



An Afghanistan Balance Sheet

By
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Introduction

The death in Afghanistan of combat photographer Master Corporal Darrell Priede reminds Canadians that our commitment to that war-torn country is a costly one. Each new casualty generates anguish, and raises questions back home about whether the human and material cost is achieving anything worthwhile.

With the current parliamentary mandate due to expire only 16 months from now, the debate will surely intensify, with Canadians more or less split down the middle on Afghanistan. This wide divergence is not surprising, in view of the complexity of the situation and the strongly partisan position taken by our politicians.

In spite of the confusion and misinformation, a reasonably clear picture is emerging about what is really happening in Afghanistan. Here is a frank estimate of the situation in mid-course, in the form of a balance sheet review of three critical areas, namely governance, security and development.

Governance

After almost thirty years of continuous warfare, Afghanistan is slowly evolving from a “failed state” into a “fragile state”. On the positive side of the ledger is the presence of a democratically elected central government. (And voter turnout was

greater than in Canada’s last federal election.) The rule of law is being instituted through the creation of courts and appointment of judges.

However, there is a long way to go. The Karzai Government’s influence and control beyond the capital, Kabul, is still limited. Corruption and cronyism are a continuing problem, while opium farming breeds criminality and warlordism, especially in the southern and eastern provinces.

At the provincial level, however, governance is taking root. This is especially evident in Kandahar Province, where the Canadian effort is concentrated.

Democratic government is slowly but surely taking hold, in spite of the absence of a democratic legacy, a history of tribalism, and a radical enemy intent on subverting the growth of the freedoms that are second nature to us. We mustn’t expect to see a mirror image of our own institutions and culture, but democratic sentiments are strong in Afghanistan. Given a chance, they will prevail.

Security

Canadians are preoccupied with the military side of things in Afghanistan. Although casualties tend to dominate the debate, most understand that the establishment of physical security is a prerequisite to effective development, which is the ultimate purpose of our presence.

So what is the military picture?

Three-quarters of Afghanistan –the

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northern and western provinces – enjoy good security, with very little Taliban activity. Only in the south and east is there significant conflict, and even there it is quite sporadic. More importantly, there are clear signs that the Taliban are failing on the military front.

Having been soundly defeated whenever they engaged coalition troops head-on in battle, the Taliban leadership has recently turned to suicide bombings, roadside explosive devices, targeted assassinations, and kidnappings. Their countless violations of international humanitarian law and the indiscriminate killing of Afghan civilians are not winning the hearts and minds of the local people. They are losing militarily.

Consequently the Taliban have turned to propaganda, designed to exploit political weakness back home in the coalition nations. What they can't win through military force might be achieved by coalition troop withdrawals. Hoping that time is on their side, they can fade back into their safe haven in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area to await an anticipated loss of political will in the coalition nations.

The Taliban also know that the western public opinion reacts severely to casualties, so that the act of killing becomes more important than taking ground in the classic military manner. They are aware of the massive media coverage that is generated in Canada by every fatal casualty, and the subsequent downturn in public support for the mission.

A serious military problem stems from the relatively small size of the coalition forces. (The entire Canadian contingent could fit comfortably into one end of a hockey arena.) With the additional problem of caveats imposed

by some allied nations, military leaders face some frustrating limitations in their ability to control the Taliban insurgency.

However, the Taliban are facing the prospect of a growing Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police Force, who will take over responsibility for security when the troops from the 37 nations of the International Security Assistance Force ultimately return home. Progress in the training of the police force is slow, but the Afghan National Army, now numbering some 40,000, is developing rapidly. Incidentally, Canadian troops are doing an excellent job of mentoring their Afghan Army allies.

On balance, the security picture is encouraging. The Taliban can't win militarily, nor is it likely that they can be completely defeated by military means alone. The answer lies elsewhere.

Development

Success in Afghanistan will ultimately come from effective development, and it is a huge challenge. Thus far, because of the necessary preoccupation with military activity, progress has been uneven, and accomplishments to date are not well known.

That is unfortunate, because there is much good news. The most promising development is evident in the fields of education, health services, human rights, infrastructure, market economy and mine clearance.

Millions of students now attend school (in spite of some 200 school burnings by the Taliban in the past two years), more than 80% of the population now have access to basic health care, and women have emerged from the total subjugation that existed under the Taliban regime.

Paved roads have been constructed, countless wells and irrigation ditches



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dug, villages electrified for the first time; the list of accomplishments is a long one. Coming out of all this is a surge in local economies, stimulated by micro-loans from the West, and by a freedom of movement that didn't exist only a year ago.

Admittedly, the pace of development is still too slow, largely because of Taliban activity to forestall advancement. But the coalition nations can do much more in the way of aid, both by governments and non-government organizations, even where security is less than perfect. Aid money has to find its way directly to field projects in a more efficient and timely way. Promises have to be followed up. Local Afghans have to become key players in development projects.

Perhaps the most difficult problem facing the current Afghan economy is the massive cultivation of opium poppies, which feeds more than 90% of the world's heroin addiction. Poppy farming, unfortunately, is for many rural Afghans the only source of income. In any case, they have little choice in the matter, because of intimidation from drug lords working hand-in-hand with the Taliban, who reap financial benefit from the drug economy.

In spite of simplistic solutions which are proposed from time to time, experts warn that it will take decades to rid Afghanistan of this scourge. The root problem, of course, is that it is driven by demand. Until heroin addiction in the West is drastically reduced, illegal opium production will persist, in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

In spite of this and other imposing challenges, wherever development progress is clearly evident, hearts and minds are being won. The trend here is in the right direction, and the potential

is enormous.

The Balance Sheet

In this cursory review of the complex situation in Afghanistan it is clear that the struggle for the Afghan nation and its long-suffering people is far from over. It could go either way. But a weighing of the pluses and minuses in the three critical areas of governance, security and development reveals a positive trend in each. Success will not come overnight. It will take patience, understanding, and continued dedication to the mission, but there is much to build on.

Ironically, the final outcome depends upon what happens a half a world away, in the capitals of the 37 nations who are in Afghanistan to help that country back onto its feet. Precipitous decisions to pull out would have a devastating effect. Canada, with its own looming decision point, is in a position to set a good or bad example for others to follow.

With things slowly but surely moving in the right direction, it would be disastrous if Afghans were abandoned at such a critical stage. A decision to "cut and run" would mean writing off the human and material cost of our nation's deep investment in Afghanistan at a time when our return on that investment is increasingly evident, and a successful outcome increasingly within reach.

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