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“Military Intervention: Lessons from Afghanistan”

Keynote Presentation by

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Lessons Learned from Afghanistan and Other Interventions

Putting the concept of intervention in a broader context.

From the first Gulf War to the Kosovo operation, the West has felt compelled to use force to intervene in humanitarian crises around the world, building on the Mitterrand concept of “le droit d’ingérence humanitaire” to eventually attempt to establish a quasi-code of intervention based on the concept of the “responsibility to protect”.

Well, at the height of the Darfour crisis, when I was responsible for the UN at DFAIT, I went to New York a few days prior to UNGA 2004 and met for an early breakfast my US counterpart, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations Kristen Silverberg, a rising star of the Bush Administration who is the age of my daughter. She quipped “I like your R2P stuff, but how do we apply it to Darfur ?” to which I replied “As a former commander of a platoon of tanks, I wish I could suggest 40 M1Abrams tanks, but it is not that easy”. Victoria Holt and Tobias Berkman ably put it in the title of their brilliant book on R2P, “The Impossible Mandate”. Hence the need to put the concept of intervention in a broader context.

Intervention or war - where the difference?

I am sure I can bore you to death by recalling the origins of foreign intervention all the way to the Neanderthals meeting their demise at the hands of the Cro-Magnons but if there is anything we have learned from Afghanistan is that in terms of means, there is little difference between an armed intervention in another country for the perceived higher good – does Iraq ring a bell, or Kosovo for that matter ? –and a military intervention to conquer a country or subdue a population. This is why all scholars of R2P have put so much emphasis on the multiple stages of R2P prior to armed intervention. But for their part, political leaders have had a tendency to bypass those stages and to focus on the “to go or not to go, that is the question”, e.g. Libya vs. Syria ! And while we may have made progress from the times of the Congress of Vienna to the present United Nations via the League of Nations, foreign interventions remain very much tied to the respective powers of the potential targets and of the potential interveners, as well as to the safeguards the latter have provided themselves with, such as the right of veto at the UNSC. Senator Romeo Dallaire has known a piece of that one as much as the Syrian National Council does today. “Coalition of the willing” is a neat subterfuge to mask a refusal by the UNSC to endorse a peace-keeping or some other Chapter VII intervention. When

successfully brokered, it circumvents a UNSC veto, with all the associated risks, but with morality and legitimacy hopefully trumping illegality.

The right to intervene

Before going on to lessons learned, maybe we should first ask why we (i.e. humans, writ large) intervene in one another's affairs mostly through the use of force. Of all the authors who have extolled one way or another the moral illegitimacy of aggression while justifying intervention, John Stuart Mill's stands out: *the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others*".

But this is far from sufficient as we sadly found out with Georges Bush's invasion of Iraq. There is no God-given certainty about the judgment on the use of force being better than any other recourse or no recourse at all, particularly when the so-called God-inspired higher good is based on fallacies and lies. In fact, all the arguments made by the Bush administration to justify a preemptive intervention against Iraq were false, from the so called magnitude of the threat and the alleged intention of Iraq to make use of the alleged WMD, to the alleged exhaustion of all alternatives and the failed consonance of the use of preemptive force with the UN Charter.

The R2P legacy or death

The implications of the Iraq War for R2P were pretty negative as Iraq was thrown at us, at the UN, as a clear abuse of a norm yet to be enshrined despite all our attempts to dispel the notion that Iraq was an R2P case. Clearly it was not ! But it also had an impact on the Libyan operation in that while all of us, nice hypocrites, in our hearts, were adamant that the success of Operation Unified Protector would be judged on Moammar Khadafy no longer being in power, we swore that regime change was not part of the deal! Of course, the real difference was the UNSC sanctioning the intervention - maybe for the last time!.

But not only did the invasion of Iraq provide opponents of R2P further ammunition to oppose it as an attack on state sovereignty – an old worn out argument – but with the companion ongoing war in Afghanistan – also initially a coalition of the willing operation - it has also stifled any enthusiasm for other interventions which might be really needed in future. Potential interventions are equally hampered by rising anti-US and more generally anti-West sentiments and the greater chance of Chinese and Russian vetoes to any further UN condoned intervention, such as in Syria – Libya being a one-time aberration!

This is why the proper articulation of the R2P doctrine, mandate or norm is so critical. In 2005, I was asked to represent Canada on the Friends of UN Reform Group of 15 countries from all continents. We spent a huge amount of time lobbying member countries for a robust inclusion of R2P in the 2005 UN World Summit Outcome Resolution – a crisp, focused, neat, rigorous, and lean, 38 pages, 178 paragraphs document – a sleeper, Un somnifère garanti ! But its sections 138 and 139 enshrined R2P and on 28 April 2006, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1674 on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, reaffirming the provisions of these paragraphs giving it some *customary prescriptive value*. It also underlined the UNSC's readiness to address gross violations of human rights, as "genocide and mass crimes

against humanity may constitute threats to international peace and security". On paper, we have made progress at the multilateral level. Indeed, on September 14, 2009, the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution on R2P. Yet, neither has R2P established new international legal obligations – à la genocide - nor has there been much progress in attempts to implement it despite sophisticated watering down by Ban-Ki-Moon's "three pillars" approach to R2P – for those who may have forgotten, pillar one emphasizes the protection responsibilities of the state, pillar two defines international assistance and capacity building requirements, while pillar three refers to timely and decisive response, with a strong emphasis on pacific measures.

Interestingly, while President Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron both spoke early on of the *responsibility to act* in the Libyan case, it took the November 2011 Halifax Security Forum to hear Defense Minister MacKay emphasize the R2P character of the intervention.

So we have to content ourselves with what Griffith University's Hugh Breakey said in a detailed review of the literature on R2P: "Perhaps most significantly, it is arguable that R2P has gained sufficient ground to frame the discourse and set the terms around which discussions of sovereignty and international action must now take place".

Failed multilateralism and Islam

I have spent a lot of time so far on R2P because the unending debate about its applicability reminds us that the multilateral institutions we created to help build some form of collective wisdom around decisions to intervene or not to intervene are pretty faulty and deeply thorn by competing national ideologies at a time when the nature and challenges of the requirements for international action are changing rapidly. We have indoctrinated ourselves in believing that existing mechanisms and models are applicable to new forms of conflicts despite our inability or our refusal to appreciate the significance of new realities, notably the civilizational and societal exacerbation of fundamentalism. We are now facing religious extremisms which know no frontier. I for one have a lot of sympathy for my friend Bob Fowler's slow "conversion" during his ordeal to the notion of a "clash of civilizations" as a result of people's different religious identities. The question is the extent of the clash and how many are caught in the "black hole" of extremism.

I think we are committing a serious error in refusing to admit that there is a Huntington effect at play in the world today, be it so far only at the margins.

However, our interventions as much as our inability to intervene through alternative modalities of influence, have a significant impact on the expansion or the contraction of these margins.

When the battleground is civilizational and not merely ethnic, territorial, or socio-economic, our traditional, Westphalian, Pavlovian conditional, reflexes are inoperative. Conventional weapons are of limited use against fanatics. And the zealots who display their anti-Americanism in Benghazi, Cairo or Sana'a are not targeting specifically military forces, economic establishments, institutions or building or even a social system. They wage an all-out war – a

Jihad – against “l’autre”. Remember Jean-Paul Sartre’s “L’Enfer c’est les autres” – “Hell is other people”. No Exit !_This is what we are dealing with. Satan is an American. As Raheel Raza of Muslims Facing Tomorrow puts it so well: “They (the Americans) are after all responsible for every evil that befalls the Muslim world including natural disasters, the killing of Shias and other minorities by Islamist mobs, the Arab Spring, oppression of women, honour killings and now this film!”

Bob Fowler talks about a “gulf between who and what they are – between their beliefs, messages, and purposes, and mine”. 24 hours a day these Jihadists base their life on archaic interpretations of the Holy Koran, often “spruced” with adequately self-serving Hadiths, many of which were twisted, when not actually written de novo, to serve political interests of the times. Ignorance and rejection of modernity fueled by a passion for a rigid enforcement of Sharia make these fundamentalists turn readily against their own Muslim brethren for failing to live by THE BOOK and for falling prey to the pluralistic voices of the West. It is no wonder that a group of fanatics in the Sinai have pronounced President Morsi as a non-believer! To paraphrase Sam Harris in “The End of Faith”, in the face of the lack of a secular culture or of secularism permeating only a few strata of Muslim populations, for these fundamentalists the progress of science has failed to winnow down belief-based interpretations of daily realities.

So it is no wonder that what we see as legitimate and essential interventions to foster or establish the rule of law, democracy, respect for human rights, stable institutions, and empowered civil societies, eventually turn into religious or quasi-religious conflicts with little accomplishments on our Western inspired objectives.

Cases studies

I have said enough about Iraq which is somewhat of an hybrid case of intervention. It’s *ab initio* illegitimacy – illegality said Kofi Annan – produced insurgencies such as that of Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr’s deeply religious inspired calls for the establishment of Islamic Law. But was followed after Saddam Hussein’s demise by a regime change whose long term stability and democratic fabric remains at best uncertain. What is certain is that religion will play an increasing role in defining the ultimate institutional and social set-up of the country. We will have to learn to deal with these changing societies.

A word on Afghanistan from that perspective

My personal experience with Afghanistan was two-phased – first travelling by car as a tourist in November 1975 with my then 6.5 months pregnant wife from Tehran to Herat, Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul, Bamyan, Bandi Amir, Balk, Tashkourgan, Mazar-e-Sharif and through the Khyber into Pakistan, a heavenly trip with not a moment of fright, the kind of defining trip you never forget – and then the second phase, in 1999-2001, once I got clearance from Lloyd Axworthy to go into a war-thorn, wroth with destruction, mostly Taliban-controlled country, where we were still doing good work at the local level through our Canada Fund for local initiatives. I had several encounters with the Taliban leadership, including when I asked then Foreign Minister Mutawakil that the Taliban stop protecting their Al-Qaeda guests, to no avail. Throughout these encounters I remained appalled by the gulf not only between their mindset and ours but

between theirs and the common Afghan folks, such as the Elders from the Jagouri district who pleaded with me to go and talk to the young Taliban leader so that our education project in the village could be sustained. I must admit that when the US forces in the weeks following 9-11 chased the Taliban from Kabul, I hoped that these men - outrageously equipped and armed by the Pakistan government, under the watchful eye of Naseerullah Babar, the Minister of Interior of Benazir Bhutto, (I hoped that these men) would not return. But then there was the escape of Bin Laden through the Tora Bora mountains into Pakistan and the subsequent birth of the insurgency.

George Petrolekas, my friend and colleague at the Conference of Defense Associations Institute, suggests looking at the war in Afghanistan in four phases. The first one, in 2001-2 had clear objectives and was an unmitigated success. The second, from 2003 to 2006 was a failure of missed opportunities in that we did not deliver what we had committed to do – remember references to a Marshall Plan ? The US war in Iraq deprived Afghanistan of the full engagement required; the mission became balkanized and the lack of strategic continuity and coherence allowed the insurgency to fill the vacuum. The third, from 2006 to 2011- was the triumph of insurgency as we failed to implement a full-fledged counter insurgency strategy, our prime focus on winning the hearts and minds of people being its softest edge. The fourth is the present exit strategy, putting a brave face on it all through the commitment to train Afghan police.

This analysis is very congruent with the superb paper written by David Bercuson and Jack Granastein in their 2011 Research Paper for CDFAI on lessons learned from Afghanistan. Among his key points:

- A) “whole of government” missions are to be achieved through the early injection of well trained, well equipped, prepared, experienced civilian and military personnel in adequate numbers with clear goals. Sounds logical ?
- B) Political and military objectives must be clearly defined by all the active partners to a mission.
- C) There must be clear, consistent and persistent lines of command and communication.
- D) Particularly cogent is his remarks that NATO being “divided both politically and militarily,... any national caveats which limit the alliance’s ability to succeed politically and militarily in any conflict must be clearly enunciated by all partners at the outset and taken into consideration in Canadian mission planning. Ask General Charles Bouchard if he agrees with that one ! David Bercuson’s conclusion is clear: “Canadian decision makers should think long and hard before entering into any coalition to which national caveats have been attached”.

While all these conclusions are intrinsically valid, the broader question remains: can or should the West intervene in conflicts or insurgencies that are increasingly religious inspired ? We should never forget that the entire Muslim world, Sunni’s and Shia’s, unifies when there is a sense that an issue appears to be opposing Moslems to non-Moslem, as evidenced in the recent crisis when deeply held religious beliefs were deemed to be under attack.

In today's world, war is not always the continuation of politics through other means. As conventional interstate wars have increasingly ceded their place on the international stage to internal crises, civil strife, ethnic and religious conflicts, it is obvious that deterrence no longer plays the role it did in the balance of power days between the US and the Soviet Union. In fact today's failure of deterrence makes nuclear weapons more dangerous and fosters the proliferation temptation. The Israeli undeclared nuclear capacity is doing little to limit Iran's efforts in giving itself at least their own nuclear capacity despite the baffling war mongering of the Israeli administration. But it is clearly not the sole motivation. I will not insult the intelligence of this gathering by even asking if we all agree that a potential Israeli "intervention" through an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would be catastrophic, to the point of potentially igniting if not a global war, certainly pretty dangerous regional conflagrations.

With regard to Israel, there is an ongoing, interesting debate between those who are convinced that the conclusion of a final agreement between Israeli and Palestinians through the creation of a Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel would bring a significant cooling off in the region and that terrorism would abate rapidly in the world. Others argue that in the present circumstances, with the turmoil of the Arab Spring and the reemergence of a dominant Islamism, such an agreement not only would do little to bring peace in the region but could add to its instability as it would alter the existing set of allegiances and power ratios. It is certain, however, that Israel's continued settlement expansion and the fundamental injustice meted to the Palestinians to whom the international community promised a state in 1948, add fodder to the Islamists' stridency and undermine deeply the potential influence of the moderate forces who are accused of betraying the only cause that unites Arabs. A lot of blood has been shed in the Middle East on the altar of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and it matters little who wins the debate. The key is for all to work towards an agreement whose terms are known to all and whose implementation only lacks political will, particularly on the part of the occupying power. For too long the dialogue, if any, has been held by or through outside nations or interlocutors. No durable peace can ever materialize in such a mode.

More broadly, I would venture to argue that more than ever before, solutions to societal, humanitarian, political, sectarian, religious, ethnic and socio-economic problems in any region will have to come from the region itself. And they will come from spasms to spasms. And, as Afghanistan slowly returns to tribalism, Taliban controlling vast swaths of land, and Kabul retaining only appearances of governance, the solutions will seldom please us!

My conclusion is not optimistic. In the face of religious extremism, were you to give me a choice between the epic Indian poem of Mahabharata and the blind allegiance and fanatical obedience to the ancient prescriptions of the Deuteronomy or some equally egregious interpretations of the other revealed religions, I would argue that as a guide for conduct, deference to the former would probably have reduced the number of atrocities the latter's modern renditions have produced. While it is true that our security depends on our capacity to defend ourselves against extremisms, armed interventions are not the best means to do so.

Thank you.