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No Canadian guns, no Afghan reconstruction

Much of the story of Canada's presence in Afghanistan can be seen from atop the Canadian forward operating base (FOB) at Ma'sum Ghar, about 30 kilometres west of Kandahar City.

On the flatland a dozen or so kilometers to the northwest of the FOB, a new causeway spans the wide Arghandab River bed. Closer in, just a kilometer or so to the northeast, several dozen local men are working to pave a road. Their equipment is primitive, their progress is slow, and their lives are in danger from Taliban killing squads. But their determination to build a road is strong, maybe unstoppable – as long as the Canadians are there.

The building of the causeway and the paving of the road are two small parts of the much larger struggle to rebuild a country that has been smashed by thirty years of war. It is true that the causeway and the paved road will allow Canadian soldiers to move more easily through the rugged badlands of north central Kandahar province. But the real importance of these two projects is that the people of this region can now bring their produce to market much more easily and the local economy might have some chance to recover. That, in a nutshell, is what Canada's (and NATO's) struggle in Afghanistan is all about now – providing the military security that is vitally necessary if the people of Afghanistan are to recover a semblance of normality.

It is difficult for Canadians to fathom the extent to which Afghanistan has been brought low by war. Thirty years ago it was a free and neutral country. Not wealthy by any means, it still provided basic services and security to its people. The southern provinces, Kandahar included, had a thriving agricultural economy. Melons, not opium poppies, were the pride of the region.

In 1978 a Communist-engineered coup toppled the government sparking over a decade of war. The Soviet invasion took at least a million Afghani lives and drove some six to seven million people into refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. When the Soviets were finally defeated, a seven year long civil war further ravaged the country. In areas of Afghanistan, the entire infrastructure was laid to waste. Cultivation systems, roads, schools, clinics, hospitals, bridges, dams, and electric power generation and transmission facilities were destroyed. Afghanistan's government ceased to function.

The Taliban won the civil war in 1996 but did almost no reconstruction afterward. They were too busy imposing their extremist version of Islam to pay any attention to improving the physical lives of the people of Afghanistan. The task of reconstruction only began in 2002, after the Taliban had been driven out and the international community slowly turned to the job of helping the Afghans recover.

If Afghanistan can be rebuilt into a fully functioning nation – as it was before 1978 – the current Taliban insurgency will fail even if Pakistan takes little or no action to curb Taliban activities on its side of the border. Reconstruction will improve the local

economy, allow basic services such as schools, hospitals, and transportation to be re-established, give the people a chance to return to productive endeavour and the raising of their children, and precipitate a stable central government that can defend the country's borders and secure its citizens. The Taliban are well aware of that and are determined to stop it. They attack de-mining teams (made up of Afghans), road building crews, local educators, health workers, administrators and, of course, the police. They believe that if they can perpetuate instability, poverty and lawlessness, the people will gravitate to them as the only hope for stability.

NATO's strategy is to provide enough military security in the most heavily populated parts of the country and the key transportation routes – especially the “ring road” that will connect all of the country's major cities – to protect the reconstruction and development work. At the same time, the Afghan army and police are being trained and mentored to shoulder the security burden themselves. The Canadian army is doing that, too, in Kandahar.

Restoring the country's infrastructure isn't the only thing that has to be done to defeat the insurgency. The government also has to tackle corruption in a major way, especially within the police. But the police training and mentoring won't be possible without military security. When outnumbered and outgunned police posts are attacked regularly by the Taliban, little progress can be expected in police training.

At Masum Ghar, a small part of the country is being rebuilt under the protection of Canadian guns. No guns, no reconstruction.

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