

Canada's new and dangerous mission in Afghanistan

"œWhy are your governments, especially those of Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Germany and Australia, allying themselves with America in its attacks on us in Afghanistan?" Osama Bin Laden

After a series of lethal suicide attacks directed against Canadian forces in Kandahar, Osama Bin Laden's rhetorical question is now being repeated within the Canadian punditscape five years into our war against al-Qaeda. Memories are short: many Canadians have forgotten we are at war with a violent radical Islamist movement that is global in scope. The combat in this war occurs in places far away from the tranquil suburbia of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, away from the everyday concerns of paying taxes, sending the kids to school and the mundanity of the workplace. The jungles of the Philippines, the arid wastes of the Horn of Africa, the dusty streets of Iraq and the forbidding hills of Afghanistan — these are the battlegrounds. Another front is the war of perceptions, waged daily, anywhere people debate, convince, cajole and manipulate to gain influence. Governments are reticent about the details. There is fear of loss: loss of inside information necessary to target the enemy, perhaps loss of prestige born from failure. There are aspects of Canada's fight that will not be known for decades. Overt manifestations of Canada's fight, however, can be discussed in some detail and are a valuable contribution to the larger war against al-Qaeda. Such a description should have been made by the previous governments, using available open information, so that the Canadian people can understand why we are in Afghanistan, what we are doing there and how we do it. None of this was made clear by the Martin government in the run-up to the election campaign or during it, to the confusion of the Canadian people, many of whom still think we are "œpeacekeeping" in Afghanistan.

Canada's objectives in Afghanistan are not a secret, but they require some explanation. Canada does not have the resources to contribute to all of the existing "œfronts" in this global war and as a result Canada's contributions are limited to Afghanistan and Iraq. Most Canadians engaging al-Qaeda and its proxies are in Afghanistan, with a smaller number in Iraq.

Why is Afghanistan so important? Al-Qaeda's war against us did not start on 9/11 in 2001 with the political mass murder of 30 Canadians in New York City. The formal declaration of war by

Bin Laden occurred in 1994: nobody noticed for several years until al-Qaeda started attacking targets in Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen, Jordan, and New York. Al-Qaeda was based in Sudan and developed a parasitical relationship to this state until it was finally cast out in 1996. Al-Qaeda migrated to Afghanistan that year, after a Pakistan-supported radical Islamist movement took over Afghanistan in the wake of a destructive civil war. From 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan, with its rugged mountains, remote inland location and violent reputation for repelling outsiders, became an al-Qaeda fortress. Multi-national terrorist training camps proliferated and a conventional Muslim "foreign legion" was constructed, as were research facilities for biological and chemical weapons. Even Iraq sent a delegation of chemical warfare specialists and, chillingly, Pakistan nuclear supremo A.Q. Khan and his representatives visited on occasion.

After 9/11, the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (called OEF or the "coalition" forces) ripped away the Taliban shield. Al-Qaeda's training, research and communications infrastructure was ripped out, up-rooted, from Afghanistan. The remnants decamped for the equally rugged (in both political and geographic terms) terrain of Pakistan, a state on the knife edge of radical Islamist violence. Canada contributed several things to OEF in Afghanistan: special operations forces first in 2001, followed by a light infantry battalion in 2002.

As al-Qaeda fled, the Taliban forces crumbled into small pieces. Those coerced to join the movement bailed out, leaving a hard core of Taliban fanatics who came from Pashtun tribes residing in the southeastern provinces. These tribes have cross-border relations with their opposite numbers in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda views its allies (which also include the HIG movement led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as well as the Taliban) as proxies in its global fight against the West. Consequently, al-Qaeda provides training, weapons and information operations assistance to any who oppose the Government of Afghanistan and its supporters. This is the basis for the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was a major defeat for al-Qaeda and they want to make life as difficult as possible for the victors, which include the Afghan peoples.

The psychological stakes are high for the Western forces in Afghanistan. OEF operations in the Philippines and the Horn of Africa are discrete, back-ally or jungle fights. They are important but secondary fronts. There is no clear definable victory in these places: they are processes. Any positive gains in Iraq, like sucking in al-Qaeda's A-list terrorists to a place where they can be killed more efficiently, are overridden by strident criticism of the Bush administration and its Iraq policies. This leaves Afghanistan, the place where al-Qaeda was defeated, the place where that victory remains to be consolidated.

Military victory is useless without political consolidation. Imagine the consequences if the Allies had walked away from a defeated Nazi Germany in 1945. Canada's efforts in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005 were a series of contributions to consolidation. An anemic European-led international security assistance force called ISAF was set up in 2002 to pacify the United Nations, who insisted that a non-US-led military force be present before the organization would

re-engage. European-led ISAF was of limited efficacy, but some realized that a NATO-led ISAF could become a valuable tool in consolidating control of Kabul. Urban operations are notoriously manpower intensive and the American forces in Afghanistan were not large in numbers and were structured and equipped for operations in the mountains. Canada sent forces to serve with ISAF: they engaged in stabilization operations in support of the emergent Afghan national government. Canadian-led ISAF's war in Kabul was mostly intelligence-oriented and designed to disrupt terrorist cells trying to interfere with the electoral and political processes, while at the same time facilitating these processes.

The need to push government authority out to the disparate provinces became the next priority. American OEF units called Joint Regional Teams were operating with local authorities in support of ongoing operations against enemy forces. A concept whereby the JRTs would become the base of support for Afghan national governance resulted in the conversion of the JRTs to the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These were all commanded by OEF, but a plan was implemented in 2004 to have NATO-led ISAF take them over gradually from OEF.

At the same time, several nations volunteered to assist the Afghan government in building up security structures: Italy worked on the justice system, Germany worked on the police. Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom worked on the Afghan National Army with Embedded Training Teams.

Simplistic scenarios where "war" stops and "peacemaking/peacebuilding/peacekeeping" starts do not apply in Afghanistan. The country is at war while it is being built up. There is no clear delineation between "war" and "peace." It is, however, possible to distinguish between the areas of Afghanistan where the Taliban does not operate and where it does. The Taliban insurgency is confined to the south and southeastern parts of the country, with residual attacks in the Kabul region and points east.

The current terminology employed in Afghanistan by coalition forces distinguishes between "kinetic" and "non-kinetic" operations. Both are designed to influence the behaviour of the enemy but also portions of the population who do not side with government. Kinetic operations employ methods to kill enemy personnel while non-kinetic operations involve the use of a variety of tools to persuade the enemy and uncommitted elements to join the Afghan government in building a new state. The primary kinetic tools in Afghanistan include air-mobile light infantry forces and special operations forces to hunt down and destroy guerrilla forces in the rural areas of south-eastern Afghanistan. Canada currently contributes special operations forces to a coalition special operations forces command and leads Regional Command South, a multinational light infantry brigade which has British, American and Canadian army units in it. Air support is provided by British Harrier jump jets, while a number of European nations contribute F-16 fighter-bombers, in addition to American aircraft. The Afghan National Army, still being built up, deploys light infantry battalions in the field who work under their own command structure but alongside OEF forces. An ANA battalion is twinned with each coalition battalion from the multinational brigade in the southern part of Afghanistan.

Enemy forces come in different varieties. There are urban cells that employ car bombs and attack civilians as well as coalition forces. In the rural areas, there are small mobile groups numbering between 5 and 20 fighters who terrorize local populations; attack relief, construction and aid workers; and attack coalition forces who pass through their areas of responsibility. There are also IED cells whose job is to lay as many improvised explosive devices as possible: they operate in both urban and rural settings. Kinetic operations are generally designed to go after the rural enemy, while the urban enemy is supposed to be taken on by Afghan police and paramilitary forces. Pashtun areas in Pakistan provide the support base for these efforts and this is cause for serious concern, since most coalition forces are not officially permitted to operate in Pakistan and the government is unwilling or unable to exert control in these areas. Targeting enemy forces is in many ways dependent upon the cooperation of the Afghan population. And that is where non-kinetic operations come in.

Canada leads a 250-man Provincial Reconstruction Team based in Kandahar city. The PRT is misnamed (it should be "reconstruction" as opposed to "reconstruction," perhaps, after 25 years of war) and this confuses many people in the policy and media communities. As the Canadian commander of the PRT points out, however, "PRT" has become a brand name with Afghans who understand the organization's importance, and therefore we will continue to use the label. The PRT conducts a variety of activities throughout Kandahar Province. It is divided into a number of sections: Patrol Company, which is a light infantry company equipped with G-Wagon and Nyala armoured patrol vehicles; and the other government departments (OGDs). The OGDs include representatives from the American USAID organization, the British Department of Foreign and International Development, the Canadian International Development Agency, Foreign Affairs Canada, and the RCMP. The Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) section, a military-staffed group, also has access to financial resources.

Each OGD conducts non-kinetic attacks. For example, the national aid agencies have access to financial resources and development programs. The American and British OGD representatives monitor existing programs, assess the potential for new ones, gather information on the environment and implement selected programs. CIDA is engaged in assisting the provincial government to develop bureaucratic mechanisms. The RCMP trains the Afghan National Police. Patrol Company does not conduct traditional framework patrolling; it is a "delivery system" for non-kinetic "attacks" conducted by the OGDs in dangerous and threatened areas. It provides security and transport. Without Patrol Company and its professionals, the OGD elements would not be able to function effectively in remote areas, especially areas of the province wavering between Taliban and governmental control.

The spectrum of non-kinetic attacks is broad: they are conducted at the "operational" level (in Kandahar city) and at the "tactical" level (rural areas). They overlap with kinetic operations. For example, in areas subject to Taliban influence, the coalition will establish forward operating bases to hunt enemy forces. To assist with improving the livelihood of the population in that area with an eye towards weaning them away from Taliban influence, the PRT may recommend

the deployment of aid programs to that area. The synergy of the kinetic and non-kinetic will, hopefully, convince the uncommitted and intimidated portions of the population in shaky areas to support the government.

In Kandahar city, CIDA's capacity-building efforts will hopefully produce or assist in producing a bureaucracy that can administer the province both in terms of finances and in terms of infrastructure improvement. The RCMP's efforts to professionalize the police will also, over time, improve the ability of the government to hunt down urban terrorist cells and corrupt elements that assist them. Accountability is of paramount importance. Donors will not deploy resources if corruption is too high or if the security level is too low. Capacity building in terms of governance and the security sectors will go a long way to assuaging these fears. A note of caution: these are long-term processes and those seeking instant gratification will be disappointed. We are engaged in a protracted war.

The strategic counterpart of the PRT is, to some extent, the Strategic Advisory Team Afghanistan (SAT-A). Located in Kabul, this 15-man team was established as an assistance project between the Canadian Forces and the government of Afghanistan. It is not part of OEF or ISAF. SAT-A emerged out of discussions between President Karzai and senior Canadian military commanders serving with ISAF who were increasingly aware that the Afghan interim government lacked the institutions capable of absorbing and distributing developmental aid monies. The weak link was the lack of planning processes and, again, accountability. The Karzai government was and is literally building a government from scratch. Afghanistan had shifted from overly centralized and bureaucratic Communist control to a virtual collapse of the system under the Commanders and then the anti-modern Taliban who preferred not to have effective Western-style governance. SAT-A is designed to assist the Afghan government in several key areas. The most prominent one is the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS). The ANDS will become the basic strategic economic document for the construction and stabilization of Afghanistan for many years to come.

SAT-A personnel work alongside personnel from the President's Office and the Office of the Economic Advisor. They are uniformed members of the CF, plus a CIDA representative and a defence scientist skilled in quantitative methodology. The objective is to adapt variants of CF planning and accountability processes (while working in conjunction with their Afghan counterparts) for Afghan government purposes. A lot of this activity revolves around the actual creation of the ANDS. Part of the mission is to assist the Afghans in, as the SAT-A explains it, "articulating strategic objectives and developing supporting plans."

Related to this is another capacity-building project where SAT-A trains and mentors the emergent civil service training organization so that when these people graduate, they are conversant with the processes that will be in play in the government. SAT-A personnel are also engaged in civil service sector reform. At the same time, there is no attempt to impose Canadian values on either of the capacity-building projects. Indeed, the SAT-A has assisted the Afghans in articulating an Islam-based code of civil service and business ethics.

No other Canadian government entity was willing to put personnel into Kabul to do the job that SAT-A is doing: in the main, other Canadian agencies wanted to use their own arm's-length contractors, but the Afghans generally view foreign contractors as untrustworthy and dedicated to feathering their own nests. The possibility of violence remains medium to high in Kabul which leads to liability issues for Canadian civilian personnel. SAT-A personnel in uniform are clear Canadian representatives who have legitimacy and demonstrate that Canada is willing to assume risk. This goes a long way in the halls of power in Kabul.

Canada's engagement in Afghanistan operates on many levels – tactical, operational and strategic – and involves the Department of National Defence, CIDA and Foreign Affairs Canada working together in relative harmony for the first time. The synergy produced by these commitments, working within coalition structures, assures Canada saliency not only in Afghanistan but internationally with important allied partners. The strategic objective is forward security for Canada first by the removal of the al-Qaeda organization from Afghanistan – the disruption of its operations, and then by making Afghanistan resistant to outside interference in the region.

This in some ways is all in spite of the lacklustre leadership demonstrated by the Martin government, or the inability to articulate a coherent strategy in the war against al-Qaeda by the Chrétien government. The choice of Kandahar as Canada's front line was made only after procrastination. Initially, Canada had a choice of PRTs from throughout Afghanistan, but internal squabbling inside Foreign Affairs and dithering over whether Canada was "peacekeeping" or "warfighting" within other elements of the bureaucracy meant that other nations got their choice of PRT locations. Canada, for example, was in line for Herat but was beaten out by the Italians, who made a better case and had a plan. Kandahar, the hottest PRT in Afghanistan, became Canada's default position in part because the Chrétien government wanted an escape valve from Iraq. Indeed, Canada's commitment to the SAT-A was a DND/CF initiative, taken when others would not think outside the box and react in a timely fashion when the Afghan government was in its hour of need. In many cases, Canadian policy in Afghanistan is being driven by "operators" who have "ground truth," not professional bureaucrats who are hidebound by bureaucracy, or politicians with decision-making and communication disorders. We may need to consider how we articulate what Canada wants when we go about committing forces overseas in the future.

The recovery of Canada's credibility vis-à-vis Canada's allies cannot be underestimated as a factor in our engagement in Afghanistan. The Canadian experience in Afghanistan can in many ways be compared to the historical experience of Vimy Ridge: the common perception was that it couldn't be taken, but we did it. Canada has been part of seizing this bastion and now is part of trying to hold it in partnership with the government of Afghanistan. This is Canada's part of the line in the war against al-Qaeda. We cannot be everywhere so we must choose. We have chosen, for better or for worse, to stand in Afghanistan.

