

SHOULD WE STAY OR SHOULD WE GO?: CANADA AND AFGHANISTAN

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In coming months, Canadians will decide their policy towards Afghanistan. That decision will be political. One hopes it also will be rational, involving an assessment of our national interests, and the balance between gain and loss. Nor should our decision be determined by the weight of past sacrifices or policy. If we have been doing the wrong thing at a cost, why repeat the error and the sacrifice? The past, however, does show the need to treat the issue seriously, more than we did before we first decided to enter Kandahar in 2003, or to stay on there in 2006.

There were good reasons to question the idea of going to Kandahar, when first we went there, and so also today. But many of the prevailing arguments on the topic are inadequate. The icky-poo school of the left assails our involvement as “Stephen Harper’s war”, or “George Bush’s war”, when all political parties and virtually all Canadians advocated our involvement in Afghanistan during 2001, few opposed or even questioned our subsequent move to Kandahar, while both Barack Obama and The Guardian support staying the course today. Perhaps we should call it “The Guardian’s war”? The Don Cherry school of Canadian public policy insists that we should support the war just like we back the team, without asking whether we are in the right series. The political parties castigate each other as cowards or warmongers,

distorting the debate while they try to squeeze advantage from it, like a lemon. No one will say the obvious: that this is a war involving Canadian interests, but not fundamental ones; that it cannot be won unless military force and diplomacy are coordinated closely; that the best outcome will be a messy compromise, and the worst one a return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, which is not impossible.

Public opinion is split broadly, but not deeply. Most Canadians have an opinion on the topic, but not strong ones. Few think the war in itself is bad; most wonder why we should be the ones fighting it. Attitudes toward our involvement are confused by the overwhelming support for our soldiers in the field. However, majority opinion seems to favour honouring our pledge to stay in Kandahar until 2009, while as regards an extension of that mission, we are divided evenly between those saying “yes”, “no”, and “uncommitted to a decision so far in advance, without explanation”.

The choices before us are to stay in Kandahar, doing what we have been doing, for several more years, or to leave that province, and perhaps the country. The Conservative government supports the first option, but it has failed to make a compelling case for its policy in Afghanistan, and even worse, needlessly politicised the issue in hopes of damaging the Liberals in electoral terms. The Liberal position changes fairly often: on one day, to stop fighting, period, on the next day, to send out patrols to fight for international development teams (which sounds rather like Conservative policy in Kandahar), on the third, to invade Pakistan. On the seventh day, perhaps they may rest. In different ways, the BQ, Liberals and NDP claim to support a non-combat mission elsewhere in Afghanistan, with the Canadian Forces at most serving as trainers

or peacekeepers. They also, especially the NDP, claim to favour a negotiated settlement, though precisely how this is to occur remains vague. No major Canadian political party purports to advocate a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, but that is where the policy of the NDP or BQ, and even of the Liberals, may take us. The most striking aspect of the politics of this issue is the Liberal Party's abandonment of a commitment that it created, something no one will forget at the next election. No matter how they squirm, the Liberals will be caught between the crossfire of the Tories and the NDP on this matter, as they should. Despite partisan rhetoric, none of these positions is intrinsically unreasonable, though at least we should be honest about what they are. So, how would those options affect Afghanistan, and Canada?

In Afghanistan, we are aiding one side, through counter-insurgency against another, in a civil war. No party in the struggle is strong. We are supporting a weak government and fighting an even weaker enemy. A majority of the population in Afghanistan supports our presence, but not most of the people in the territory where we are fighting. We also know that most of the local Pushtun population is not hostile to us, because if that was the case, we would be long gone. However, probably they will become increasingly hostile to us, the more we fight a war among them.

Our great problems in Afghanistan are political. We and our allies are violating the first lesson of counter-insurgency: the need for unity and coordination between all the organizations involved. NATO and the Afghan government are divided within and between themselves. We have limited influence over these problems, though no matter what else, we should apply all of it in that direction, just as we have used our

capabilities to strengthen the Afghan government through the Strategic Advisory Committee.

. On its own, to stay in Kandahar will do nothing to solve these problems, and it will be hampered by them. To withdraw will not particularly affect these problems. It will reduce their impact on us in the short term, but not in the long term, so long as we stay in Afghanistan at all.

Our most annoying political problem is our inability to make other NATO countries share the load. That is par for the course. NATO is a classic buck-passing organisation; its members never have sacrificed much for collective security, unless they have no other choice, as we well know: in the 1970s, we took a lead in jettisoning our commitments to NATO. If we stay in Kandahar, we are unlikely to get any more NATO countries to help us than already are doing so. Our greatest ability to get such help is to leave, though of course this carries the danger that no one else will respond, and the position will collapse, or else that we will throw more of a burden on the allies which are carrying it.

Our contribution to Kandahar is significant, and our withdrawal would matter, especially since it might cause the Dutch to leave as well. However, if we go, it might shame other NATO countries into taking our place, or else the reported redeployments of British or American forces to southern Afghanistan would cover our absence. And if we withdrew, no one could say we have not done more than many other NATO members. It also would reduce the loss of Canadian lives which, obviously, soldiering on cannot do so.

To withdraw, however, would be to leave before the job is done, and to harm the chances it ever will be. The only possible means of victory in Afghanistan involves a combination of force and diplomacy, using military leverage to convince significant fractions of the “Taliban” that victory is impossible, and then to negotiate them out of the war. Negotiations are nice, but they are not easy. They will be prolonged and complex, given the multiple and conflicting interests involved: for example, are all the insurgents “Taliban”? Will all of the “Taliban” negotiate? Nor will war stop simply because talks begin — in fact, all sides have followed both tracks simultaneously for years. They all will use negotiations as another front in the war, and military success to improve their bargaining position. Negotiations will be secret, because otherwise Mullah Omar will aim to assassinate the participants, especially his subordinates. This is not to condemn negotiations—they are essential and unavoidable—but it is to be realistic about them. If we really want a negotiated peace, we will have to fight for it.

In the area of negotiations, Canada has little leverage, far less so than either the US or the UK or the EU; in recent weeks, international newspapers have reported that SIS officers or EU officials have been negotiating with significant Taliban figures. Although this freelance activity angered Afghan authorities, they too have conducted pourparlers with Pushtuns. If there is any area where one would like to know that Canada is doing something different than it has been, this is it. In any case, to stay in Kandahar helps us to do the job we started. Withdrawal directly weakens this possibility.

So, how would these options affect our aim of promoting Canadian values? That aim carries whiffs of imperialism and missionary work; yet if we take our values at all seriously, we have to believe that they are universal, but apply them with a pinch of

realism. In practice, we cannot directly create Canadian values by staying in Kandahar; nothing is more likely to create opposition to us there. All we can do is create an environment where Afghans themselves can choose what they want. However, in negative terms, to stay in Kandahar can have a significant effect, by preventing the rise of a power hostile to anything approaching Canadian values, one which took pride when in power in destroying women's rights along with irreplaceable human monuments, and serving as a base for terrorists to attack us. To stay in Kandahar will not guarantee success for Canadian values, but it will give them a chance to emerge. To withdraw will be to abandon them.

The biggest area where our actions will affect Canadian values is not in Afghanistan, but at home. An old adage describes foreign policy as domestic politics with its top-hat on. What does the debate about Kandahar say about us, in both its terms and its deficiencies? Is the mythology of peacekeeping so much a part of our national self-perception that it has become a policy and interest in and of itself, rather than simply a valuable but limited technique or instrument of policy? Do we have legitimate interests – including interests that may call for the use of force by choice – that include, but are not exhausted by, supporting the United Nations? Does the much-vaunted Responsibility to Protect apply only when it does not hurt, or are we willing to do some heavy lifting on its behalf? Is it true that, if we keep our heads down, do good, and try not to offend, nothing nasty will happen to us? Are we prepared to confront the world or do we just want it to go away and leave us alone? If we do act in the world militarily, can we do so effectively, and understand why we are doing so, in terms of a well-defined sense of national interests, on issues of foreign and defence policy?

Should we stay or should we go? The balance between benefits and costs is close. Simply to stay does not mean that we can win, nor does withdrawal mean we will lose, simply that we will no longer be helping to solve a problem we once took seriously. We dithered ourselves into Kandahar. We should try not to dither ourselves away from it. The only reason to get out of Kandahar (and a good one) is that it is not our business. By that logic, however, will we ever go anywhere that involves any cost or risk at all? If we accept the arguments to leave Kandahar, where would we ever stand against opposition? Few cases for intervention are stronger. The preferred candidate for the Liberals and NDP, Darfur, leads us toward neo-colonial counter-insurgency, side by side with the United States, in a civil war against an enemy backed by Islamic militants and a hostile state. No matter the tragedy occurring there, until the Sudanese government authorises the deployment of non-African forces, discussion of a deployment to Darfur is just a red herring, a rhetorical device to argue us out of Afghanistan while trying to pretend we still are responsible world citizens. That claim also panders to anti-American feeling, a sentimental and inadequate understanding of the UN, peacekeeping or Darfur, and our well-known self-worship: we will continue to see ourselves as Good People doing Nice Things for Deserving People – even if in reality we do it on the cheap and highly selectively, or not at all. The moral superiority of security and reconstruction in Darfur, as opposed to security and reconstruction in Afghanistan, is not obvious. If anything, it is even more a matter of choice and remote from our national interests than Afghanistan. Perhaps that very distance makes it seem purer?

Isolationism is a perfectly good policy. When combined with self-righteousness, however, it produces a word called hypocrisy, and a condition which Robertson Davies once termed a “fool-saint”: someone whose good intentions, combined with ignorance of the world, fail at the cost of himself and all those he purports to help.