

A lack of strategic insight bad news for Canadians in Afghanistan

By Bob Bergen

The news that Islamic militants have established safe and comfortable rear-staging areas in Pakistan to rest, re-supply, train and reinforce insurgents does not bode well at all for Canadians fighting against them in Afghanistan.

Worse is learning that apparently no one in the former Liberal government – which committed the Canadians to switch the mission from relatively safe Kabul to the more dangerous Kandahar area last year – even considered the al-Qaeda-Taliban alliance might do that.

It now appears no one gave consideration to the strategic state of the turbulent Pakistan border regions that might pose long-term threats to the Canadian Forces next door.

That oversight is astounding because history's lessons are clear.

Limited wars – and wars today are all limited – ought to be fought when conditions are such that they can't spiral out of control.

That lesson should have been learned from the Korean War more than half a century ago when United Nations' soldiers in South Korea – most notably Canadians – were suddenly fighting the “volunteers” of the People's Republic of China in addition to North Koreans.

That lesson should have been learned from the failed Vietnam War when America decided to take a stand against the spread of Communism in South Vietnam only to become hopelessly embroiled in both South and North Vietnam.

It is the same lesson that should have been learned more recently with the convoluted clash between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in which supplies and support to Hezbollah flowed in from Syria and Iran.

Of course there are many, many differences between those wars and the Afghanistan conflict, but the point remains that while a war's aim might be limited, it is seldom geographically and strategically isolated.

Along the Afghan-Pakistan border are a number of independent lawless Pakistan regions such as Waziristan where tribal leaders wholly support the Taliban in what they view as a legitimate struggle against an American-led western invasion of Afghanistan.

The fact that they employ al-Qaeda tactics in the form of suicide bombers to routinely blow up Afghan civilians – men, women, children – as well as Canadians doesn't bother them one iota.

Complicating matters is Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's October deal with local tribal leaders in those regions to withdraw his military in return for the leaders withdrawing their support for the Taliban.

That clearly has not worked with reportedly between 500 and 2,000 foreign fighters regrouping there for future counter attacks.

The problem with Musharraf is that he has a long history of saying one thing and doing another.

He claims to be the west's anti-terrorist ally who has survived a number of attempted assassinations for publicly siding with the U.S. against al-Qaeda.

On the other hand, Musharraf openly allows the Taliban to flourish and supports countless madrassas or radical religious schools in Pakistan to churn out wave upon wave of new suicide bombers.

For example, as journalist and author Kathy Gannon pointedly notes, Pakistan's most-conservative and pervasive religious group Jamaat-e-Islami has holy war at its

heart; ties to al-Qaeda and Afghan insurgents; 1,300 madrassas and a special Afghan Fund which Musharraf allows to operate outside government controls.

Musharraf claims the problem for NATO troops in Afghanistan is that it is virtually impossible to seal the porous Durand Line, the contested 2,640-kilometre border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which may be true, but there is more that could be done within Pakistan to disrupt the terrorist tide.

If Musharraf was sincere, his government could collect and share counter-insurgent intelligence, stem the flow of terrorist funding, offer government-funded schooling as an alternative to the madrassas and arrest, kill or otherwise disrupt terrorist organizers.

Instead, Musharraf's recent pact with the Islamic militants in the north allowing Taliban safe havens is but the latest example of his chameleon character and ambiguous if not hypocritical policies.

Still, Musharraf moves in powerful circles and, during a recent joint press conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, he criticized NATO's Afghan mission.

He called for a Marshall-type plan to make political settlements and pump billions of development dollars into Afghanistan instead of depending on military force.

Similarly, Canada's new Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion recently called for a Marshall Plan to rebuild Afghan's economy to make the country more secure because he said combat alone isn't achieving results.

But, where Musharraf's plan is couched in duplicity, Dion's plan can only be described as impossibly naïve.

There can't be reconstruction without security and the Pakistani safe havens, madrassas, and jihadist religious organizations funding them are all contributing to Afghanistan's instability.

Musharraf, a military man, knows that and Liberal Leader Dion apparently doesn't, but he's not alone.

The question is why the previous government didn't consult their own sources – Canadian diplomats and military attaches in Pakistan – about strategic considerations in Pakistan's north before expanding the Canadian mission from Kabul to Kandahar.

Another question is whether there are lessons to be learned here about intelligence gathering before future governments' military commitments.

One can only hope.

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