

How we put our foot in it, in Afghanistan

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‘It is almost always far easier to get in than it is to get out,’ write Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang in their must-read book about how Canada wound up in Kandahar.

Canada involved itself in that volatile Afghan province based on almost entirely false premises. Now there is no easy way out.

No NATO country wants to replace us, but Canada cannot leave Kandahar unoccupied, for it would soon be overrun by the Taliban and its disparate allies. Canada cannot leave without inviting defeat; Canada cannot stay with any reasonable assurance of success.

Canada is fighting a counterinsurgency war – against almost all the rules of that kind of combat. Our soldiers are undoubtedly brave and skilled, but there are too few of them, as there are too few NATO forces for the entire country. The ratio of troops to insurgents needed to “win” such a conflict is too low; the ratio of military to development deployment is too large.

The enemy has easy recourse to escape (into the hills, over the border to Pakistan), to money (from the drug trade, extortion and sympathizers elsewhere) and to time. Some of our allies in the Afghan government are corrupt; some of our allies in NATO are craven.

We are trying to win the “hearts and minds” of a people we barely know and who would or could scarcely distinguish a Canadian from a German or a Brit. We are all Westerners to them and, therefore, aliens to their culture – well-meaning perhaps, but alien.

We have brought them some security, but not as much as they would like; we have delivered some assistance, but not as much as they need. We are a kind of thin red line separating them from the Taliban, whom the majority, if polls and other indications are broadly right, would prefer not to see return.

Co-authors Stein and Lang cite Ken Calder, the top civilian policy-maker in the Department of National Defence, saying of Afghanistan in 2003, “We don't know anything about this country.” Presumably, our forces know the Pashtuns of the region better now, but they can never know them as well as their adversaries do.

Time is our adversaries' ally, but it is our foe. Anyone who looks dispassionately at poor, battered, tribal and post-medieval Afghanistan understands that realizing the twin goals of stabilization and economic development will take many years, perhaps decades.

The country is already the leading recipient of Canadian aid and, of course, military assistance. Are we prepared to remain there – in Kandahar? elsewhere in Afghanistan? – for “as long as it takes” to “get the job done,” to use the defence lobby's favourite clichés? If we are, then the commitment will extend far, far beyond the expiration of our current mandate in February, 2009.

And what is the goal of commitment? It has never been clear, as Ms. Stein and Mr. Lang compellingly recount in *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*. The rationale for the Canadian (and NATO) mission has been shifting from the beginning

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In 2002, the government committed to a short-term combat mission, then, in 2003-04, to a stabilization mission, then to a lead role in Kandahar that was not supposed to lead to as many casualties as have been suffered.

Among the fascinating vignettes of official Ottawa the two authors offer are two that reflect the prime ministers of the time.

In one, prime minister Paul Martin rambles on (and on) about Darfur and Haiti as more important missions than anything in Afghanistan, seeking assurances from the military brass that Canada could do Kandahar and also lead, or at least participate in, an international mission in Darfur and help Haiti too. The lack of focus was mind-boggling.

In another, Prime Minister Stephen Harper (and a few senior advisers and civil servants) decides to extend the Afghan mission without consulting cabinet (until after the fact), a template for how decisions get made in this government, and by whom.

Chief of the Defence Staff Rick Hillier, more than anyone else, drove the Kandahar mission. He got the top military job for many reasons, but one was his vision for the military as a fighting force, centred on the army, to be used in failed states that he believed posed the greatest future threat to world order. Afghanistan would be the testing ground for the vision.

Gen. Hillier has apparently asked for an extension of his three-year term, a time frame of convention rather than law. The Harper government is now considering his request. Obviously, the Conservatives don't like his outspokenness in a government obsessed by control of message, but can they let the principal architect of this Canadian commitment depart while the going is tough?

All through the piece, governments and especially the military worried incessantly about how the Americans would react to this or that decision. In fact, the Americans didn't much care, just as long as Canada decided something.

Canada has been, and remains, in Afghanistan as a way of not being in Iraq. The two situations are vastly different in every way but one: The Americans in Iraq, like NATO and Canada in Afghanistan, got in easily but do not know how to get out.

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