

AFGHANISTAN: NOT THE WAR IT WAS

Sean M. Maloney

The Canadian endgame in Afghanistan affords us an opportunity to relearn the role of military forces in influencing coalition politics and in Canadian international affairs generally. The influx of American forces in Kandahar province and the progressive reduction of Canadian activities is a case study in how a reduced presence results in reduced influence. Timeless lessons in saliency and operational influence also help us ask hard questions about the role of force and development in future Canadian policy.



La fin de partie du Canada en Afghanistan est l'occasion de réexaminer le rôle que jouent les forces armées dans les coalitions et leur influence sur la politique internationale canadienne en général. L'entrée des soldats américains dans la province de Kandahar et la réduction progressive des activités canadiennes montrent à quel point recul de la présence militaire et diminution de l'influence vont de pair. Or les leçons d'efficacité et d'influence opérationnelles qui en découlent soulèvent d'épineuses questions sur le rapport entre force et développement dans la politique à long terme du Canada.

Afghanistan is not the war it was two years ago. The conflict has evolved dramatically but subtly, in ways not readily apparent to the casual observer or the Canadian media. Specifically, the effects of the influx of massive numbers of American forces and aid money into an area of operations originally dominated by Canadian efforts coupled with significant changes in how the enemy does business have had profound effects. These changes have significant implications for Canada, not only for the future of national security policy in the region but for how we as a country are handling the situation on the ground in Kandahar province. Most importantly, those implications provide us insight into the relationship between the tools of national power, national objectives and coalition saliency — timeless lessons for a nation that will engage in overseas operations in the future.

First things first — a little myth busting. The idea that there is an “Obama strategy” and we are seeing a manifestation of it on the ground in Afghanistan is, for the most part, incorrect. Planning for the present level of American involvement in southern Afghanistan pre-dated the Obama administration by nearly a year, while implementation started over five months before its election. The critical thing to understand is this: from 2006 to 2009, the Canadian Army — while mentoring the Afghan national security forces, working in parallel with coalition Special Operations Forces and supported by air power provided mostly by the United States Air Force and the United States Army — was able to

frustrate and disrupt insurgent designs on Kandahar City and its surrounding districts. The Canadian forces and their allies bought time that permitted the American administrations to re-calibrate their approach to Afghanistan, particularly in the south. One key factor was the level of continuity provided by the retention of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates over the course of the two administrations and that office's interest in learning about changing conditions on the ground and then prioritizing Afghanistan issues.

During this period, the situation in Kandahar province deteriorated, and it was increasingly evident that the single Canadian battle group was stretched thin trying to cover all of the districts west of the city. Canada requested additional forces from NATO countries and from the Afghan government, while at the same time competing for scarce resources with the other members of Regional Command (South): the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States. For the most part, only temporary or, worse, token support was provided by many NATO countries, while the Afghan government chose to retain significant forces in and around Kabul. During the deliberations leading up to the “Report of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan” (Manley Report) in 2007-08, one of the unstated messages was that if Canada was not reinforced by NATO member countries, it might entertain the possibility of withdrawal from Kandahar province. Elements in the

American government, keeping close observation on Canadian decision-making, interpreted this process as a veiled threat to gain American help.

Though this wasn't necessarily the case (the messaging was, apparently, directed at NATO, not the United States), a series of informal discussions followed by more formal analysis resulted in the American decision to deploy a US Army infantry battalion to Kandahar province and place it under Canadian command. This battalion, 2-2 Infantry, was deployed

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in the summer of 2008 and was conducting operations by fall 2008. This, for all intents and purposes, was the start of the American influx: the US Army brought in several more battalions and deployed them to other provinces in Regional Commands West and East at roughly the same time. Some of these units were turned around from their planned Iraq rotations and sent to Afghanistan in as little as four to six weeks. This all predated the US elections in 2008.

Of note, there were also increasingly strengthened connections between the various American entities operating armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in southern Afghanistan and the Canadian headquarters and units fighting the war in Kandahar province: (Note that the media's use of the word "drone" to describe these machines is incorrect and technically inaccurate.) Canada's access to these platforms and systems increased significantly in 2008. A lot of it was driven from the ground up through personal connections established in Kandahar and a buildup of operational credibility between the UAV operators and owners and the Canadian army "end-users." However, a later visit by high-level representatives of the Secretary of Defense's office to Task Force Kandahar brought more official

recognition that this was an American contribution to the Canadian fight and that it should be supported at all levels. Canada's unwillingness to deploy CF-18 fighters or acquire an armed UAV meant that somebody else had to supply the air support but at the same time there were recognized sensitivities related to retention of Canadian command.

The selection of a battalion-sized unit and the reliance on UAVs instead of a flood of American "fast air"

jets were appropriate for political reasons as much as military ones. In coalition warfare, those who provide the preponderance of military forces have the right to command the coalition formation overseeing them. If there is a balance, the command positions in the headquarters are rotated to reflect the balance. Command of Canadian forces is an extremely sensitive thing to Canadian commanders, as it should be for politicians; this goes back to the disasters of Hong Kong and Dieppe in the 1940s, when Canadian forces were misused by Great Britain, and before that back to the First World War, when Canadian national pride emerged alongside independent Canadian command of Canadian forces in the context of an imperial structure.

In Kandahar province in 2008, there was a 1,000-man Canadian battle group (an infantry battalion with a tank squadron, a recon squadron and a battery of artillery) and there was nearly half of a Canadian infantry battalion working as mentors alongside the Afghan national security forces, plus combat and construction engineers and logistic support. A 700-man US infantry battalion didn't disrupt the command balance and it was placed under Canadian command, supported with

Canadian "enablers" (artillery, UAVs, engineers, intelligence). There was a partnership on UAV usage: the unarmed Canadian Sperwer Tactical UAVs provided coverage for American forces, while the armed American Predator and Reaper UAVs supported Canadian forces interchangeably.

On the development front, the situation was similar. Canada led the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), though there were United States Agency for International Development (USAID) representatives with their checkbooks and country-wide programs. The situation at the PRT was a bit more problematic, as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and USAID competed for prestige reconstruction projects — and the Americans had a lot more money to work with. In coalition terms, however, the Canadians leading the PRT were able through force of personality and procedure to maintain a precarious coordination of both Canadian and American reconstruction projects and monies.

Thus from 2006 and into 2009, Canada was able to retain lead command of coalition efforts in Kandahar province. The insurgency, on the other hand, also got a vote in what was going on. Having been badly mauled by Canadian forces from 2006 to 2008 when it attempted near-conventional and guerrilla-type operations, the insurgency altered its approach. From late 2008 and throughout 2009, the insurgency placed greater emphasis on expanding its development and governance capacity in districts thought to be controlled by Canadian and coalition forces. Previously, the insurgency followed a "negative governance" path: intimidation, school burnings, and other forms of coercion (see "Taliban Governance: Can Canada Compete?" *Policy Options*, June 2009). By 2009 and into 2010, the insurgency mimicked, albeit on a small scale, coalition development efforts in areas not patrolled or controlled by the Afghan

government. The emergence of insurgent dispute resolution mechanisms that provided better services to the Afghan population than the Kandahar-based government was a major shift to a positive governance approach. All of this was enhanced through the insurgency's domination of Afghan religious structures in Kandahar province. After a prototypical assassination campaign directed against governance structures in Arghandab district, the insurgency learned that negative governance (denial) coupled with positive governance (provision of services) was a powerful combination — even more powerful when coordinated with guerrilla operations designed to keep the coalition security forces back on their heels.

The insurgency's ability to swing the population away from the government was enhanced by a variety of independent allegations that the 2009 federal elections in Afghanistan were fraudulent. Whether they were has become virtually irrelevant, as the general population believes that they were. Prior to 2009, coalition forces could claim that they were in Afghanistan backing a legitimate government beset by an insurgency fuelled by external sources. Now it appears that coalition forces cannot make that claim. Insurgent propaganda depicts coalition forces as a protective force for an illegitimate regime — and it has the religious mechanisms to capitalize on this to enhance the legitimacy of the insurgency. This is exactly how the mujahedeen were able to gain community support against the Soviet Union in 1981. Up to 2009, the present Taliban-based insurgency has not been able to do so. Now it can. It is important to note that the population doesn't have to openly support the insurgency for the insurgency to be effective. It just has to not support the government.

As before, there remains substantial external support to the insurgency. The inability of the international community to deal with Pakistan in any coordi-

nated fashion Pakistan's and inability or unwillingness to assert control over their provinces adjacent to Regional Command (South) continue to be the major obstacles in shutting off the flow of money, weapons and jihadists that kill Canadians in Afghanistan. To pretend that Pakistan is anything but a failed state equipped with nuclear weapons, and a country with a 50-year history of exporting low-intensity warfare as a strategy, ignores the 800-pound gorilla in the room. There are entities in Pakistan that do not want to see a viable Afghanistan. We are seeing those entities succeed, in part because nobody is turning the arc lights on them. There is not enough public scrutiny of those entities or what their objectives are: it is easier for Canadian media and other critics to be hypertactically focused or to latch onto nonissues like detainees. Spending Canadian money on the Pakistani educational system or on border controls is closing the barn door long after the horse has bolted and does not address the main problems at hand.

Providing bureaucratic support to Afghan provincial-level governance and deploying aid projects and reconstruction programs throughout the province, including to those areas not controlled by the security forces, cannot successfully compete with the enemy's increasingly sophisticated and coordinated

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campaign. Various NGOs even undermine government legitimacy by behaving in a neutral fashion. Canadian governance and development initiatives can in no way make up for what is increasingly perceived by the Afghan population to be an illegitimate government. The unwillingness of the Canadian approach to take into account the role that the religious structures play in this contest ceded that vital ground to the insurgency as early as 2007.

While the enemy was changing gears, the American influx started.

Overall, the US influx is a good thing — greater troop density is a requirement to establish a security environment that integrated development and governance can flourish in. Canada got the reinforcements that were asked for. But, as the saying goes, be careful what you ask for as you will surely get it. In 2008, there was one Canadian battle group, an American infantry battalion and about half of another Canadian infantry battalion mentoring the Afghan security forces in Kandahar province. As of mid-2010 there are about 12 American battalions in the province. The ratio of Canadian to American forces is now 1.5:12, where it had been 1.5:0. The implications are obvious: Canada no longer retains the right to lead or control coalition operations in Kandahar province. In terms of aid and development, the American approach provides more money and a greater dispersion of the district-level mechanisms needed to dispense it than the Canadian approach. The entrepreneurial survivalism that is endemic to Afghan society will be influenced by the money and where it comes from. Period. Canadian expectations of any form of reciprocal gratitude are naive: what we have done does not necessarily translate into influence. Indeed, the amounts of aid and development monies that have flooded into the country with little accountability or controls may have even

distorted the tribal structures in southern Afghanistan as we understood them in the 2002-06 time-frame.

Canada, simply put, no longer has saliency in Kandahar province. We are not doing anything out of the ordinary, as we were before. We do not deploy significant numbers relative to the US effort in the province, as we did before, nor do we bring substantially proportionate aid monies to the table. Yes, Canadians are tactically proficient in whatever district they choose to be

in. Yes, we can be at times more agile with our use of aid monies than our more ponderous southern ally. We have to ask ourselves: What positive effect are we having, given that the preponderance of power has shifted, and is it, in a cost-benefit analysis, worth it?

I will emphatically point out that such realism in no way calls into question what Canada has already accomplished in Afghanistan — only those with a simplistic, uneducated or highly politicized outlook would even seriously raise that question. As a country we have a list of impressive accomplishments in that country already, and we don't need to apologize for it or dismiss it all as a waste if we don't get what we want in its entirety, or if the endgame isn't necessarily to our liking.

If we look back at our nearly 10-year engagement with Afghanistan, the Canadian narrative breaks down into several key periods:

- 2001-02: The removal of the Taliban regime, the disruption of the al-Qaeda organization and the strategic exploitation of al-Qaeda's facilities.
- 2003-04: The stabilization of Kabul, the establishment of national-level governance mechanisms necessary for the reconstruction of the country and the prevention of another Afghan civil war.
- 2005-06: Mentoring the Afghan government in the creation of a national development strategy, getting the international community to accept and fund it, and then accepting the lead of a Provincial Reconstruction Team in the most volatile province.
- 2006-09: The defence of Kandahar City and environs against an unforeseen protracted insurgent assault by varied enemy methods ranging from urban suicide terrorism to near-conventional operations; mentoring the Afghan national security forces while under fire.
- 2010-11: Transition and withdrawal. Maintaining operations while under increasingly sophisticated insurgent assault; profes-



Courtesy Sean M. Maloney

The deployment of nearly a division of American troops now eclipses Canada's contribution to the fight in Kandahar province.

sionally and successfully handing over key areas of Kandahar province, including Kandahar City, to American forces.

The importance of the transition and withdrawal phase is the hardest for the layman to understand. It is easy to be emotional about walking away from an ongoing fight and to focus on the frustrations that led Canada to that decision. However, without effective transition, the situation on the ground is worse overall for everybody except the insurgents.

We have, in the past, seen the negative effects of what happens when a coalition partner walks away and does not hand over properly. This occurred in 2005 when the American-led PRT in Kandahar left before the Canadian-led PRT was even on the ground. This forced the new PRT to start all over again, nearly a year and a half after the original PRT was established, with no development data, few local contacts and no coordination mechanisms.

That is not happening today. Canadian forces were extremely profes-

sional in handing off Arghandab district, Dand district, Zharey district and then the city itself in August 2010. Deploying American headquarters and units were provided with up-to-the-minute intelligence, detailed governance and economic data, and a variety of functional Canadian-Afghan coordinating mechanisms to work with. Nobody can claim that they did not receive a proper and professional handover. American forces entering Kandahar province do not have to start from scratch (though some may choose to anyway) as Canadian forces did in 2005-06.

The peak of Canadian involvement in Afghanistan in 2008-09 included a substantial number of influence tools working in a clearly delineated Canadian-commanded area of operations. In southern Afghanistan, Task Force Kandahar included:

- a combined arms battle group consisting of a mechanized infantry battalion, a tank squadron and an artillery battery;
- brigade troops including engineers, an intelligence processing unit, PSYOPS, Civil-Military Cooperation operators, electronic warfare forces and unmanned aerial vehicles;
- the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team;
- Special Operations Forces;
- a tactical helicopter force;
- an Operational Mentor and Liaison Team working with an Afghan National Army brigade and its associated battalions; and
- a Police Operational Mentor and Liaison Team working with the Afghan police forces.

On numerous occasions, Canadian forces were redeployed to adjacent Helmand province to prop up the British position there.

In Kabul, Canadian organizations included:

- the Strategic Advisory Team Afghanistan, responsible for mentoring the Afghan government in

the development of strategy;

- Canadian Army training staffs at the Kabul Military Training Center and other facilities; and
- Canadian staff working in NATO and American headquarters.

Canada's role in Afghanistan has now been reduced from a significant operational-level command with strategic connections in Kabul to the tactical command of a single district in one province — the now-problematic Panjwa'i district. It is, theoretically, possible for Canada to concentrate development and military resources in a manner similar to that tried in Dand district in 2009. It is not clear what kind of positive effects, whether long-term or

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short-term, can be generated between now and mid-2011 from this tactical configuration. It may be a case of holding onto as much of that district as possible and transitioning to an American unit. Focused national efforts on a single district in one province among the 34 in Afghanistan are not enough to generate influence. Other influence tools are gone: the Canadian-led PRT, the Strategic Advisory Team Afghanistan. Even Canada's involvement in mentoring the Afghan National Army has been seriously reduced, both in Kabul and in Kandahar. It remains to be seen if an expanded teaching role in Kabul (as distinct from mentoring on the field of battle) will be enough for Canada to keep its hand in.

Strategically, there is discernible fallout from the Canadian decision to disengage in Afghanistan. In October, Canada failed in its bid for a UN Security Council seat. During the highly politicized blame game that ensued, it emerged that the United Arab Emirates worked against Canada's bid, ostensibly because of a trade dispute. What also emerged was that the Obama administration did little or nothing to support Canada either. While commentators went wild trying to blame the Harper government's lack of commitment to the UN and UN peacekeeping, they missed another possibility: that Canada's pending withdrawal from Afghanistan has seriously reduced Canada's influence not only with its

largest ally and trading partner, the US, but also with its primary regional partner, the UAE. Indeed, few realize that the UAE is a major supplier for the Canadian effort in Afghanistan, from water to SUVs. It will not be in the future when Canada departs. The Emirates also doesn't like having its human rights record scrutinized and criticized, nor does it like any suggestions that narco and terror dollars flow through the banking systems based there unimpeded. Having a tendency toward an overly moralistic foreign policy can be problematic for Canada at times.

There are a number of timeless lessons for Canada that emerge from our Afghanistan experience. The first is that we should never forget that the properly coordinated combination of military, diplomatic and development resources are influence tools: they are used to influence the enemy — and our allies. Second, these tools are there to be used to further Canadian international objectives. If other nations' objectives or the objectives of an international organization coincide with ours, fine, but Canada is the priority in all cases. Third, those tools consist of human beings as much as money or equipment —

Canadian people, citizens and taxpayers all. They should not be expended wantonly to further the objectives of other nations or international organizations if those objectives are not coincident with, or become divergent from, Canadian international objectives. That stipulation makes it incumbent on elected Canadian politicians and the unelected Canadian bureaucracy to agree clearly, even publicly, on what Canadian international objectives are generally and specifically as required. Each entity will have to answer questions that go beyond either selfish domestic political survival or the adolescent accrual of personal power. Those questions are:

- What is worth killing over?
- What is worth dying for?
- How do we educate the Canadian people to understand that both will be necessary to further Canadian international and domestic objectives, now and in the future?
- How do we do the necessary killing as efficiently as possible to influence the enemy while still achieving Canadian objectives?
- How do we minimize the effects of the necessary dying on Canadians without unduly constraining our ability to achieve Canadian objectives?

On the development side, the questions are:

- What is worth spending Canadian money on?
- How do we ensure that Canadian money generates the effects that Canada wants to achieve?
- How do we operate effectively to achieve Canadian objectives in environments that do not conform to Canadian moral and ethical standards?
- How do we develop an “airlock” so that low non-Canadian moral and ethical standards are not brought back to Canada?

The fundamental question revolves around this: Canada is going to

continue in the future to kill for peace and spend money on development overseas to further our objectives. How do we do that as morally as possible to achieve our objectives given our political and social culture?

Canada’s experience in Afghanistan is not the anomaly some want it to be. Recall that after the First World War, commentators and critics nostalgic for the past exclaimed that, after years of trench warfare, the army

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could get finally back to “real” soldiering. The Second World War in many ways turned out to be worse than the First. Today, those who pine for the heady days of Cold War UN peacekeeping and think we can dial back to that level and type of engagement are in the same position.

We must admit that there are factors beyond our control. There were things that Canada couldn’t influence. That, however, does not let our decision-makers off the hook. Why were Canadian leaders unwilling to explain more effectively what our national objectives were in Afghanistan? That would have staved off much of the criticism we saw directed against our efforts there. Why was Canada unwilling or unable to reinforce ourselves and demand NATO reinforcements? (As a sidebar, Canada could have surged more Canadian battle groups in, but did not do so, most likely because of domestic security demands related to the Olympics and G8-G20 summitry.) Were/are we just too parsimonious? Why was our whole-of-government effort subjected to serious turbulence during the course of our tenure in Afghanistan? Do have the right people in the right jobs? Why do we remain so reliant on certain American capabilities — and then complain when we don’t get full access to them? Why were the

various Canadian influence tools not seen as such and exploited to the fullest potential? I would suggest that if Canada had a more mature and integrated approach to national security policy, many of these issues would not have existed or at the very least would not have had the negative effects they generated.

There will not be a “V-A” day for Canada. Others will take credit for any success that emerges out of Afghanistan,

and if we are not present, we will not exist. If we are not careful, and we play our endgame poorly, negativity will overshadow the positive Canadian contributions and accomplishments in that country during the critical first decade of the conflict. We as Canadians must learn from this experience and mature so we can operate more effectively in the global environment. We cannot afford to regress to Trudeau-era adolescent behaviour and hide behind a light-blue laurel wreath and reflexive anti-Americanism whenever the going gets tough. The world is violent, the world is dangerous. Our young people who fought in Afghanistan understand this and will demand a higher standard of leadership and national direction. Constructive analysis of the last two years of Canadian involvement in Afghanistan will provide many positive lessons. Let’s not waste that.

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