



The Ploughshares Monitor

Winter 2007, volume 28, no. 4

Failed states and the limits to force: The challenge of Afghanistan

By Ernie Regehr

In Ottawa on 1 November 2007, the North-South Institute launched the tenth edition of the Canadian Development Report, *Fragile States or Failing Development?* with a public panel. One of the panelists was Ernie Regehr of Project Ploughshares, who contributed a chapter to this report. What follows is a selection from his presentation at that panel.

From noninterference to non-indifference

At the start of this century the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union gave rise to the compelling idea that Africa was shifting from a collective policy of noninterference to one of non-indifference. There was to be a rejection of the OAU's strict stance against any external interference in the internal affairs of African states, and an end to the apparent collective indifference to the plight of vulnerable people within the walls of sovereign states that either could not or would not provide for their wellbeing.

At about that same time, the Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty was elaborating a similar shift from the primacy of sovereignty to the primacy of human security, asserting the international community's "responsibility to protect." The Commission tried to mitigate the danger of offering new excuses for foreign military interventions by proposing very high thresholds for such intervention. The basic framework was to place a high value on protecting people in peril while strongly cautioning against foreign intervention.

Much of the post-9/11 discourse essentially stands that framework on its head. In his introduction to the 2002 US National Security Strategy, President Bush (2002, p. 1) declares that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than...by failing ones." Similarly, in the 2007 Failed States Index produced by *Foreign Policy* journal and the Fund for Peace (2006, p. 1) the focus is not on the plight of the vulnerable within those failing states. Rather, "the threats of weak states...ripple far beyond their borders and endanger the development and security of nations that are their political and economic opposites."

In other words, if a primary assumption about failing states is that they threaten the security of distant powerful and stable states, it is likely that international responses to failed and failing

states will be filtered through the perceived security needs of the powerful rather than the welfare of the most vulnerable.

Attack on Afghanistan

Concern about the extraordinary human rights situation in Afghanistan preceded 11 September 2001, but when the United States, in the operation it called Enduring Freedom (OEF), first led the attack on Afghanistan, the formal mission was unambiguously the defence of the United States. However, the subsequent establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), supported by the UN Security Council, was based on another paradigm—one later elaborated in the Afghanistan Compact: “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.”

Both formal paradigms still operate in Afghanistan—and the success of neither is guaranteed.

An obviously warranted wariness about mandating foreign armies to intervene in sovereign states, even if the objective is human security, has led policymakers, at least those not linked to hegemonic interests, to emphasize armed force as a “last resort.” Of course, the resort to force must be heavily constrained, but there is something about the “last resort” formulation that tends to mythologize the utility of force: it posits force as a kind of external guarantor to be held in reserve until all other options are exhausted and failing. But the reality is that the impact of force is heavily shaped by its context and is least effective when all else is failing.

Furthermore, delays in careful and planned efforts to restore a state’s monopoly on force in the face of increasing state failure and escalating criminal and political violence serve primarily to ensure that when force is finally used it will not be effective. When increasingly chaotic conditions belatedly trigger the effort to restore order, there is a heightened risk of major clashes and a greater likelihood that nationalist sentiment against combat-intensive foreign military intervention will generate rather than quell insurgency.

Factors in managing force

The management of force is an inevitable part of peace support efforts, but the resort to force cannot overcome its political and social context. Appropriate and effective use of force to restore the state’s monopoly on force and to protect the vulnerable depends on some key contextual factors.

The legitimacy of the authority or order that is being supported

Foreign military forces deployed in support of governmental authorities and public institutions that do not continually earn the confidence of the majority of the population are experienced by residents as hostile efforts to entrench leaders that are not trusted and to strengthen institutions that are regarded by many as antithetical to the interests of their community.

Force methodology

Foreign forces that abandon restraint, do not respect the safety of civilians caught in the crossfire, and pursue counterinsurgency attacks on fellow citizens undermine not only support for foreign security forces but also support for the leadership and institutions that those forces are there to bolster.

Regional cooperation

External forces that do not have the cooperation of neighbours face ongoing malaise and even spreading armed conflict.

Energetic peacebuilding

Resort to force in the absence of measurable improvement in the daily lives of people becomes yet another adversity, the scourge of increased violence on a social and economic landscape that is already overwhelmed by trial and hardship.

Political consensus (or a credible process to pursue it)

Force in the absence of a credible political consensus regarding the new order becomes hostile action on one side of a civil war in which not only fanatics and extremists but also broad swaths of the affected public oppose foreign military action.

Political consensus in Afghanistan

Without a broad political consensus to support a new national order, the insertion of international military forces into any ongoing armed conflict risks prolonging and intensifying that conflict. Political consensus cannot be forged on the battlefield; that presumably is what Canadian, Afghan, and NATO leaders mean when they frankly agree that peace in Afghanistan will not be won by the military effort alone.

Prime Minister Harper made no reference to diplomacy or the exploration of peace and reconciliation needs when he listed the options that his Afghanistan Panel should consider, but there is growing evidence, and growing demand, that diplomacy become part of the core of the Afghanistan peace effort.

As the security situation continues to deteriorate, especially in the south, there is growing recognition that contemporary Afghanistan has yet to go through a comprehensive national peace and reconciliation process. All sectors of society and communities of interest must become engaged in building national institutions and practices that Afghans trust.

Such a process must

- be inclusive, involving all local stakeholders, but also regional actors;
- be a locally owned process that is broadly based and includes women and civil society, as well as political and military groupings;
- have international backing that lends legitimacy and authority to the process; and
- have an external facilitator.

Canada's role

It is not for those of us who view Afghanistan from afar, or even for those Canadians who view Afghanistan up close from the perspective of its battlefields, to define the details of this peace and reconciliation process. But we can confidently draw on past experience in other contexts to conclude that Canada should, at a minimum, become a tireless advocate for a comprehensive, inclusive peace process that tries to build the political consensus that is now clearly absent.

Current Canadian leadership has too often treated the very idea of negotiation as if it were a denigration of the military effort. But peace and reconciliation efforts are not tactics to assist a faltering military effort; rather, the military effort must be oriented to support an essential political peace process.

Such advocacy means encouraging our ISAF partners, the government of Afghanistan, and the key regional actors to continue in those talks and contacts that are already underway, but also to broaden such efforts. Canada can also provide technical and financial resources to facilitate initiatives and to ensure that Afghan women and civil society have the resources to participate effectively.

We have to be appropriately modest about what we can do, but a fundamental and urgent requirement is that we infuse the extraordinary commitment that Canada has made to Afghanistan with a palpable energy directed at supporting Afghans in the pursuit of a new political order that earns the confidence of Afghans in all parts of the country.

References

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Project Ploughshares
57 Erb Street West
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 6C2
Tel (519) 888-6541 Fax (519) 888-0018 Email: plough@ploughshares.ca