



## **A Rational Exit Strategy For Afghanistan**

by General (Ret'd) Paul Manson

President, Conference of Defence Associations Institute

Foreign Minister Peter McKay was being realistic in suggesting during his visit to Afghanistan last week that the Canadian commitment of 2300 troops to that battered country would continue for some time. Barring unforeseen political developments back home, then, it would appear that our military presence will go beyond the current mandate, which expires next February.

This raises a couple of important questions. First, how long will we be there, and second, on what basis should Canada eventually withdraw?

The first can't be answered with any certainty. It might be one year or two, but the situation in Afghanistan is very complex and scarcely predictable at this transitional stage. The tough challenges facing the new NATO-led coalition, of which Canada is a part, are such that a successful exit could take five or even ten years.

That sounds like a long time, but compare it with the thirty years that Canadian peacekeepers were in Cyprus (1964 to 1994), or the thirty-three years on the Golan Heights (1973 to 2006).

To be realistic about it, the establishment of security and stability throughout Afghanistan won't happen quickly, even in the most optimistic view.

The second question - about how we will know when the time has come to withdraw -- can be answered with considerably more confidence.

To be sure, there will be no bolt from the blue telling us that Afghanistan is suddenly back on its feet, that the Taliban insurgents have been defeated, that military assistance is no longer needed, and that our troops can come home.

The world is not that simple. At best, success would emerge gradually, but if things are going well the time will come when a successful outcome can be declared with confidence, and our soldiers brought home.

Here are the principal indicators that the government should be looking for.

- ***The Taliban is in decline.*** A first indication of impending success would be signs that the campaign of terror being waged by the Taliban remnants and their extremist allies is failing. Attacks on allied military contingents would gradually

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Conference or its members.*



decrease, as would intimidation of the Afghan people. The coalition forces would go on the offensive, chasing the insurgents further into their mountain refuge, denying them freedom of movement in the populated areas. Canadian military successes in Kandahar Province will be particularly significant because this area has been a Taliban stronghold.

- ***Security is restored.*** As security against physical attack is gradually established in the various provinces, ordinary Afghans will enjoy personal liberty and freedom from fear of a sort which has not been known since the Soviet invasion of 1979.
- ***The Afghan Army and Police become effective.*** More and more, security will be ensured by Afghan military and police authorities.
- ***Local market economies begin to flourish.*** These were virtually destroyed by years of Soviet occupation and Taliban oppression. Encouraged by the weakness of legal authority after the removal of the

Taliban following 9/11, drug barons and warlords built up a massive poppy-based culture, the largest in the world. This was the only available cash crop for many farmers. The restoration of legal authority will encourage the emergence of a legitimate market economy and growth in per capita income, making alternative crops increasingly attractive.

- ***Central government control spreads.*** The democratically-elected Karzai government, whose effective presence beyond the Kabul area is currently limited, will increasingly exercise political control in the provinces, as terrorism and warlordism decline.
- ***Human rights increase dramatically.*** Free from fear of retribution by extremists, Afghans will enjoy a pronounced improvement in their nation's human rights environment. The opening of new schools under the Provincial Reconstruction Team program, a broadening of curricula into the sciences and humanities, attendance by women in educational institutions and their participation in civic life (including politics), will all be



indicators of great progress towards a more open and free society.

- ***The Development of infrastructure.*** The people of Afghanistan need new and better roads, electricity, adequate health care, water, and other amenities of the kind that Canadians take for granted. Greatly improved physical security will permit the reconstruction teams, both military and civilian, to do their principal job, which is to rebuild Afghanistan.
- ***Democratization.*** Although it would be unrealistic to expect Afghanistan to become “westernized” in its political environment and parliamentary tradition, considerable progress has already been made toward the establishment of a genuinely democratic society, and Canadians can watch for a continuation of this trend.

These, then, are the chief indicators of success that the government can look for in the months and years ahead, as the Canadian military contingent does its important work in Afghanistan.

It is possible, however, that success will elude Canada and her coalition allies in Afghanistan, and that the Canadian government would

have to invoke a removal of our military forces based on a perceived failure of the mission. Distasteful as this eventuality would be, the possibility has to be considered.

A critical element in such a decision would have to be a careful assessment of the consequences, both domestic and international, of withdrawal under these circumstances. It is not hard to imagine the boost that failure of our mission would give the extremist forces in Afghanistan and beyond.

If things do not seem to be going right in the shorter term, especially if there are more Canadian casualties, the government of the day must be very careful not to move precipitously, for premature closure of the Afghan mission could be very damaging, not just to the people of Afghanistan, who desperately want Canada and her allies to be there, but to Canadians as well.

Minister McKay was right. Our role in Afghanistan will take time to prove its worth. But whatever the ultimate reason for closure, it must be made on a rational basis, in the broader national interest.

The CDA Commentaries may be freely reproduced in their entirety for academic research or instructional or journalistic purposes provided that the author's and the CDA's copyright is acknowledged.