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“Military Intervention: Lessons from Afghanistan”

Presentation by

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The UN – the Indispensable Peace Facilitator for Afghanistan

The only way forward for Afghanistan is a negotiated settlement.

- I have been saying this since at least 2006 – others like Ernie Regehr and Paul Rogers – well before that – another way to put this – and this in my view is THE main lesson of the armed intervention - no way for international intervenors to help bring security to Afghanistan without ending the war and no way for them to end the war by military.

- Ernie Regehr in the first session talked about how international forces prevented a recurrence of the big spike in casualties such as we saw during the pre-Taliban rule phase of the civil war; he said that the danger now is that it will spike again upon the departure of the international forces, absent a credible political process.

- Daryl Copeland lamented the failure to shift in 2003 from military action to full-scale nation building.

- This was supposed to be initiated by the Bonn Conference but nation building requires good governance and building good governance requires an inclusive political process. The best opportunity to date to do this was in 2003 when the Taliban were at their weakest.

So the best opportunity for an inclusive negotiation was wasted in 2003. What about now in 2012? There is a plethora of talks about talks going on, mainly in secret, with a bewildering array of back channels and actors. I would argue they are inadequate, ineffective and incoherent at best and utterly counterproductive at worst.

Key Principles for a durable negotiated settlement for Afghanistan

On March 4, 2008, in comments to the Montreal Citizen's Forum about Afghanistan, I said:

Drawing on the wealth of experience from the then 63 UN-led peacekeeping operations and the handful of UN-authorized, but not UN-led, peacekeeping, peace support, and crisis stabilization operations since the end of the Cold War, we need to focus instead on what we have learned about how it SHOULD be done? How do we, the international community, help *resolve* the armed conflict and start to build a sustainable peace? So my starting point is a distillation of key lessons learned in relation to internal armed conflict, or at least, lessons identified, since "learning" implies that we will act on these experiential insights.

The first lesson is the need for a broad, inclusive peace process leading to as comprehensive a peace agreement as possible, meaningfully addressing all relevant issues underlying the conflict.

Let us contrast this approach with what happened in Afghanistan on the critically important issue of developing a new Constitution. It was drafted by Americans, and imposed on Afghans, entrenching one of the most centralized systems of government imaginable in a country which is extremely "diverse in its unity".¹

The second lesson is that the agreement must encompass not only all relevant issues but all relevant parties. This will include all the various factions engaged in the conflict (government and insurgents alike, all sides of the civil war). There may be some "irreconcilables" but, if there is to be any chance of achieving a comprehensive and sustainable agreement, they must be kept to a minimum. The more factions *outside* the negotiation, the less chance of the peace holding. This, of course, is the story of Afghanistan post 2003.

But it will not be enough for the peace talks to involve political and military leaders. The negotiations must be informed by an inclusive consultative process down to the grass roots level if it is to replace elitist, exclusionary forms of governance with pluralistic, inclusive political institutions and mechanisms.

¹ I believe it was Nipa Banerjee who, in a comment from the floor, in response to a suggestion that Afghanistan consider partition, stated that the Afghans see themselves as "diverse in unity" and that was why I used this term.

And of course the next lesson is that relevant parties that need to be part of the overall peace process architecture/ negotiating framework go well beyond the internal factions, to encompass regional actors (Pakistan, Iran, India and bordering Central Asian states) and other external players with vested interests - USA, Russia, China.

All of these external actors are involved in the conflict for a variety of reasons relating to their own perceived interests and it is quite simply impossible to effectively address these concerns without a negotiating framework expressly designed to do so. (The antithesis of this approach is secret talks with select actors that so concern other key actors that they resort to assassinating participants to stop a process that does not include them.)

A fourth lesson relates to the need to negotiate and include in the peace agreement the type and scope of international assistance in its implementation phase. I am not going to dwell on that here (read the chapter in *Afghanistan and Canada*, ed. Kowaluk and Stapes) – but, referencing Session One in particular, I simply want to note that there is no escaping the need for this type of foundation as the basis for international peacekeepers/providers of security assistance. There can be no coherence in the international effort without it.

Now to the lesson that I wish to highlight here today and that is the centrality of impartial and expert third party assistance for a comprehensive peace process and, in turn, the indispensability of the UN in fulfilling this role.

Belligerents, parties to the conflict, cannot devise an inclusive peace process on their own, however important and critical it may be to ensure that the negotiating process is Afghan-led to the maximum extent possible.

- even if they had the requisite expertise, there is manifestly insufficient credibility and trust and even motivation among the parties to take on this task; one of the early tasks of an expert facilitator will be to build confidence that a broad peace process is both possible and worthwhile.

We are talking about a multi-tiered, complex negotiating process – the internal Afghan negotiation with government, opposition, insurgents, but also a broad public consultative dimension, an extraordinarily complex regional dimension and key external actors, particularly but not only the USA, with vested interests;

Only the UN has the expertise, the legitimacy and the credibility to take on this role of third party, expert, impartial facilitator.

I made this argument to the Foreign Affairs Committee a while back and Nipa Banerjee was sitting next to me and literally scoffed at the notion the UN could play this role (albeit she did acknowledge to me after that her quarrel with the UN was on other grounds). Daryl Copeland has said, why not, nothing else has worked, and time is running out as the countdown continues to the departure of international forces at the end of 2014.

And the other difference now, as I alluded to above, is that key coalition partners, notably the USA, have embraced the need for some sort of negotiations AND equally important, credible international voices are finally calling for a broad, inclusive peace process with the UN as the indispensable third party facilitator.

Brahimi and Pickering in the *2011 Report of the Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan in its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions* make an urgent call for an internationally designated facilitator to begin exploratory talks as the first step in building the negotiation framework. They state, and I agree, that the United Nations has the greatest institutional expertise in providing such a facilitation role and appointment by the UN Secretary-General of a representative would be the most promising option for establishing a political process.

I turn next to the ICG report, of 26 March 2012 entitled: *Talking About Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan* (which I highly recommend). It took the ICG a long time to come round to the need for a comprehensive peace process but now that they have, they really have! in this report the ICG has this to say about the need for the UN to lead a mediation team:

“During the last decade, Afghan regard for the UN has dimmed, and the appetite to wade deeper into the conflict has faded in New York, as UNAMA has repeatedly suffered attacks – both armed and political – since the 2009 presidential elections. However, while several international organisations, including the OIC and even the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), are likely to contribute to the process, the UN, despite its current limitations, is the only one with the capacity to facilitate negotiations and to ensure, with robust international support, the implementation of a settlement over the long term.”

Perhaps the clearest example of the need for a UN mediation lead is the floundering of the so-called Istanbul Process, despite formal agreement of delegates from a dozen countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, China and the USA, as well as international organizations, for an internationally-supported mechanism to facilitate negotiation of the conflict's regional aspects.

Where are we on a comprehensive UN-facilitated comprehensive peace process?

Brahimi-Pickering Report called for appointment of a UN facilitator in 2011.

ICG called for a UN-led mediation team to be in place by May 2013 so that it can be well along in its work before the NATO withdrawal at the end of 2014

But so far as one can discern from the outside, there has been no progress in actually appointing a UN facilitator/mediation team to begin to devise a comprehensive peace process (and of course ICG urges Security Council, regional partners and major donors to take an active role in ensuring this appointment takes place – as it is clear that the UN will not and indeed could not realistically step in otherwise).

The international Community, has followed a US-led strategy since 2001 that has, in the damning words of the painstakingly documented ICG report, and many others too, not only failed to end the war but has instead reinforced long standing factional and ethnic rivalries, empowered the rise of predatory government and thus contributed substantially to the resurgence of the armed opposition to the Karzai government.

Now the international community appears to be acquiescing in a US-led negotiating strategy that, insofar as one can discern anything about it at all, given its opaqueness, seems designed, like President Karzai's myriad ad hoc efforts, to co-opt certain insurgents into some sort of power-sharing arrangement – and which seems destined to have as little success as Karzai's efforts at building a durable political framework but a high likelihood of undermining further the prospects for a MEANINGFUL negotiation process.

Here I wish to quote once again from the ICG report:

“Whatever the possible initial necessity for some secrecy around bilateral contacts in the initial stages, the ongoing absence of transparency and of clarity on the ultimate goal is counter-productive. At present, there is no consensus within Afghanistan or among its international partners on the fundamental goals of talks with the Taliban, on the agenda or even on who is qualified to negotiate. Without some basic agreement between Afghan stakeholders, the U.S. and NATO partners on the criteria for establishing the credibility and strategic value of purported high-level insurgent interlocutors and on the end game itself, talks are unlikely to progress toward a meaningful settlement.”

How do we move forward?

What nation will argue for a comprehensive UN-facilitated negotiation process for Afghanistan? This used to be a pre-eminently Canadian role but we were, until recently, a belligerent to the conflict (and, until relatively recently, an extremely outspoken opponent of talks with the Taliban). Brahimi and Pickering believe that some ISAF forces are sufficiently untainted to still potentially be able to contribute to a UN-led pko in the peace agreement implementation phase (eg. Turkey) but certainly not any of the countries directly involved in combat operations, such as the USA and Canada.

The USA of course is a vital participant in the peace process but cannot effectively lead it.

Precisely because Canada is a former belligerent, our promotion of a comprehensive peace process could be very powerful, and would be even more effective if we actively solicited the support of fellow NATO members.

There is a also big role for civil society in countries who contributed troops to ISAF to take up the call.

Notes for Answer to the Question: Will the Taliban Negotiate?

- now seems more widespread view of military stalemate in that neither side (GOA and international forces on one hand and insurgents on the other) is likely to prevail military before the 2014 departure of ISAF

- without a full-fledged effort to launch a comprehensive peace process, a civil war seems probable

- Brahimi/Pickering Century Foundation 2011 report – only way Taliban will be able to really get USA forces completely out post 2014 is likely a negotiated settlement

- and current backroom wheeling and dealing (not to mention Pakistani ISI targeted assassinations of high ranking Taliban interlocuters) seems to suggest at least some of them are willing to negotiate