in their homes and communities, preventing the spread of the insurgency, and strengthening efforts toward more effective governance and reconstruction. And then, of course, there is the preeminent need to accelerate diplomatic support for a comprehensive peace process to address the grievances and regional conditions that continue to drive the insurgency.

Notes

1. The point is made clearly by Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang in *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Viking Canada, 2007): “A new consensus, led by DND, was rapidly emerging in Ottawa: Canada, and in particular the Canadian Forces, needed to do something significant for Washington—something that the Pentagon really valued—to compensate for the refusal to participate

in Ballistic Missile Defence” (p. 181; see also pp. 181-188).

2. A new report of the Atlantic Council of the United States (chaired by retired Gen. James L. Jones) and a second report by the Afghanistan Study Group (co-chaired by Jones and former Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering).

3. On February 8, 2008, the Government’s “Motion on Afghanistan” called on the House of Commons to support “the continuation of Canada’s current responsibility for security in Kandahar beyond February 2009, to the end of 2011.”

4. The Panel includes a number of additional and major recommendations regarding development, reconstruction, diplomacy, and overall coordination of efforts.

5. See, for example, the *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2004). The focus of the entire issue is the duration and termination of civil war.

References

Afghan Study Group. 2008. *Revitalizing our Efforts, Rethinking our Strategy*. Center for the Study of the Presidency, January 30.

http://www.thepresidency.org/pubs/Afghan_Study_Group_final.pdf.

Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan [The Manley Panel]. 2008. Final report. <http://www.independent-panel-independant.ca/report-eng.html>.

Oxfam International. 2008. *Afghanistan: Development and Humanitarian Priorities*. January. http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/afghanistan_priorities.html.

UN Security Council. 2007. *The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security*. Report of the Secretary-General. September 21. A/62/345–S/2007/555. <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/sgrep07.htm>.

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

Project Ploughshares is the 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)