Plan B:
Bringing peace to Afghanistan

by Gerald Ohlsen, Caitlin Vito and Erica Noordermeer

The prospects for a stable and democratic Afghanistan after troop withdrawal in 2014 are depressingly dim as the country remains in political, social and economic turmoil.

The USA-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) seems determined to leave Afghanistan "good enough," or in other words, to leave behind a military able to protect urban areas in what risks being a perpetual insurgency, if not a full scale civil war. Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid has suggested that this leaves Afghans without an alternative to war, without a Plan B. Is this good enough? Is this the legacy we wish to leave behind? It should not be, and it is time to rethink our strategy, change our attitude and try something new. It is time to offer Afghans a Plan B. Fortunately, there is one, if all parties involved in the conflict will give it a try.

If we do not change our direction we are likely to end up where we are headed for.
~ Chinese Proverb ~

COMPREHENSIVE PEACE PROCESS

A comprehensive peace process — one that addresses all of the issues underlying the conflict, and those necessary to its resolution, and that engages all parties to it — is an effective means of ending conflict and building a lasting peace. An enduring peace is what the world needs in Afghanistan; it is what millions of Afghans want. And Canada can help make it happen.

A comprehensive peace process will require a multi-tiered diplomatic effort, involving both governments and civil society. It will demand that we address three issues crucial to creating a sustainable peace. First, both a national and international consensus on the future of Afghanistan must be reached. Second, Afghans must develop a collective, national consciousness of their own history, one that bridges ethnic divisions. Third, all stakeholders must be involved in a dynamic

reconciliation process which addresses their past grievances and legitimate interests.

Success will require what conflict resolution experts, such as Dr. Lisa Schirch at Virginia's Eastern Mennonite University, call a "vertical" peace process. Dr. Schirch suggests three levels of negotiation: regional, national and local. Connecting the levels and coordinating discussion between them reinforces and consolidates the achievements at each. Throughout these discussions, all sectors of society — the young, the old, women, men and various ethnic and tribal groups — must feel represented. Indeed, they must participate in negotiating a peace agreement, both directly and indirectly. It is that inclusivity that makes a peace agreement legitimate and sustainable.

Regional and domestic actors will be interested in a comprehensive peace process. Regional governments will see that their legitimate interests are acknowledged, and form part of the negotiations. For the armed opposition, including the Taliban and militias supporting the government, involvement in such a process offers meaningful political participation and a process that can lead to the complete withdrawal of foreign forces.

The United Nations must take the lead in developing the framework for and securing a buy into a comprehensive peace process. This view is drawing support from experts who were once skeptical about this approach in Afghanistan. Former UN Special Representative Lahkdar Brahimi and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering, in their 2011 report on the Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan in its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions, propose that an internationally designated facilitator begin exploratory talks. This is the first step in building a framework for negotiation, they argue, and the United Nations has the greatest expertise to play this role. Brahimi and Pickering further suggest the appointment by the UN Secretary-General of a Special Representative with such a mandate.

Calm in the streets of Kabul: The absence of a comprehensive peace plan in Afghanistan leaves questions about a perpetual insurgency as troops withdraw. (SCOTT TAYLOR, ESPRIT DE CORPS)

Can the international community commit to finishing the job in Afghanistan after the troop withdrawal in 2014? The prospects are grim as the country remains in political, social and economic turmoil. (DAVID PUGLIESE, ESPRIT DE CORPS)

In March of this year, the International Crisis Group issued *Talking about Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan*, which said: "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 Organization of Islamic Countries (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."

Canada must work together with other ISAF nations to champion a comprehensive peace process for Afghanistan, and push for a UN role in building support among involved parties. These parties will not agree to this process unless extensive supportive work is done with experienced mediators who know how a comprehensive peace agreement functions. Canada has the knowledge and skills to effectively promote a comprehensive peace process as the most likely opportunity for agreement among all parties.

CANADIAN CAPACITY

Canada's role, and that of other outsiders, will be to assist Afghans in the navigation of the complex, multi-layered negotiations needed to address these issues. This will require a substantial commitment of diplomatic resources over many years and will cost millions of dollars. Nevertheless, this will be nothing when compared to the multi-billion dollar military engagement that preceded it. In return, it will offer hope for a peace which has been denied to Afghans for more than three decades and help bring stability to a dangerous and vulnerable part of the world.

GROUP OF FRIENDS

A first step for Canada might be to coordinate a Group of Friends: four to six countries committed to supporting unbiased diplomatic

Wartorn: A well-funded peace education program is required for a successful peace process. (SCOTT TAYLOR, ESPRIT DE CORPS)

efforts. ISAF and the region surrounding Afghanistan and the Islamic world must be represented in such a group. An early United Nations Security Council resolution mandating such a group will be beneficial. Ultimately, leadership of the peace process will fall to the United Nations, with Security Council support, through the appointment by the Secretary-General of a fully resourced Special Representative acceptable to all major parties. Once established, a United Nations team will take over the lead on the full range of negotiations. As a former combatant, Canada cannot be a part of that team but will continue to provide support and resources to it.

The benefits of international support are best realized if the core group takes a common approach to the peace process, avoiding competing efforts in talks and establishing one reliable channel of communication with the full range of stakeholders in the conflict. The sporadic and disjointed nature of the talks between the Taliban and both the Afghan government and the U.S. separately, demonstrates both the need for a single channel and the difficulty that will be faced in achieving it. Discussions involving regional governments have been disparate and unsustainable. Consultations with the numerous militias both affiliated with and opposed to the government have been irregular at best. A UN Special Representative can bring cohesion and authority to one process over all others. He or she will need to establish a structure for the transparent monitoring of the peace process, an institution essential to confidence-building among stakeholders and to the acceptance of the process by the Afghan people.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Most Afghan and regional stakeholders in the conflict need capacity building to support their participation in a peace process. Canada can provide such support. This will include research into the causes and consequences of conflict, as well as training in negotiation, mediation, process planning and facilitation. It will also require financial and administrative support from the preparatory stage through to the conclusion of an agreement.

A locally employed civilian at the Canadian International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) camp is being searched in Kabul, Afghanistan, by a member of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment. (SGT FRANK HUDEC, COMBAT CAMERA)

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Civil society representatives can be fundamental to the implementation and adaptation into local communities of policies and processes emerging from higher-level negotiation. They are often effective in raising community issues and concerns during those high level processes. A successful peace process, which takes into account the needs of all the stakeholders, demands that Afghan civil society be fully integrated into the peace plan and work in tandem with governments. This requires the participation of the full range of community actors, including local and regional councils, business and professional associations, women's organizations, Ulema councils, councils of elders and groups of young people, as well as formal CSOs.

There are two distinct roles that Canadian CSOs can play in fostering the engagement of Afghan civil society. The first is in drawing on their own experience to build support among their Afghan counterparts and others for a comprehensive peace process involving neutral outside mediation and for their engagement in such a process.

The second is the fostering and support of Afghan organizations themselves. This can take the form of facilitating workshops, local peace commissions and civil society dialogues addressing local issues. CSOs also can provide facilitators for exchanges among governments, Afghan organizations and the general public. They can act as advocates against discrimination and injustice in the design and implementation of peace processes. Working on behalf of the public interest, international CSOs can help to foster democratic dialogue and form partnerships among various groups while linking the four levels of a comprehensive peace process.

Similarly, both local and international CSOs will be needed to help develop local stakeholders' technical skills in the art of peace negotiation. In this context, we should seize upon Afghanistan's long history of participatory decision-making, usually in the form of *jirgas* and *shuras*, and help to adapt these to the needs of a formal peace process. Building on this tradition will increase the legitimacy of the peace process in the eyes of Afghans.

That said, the local traditional forms of negotiation must be adapted to support human rights, women's rights and the constitution. Talks must be inclusive and involve all stakeholders, especially women, who have often been excluded. Creating a safe space where Afghans can voice their frustrations on issues such as corruption and

Ethnic leaders, including armed opposition such as the Taliban, should be allowed meaningful political participation in the peace process. (DAVID PUGLIESE, ESPRIT DE CORPS)

drug trafficking, will create a healthy and productive dynamic in the peace process. In this regard, CSOs can establish public consultation mechanisms, train and lead peace councils capable of managing this endeavour.

Providing communities throughout Afghanistan with the needed financial resources, protecting civil society leaders and providing access to information are areas of responsibility that Canadian CSOs can readily assume. Their role can be central to the success of a comprehensive peace process in Afghanistan.

PEACE EDUCATION

Developing and expanding education services across Afghanistan as a means of healing ethnic wounds and preventing further injustices will be essential to a successful peace process. While the government has taken initial steps to introduce such programs, a fully-structured and well-funded peace education program is needed to increase understanding among Afghanistan's various ethnic and tribal groups, and to help eliminate misconceptions. Education will help prepare the ground-work for peace and reconciliation. It will also provide a means through which respect for human rights can be instilled and through which a new, national collective history eventually can be built. CSOs, both local and international, can assist in the development of locally relevant and appropriate peace studies and programs at the elementary, high school and university levels. A community-based education is essential to success.

SUSTAINABLE PEACE

A comprehensive peace process will require time, money and extraordinary effort. Navigating the complex web of actors and cultural and ethnic traditions will be no easy feat. Nevertheless, pursuing a comprehensive peace process offers the prospect of leaving behind an enduring peace in a secure Afghanistan. Canada can play a leadership role in bringing this about. Honouring the effort we have made and the tragic losses we have suffered demands that we do so. When the current prospect is perpetual war, the Plan B of peace is the only real option.

Gerald Ohlsen is a retired Canadian diplomat and Chair of the International Steering Committee of Afghanistan: Pathways to Peace. **Caitlin Vito** is a graduate student in Global Studies at the University of Leipzig. **Erica Noordermeer** is a graduate of the International Development and Globalization program at the University of Ottawa.

esprit de corps

CANADIAN MILITARY MAGAZINE

INDEPENDENT VIEWS
INVESTIGATIVE NEWS
INFORMATIVE HISTORY

Since its first edition in 1988, *Esprit de Corps* has become the most talked-about military magazine in Canada and the most influential publication within defence circles. Independent editorials and history features make *Esprit de Corps* a must-read for Canadian Forces officers, the rank and file, key political decision-makers and policy-makers, industry representatives, and Canadian history buffs alike.

For more information contact
Esprit de Corps Magazine
#204 – 1066 Somerset St. W.,
Ottawa ON K1Y 4T3
Tel: 1-800-361-2791
www.espritdecorps.ca