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A peace to keep in Afghanistan

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The January–March 2008 parliamentary effort at bipartisan cooperation in reshaping the Canadian mission in Afghanistan held the possibility of pursuing a genuinely national consensus that spans a broad political spectrum and is rooted in proven peacebuilding and counterinsurgency realities. However, the Afghanistan motion passed by Parliament in March, modeled on the Liberal proposal but with a few significant changes, was weakened by three omissions.

First, while the motion does change the focus of the military mission, the Liberals and Conservatives have both made it clear that combat decisions will be left to local commanders on the ground. That raises the question of how Parliament, the civilian authority to which the military must obviously remain beholden, can ensure that tactical military engagement decisions made by commanders in the field actually reflect a changed strategic direction for the mission. Canadian military forces are henceforth to focus on “training the Afghan National Security Forces” and “providing security for reconstruction and development efforts,” including the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar (House of Commons 2008). But the extent to which the mission will in practice switch from search-and-destroy counterinsurgency combat cannot be clear in the absence of new rules of engagement for Canadian forces.

Second, the motion in Parliament does not acknowledge that the NATO counterinsurgency war in the south is in serious trouble and thus it fails to call for a much needed review of NATO strategy. Instead, the Parliamentary motion focuses on ensuring that forces other than Canadian carry out the failing strategy.

Third, there is no acknowledgement of the need for dedicated diplomatic and reconciliation initiatives designed to address the grievances and conflicting interests that fuel the insurgency and continue to generate support for it in the Pashtun-dominated south and in Pakistan.

The central military issue that has driven the Canadian political debate and the differing Afghanistan policies of the Conservatives, Liberals, Bloc Québécois, and the NDP has in a sense been about the choice between intensifying the southern war against the Taliban, on the one hand, and strengthening peace consolidation efforts in more stable parts of the country, on the other.

The Conservative Government, in its initial response to the recommendations of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan (Manley Panel), focused on making the counterinsurgency war more effective. That led to the central demand for another thousand soldiers along with helicopters and drones. But security conditions in the south in particular have been deteriorating for some time, and inasmuch as the Liberals, Bloc, and NDP all were calling for an end to a Canadian combat role, the Conservatives and even Canadian military commanders have become increasingly interested in shifting combat responsibilities to Afghan forces—hence the focus on training, which was also advocated by the Manley Panel.

The Liberals, working from the principle of burden sharing, did not explicitly call for an end to the military counterinsurgency effort, but insisted that other NATO or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) contingents and the Afghans do the war-fighting after February 2009. Thus the Liberal proposal did not echo the Manley Panel call for another 1,000 soldiers—a figure that they say has no obvious strategic or tactical rationale—but called on NATO to provide “sufficient troops to rotate into Kandahar...to allow Canadian troops to be deployed pursuant to the mission priorities of training and reconstruction” (Liberal Party of Canada 2008). The emphasis, in other words, was on facilitating the replacement of Canadians now available for a counterinsurgency combat role and thus releasing Canada to focus on training and providing security for reconstruction and development.

The NDP has always wanted NATO/ISAF to end the search-and-destroy counterinsurgency operations and so has called for Canada to withdraw its troops from a combat role in favour of a civilian-focused effort in support of reconstruction and related peacebuilding efforts. Some members of the NDP have been open to an ongoing military role for Canada as long as it would be oriented toward supporting reconstruction with a strong mandate to protect civilians.

When the Conservatives modified the Liberal proposal to produce what they hoped would be a consensus approach (Government of Canada 2008), they rejected the language that implied the replacement of Canadians. Instead, the motion repeated a call for a thousand additional troops but said nothing about the role of those new troops in facilitating a shift in the responsibilities of the Canadians in Kandahar to provide security for reconstruction. When that absence of direction is coupled with the insistence by both the Conservatives and the Liberals that operational decisions in the field be left to the military, it is not clear to what extent the motion actually mandates a new approach.

Chapter VII peacekeeping

That lack of clarity is embedded in the report of the Manley Panel (2008). It reinforced the prominent misperception that “there is not yet a peace to keep in Afghanistan,” leading to its conclusion that the only credible role for the Canadian military is counterinsurgency combat and training Afghans for the same. Furthermore, it went on to define training to include the mentoring of Afghan national army personnel in combat.

In reality, however, there is a peace to keep in much of Afghanistan. It is a fragile peace, to be sure, and the danger is that it will yet be lost if it is not protected and consolidated. In areas of the country where the insurgency is not present, mainly the north, there are growing reports of deteriorating security conditions that threaten stabilization there. Chronic criminal violence is exacerbated by spreading political clashes as militia leaders take advantage of Kabul's and the international community's preoccupation with the war in the south to reassert their extra-constitutional presence and influence.

Consolidating security and advancing well-being in areas of the country nominally under Government control are critical to prevent the civil war from spreading. So, what is needed is ongoing security assistance to protect reconstruction outside the current war zones and to train and reform Afghan forces—not for counterinsurgency war, but to provide security services that win the trust of local communities.

Indeed, it is this dual requirement of enhancing security in the areas outside the southern war zones and training Afghans in that role that demands a clear political directive to the military to mount a peace support operation rather than to engage in search-and-destroy counterinsurgency warfare and to support training that is not defined as mentoring Afghans in counterinsurgency. The parliamentary motion (Government of Canada 2008) is helpful in prescribing, in its preamble, a much broader notion of training. It argues that if Afghanistan is to become “a country that is better governed, more peaceful and more secure” it will be “essential to assist the people of Afghanistan to have properly trained, equipped and paid members of the four pillars of their security apparatus: the army, the police, the judicial system and the corrections system.”

Stationing security assistance forces outside the areas of current armed combat, notably in the north, is critical in 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, are able to follow the model of peace support operations intended to protect people in their homes, communities, schools, and places of work. Peace support forces in Afghanistan 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 search out and defeat the Taliban on their home ground in the south. 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 Manley Panel insisted that “transferring responsibility for security to Afghan authorities is the ultimate objective” (p. 24). To the extent that this is an effort to get Afghans to take over the faltering war against insurgents it is reminiscent of Richard Nixon's strategy of “vietnamization”—the outcome of which is not a compelling precedent. The effort to train Afghans to militarily defeat an insurgency that we are repeatedly told cannot be defeated on the battlefield is, in reality, a formula for endless war—i.e., ongoing state failure.

It must be said that Kandahar province is likely to be one of the last places in Afghanistan where responsibility for security will be successfully transferred to Afghans. Only in the north is there currently a realistic prospect of gradually shifting security responsibility from ISAF to Afghan forces, and that will be possible only with increased attention to training local police who will be trusted and to building the kind of economic, social, and governance conditions on the ground that are conducive to building confidence in public institutions and thus 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. Unfortunately, the “develop” phase (reconstruction and governance, in particular) has been chronically under-resourced. Governance reform has been resisted by the central government, as well as by local officials and politicians (and militia leaders), in attempts to preserve their own advantages in a still corrupt system. The danger is that the focus on combat in the south will lead to continuing neglect of the north and the peace consolidation measures that are necessary there to prevent the spread of war.

To “hold” and “develop” in the south

But what about “clear, hold, and develop” in the south? Counterinsurgency warfare regularly and successfully engages in military “clearing” operations in the south—that is, clearing the Taliban out of particular areas. But it lacks the capacity to hold and develop those areas. Tactical victories against the Taliban that are temporary have a way of becoming strategic setbacks as security continues a steady decline, with official and civil society access to south and southeastern Afghanistan increasingly restricted (UNSC 2007, p. 2, para. 5).

On the other hand, there is concern that a change in ISAF security strategy to protecting (and stabilizing and developing) those parts of the country essentially under Government control and where the insurgency is not present and withdrawing from counterinsurgency combat could leave the population in the south exposed to the callous mercies of the Taliban. The southern population that is now protected by ISAF would be subject to the wrath and reprisals of the Taliban if ISAF were no longer to keep the pressure on the insurgents.

It is certainly correct to insist that the fate and safety of Afghan communities in the south should be a central concern and objective, but that raises the question of just how much of the south is now under the effective protection of Canadian and other ISAF forces. By most accounts, very little of Kandahar province is currently safeguarded by foreign or Afghan forces on a 24/7 basis. Recent maps show even the Panjwai¹ district to be in the “extremely hostile” category, hosting a permanent Taliban presence, and with low access for humanitarian relief purposes. It is not clear, therefore, that a pullback from counterinsurgency engagements in the province would actually leave a new security vacuum. In some areas, like key district towns, ISAF or Afghan forces are able to provide

a security presence in daylight hours, but at sundown the security perimeter essentially contracts to the headquarters building.

The current style of counterinsurgency operation may in fact place the local population in added peril. The pattern is to clear a particular area of Taliban, with elements of the population displaced during the fighting, followed by a period in which that newly cleared territory is held and displaced people are allowed to return to their homes. The scarcity of forces means that ISAF troops are inevitably required to withdraw and Afghan army and police forces are left to protect communities. The Afghan forces are unable to sustain stability and the Taliban just as inevitably return and attack the Afghan security forces and visit their reprisals on those whom they term "collaborators." Then, at a later date, ISAF decides that those areas must be retaken for important strategic reasons, and the whole process begins again.

The military counterinsurgency effort creates this kind of seesaw that actually puts the population in extreme peril. The key point of a new mission mandate based on providing security for reconstruction is that ISAF forces should not withdraw from areas of the south where they are in ongoing control and in a position to offer reliable and continuous protection, but by all accounts such areas, beyond Kandahar city and its immediate environs, are the rare exception.

Indeed, according to Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, who heads the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, Canadian forces are currently focused on just such a protection role: "to create secure conditions in regions around Kandahar city so reconstruction efforts can occur." Gauthier is quoted to have said, "It's less a question of offensive actions than it is of taking the necessary measures to secure a zone of action" (Clark 2008). What is not clear, however, is the extent to which local commanders determine whether such a role or a return to counterinsurgency combat is adopted.

Still losing the counterinsurgency war

A primary rule of counterinsurgency combat should be that insurgents are only cleared out of areas that can be subsequently protected and given an opportunity to develop. That rule is far from being observed.

At the moment, as the Manley Panel essentially admitted, the military counterinsurgency effort is on a trajectory to repeat history. Scholars who study post-WW II armed conflicts and their ultimate resolution draw some telling conclusions.²

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. This conclusion is reinforced by a host of studies, including the Manley Panel’s, 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.

From amnesty to a peace process

Sooner or later it will be necessary to give concrete political meaning to the recognition, repeated by the Manley Panel, that ultimately “no insurgency—and certainly not the Afghan insurgency – can be defeated by military force alone” (p. 28). That means, in addition to protecting reconstruction and responsible governance in the parts of the country that are currently beyond the reach of the insurgency, there must be a prominent increase in diplomatic support for a comprehensive peace process to address the domestic and regional roots of the insurgency and to forge a new national consensus in Afghanistan.

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 part of 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 failed 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, nor is it part of the parliamentary motion.

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. See ReliefWeb 2007; Afghan Conflict Monitor 2007.
2. 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.

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