

Toronto Star 22 Jan 06

Thin Red Line: Canada in Kandahar

Sean M. Maloney, PhD.

The spectacularly lethal suicide attack conducted against the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar last weekend has raised concerns about Canada's viability in the region and generated spurious comparisons to the American experience in Iraq. Let us be clear: Kandahar Province is the Canadian-held portion of the front line in the global war against Al Qaeda, a war that is as much fought in the psychological realm as in the physical. Succumbing to a terrorist act like this, particularly by withdrawing any component of the PRT, is exactly what Canada's enemies are counting on. Unfortunately, there are numerous myths and misperceptions of the nature and extent of Canada's war in Afghanistan that lurk in the Canadian consciousness, myths which overly-simplify a complex, dangerous but critical environment. If not addressed, our ability to accomplish our goals in Afghanistan may be put at risk.

First, Canada's involvement in Afghanistan is not and has never been "peacekeeping." Canadian media outlets, and even the BBC, who should know better, continue to label counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan with obsolete and discredited terminology from the 1950s. Canada joined the Operation ENDURING FREEDOM coalition in 2001 in order to destroy the Taliban shield that was protecting the infrastructure of the Al Qaeda movement which was resident in that country. In the transition to stabilization operations from major combat operations after the collapse of the Taliban government, another international force was introduced into Afghanistan: the International Security Assistance Force. ISAF was never a peacekeeping operation: its job was to back the emergent Afghan interim

government and, when that government was legitimized with the electoral process, work in building up Afghan security forces to protect that government from enemy forces. Canada contributed to both OEF and ISAF. Both organizations used lethal force in carrying out their missions. There was no impartiality involved.

Second, the decision by Canada to assume command of a Provincial Reconstruction Team has presented the Canadian people with some confusion, particularly with the last minute replacement of the word “regional” with “reconstruction” on the insistence of the Afghan government. The PRT is not a peacekeeping tool: it is a counterinsurgency tool. The organization has a number of functions, but the primary ones involve assessing Kandahar Province in all areas, delivering developmental assistance projects and facilitating capacity building in the provincial government. The objectives of these programmes are to ensure that the Afghan government has a functional bureaucracy in the region, that that bureaucracy has a relationship with the central government in Kabul, and that local needs, both in the security and livelihood realms, are addressed effectively.

Canada and Afghanistan are engaged in a counterinsurgency war in the urban and rural areas in the south-eastern part of Afghanistan. Capacity building and other forms of Canadian non-lethal assistance go hand in hand with the conventional and special operations being conducted by Canadian and allied troops in the region. The elements cannot be separated, no matter how many skittish Ottawa bureaucrats would like them to be. The ultimate objective is to limit and then destroy the remnants of the Al Qaeda-supported Taliban, and prevent them from interfering with the construction process. After nearly 30 years of war, the activity is not “reconstruction,” it is “construction.” Indeed, Canada also deploys a Strategic Advisory Team in Kabul, a military and civilian organization, to assist the Afghan government with national-level projects.

Regarding the enemy, (a term some Canadians are afraid to use after years of successful social engineering designed to convince people Canada has no enemies) insurgent forces which employ both terrorist and guerilla warfare tactics have killed and maimed Canadian soldiers and civilians who are in Afghanistan specifically to thwart the Al Qaeda-trained and supported Taliban in their efforts. Unfortunately, simplistic media analysis asserts that because there are more suicide bomb attacks lately measured over time, that the situation is deteriorating, the war is getting worse, and the Taliban are poised to take over Afghanistan all over again. This is abject nonsense. The Taliban movement does not and will never regain the allegiance of the bulk of the Afghan population no matter how many of their operatives liquefy themselves against coalition armoured vehicles or in the midst of Afghan sporting events. Afghans saw how the power-drunk Taliban, heady from its successes against small armed criminal groups, converted the country into a violent, terroristic theocracy. The Afghan peoples do not want a return to this state of affairs. Within certain Pashtun tribal areas in the south, however, the Taliban ideology still resonates but it does not have widespread support. It unlikely that it will ever grow to be a mass revolutionary movement again. It is considered to be an import from Pakistan, a country that is viewed with fear and loathing by numerous Afghans I spoke with on several research trips,

The movement can continue to detonate its members along “suicide ally” in Kandahar City, but that will not sway the population to re-align itself with the movement. The classic 1960s terrorist concept whereby extreme violence demonstrates the impotence of the state and a revolutionary movement takes control on the backs of it does not apply in the Afghan environment. Afghans turn in Taliban cells all the time: many bombers do not make it through, but this goes unreported. Indeed, Afghans assist coalition forces in hunting guerillas in the hills. The Pashtun code deems us to be guests in their country

and these outsiders based in and supported from Pakistan are an embarrassment.

The danger to the coalition effort is from the Western media's simplistic interpretation of the violence: our enemy wants the media to do its dirty work for them and try to undermine support back in Canada and within the coalition countries. They have succeeded with the Dutch, who will not thus far contribute to operations out of fear of what one opponent to OEF operations repeatedly referred to as the possibility of "a second Srebrenica."

If our enemy is successful in convincing Ottawa to withdraw our soldiers and recall highly-effective development workers, our enemy will reduce the ability of the PRT to capacity-build within the provincial government, projects which are now on hold. This in turn will generate a loss of confidence between Canada and the Afghan government in Kabul, and between Canada and Afghan government in Kandahar. If Canada is seen to cut and run too often, our ability to influence events and support the ongoing effort to limit Taliban influence and ultimately to destroy the movement will seriously decrease. The only people who benefit from this are the Taliban and by extension, Al Qaeda, and perhaps the careers of risk-adverse individuals in Ottawa or those who oppose what Canada is doing in Afghanistan because it doesn't fit their mythological notions of Canadian "peacekeeping". The Afghan peoples and the Canadian people, who are partners in the global war to thwart Al Qaeda, do not benefit from this behaviour. Kandahar is our part of the line, like Vimy Ridge was our part of the line in the First World War. Developmental aid deployed by civilians and protected by soldiers is an integral part of today's battle. And our enemy does not distinguish between soldier and civilian.

-Dr. Maloney teaches in the War Studies Programme at the Royal Military College of Canada and is the author of the recently-published Enduring The Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan.