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Afghanistan: Out of Sight...?

A Policy Update Paper

By

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and

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Role in Afghanistan

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The tragic earthquake in Haiti, and Canada's swift and substantial response, has moved the focus sharply away from fundamental questions about our ongoing role in Afghanistan. Parliament approved an end to Canada's "combat role" in 2011 and this is being translated in some instances to mean a complete withdrawal of all of Canada's military activity in this beleaguered country, leaving unanswered many critical strategic questions. Parliamentary and media debate has centered around the dated and peripheral issue of detainees, but discussion on Canada's future role has been sterile, reflecting little analysis of the consequences for our non-military role as well for the volatile region in which we have made such a significant commitment of treasure and blood over more than eight years.

A complete withdrawal would presumably include the sharp end being conducted with significant, albeit unreported, success by our Special Forces units. It would also mean that the essential security support for Canada's massive economic development assistance programs would also come to an end, raising questions, from the Auditor General among others, about whom we should expect to substitute for us in providing this security. In a place as volatile as Afghanistan, there is simply no way that bilateral, economic assistance can be provided without basic security. The two go hand in hand. Will all of Canada's future aid be funnelled exclusively through multilateral channels? Have we thought through what the implications more broadly would be from a total military withdrawal, including the consequences for relations with key allies who, along with Canada, are doing the heavy lifting in Afghanistan?

Stability in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to stability in Pakistan, a nuclear weapons state wobbling precariously under pressure from terrorists who see no border distinction between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but who use the open geography of the frontier as safe havens for attacks in both countries.

The prolonged dithering by President Obama before his decision to increase the U.S. military commitment undermined support among the key allies, but it is now evident that the U.S. is adapting its counter insurgency strategy, as well as its capability, to reflect more of what seems to be working (belatedly) in Iraq. It will take time to recoup confidence in U.S. leadership just as it will take time for their troop increases to have practical effect on the ground. What we are likely to see – at least from the U.S. Administration – is a lowering of benchmarks for progress and increasing accommodation of local factors in Afghanistan, i.e. tribal and political factors. The more pervasive U.S. concern, however, is Pakistan. But to suggest that, because the U.S. intends to start withdrawing forces in 2011, Canada should pull out completely is a non sequitur.

The international forces are pledged to stay until the Afghan Defence Force is trained and capable of preserving basic security for larger proportions of the Afghan population. The non-combat, training component is an essential element of the commitment by NATO and other international units operating under a U.N. mandate with that objective in mind.

Canada has pressed persistently for more troops from other allies in Afghanistan and for a more comprehensive or coherent NATO strategy. How would a decision to withdraw completely tally with that position? It is not to deny that Canada has done more than most, and certainly more than its share, but there are gradations between what we are doing and what we still could do that should be analyzed. Are we influencing the new U.S. strategy on the basis of our experience? Are we assessing our own military effort in Kandahar against the new strategy? What precisely have we learned that has worked or not worked through the sacrifices to date?

The Americans changed their strategy in Iraq after a vigorous debate in Congress and within the U.S. military itself. Much of the latter is now a matter of public record. The upshot has been

less emphasis on spasmodic patrolling in volatile neighbourhoods and more on stationing troops prominently in those communities. The theory is that if you are present for only one or two hours of patrol, the insurgents have virtually free entry for the remainder of the day. Is the surge that made this change possible in Iraq applicable in Kandahar with a similarly increased deployment? We read, too often, news reports about regular patrols by Canadians in Armoured Personnel Carriers that are not sufficiently armoured to withstand increasingly lethal IEDs. Is our own military rethinking the utility/futility of this routine? If not, why not?

There are many reasons to be discouraged about events in Afghanistan. Desertion rates within the Afghan forces are reportedly as high as 25% and the recent attacks in Kabul suggested some serious deficiencies in intelligence gathering as well. More fundamentally, the Karzai Administration is tottering following a flawed electoral process and failed attempts to form a cabinet demonstrating seemingly less capacity for basic governance. The pressures for democratization are not necessarily conducive to greater stability. In an environment where the capacity to govern and to provide rudimentary levels of security are nascent, ideals associated with democratization have little resonance. Yet another international forum assembled in London last week in yet another effort to establish a more effective plan forward. The prospect of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban surfaces yet again for consideration. But the ingredients for progress, let alone success, seem more elusive than ever.

The Canadian public may be immune or fatigued by a steady stream of negative reports about Afghanistan. Questions persist about what our future role should be and why. The lack of serious debate and direction on these questions, along with the exaggerated attention devoted to the marginal issue of detainees, saps the most basic commodity of all – public trust in the value or efficacy of what we are doing and why.

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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