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Why is Canada in Afghanistan?

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The current deployment of Canadian Forces to Afghanistan continues a major military, humanitarian, and diplomatic commitment to that country. The grave dangers faced and the extraordinary commitment required are emphatically and sadly confirmed by serious injuries and the deaths, so far, of eleven Canadians—one diplomat and ten soldiers. Canada's obligations to the people of Afghanistan became non-retractable when it joined in the 2001 US war to overthrow the Taliban government. The regime was quickly destroyed, but four years later the war continues and there remains an increasingly difficult, dangerous, and far from completed effort to establish a new and more just democratic order in Afghanistan. In the context of an ongoing international military and peacebuilding presence in Afghanistan, with Canadian involvement in both, experience suggests that a military-centred counterinsurgency campaign will not bring the protection and stability that the country desperately needs.

Losing the “war” on terror

International commentary on Afghanistan is now in broad agreement that the “war” against the insurgents is losing ground and is probably not winnable as it is now being prosecuted. At the same time, the belief persists that, quite apart from the counterinsurgency effort, an ongoing foreign military presence there will be required for the foreseeable future.

Many, including Project Ploughshares and the Canadian churches, opposed the 2001 war on Afghanistan in response to the September 11 attacks on the United States. While we agreed that a focused effort against terrorism was required, we rejected the idea that a literal “war” on terror would be effective. Indeed, we argued that the military eviction of the Taliban was likely to be as successful as the 1980s eviction of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The Soviets fled, but there was no peace in their wake. The almost limitless quantity of small arms and light weapons that had been supplied through Pakistan continued to fuel civil war in Afghanistan. Uncritical US support for the anti-Soviet mujahadeen rebels spawned the Taliban. And the same Osama bin Laden who was embraced by the US as an ally in the fight against the Soviets is now an elusive, if only erratically pursued, fugitive.

The all-out American attacks on Afghanistan in 2001 and early 2002, which deposed the Taliban with such efficiency, have proven much less effective in defeating an internationalized al-Qaeda or in supporting the new government and ending the ongoing Taliban insurgency. Once again, Afghanistan has been flooded with small arms and light weapons. Despite weapons collection programs “the country remains one of the largest open warehouses of small arms in the world” (Sedra and Middlebrook 2005, 13). Warlords use their private armies for criminal trafficking in drugs, timber, petroleum, and other commodities (Sedra and Middlebrook 2005). The opium trade retains its central role. Narcotics trafficking accounts for half of the country’s GDP, and key figures in the industry also figure prominently in the national and provincial governments (Moreau and Yousafzai 2006).

By most accounts, the security situation is steadily deteriorating. Suicide bombers, as Canadians are tragically learning, increasingly attack foreign troops as well as expatriate aid and construction workers. Afghan police and government facilities and officials continue to be prominent targets. While there is typically a lull in attacks over the winter, indications are that next spring and summer the attacks by Taliban and al-Qaeda forces could become more intense with the benefit of the new and more sophisticated weapons they are now acquiring through new smuggling routes (Rogers 2005).

Even in the capital, Kabul, instability prevails. Foreign forces patrol the city in heavily armored convoys and “Nato and US commanders as well as the Afghan Government shelter behind high walls and bombproof barriers that look more like the Green Zone in Baghdad by the week” (Baker 2005).

In August 2005 the UN Secretary-General (para. 61) reported to the Security Council that, since his last report, “the level of insurgency in the country has risen, as has the sophistication of the insurgents’ weaponry. Their tactics are more brutal and effective and have been expanded to target community leaders. They are better organized, better funded and more clearly aim to destabilize the Afghan political transition.”

Afghanistan could once again disintegrate into a society ripe for extremist takeover, a welcome home for international terrorists, and a place where the people continue to be extraordinarily vulnerable. At the same time, while the Karzai government may be compromised, it has earned legitimacy through an electoral process that, while also compromised, is better than any other in recent Afghan history. The welfare of Afghans would be served if the current government’s reach could be extended to the entire country, the rule of law advanced, the economy developed to depend on legitimate (non-drug) production, and that government confirmed or replaced through an electoral process.

Prominent non-governmental and UN voices say this is unlikely to happen without ongoing external support. “The viability of the Afghan government continues to depend on the presence of foreign troops,” say two expert observers (Sedra and Middlebrook 2005, 19). The Secretary-General (2005, para. 82) also insists that progress on security and governance “requires military action, carefully calibrated to ensure that it does not

add to the population's suffering." Security also requires much more than military action, of course, and certainly not all military action is carefully planned or executed with the safety of Afghans the priority. Despite this, most observers insist and a December 2005 poll (Charney) appears to confirm that the Afghan population continues to welcome and plead for a larger and more effective foreign military presence.

Finishing what we started

It doesn't follow, however, that Afghanistan should necessarily have become a Canadian security priority. The Democratic Republic of Congo and Northern Uganda remain among the world's most extensive and urgent humanitarian crises. In the Darfur region of Sudan, ongoing instability is forcing humanitarian agencies to abandon desperately vulnerable people. In Côte d'Ivoire the UN peacekeeping force needs thousands of reinforcements if elections are to be held and a resumption of major conflict averted.

Explanations for Canada's priority involvement in Afghanistan have ranged from giving NATO a 21st-century purpose (McCallum 2003), to repairing Canada-US relations (Wattie 2005), to advancing neo-imperialist agendas (Podur and Kolhatkar 2005; Jenkins 2006). A serious purpose is to be found in the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) doctrine that Canada has been promoting internationally, and the "failed states" discussion in the 2005 International Policy Statement. Former Defence Minister Bill Graham (2005) made the case as clearly and succinctly as anyone: "We must address [failed states like Afghanistan] not only because of the geopolitical instability they generate as breeding grounds for terrorism and international crime..., but also because the suffering and denial of human rights challenges basic Canadian values."

The only justification for sending young Canadians into harm's way is the pursuit of peace and security in response to our sense of a common humanity that makes the plight of others our own. That still doesn't answer why, in a world of extraordinary need and limited capacity, Canada chooses to make Afghanistan a priority.

In fact, Canada must continue to respond to Afghanistan's needs, in large part because, having gone there in 2001, we cannot now escape our self-made Afghan dilemma. On the one hand there is no clear, persuasive rationale for Canada to give Afghanistan priority over other more devastating crises; on the other hand, if all others were also to question the priority accorded to Afghanistan and precipitate a wholesale withdrawal, it would condemn Afghanistan to the worst kind of repetition of history. After helping to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the West left a devastated Afghanistan to fend for itself and fall prey to the catastrophic ascendancy of the Taliban. The Afghans have paid a terrible price, and part of the cost was transferred to America when the al-Qaeda leadership that the Taliban had been harbouring launched their September 11 attacks on the United States.

The international community has a long-term obligation to Afghanistan. We especially need to finish what we started when we removed its government as a result of the US-led 2001 attack (and saying "we" is entirely appropriate—the United States led the attack but

did so with the explicit support of Canada and other NATO countries and the implicit support of the UN—see sidebar). Expectations have been created. Canada's obligation is not to the Bush Administration's ill-conceived and ineffective "war on terror." Our obligation is to the people of Afghanistan. We have a responsibility to try to help authorities and communities bring protection to people whose government we helped to destroy. For the current commitment and deployment, the question is not whether Canada should be in Afghanistan, but what Canadians should be doing there.

Doing counterinsurgency by other means

While the need and mandate (see sidebar) for foreign involvement are clear, the nature of that involvement, in the words of the UN Secretary General (2005, para. 82), needs to be "carefully calibrated." Is Canada going there to protect vulnerable people and to advance security conditions conducive to humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, or are we entering the fight on one side of a civil war? Until now, the UN-mandated and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has not joined the counterinsurgency war, and a British spokesman for ISAF, Maj. Andrew Elmes, told the *Washington Post* that ISAF would continue to focus on security patrols and protection functions rather than 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" (Witte 2006).

At the same time, humanitarian agencies are among those that question the wisdom of confining ISAF troops to security patrols in urban centres and performing some humanitarian tasks within the context of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) (McHugh and Gostelow 2004). If ISAF concentrates on policing that doesn't aggressively pursue the spoilers, say some NGOs, the Taliban, warlords, and drug traffickers will continue to have the run of the countryside.

On the other hand, US military forces, while also establishing Provincial Reconstruction Teams, have been actively taking the fight to the insurgency, only to see it prosper. Efforts that try to capture or kill insurgents at a faster rate than they can be recruited are a proven folly. In a recent discussion of Canada's Afghanistan mission, a Canadian military official emphasized that lethal force must be a last resort, repeating the familiar truism that "for every young man you kill, ten more are recruited."

The PRTs are themselves widely suspect in the humanitarian and reconstruction community. The objective of integrating security, diplomatic, and reconstruction efforts is laudable, but humanitarian effort, and the security of humanitarian workers, can actually be undermined when humanitarian and military objectives are conflated. Some NGOs suggest that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams be renamed for what they really are, Provincial Stabilization Teams, which focus on security and policing roles, and that the reconstruction efforts be left to civilian agencies accomplished in those tasks.

It is important that the results of four years of counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan, some involving Canadian forces, lead Canadian military and peacebuilding planners to ask a fundamental question: Does a combat-focused counterinsurgency effort enhance the

security of people in their homes and communities, or does it enflame the insurgency, as it has in Iraq, and threaten to drag the country back into an escalating civil war?

The essence of protection and stability operations, according to the Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001), is to be found in “the challenge...to 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” (p. 5). It makes the point that “military intervention [for protection purposes] involves a form of military action significantly more narrowly focused and targeted than all out warfighting” (p. 37), and that it is designed “to protect populations in that state from being harassed, persecuted or killed” (p. 63).

Such intervention, as the British ISAF spokesman put it, is broadly analogous to policing, although not necessarily in the level of force required, since it is inevitable that in some instances protection forces will face heavily armed and unrestrained adversaries that, like the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, attack mainly civilians. But military operations to protect people from such attacks 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 protect people in peril and to maintain some level of public safety, in strict compliance, it should go without saying, with international humanitarian and human rights law, while other reconstruction and peacebuilding initiatives pursue solutions to underlying problems.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, a specialist in the failed Vietnam counterinsurgency effort made the same point about Iraq: “Rather than focusing on killing insurgents, [US and Iraqi Government forces] should concentrate on providing security and opportunity to the Iraqi people, thereby denying insurgents the popular support they need. Since the U.S. and Iraqi armies cannot guarantee security to all of Iraq simultaneously, they should start by focusing on certain key areas and then, over time, broadening the effort—hence the image of an expanding oil spot” (Krepinevich 2005, 1).

Key to spreading the “oil spot” of relative stability in Afghanistan is the continuing effort to undermine popular support for the insurgency and to demonstrate the benefits of gradually extended public services and safety in the country. It is a long-term strategy to be measured in decades rather than years, with a focus on the progressive reduction of the military presence as peacebuilding efforts take hold. Successful counterinsurgency is ultimately a political struggle to build confidence in public institutions and to marginalize the warlords and insurgents as spoilers that increasingly are rejected and estranged from the local population (Millen 2005).

Of course, armchair generals cocooned in the safety of Canada should have the grace to acknowledge that conditions on the ground are apt to be rather more complicated than they appear from afar. In the field it won’t be easy to make clear the distinction between military-policing operations, designed to protect communities and to bring the perpetrators of violence to justice, and all-out counterinsurgency operations, which put

the population at unacceptable risk and threaten to drag the country back into civil war. But it is a distinction that military and diplomatic professionals should be encouraged to pursue and respect.

Part of Canada's military role in Kandahar is to facilitate the transition from the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom to the NATO-led and UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force. That should not simply mean the transfer of a military-centric counterinsurgency 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 multi-dimensional peacebuilding efforts to choke off its oxygen.

In the long run, that means the foreign presence in Afghanistan must come to focus overwhelmingly on humanitarian assistance and, especially, reconstruction and peacebuilding wherever the security situation permits such action. When the current Canadian military commitment ends in February 2007, the humanitarian/peacebuilding obligation will certainly not have ended, and whether a continued Canadian military presence will then be necessary and effective for enabling those peacebuilding efforts will be a question for careful public and parliamentary discernment.

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