

“Afghanistan, Afghanistan.”

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Afghanistan is a dangerous, unforgiving place. Not only do I understand this intuitively as a historian, I have also been there. The Chretien government has by now deployed 1800 Canadian soldiers to serve with the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul. I have never had a problem with putting Canadians in harm's way if it was for a good reason. Indeed, over the past ten years I have supported most Canadian overseas operations, provided that the troops were properly equipped, trained, and supported. The men and women from the Canadian ISAF contingent are well-trained and equipped. I have great confidence in their professionalism. But I have yet to be convinced that there are good reasons for this deployment. I am disturbed by the inability of the government to articulate clear Canadian objectives to me, a Canadian citizen, taxpayer, and national security analyst. I do not accept the argument put forth by other analysts that vague policy direction is somehow an acceptable substitute for national strategy.

The Canadian decision to commit to ISAF apparently was made out of domestic political considerations related to not committing forces to Iraq. The decision highlights the lack of a true national security policy process, a lack of understanding of the process of identifying and then connecting national means and ends, and a lack of effective constitutional safeguards in the Canadian political system to prevent ill-conceived policies from being executed. The confusion over what Canada wants to achieve in Kabul is highlighted by the shifting language used to describe the mission. First, ISAF was 'peacekeeping' and by implication, low risk compared to war in Iraq. Once the sham of Canadian peacekeeping mythology was exposed, the

mission was dubbed 'peace enforcement' or 'peace support'. Now it is part of the War on Terror. ISAF is none of these. Peacekeeping is the agreed-to insertion of military forces of a third party between two belligerent military forces. Peace enforcement and peace support, Orwellian terms at best, is the use of coercive military force to establish peace between several belligerents. Is ISAF really part of the War on Terror against Al Qaeda? No. ISAF is a small-scale stabilization mission providing limited assistance to the Afghan government in Kabul. At best, it is a secondary effort in Afghanistan. The main effort is the American-led Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) which trains the Afghan National Army, hunts down and kills Al Qaeda and contains the Taliban remnants in the south east.

The concept of an international force for Afghanistan was a diplomatic tool wielded by the Americans in the Fall of 2001. It served two purposes. First, the anti-Taliban factions would only agree to discuss post-war government if there were firm promises of international aid. Second, the UN wanted to be the prime agency for Afghan reconstruction to make up for its failures there after the Soviets pulled out in 1988-89. The UN would only commit aid if there was an international force to protect the aid delivering agencies. Note the similarity to the situation in Bosnia during 1992 or Somalia in 1993.

The compromise to get the parties together was the creation of an ISAF. All players agreed to that in Bonn in November 2001, but the UN cleverly left it up to the Afghan factions to determine the size, composition, and mission of the force. The Americans did not want a European-led force that could overlap and interfere with the more critical OEF operations. Not surprisingly, the US –supported Afghans wanted a small non-UN force that could train and re-equip them, help stabilize Kabul until the government was up and running, and not pose a threat to their own forces. And that is what they got in the spring of 2002. ISAF was limited to 1000 combat troops with 3000-3500 support troops, far short of the 25 000 number bandied about in European capitals and NGO boardrooms.

In the 2002 Military Technical Agreement with the Afghan Interim Administration, ISAF nations committed to conduct protective patrolling; assist in developing security structures; assist in reconstruction; and to identify and arrange training and assistance tasks for Afghan security forces. Over the course of the next year, the inability of ISAF to carry out the training tasks and failure to protect the Karzai government in the face of terrorist attacks meant that these roles were soon turned over to OEF. This left the protective patrolling and reconstruction assistance missions. Long-term reconstruction is best left to professional NGOs and perhaps CIDA money: ISAF's civil affairs capability, though useful in the short term, has to be passed on to the Afghan administration for the long term. As for protective patrolling, 1000 armed men in a city numbering in the millions meant that combined patrolling with the nascent Kabul police forces had to be undertaken. The people who really stabilize Kabul are the Northern Alliance forces (estimated at 27 000 men), the NDS secret police (Northern Alliance-dominated), the Kabul police, which is trained by a non-ISAF German police unit, and the contract American security forces protecting President Karzai and his ministers. Under the Bonn Agreement, the Northern Alliance forces were supposed to withdraw from Kabul. This did not occur because there was no means or will to enforce compliance, which illustrates ISAF's limitations. Indeed, a substantial percentage of ISAF's resources are employed in force protection. ISAF has taken over 50 casualties from ordnance clearance explosions, rocket attacks, car bombs, and ambushes conducted by shadowy entities which may or may not have anything to do with Al Qaeda.

Some would like to see ISAF expand outside of Kabul. This move has been subject to intense debate and has thus far been blocked by Afghan factions and the Americans. The American strategy in Afghanistan is based on a small 'footprint' with its OEF forces. The larger the 'footprint' of foreign troops on the ground, the greater the number of infidel targets for Islamist insurgents. The Americans learned from Soviet failure: those advocating

ISAF expansion have not. The key to stabilizing the regions outside of Kabul is a combination of OEF forces and forces belonging to the factional leaders in the provinces who can be bought off or convinced to go along with the process. In time, perhaps, a collaborative arrangement can be worked out between an expanded Afghan National Army and the militia forces. Using ISAF to coerce militia forces will put NATO in the same historical position as the British and the Soviets: occupying a volatile land where armed tribal factionalism rules and the central government remains, by geographical and historical realities, weak.

Making military commitments without a public and clearly-defined strategic aim is exactly how the disasters at Dieppe and Hong Kong happened during the Second World War and why we wound up embroiled in the Somalia affair: similar problems led to American involvement in Vietnam. The American strategic objective in Afghanistan, publicly stated, is the elimination of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a sanctuary for terrorism. What exactly is Canada's strategic objective? If there is one, by what process was it arrived at? Taking the fight to terrorism to prevent attacks on Canadian interests, and sending troops to act as targets in an urban shooting gallery to satisfy perceived public opinion are two completely different things. At the very least, it's a break from Bosnia.