Looking for a Mirage in Azerbaijan

SCOTT TAYLOR
Inside Defence

Last October, when it was first announced that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had triggered the lease for its Camp Mirage air base in Dubai, I had predicted this would be a major setback to our operations in Afghanistan.

Not so, claimed the Harper Conservatives who had triggered the lease in order to ensure that the UAE, as well as the US, would have a viable alternative to the US Air Force’s Kandahar base in Afghanistan.

Sure, we had used the Camp Mirage facilities for over nine years rent-free, and the UAE even reportedly provided vital medical facilities for Canadian forces from the Camp Mirage base in Dubai.

For Canada and its allies understanding the regional location for us to establish our next air staging base was key to pitch a tent.

That said, I hereby nominate Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, as the most suitable regional location for us to establish our next logistical staging area.

Although not a member of NATO, Azerbaijan has troops in Afghanistan and has been a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace program since 1994. While not entirely without corruption, this oil-rich former Soviet republic is politically stable and eager to increase trade and development with the West. Other NATO air forces are staging cargo flights through Azerbaijan, as evidenced by the Luftwaffe crews I saw eating breakfast in my hotel room a few years ago.

A closer examination of the circumstances surrounding these two airfields makes it clear that neither is a likely long-term solution. For one thing, the Germans are only barely clinging to their landing privileges and are paying large sums of money to prop up the despot’s rule in Uzbekistan in order to combat despotic insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Since February 2009, the Kyrgyz government has threatened the Americans with expulsing the US forces from Manas in the Kyrgyz Republic.

This is the second time the Americans have had to leave a base in Central Asia. The first was a 2001-2005 period when the Americans kicked the Americans out of their leased base in Khanabad and subsequently denied the US Air Force—and most NATO countries—the use of Uzbek airspace.

The German military presence in Termez remains a closely guarded media secret within Uzbekistan as President Karimov continues to worry the expulsion of the Germans will prove to be a serious setback to our operations in Afghanistan.

Coincidentally, some media pundits in Germany have commented on the irony of paying millions of Euros to prop up the autocratic rule in Uzbekistan in order to combat despotic insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan.

As for the US, we’ve been leasing the Camp Mirage air base since 2004, but Canada still conducts its diplomat’s mission in Baku.

The German military presence in Termez is a small price to pay compared to the current ludicrously expensive stop-gap measure of renting civilian airport use in Cyprus and having our soldiers stay in hotels.

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Afghanistan and the regional blindspot

DAVID CARMENT

A recent issue of Canadian Foreign Policy Journal has taken up the challenge of explaining the impact that India, Pakistan and Iran are having on Canada’s mission in Afghanistan, a topic that until recently was rarely discussed by Canadian policymakers.

Various contributors to the issue tackle the regional dimensions from a variety of perspectives. Several authors argue that so far, Pakistan has shown resilience, but economic collapse and civil war are real possibilities. Others show that India’s foreign policy goals and objectives remain largely misunderstood in the West, while one author demonstrates that Iran’s perspective on the region is far from the most ignored by virtue of our unwillingness to properly engage the country.

For Canada and its allies understanding the regional dimensions is essential to bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. In particular, Pakistan and Iran have an undeniable role in Afghanistan, as demonstrated by the fact that Pakistan has been an ally but ignored in all aspects of policy making, from strategic analysis to public debate and intergovernmental cooperation.

Canada appears to have had no significant internal evaluation of and policy on the region until it introduced a rather undersized and somewhat superficial Canada Border Services Agency-led border training program in 2008 and initiated and supported the Dubai Peace process around the same time. The Canadian government also supports the proposed development of a Pakistan-Afghanistan super highway.

To be sure, a 2009 CSS report on Pakistan indicated that Canada was at least analytically “on top of things,” but the situation had unraveled long before.

Several years ago, a series of very clear warnings, including one from the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and another in the Economist noted that Pakistan had quickly become the world’s “most dangerous country.” Similarly detailed reports, commissioned by the Canadian government, tracking the historical risks Pakistan posed to itself and its neighbors, were also made available to policy makers.

There is, unfortunately, no evidence that any of the aforementioned warnings were ever taken into account. The Canadian government and its policy makers remain largely unaware of the risk Pakistan poses to itself and its neighbors, and are therefore unable to properly engage the region.

For Canada’s military presence in Afghanistan to be sustainable, our policy makers must take into account the regional dimensions which are essential to properly engage the country.

The policy blindspot is actually a function of more fundamental problems. The first is that military operations were never equipped nor mandated for a regional approach to stabilizing Afghanistan and were, as a result, slow to adapt to changing regional dynamics.

Our original mission’s goals were focused on a “small footprint” support operation to the government in Kabul. In terms of a mission statement, there is no evidence to indicate that our original strategy was analytically or otherwise equipped to incorporate or adapt to changing regional influences. Nor were our policymakers prepared to explain to Canadians how and why a key ally in the Global War on Terror could be fighting against our interests.

Second, the key Canadian party responsible for assessing the regional aspects of the conflict and working through policy options would be the Department of Foreign Affairs and as one of the three legs in the 3D approach to “refuelling states,” DFAIT played its hand only in the later stages of the game. We should not expect CIDA, for example, to have a comprehensive appreciation for regional dynamics since it operates and focus are primarily focused on winning the “war” in Afghanistan.

To be sure, DFAIT’s recognition of the problem and its answer in the form of the Dubai process may well bear fruit. One must ask, however, where the broader regional diplomatic effort was from 2001-2008? Where was the strategic assessment prior to the Manley report? Where was the guiding hand? The overarching strategic analysis? The preventative foresight?

This takes me to my third and most controversial point. If one reviews how much and where Canada commits to supporting Pakistan’s stability (democracy promotion, education and human rights) it becomes quickly apparent that our leverage with the country’s leaders and its peoples is quite minimal. Even if one were to raise the idea that Pakistan was a dangerous influence, there is likely little that Canada could do (on its own) to influence it. What we have here through inaction is a tacit understanding of how overwhelming the prospects of fixing a complex failed state is.

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