

## **SUBMISSION TO THE MANLEY PANEL ON THE FUTURE OF CANADA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN**

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

George Petrolekas, a reservist, was for years the Vice President, Marketing for an international telecoms company with interests in over 75 countries. He came out of retirement in 2003, donned a uniform and represented Canada and the Chief of Defence staff to NATO's operational headquarters on Afghanistan. He was also instrumental in developing the process governing the evacuation of wounded through Germany. He was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for these efforts. He studied international relations and development economics at Glendon College, York University.

*"...it is hard to speak properly upon a subject where it is even difficult to convince your hearers that you are speaking the truth. On the one hand, the friend who is familiar with every fact of the story may think that some point has not been set forth with that fullness which he wishes and knows it to deserve; on the other, he who is a stranger to the matter may be led by envy to suspect exaggeration if he hears anything above his own nature."*

*Thucydides, 431 BC  
"The funeral oration of Pericles"*

These deliberations would normally be conducted within a contextual background that articulated a unified foreign, defence and development statement of Canada's role in the world. However that has yet to find full means of expression. Accordingly, this paper, takes its point of departure and remains focused on aspects of the above, as they refer to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is perhaps one of the most nuanced countries in the world and hence defies simple categorization; a state which cobbles together various ethnic groups, a multitude of tribes within these groups, each of which have dissimilar interests and in continual clash with the forces of modernity, urbanism and nation-building. Very few authorities can claim deep expertise on Afghanistan. Amongst the skilled few who can claim such in depth knowledge are academics who have devoted a lifetime of study to the region and the country such as members of the Council on Foreign Relations, cultural anthropologists who have an understanding of the dynamics within central Asian tribes and peasant warfare, and finally persons (generally, but not exclusively, diplomats, NGO's and the military) who have had an intimate relationship with the country.

It is best to illustrate my point with two short stories:

In 2003, when Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) were first being instituted, the Americans located a village near Jalallabad that appeared to be a perfect candidate for reconstruction/development aid. This village was on the side of a mountain, yet the well that provided it with drinking water was an hour's descent into the valley. The Americans thought that pumping water from the well-head into the village was a perfectly logical project to pursue. American aid officers requested input from every single village stakeholder they could imagine, from the local imam, mayor, district police chief, army commander, warlord, drug lord and in all cases, everyone agreed that the suggested project should move

forward. Three months after the project was completed and launched to great fanfare, the Americans re-visited the village..... only to find the well pipeline and pump destroyed.

At this point I ask my listeners on why they thought the well was destroyed. Invariably no one gets it right. For the well was in fact destroyed by the women of the village, because the time it took to descend into the valley, fetch water, and climb back to the village represented hours worth of freedom from the patriarchal society they were in. This reaction could change the next village over. Western minds generally cannot grasp these facts at the outset and therefore their “expertise” is flawed; Sheikh Khalid Mohammed stated during his interrogation of Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 planning, “that the Western mind could not comprehend Eastern logic and process”.

Nowhere is this lack of comprehension more evident than in the Western assessment of the security situation, from 2003 to 2005, as the following brief account portrays.

Most strategic assessments painted the Taliban as a spent force, decentralised and unsophisticated. Yet Taliban activity in that time period - though lower in intensity than at present - provided ample evidence to the contrary; they (the Taliban) were more numerous than thought and clearly not a spent force. The West for various reasons, refused to mentally accept and absorb this clear contrarian evidence as the insurgency intensified in 2005; we were thus caught by what I would term “strategic surprise”, with the Taliban demonstrating centralised coordination and a level of operational sophistication that we previously refused to credit. A surprise compounded by the porous and transparent Pakistani border providing Taliban safe havens, a transparency however we did very little to obfuscate, thus violating a basic rule of counter-insurgency warfare, the denial of a safe haven and reinforcements through concerted military and diplomatic action.

The main point of these two stories is to counsel the panel to avoid the seductive lure of western logic and partisan agendas whilst looking at Afghanistan generally or uniquely, as opposed to a broader, historical and culturally sensitive context. Western logic does not apply to Afghanistan as events in the country are coloured by tribal and village loyalties and pre-modern behaviour modes. The various ethnic groups “Pashtun, Hazari, Tajik, Uzbek etc” are not homogenous or national and thus defy “Afghan” generalizations. As in our own country, statements of national import must be tempered by recognition of provincial realities. In my three years of very high-level linkages into the country and the mission, with over 30 voyages to Afghanistan straddling the period of 2003-2006, I was amazed to discover how little I actually knew; And therefore, am particularly suspicious of partisan politics and agendas, especially when represented by people who have not set foot in the country, nor read serious, reflective scholarly works vice opinion editorials on which their point of view is based.

Canadians are also trapped in many ways by definitions. Our ordered and “rational” thought process seeks to distinguish between development and re-construction, yet my experience on the ground is that it is very difficult to distinguish between the two. When infrastructure build has been non-existent for a generation, its reconstruction is tantamount to development. As well, the desire of civil organisations to impose a division between Armed Forces Civil Operations, and the humanitarian/development work of non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) harkens to a now dated reality, of an earlier and somewhat simpler time. In the era where failed states are in the ascendancy, the overlapping demands of security and development cannot be divorced from each other and this creates an almost insurmountable paradox.

NGO's do not like to operate in concert, in coordination or geographically with the military, yet without the military, NGO's do not have the security in which to operate. Thus, the assessment of results (depending on who interprets them) is flawed at the onset by virtue of the definitions we use. We share the same space and hopefully the same goals for Afghans despite the sometimes appearance to the contrary. Yet from an objective standpoint, in speaking to ordinary Afghans throughout the country, one gets the sense of improvement - even in the South - and national polling has affirmed this sense. Winning, "one irrigation ditch at a time" is not fast enough or grand enough for detractors of the mission and therefore a more or less untruthful picture of our effect is frequently presented to Canadians.

There is one other point to recognise in deliberating on Canada's role, one should bear in mind that Khandahar and the South is NOT a metaphor for the rest of the country. There are tangible gains elsewhere in security, governance and economic growth where in fact national GDP growth exceeds 8% per annum! Myopic views detract from our ability to recognize such facts. That is not to say that there are no security and development challenges in the rest of the country; they are simply different. However, the south is the area where the great international project runs the greatest risk of becoming unhinged. The fact that there is an insurgency is neither the central nor the most critical issue. As the Economist magazine recently postulated, rebellion has existed as long as there has been a figure or body of authority, especially when there are linguistic, religious or ethnic differences dividing rebels and government.

The strategic choices facing Canada can be distilled into two major concerns. Allow the insurrection to succeed and thus divide/partition the country or to assist the Afghans, as they have requested, to protect development and reconstruction through security. The historical aberration, the bug in the ointment, is that a rebellion, with its asymmetric tactics, has never been defeated by a coalition/alliance, especially one which is not able to deny its enemy the use of sanctuaries. If purely military action does not, or cannot lead to success, then negotiation is certainly another route to stability but it can only occur when all sides fully understand that military success is fleeting. The Taliban have yet to come to that realisation, still believing that the commitment of the West can be undermined by removing the political support of its respective peoples.

Given these difficulties, what role might Canada play? Before examining the options, it may be worthwhile to discuss the thoughts of those who have actively been engaged in Afghanistan.

Of all the nations I have served in, I was struck by the possibilities of success in Afghanistan. Even as early as 2003, one could see villagers, producing mud-bricks for reconstruction, markets that whilst nowhere as sophisticated as ours, testified to the strong rise of an entrepreneurial class if given the opportunity to function, as well as the rise of new infrastructure networks such as radio, television, internet access, wireless systems all without much foreign intervention or aid. The introduction of the cell phone for instance, has done more to empower women than any project dedicated to developing women's' rights.

What development, state and societal organisations should strive to achieve is to nourish the fledgling political, legal and regulatory environments for success to take-off until security and stability, in all its forms is achieved. And in concrete terms, that means - inter alia - promoting bottom-up, local and

communal trust and stability, providing (micro) financial guidance and assistance while rewarding transparency in day-to-day business dealings.

In 2006, over \$16 billion had been made available for development projects which by November 2006, only 45% of which had been spent. That is shocking! Chris Alexander, Canada's former ambassador in Kabul, and presently the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations (DSRSG) once told me that there was still a syndrome of "mine is bigger/better than yours" with respect to aid and development projects. They were not grand enough or prestigious enough in scope, when what as an Afghan minister once told General Hillier, "we don't need a four lane paved highway when a cobblestone road will initially do, sooner rather than later".

Given the divergent interests of an extant semi-secular government in Kabul and the desire of the insurrectionists for a theocratic form of government, it is unlikely that these differences will be resolved or negotiated in the short-term. Accordingly, until that time comes; the people of Afghanistan cannot be abandoned to their own devices with respect to security. Whilst we may gradually step back from a leading role in combat as the Afghan Army (ANA) continues to grow and be trained, we will nonetheless be required to provide the "backbone" to the security effort in the near term. Whilst in a perfect world it would be possible to determine a date by when we could separate from the security effort, it is realistically impossible to do so as there are too many variables. Nonetheless, this reveals one possible role for Canada. To continue training the ANA and the Afghan National Police (ANP), whilst providing direct support in security operations when occasional circumstances and momentary conjuncture so warrant.

Detractors of the security mission have used a variety of arguments to convince Canadians to withdraw from southern Afghanistan without being wholly objective - or sincere - in my opinion.

One frequently heard argument is that the burden of the security task (and associated casualties of our soldiers) must be shared across the Alliance. There is of course, like all subjective judgements, only some truth to that premise. France is frequently used as an example of a NATO nation that could do more; however, we frequently forget that on any given day, France has more than 15,000 soldiers overseas serving in missions in Lebanon, the Congo, Sierra Leone, Darfur etc., where France believes it is defending western interests on its own. Unless we can answer the question why we are not similarly involved outside Afghanistan, we do not have the moral right to criticize as vehemently as we do. The same applies to the numbers of casualties. This is an odious comparison. While I fully agree that the death of Canadian soldiers is tragic, to imply that we carry much more than our fair share, is to diminish the pain and sacrifice represented by other Alliance casualties. The tragedy that families and societies experience is not lessened by comparative body counts.

Detractors, further point out that this mission is somehow counter to the great Canadian traditions of peacekeeping. If that is to be believed, it is because most Canadians are not intimately aware of what peacekeeping entails. Peacekeeping, for example the intrusion of the United Nations into Bosnia in 1992, made Canadian soldiers unwittingly aid and abet in the terror. The UN mission was for the delivery of "humanitarian" aid to villages, and thus the "rules" did not allow the international force to stop abuses of humanity that can only be termed as aberrant. Early in 1993, a village of 280 (the village of Vares) was butchered and not a word was said, not a thing was done. There were so many such events that soldiers

wept at the frustration of not being able to do the right thing. If that be keeping the peace then you can have it.

Nonetheless, there is scope for Canada to continue to pressure the Alliance to provide more resources to the South; more soldiers of course, but it is an indictment on the future of the Alliance when 26 nations cannot find the wherewithal to furnish transport helicopters for use in the south, by way of example. This entails envisioning an additional further role for Canadian foreign policy, one which is substantially more pro-active in seeking to establish partnerships and consensus within the Alliance, by doing so perhaps even forestalling discussions on its future viability, something that has not been done to date.

Negotiation, coalition building, policy synchronisation are properly within the purview of Foreign Affairs, but Lester Pearson's activist foreign policy that is nostalgically memorialized and much revered no longer exists. If Professor Janice Stein's/Eugene Lang's book "The Unexpected War" is to be believed, since 9/11 Canadian Foreign policy can simply be characterised by the notion of "what will the White House think". There is moreover much anecdotal evidence that points to Afghanistan not receiving priority treatment within Foreign Affairs, such as my own weekly correspondence with Glynn Berry prior to his death, where he frequently lamented the lack of knowledge, understanding and vision within his own department with respect to Afghanistan. I would accordingly respectfully suggest that some time for reflection is required to ponder such matters and inquire what can and needs to be done henceforth in articulating a unified national vision, as there is indeed a great role Canada might be able to fulfill.

Most international observers of the international effort in Afghanistan lament the lack of policy and end-state synchronization, which has produced competing visions on what, is required across the spectrum of time. All too frequently these divisions are grouped around national or organizational interests, which for ease of discussion may be grouped into institutional (UN, NGO's), political (European, Afghan, or American), or economic (German, French, US etc) concerns.

In the past, Canada has positioned itself as one of the key bridges between the US and European nations (jointly or severally) and this is a leading role that Canada as a middle power without a specific agenda in Afghanistan could take on. There are two aspects to this role. One might be the coordination of the international effort, to help provide focus, but the second and in my view, the more important role, would be the identification, selection and support of an individual, a High Representative, who might best personify the international effort. Canada's SAT (Strategic Advisory Team) could easily transform into the secretariat for such a key personality.

Almost every great political or economic endeavour has had a champion of sufficient gravitas to forge coalitions or keep divergent interests focused on a common vision, in a common cause. The reconstruction of Europe and Japan post WWII (the Marshall plan and the MacArthur "Shogunate"), the disarmament of the IRA, the post-Dayton Bosnian conflict, the Egyptian-Israeli Accord amongst others, all succeeded because an individual of international reputation was able to galvanize the imagination of competing interests. Afghanistan lacks this man or woman of gravitas.

In conclusion, the 3D (defence, diplomacy and development) approach to Canada's future role in Afghanistan must give birth to something which transcends marketing slogans, institutional ego's or the "not invented here" bias of the recent past.

Of course such a new integrated policy can only be constructed and sustained with the approval and consent of our democracy. But the nation must be made to understand that there will continue to be a security role of varying degree for some time to come, while development is re-focussed to practical realities as these exist in Afghanistan, both efforts abetted by an activist foreign policy that ensures we are not alone in contributions of either defence or of development.

To recapitulate then the main points of this submission with as much clarity and economy as possible, I submit that the following prescriptive items are of essence:

- We must avoid western rationalist thinking and the related conceptual trap of generalisation. Afghanistan is country where all major events are primarily coloured by tribal and village loyalties and pre-modern behaviour modes. Thus modest and very practical endeavours are the ones that usually prove to be most effective, politically and operationally;
- Our development objectives must be equally realigned to immediate realities on the ground. Development and reconstruction in Afghanistan - where infrastructure has been non-existent for a generation – is one and the same. Even if that means building “one irrigation ditch at a time” or favouring a cobble-stoned road project over a four lane highway. And priority should be given above all in providing those small-scale, yet all-important, micro-incentives that encourage the build up of both communal trust and entrepreneurial endeavour;
- We must continue to be involved in Afghan security where we have a vital dual role to play. First, by enhancing our contribution to the training efforts of both ANA and ANP, and second, by remaining, but solely until training levels produce the required military and police efficiencies, the ultimate security spine of the nation, taking appropriate action sparsely and only when so absolutely warranted;
- On the international level, a more pro-active Canadian foreign policy on Afghanistan is called for. Our efforts should be focussed on the establishment of a “High Representative”, an international political Authority of sufficient stature mandated to co-ordinate security operations and to provide the focus of civil development/reconstruction; and
- Finally, within the context of national policy, stronger internal linkages between Afghan policy objectives within defence, foreign affairs and national development agencies are called for. The articulation of such linkages can and should animate, as a value-added contribution, the wider debate on Canada’s role in world affairs.

I fully appreciate it is well beyond the scope of this panel to articulate such all-embracing policy positions, but it must be stressed that the military, CIDA and diplomacy as tools of policy can and must contribute to and be consistent with a global policy statement which defines Canada’s role in the world; One that has yet to be clearly enunciated.

To quote John F. Kennedy, “we embark on great projects, not because they are simple, but precisely because they are difficult and are the right thing to do.”, and so for Canada’s role in Afghanistan, to abandon the difficult road for a simpler road less travelled, is not worthy of our great nation.