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“Military Intervention: Lessons from Afghanistan”

Notes for Presentation by
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Canada in Afghanistan:

Three Lessons, Three Questions, No Answers.

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It may be that the most that can be salvaged, and the only lasting benefit accruing to Canada’s costly investment in the Afghanistan conflict will be chance to avoid similar mistakes in the future.

Right off the top, then, three obvious lessons:

- *Look before you leap.* If a major change in international policy direction is being considered, elected governments must undertake comprehensive analysis in advance. This is essential to the discharge of their responsibilities as representatives of the public interest. The case for some form of multilateral intervention, although not necessarily involving armed force, was compelling in late 2001. But... Basic policy research was not undertaken before the decision to join Operation Enduring Freedom, a.k.a. the Global War on Terror, and shift from UN-mandated peace support in Kabul to aggressive counterinsurgency warfare in Kandahar. It was as if as if burden of history and the complexity of Afghan demography, society and culture came as a surprise. Canadian actions displayed levels of political, military and senior official incompetence which border on negligence.
- *Have clear priorities, a strategy, a plan and performance benchmarks.* Canada, the US and NATO had practically none of the above. Objectives kept changing, and now the episode is showing every sign of ending badly. The US and NATO likely realized their major achievable strategic objective - removal of Taliban government and disruption/ejection of al-Qaeda - by early 2003. If the promotion of democracy, economic recovery and nation-building were the ultimate goals, the intervention should have been largely demilitarized at that juncture, with a wholesale shift to civil society-led development assistance. But when you don’t know where you want to go, or where you are going, you will never arrive. This is especially true if the coalition leader is distracted by another war of choice - Iraq.
- *Learn from failure.* There are no foreign military solutions to Afghanistan’s vexing problems of underdevelopment and insecurity. The ill-advised decision to join one side in a civil war has wrought a terrible backlash. The real message inherent in the huge

increase in “green on blue” attacks is that the attempt at the “Vietnamization” of this engagement is going the same way as it did in SE Asia in 1975. This latest insurgent tactic, the “insider” threat which cannot be defeated through enhanced “vetting”, now threatens to derail NATO’s exit strategy. Despite the significant increase in lethal risks facing Canadian trainers, no one is talking about it. Where is the national discussion and debate?

Like the two large scale jailbreaks from Kandahar’s Sarposha prison, or the disturbing and still unresolved issues surrounding the treatment of Afghan detainees, of these three lessons there is scant evidence that any have been learned.

Talking numbers

I would like now to drill down a bit into the recent increase in green on blue “insider” attacks, which have led to the deaths of 51 coalition troops across 36 incidents so far in 2012. The facts:

- This year to date 332 members of the ISAF coalition have been killed
- At 246, roadside bombs make up the majority of coalition deaths in Afghanistan
- 15.4 per cent of all coalition deaths in 2012 have been due to 'green-on-blue' attacks, up from six per cent in 2011
- 12 of the 36 attacks in 2012 occurred in August; 28% of total ISAF casualties that month, and both that %, and the frequency of attacks has been rising:
 - 2007 - 2 attacks, 2 ISAF soldiers dead
 - 2008 - 2 attacks, 2 dead
 - 2009 - 6 attacks, 10 dead
 - 2010 - 6 attacks, 20 dead
 - 2011 - 21 attacks, 35 dead
 - 2012 (so far) - 36 attacks, 51 dead

Source: International Security Assistance Force; iCasualties.org

Interpretation? The trend lines are clear. These numbers, plus the ISAF decision on scaling back of joint operations and reducing shared military space, are harbingers of a deteriorating situation.

The Taliban, moreover, appear to understand the dynamics of both politics and public relations; it is easier to win media war in living rooms abroad than it is to prevail on battlefields at home.

The larger picture

Among my conclusions following several years of research conducted in preparation for the writing of my book *Guerrilla Diplomacy* was the observation that at the end of the day there are only three ways to *successfully* counter an insurgency. These are:

1. Recourse to large scale, systematic brutality, particularly in response to specific provocations. This tactic was common from the Romans to the Nazis, but such practices are no longer possible due to amateur digital reporting, media connectivity, and heightened sensitivity to human rights abuses.

2. Massive occupation. Success here requires ratio of between 1:10 to 1:200 foreign troops/units of local population, depending on the ferocity and extent of resistance. At its numerical peak, even at height of the unsuccessful 'surge', ISAF strength was only near very the bottom end of that scale and hence clearly inadequate to the scale and intensity of the revolt. Occupation therefore was, and remains mission impossible.

3. At the right time, cut a political deal through negotiations. This might have worked a few years ago, and circumstances can always change, but it appears too late for any of that now. In the wake of continuing civilian casualties (collateral damage), rogue killings of women and children, Koran burnings, urinating on dead insurgents, posing with severed body parts - not to mention corrupt government, failed elections and a persistently bad economy - foreign forces are now seen as occupiers rather than liberators. They have become an integral part of the problem rather than the solution.

Following from the fundamental strategic misjudgment in 2003 and missed opportunities since, the situation appears at present unrecoverable. Indeed, with the Taliban re-established, and quite possibly poised to resume control - or try - following the almost certain collapse of the current regime or its post-war successor, Afghanistan is in many respects worse off now than it was a decade ago. And a host of regional players with competing, and largely divergent objectives - Pakistan, Iran, India, China - are waiting anxiously in the wings, eager to intensify their engagement in the vacuum which will follow ISAF's drawdown 2013-14.

The wrap

Central Asia is a fulcrum of great power economic, geo-political and strategic concern. In that regard, Canada has interests. But, after almost 12 years of concentrated involvement, this country has never had much more than an ad hoc, reactive policy. Above all, we have forgotten one of the Cold War's most important lessons, namely that militaries work best when they are not used. Take the sword from the scabbard and it makes a dreadful mess.

When policy becomes an instrument of war, rather than the reverse, problems quickly compound.

Insufficient attention has been directed to a consideration of the internal and opportunity costs associated with Canada's lengthy international policy pre-occupation with Afghanistan. This episode has revealed multiple shortcomings in public administration and governance, and

incidents such as the (second) prorogation of Parliament in December 2009 have illustrated the weakness of democratic checks and balances.

Within the Government of Canada, Afghanistan functioned like a malignant disease. It proved useful for ambitious careerists in the bureaucracy, and it was bliss for those who adulate war fighting and adore expensive military kit, but it has been debilitating to public policy and the greater good. Within DFAIT, for instance, the Afghan Task Force siphoned human and financial resources away from all other areas. In an environment of scarcity, this set back the Department's, and government's capacity to address the real threats and challenges to Canadian values, policies and interests, namely the sprawling suite of transnational issues which are rooted in science and driven by technology.

By way of illustration: You can't send out an expeditionary force to occupy the alternatives to the carbon economy. You can't garrison against pandemic disease. You can't call in an air strike on climate change.

These global issues are not amenable to the application of armed force.

I will conclude by addressing three inter-related questions, all derived from the conference themes:

- Lingering responsibilities? Because Canada has for so long been part of the problem, it is difficult to imagine that this country might now become part of the solution. The initiative in brokering any peace deal - and internal dynamics at present render success unlikely - is best left to the regional powers and multilateral organizations. Participation in any subsequent peace enforcement operation would be highly costly, and of dubious utility.
- Assessed costs? In Afghanistan, given all of the lives and all of the money (over \$20 billion) expended, the price cannot possibly be justified in the face of so little achievement.
- Accountability? This disaster was entirely avoidable, but with responsibility shared among all three major parties there is no political appetite for a serious retrospective. The polity deserves better.

Recommendations

The considerations set out above carry a variety of implications.

For the international community:

- Transfer the political lead from NATO/ISAF to the UN
- Organize a comprehensive peace conference with all internal parties, regional/interested players and great powers, including. Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, India, the neighbouring central Asian states, plus NGOs and civil society actors. Give diplomacy and negotiations a chance.

- Explore involvement of OIC, SCO and OSCE. De-militarize and multilateralize.

For Canada:

- Review the operational security of the training mission; if necessary, suspend or cancel the program
- Convene a full public enquiry on Canada in Afghanistan
- Initiate wider public discussion on Canadian international policy. In the face of power shift from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific, and amidst the emergence of a *heteropolar* world order, what kind of military, diplomatic service, and aid agency do we really need?

Canadian veteran Trevor Greene, who has made a remarkable recovery after receiving an axe wound to the head during his service in Afghanistan, has said: *I think the decision to move into Kandahar Province... was misguided, to say the least. I have tried to track the decision-making process and the decision makers, without success.* (March 2012).

It is time to begin the national discussion which might help Captain Green, and indeed all Canadians, to close that loop.

The last word on “lessons” belongs to British author and analyst Robert Fisk:

The only thing we ever learn is that we never learn.

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