

ISAF IN AFGHANISTAN, OR LEARNING TO LOVE COUNTER- INSURGENCY

Joshua D. Kertzer



One reason why the national discussion on Afghanistan has become so muddled is widespread misunderstanding about the nature of counter-insurgency campaigns. Viewing the Canadian engagement in Afghanistan through the prism of counter-insurgency doctrine not only contextualizes continuity and changes that have taken place in Canadian strategy since the mid-1990s, but points to some of the missteps that have dogged coalition forces over the past seven years: a lack of resources, a lack of presence, a lack of follow-through and a lack of local state capacity.

La méconnaissance — largement répandue — de la nature des missions contre-insurrectionnelles est l'une des raisons qui expliquent que le débat sur l'Afghanistan soit si confus au Canada. Analyser l'engagement du Canada en Afghanistan à la lumière de la doctrine de contre-insurrection nous permet non seulement de mettre en perspective tant la continuité que les changements de la stratégie adoptée par le Canada depuis le milieu des années 1990, mais aussi de cerner certaines faiblesses qui ont marqué l'action des forces de la coalition depuis sept ans : le manque de ressources, le manque de suivi et la faible capacité de l'État afghan.

Nearly seven years after Operation Apollo brought Canadian troops to Afghanistan, public opinion polls indicate that Canadians remain torn about the country's continued presence there. As the Report of the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan (Manley report) suggested, some of this division stems from the Canadian government's inability to clearly articulate the parameters and rationale of the mission; in this sense, Canadians can be forgiven for wondering why their armed forces are in Afghanistan, given that their government has done such a poor job of explaining it to them.

However, much of this confusion also emanates from the complexities present at the level of grand strategy; a muddled communication strategy is bound to originate from a military operation as convoluted as the current one, which, to the Canadian Forces' credit, has gradually changed along with the situation on the ground. After all, it was not long ago that certain circles in the Canadian defence community were disappointed that the Canadian Forces were deployed to Afghanistan rather than Iraq, since serving in Iraq would have provided an opportunity to restructure the Forces to withstand heavy combat, whereas the Afghan mission was seen as merely extending the status quo. Instead, the status quo has shattered.

This latest Seven Years' War therefore prompts reflection over what Canada is doing in Afghanistan. Regardless of whether the Canadian Forces ended up in Kandahar because of Ottawa's desire to curry favour with the post-9/11 Bush White House, or merely as a reflexive response to NATO's invocation of article 5 of the Washington Treaty, it remains important to consider what precisely Canada is engaged in now that it is there. This article argues that the Canadian engagement in Afghanistan can best be understood from the perspective of counter-insurgency doctrine, a paradigm that has experienced a strong resurgence in American security strategy but that remains poorly understood in the Canadian context.

Since the mid 1990s, the American approach to counter-terrorism has undergone two major paradigm shifts. The Clinton administration understood terrorism primarily as a law enforcement problem, like the drug trade and organized crime: challenges requiring institutionalized multilateral cooperation, particularly between law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Following the September 11 attacks, however, the Bush administration decided that its predecessor was not sufficiently serious about fighting terrorism, and shifted from understanding terrorism as a law enforcement issue to viewing it as a national security problem. The 9/11

attacks were widely criticized as an intelligence failure, so it was an emboldened Pentagon, rather than the intelligence agencies, that was given the lead in the war on terror. As the 2002 National Security Strategy

tics” gleaned from decades of COIN operations beforehand: the Israelis against Hamas, the Russians against the Chechens and so on. Second, the re-coronation of COIN as the last best hope on earth is somewhat surprising

term on paper, Canada has tended to embrace strategic doctrines in practice, and the shift from the Axworthy doctrine of the mid-1990s to the counter-insurgency approach of the mid-2000s constitutes a dramatic transformation worth examining in detail.

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emphasized, the central aim was to ensure that the war was fought abroad, rather than at home.

As the situation on the ground in Iraq stagnated, however, momentum grew in policy circles toward understanding the war on terror as a counter-insurgency (COIN) operation. The distinction is not merely a semantic one: COIN doctrine sees terrorism as a tactic rather than as a group's defining characteristic, and advocates an integrated military economic and political strategy to delegitimize insurgent groups and prevent them from achieving their objectives. In this sense, the shift toward COIN, culminating in the release of the US military's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* and the appointment of one of its authors, General David Petraeus, to oversee the multinational forces in Iraq, can be seen as a revolution in military affairs of a very different kind, a recognition that “shock and awe” is unable to win over hearts and minds.

The fanfare that has greeted the “surge” in Iraq and the subsequent promotion of General Petraeus to oversee both the Iraqi and Afghan missions, as the new head of the US Central Command, indicate the increased clout that COIN doctrine continues to exert in Washington.

The American embrace of COIN operations is fascinating for at least three reasons. First, although the COIN field manual is new, its arguments are not, culling the “best prac-

tices” given that its failures are plentiful and prominent — the Vietnam War, the Algerian civil war, the Cuban civil war and so on — and its successes fall into that undesirable zone between rare and obscure, such as the British defeat of the Malayan emergency in the 1950s. Although COIN practitioners have made a concerted effort to learn from history — the Pentagon's COIN training reportedly includes watching the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, and COIN scholars revisit the works of Che Guevara, T.E. Lawrence and Mao Zedong — it is worth recalling that counter-insurgents lost the former, and were defeated by the latter. Third, and most important for our purposes, this shift toward COIN has occurred almost simultaneously on both sides of the 49th parallel, but through very different routes. Whereas the American embrace of COIN implied a decreased emphasis on military force, the Canadian adaptation required a remuscularization of Canadian policy.

It may seem slightly presumptuous to speak of Canadian strategy, not because the word sounds too grandiose but because Canadian governments have tended to eschew the term. Whereas the White House releases a National Security Strategy every four years, the Canadian government tends to release policy papers, such as the 2005 International Policy Statement, or the 2004 National Security Policy. Yet even if the government skirts around the

When Lloyd Axworthy took the reins of the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1996 in the midst of budgetary cutbacks that affected Canada's defence and development budgets with particular severity, he immediately embarked upon a policy direction designed to rejuvenate the battered department, resulting in what colloquially became known as the Axworthy doctrine. According to this paradigm, the end of the Cold War fundamentally transformed the character of global affairs: military force is less useful while “soft power” is indispensable; human security trumps state security; and NGOs and public diplomacy have crucial roles in the new security environment. It was under Lloyd Axworthy's leadership that Canada spearheaded the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel mines, pushed for restrictions on the use of child soldiers and created the International Commission on Intervention in State Sovereignty, the panel that articulated the “responsibility to protect” doctrine, which articulates the conditions under which states can intervene in response to government abuses.

The Axworthy doctrine came under considerable fire by the end of the Foreign Affairs Minister's tenure, with academic critics deriding it as “pinch-penny diplomacy” and “functional isolationism.” The problem is not that its precepts are invalid: as scholars like Joseph Nye have convincingly argued, technological diffusion, economic interdependence and nationalist movements have increased the costs of using military force, such that it is often a less useful way of achieving one's foreign policy objectives. Similarly, scholars have noted for decades that the international system

is becoming less state-centric, as multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations, transnational terrorist groups and non-governmental organizations have all become major actors in their own right. In this respect, Axworthy's analysis of the changing international system is largely correct.

The primary fault of the Axworthy doctrine, then, was not that it was inaccurate about the transformations taking place on the global stage, but that it convinced those holding the purse strings that foreign policy could now be conducted on a shoe string budget, and that the severe slashes to Canadian foreign aid and military budgets that had occurred from 1993 to 1998 (cuts of 29 percent and 23 percent, respectively) need not be reversed. Soft power may be more important due to the declining utility of military force, but that does not mean that military power is useless altogether; indeed, when Nye defined soft power he made clear that he still understood military power as the "ultimate" form. Likewise, safeguarding human security is important, but it is not possible without an effective state apparatus protecting its citizens; as defence scholar Douglas Bland notes, peace and order are prerequisites for good government.

Herein lies the paradox about the Canadian engagement in Afghanistan. On the one hand, Canada's involvement with ISAF seems to constitute a break from the Canadian foreign policy doctrines of the 1990s. Counter-insurgency doctrine certainly lacks the soaring rhetoric of a human security agenda, such as when it refers to local populations not as human beings whose rights need protection, but as the "political space" of a conflict. The contrast goes beyond clumsy phrasing; when former chief of defence staff General Rick Hillier suggested that the purpose of the

Canadian mission in Afghanistan was to kill Taliban "scumbags," an outcry arose as pundits and politicians suggested that Canada was abandoning its historical role as a peacekeeping power. Much of the debate in the House of Commons on the Afghan mission touched upon a similar theme, with members of Parliament suggesting that Canada was unwittingly becoming a "war-fighting" power. Certainly the Canadian mission in Afghanistan is far removed from first-generation peacekeeping operations, where lightly armed troops maintained a previously established peace while remaining neutral between the two hostile parties. Indeed, Axworthy himself published a *Globe and Mail* op-ed during the Liberal leadership campaign criticizing the militaristic nature of the Canadian role

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in Afghanistan, suggesting that the current Canadian approach bears no similarity to the one he pursued as foreign affairs minister.

And yet it is unclear that COIN operations are that far removed from the principles underlying Axworthy's human security agenda, even if they operationalize them in a divergent manner. Just as the Axworthy doctrine emphasized the declining utility of military force, classical COIN doctrine suggests that only 20 percent of a counter-insurgency effort should be military in nature. David Kilcullen, the former chief strategist on counter-terrorism in the State Department, goes further in suggesting that modern counter-insurgencies are actually 100 percent political, and that perceptions

and political outcomes far outweigh military achievements. COIN theory places a similar importance on human security: COIN operations should not just capture insurgents, but also bring stability and security to local populations, addressing grievances and thereby denying insurgents a support base.

The provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) that the Canadian Forces head in Kandahar, combining Canadian Forces personnel with staff from the Canadian International Development Agency, Foreign Affairs, and the RCMP, are an example of the integrated nature of the conflict, which the Canadian government dubbed a "3D" (diplomacy, defence, development) approach. In this sense, the doctrinal difference between a human security agenda and the strategy guiding the Afghan mission is minimal; the major distinction is that consideration has also been paid to the hard-power capabilities needed to support the humanitarian goals. Thus, although critics of the Afghan mission have suggested that the Canadian role in Afghanistan has become Americanized, the presence of a human security agenda within counter-insurgency doctrine suggests that to a certain extent American strategy has been Canadianized.

Understanding the Canadian engagement in Afghanistan as a counterinsurgency operation is useful since it points out some of the key missteps in the mission thus far, of which four interrelated points will be presented here: a lack of resources, a lack of presence, a lack of follow-through and a lack of state capacity.

First, COIN is resource-intensive, and ISAF is simply not large enough to get the job done. Classic counter-insurgency texts speak of a ratio of 20 counter-insurgents per 1,000 residents, while NATO's 50,000 troops in Afghanistan amount to a ratio of around 1.56 counter-insurgents per 1,000 Afghans, only one-twelfth of the



Canadian Forces photo

A heavily armed Canadian soldier on the lookout for the Taliban in Kandahar province, one of the key battlegrounds in the counter-insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

ideal proportion. In comparison, the Soviet Union failed to quell an insurgency in Afghanistan in the 1980s when it had over twice as many troops on the ground as ISAF currently has, and troop deployment would have to increase by 300 percent to match the same levels maintained by coalition forces in Iraq in 2004. The Canadian government has repeatedly called for additional contributions from NATO members, but this 20:1,000 ratio remains well beyond the wildest dreams of NATO commanders, who rejoiced at the Bucharest summit when France pledged an additional battalion. Given the current inability of the Pakistan government to crack down on insurgents in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering

Afghanistan, and the recent increase in the intensity of the insurgency through the spring and summer, NATO's insufficient presence in Afghanistan remains highly problematic.

Second, this lack of presence on the ground sends the wrong signal to the Afghan population. Whereas Canadian discussions of Afghanistan have tended to focus on burden-sharing issues within NATO and overcoming national caveats, Afghans have focused on whether NATO has the political will to withstand what twice as many Soviet troops could not. Indeed, although many pundits have treated as an unfortunate coincidence the simultaneous rise of the Taliban insurgency and NATO's assumption of

control of southern Afghanistan, others, like security scholar Renée de Nevers, have suggested that the increased Taliban attacks were part of a deliberate strategy to weaken NATO's resolve, especially with the United States bogged down in Iraq. This perception of a lack of political will is problematic not because it emboldens the Taliban — scholarship in political psychology suggests that it is extremely difficult to earn a reputation for resolve in the eyes of your opponents — but because of how it affects the Afghan population caught in the middle. COIN operations, after all, are all about shaping the perceptions of the local population, denying insurgents the resources they need for mobiliza-

tion. The Afghan National Army is unlikely to recruit dedicated members if there is a widespread belief that its NATO allies are not prepared to stay for the long haul, and villagers in Helmand province are unlikely to assist NATO forces if they are being threatened by insurgents and feel that NATO cannot offer them security.

The Manley report attempted to mitigate this lack of presence in Kandahar by recommending that Canada adopt “signature” aid projects whose visible contribution to Afghan society will also remind Afghans of the depth of the Canadian commitment. Beneficial as these projects may be — both for the people of Kandahar and for a Canadian government eager for feel-good stories on the nightly news — the fundamental predicament remains NATO’s overall lack of presence, of which Canadians make up only a small component. Part of the problem is the skewed distribution of capabilities within NATO; the United States spent twice as much on its military in 2007 as all of the 25 other NATO members combined, but much of this might is tied up in Iraq. The Iraq War has also raised the domestic political costs for many ISAF members, who, although willing to sign up for a peacekeeping mission, encounter little domestic support for tactics tarred by association with the American misadventures in Iraq; this phenomenon also appeared in Canada, amid cries that the country was now fighting an “American-style counter-insurgency.”

As of this writing, Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, has proposed redeploying two brigades (around 7,000 troops) from Iraq to Afghanistan, which would greatly bolster the coalition’s presence in the latter. His Republican counterpart, Senator John McCain, after spending months equating redeployment with surrendering to al-Qaeda, recently reversed course and proposed the redeployment of three

brigades. Nevertheless, American overcommitment in the region has led to a fundamental strategic dilemma. On the one hand, the United States is eager to foster a reputation for political will in the Middle East and is therefore reticent about pulling out from Iraq, as evident in Senator McCain’s famous assertion that he was willing to stay in Iraq for “maybe a hundred years.” On the other hand, maintaining an insufficient presence in Afghanistan and letting the Taliban eke out a gradual victory sends the opposite signal, and it is unclear what the effects of transferring US troops from one arena to another will be.

Third, because the resources to fight a successful COIN operation have simply not been there, a counter-insurgency strategy on paper has often turned into a traditional military operation in practice. From 2001 to 2005, the United States spent 11 times as much on its military operations in the Afghanistan as it did on all other reconstruction activities combined. Although Afghanistan is now Canada’s largest bilateral aid recipient, this statistic says less about the Afghan mission and more about the minuscule

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Canadian foreign aid budget. In the American case, much of the underemphasis on reconstruction and overemphasis on military operations stems from the Donald Rumsfeld-led Pentagon, which reflects the policy environment in Washington that developed over the previous decade. In the early 1990s, when Madeleine Albright was the American ambassador to the United Nations, she famously asked Colin Powell, then chairing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, what the point was “of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it.” A decade later, the Pentagon

inverted the question: what was the point of having this superb military if its efforts were spent on reconstruction and nation building, activities which any other nation could pursue? Thus, although the United States advocated training the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, it wanted to leave it to the trainees to rebuild the country, and was less interested in international assistance. Defense Secretary Robert Gates’s midsummer critique of the “creeping militarization” in American foreign policy is therefore a promising sign, although it’s unclear what his comments will mean in practical terms.

An overreliance on the military, however, is not the only way in which COIN strategies have evolved in Afghanistan. The lack of boots on the ground has resulted in dependence on planes in the air: as Anthony Cordesman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies has pointed out, the number of US air support strikes where munitions were used doubled from 2004 to 2005, increased tenfold in 2006 and nearly doubled again in 2007.

Although this crescendo is partially explained by the increasing intensity of the insurgency, it is nevertheless problematic for COIN scholars, since air power brings an increase in coercive force at the expense of targeting precision. Euphemisms such as “collateral damage” fail to convey just how counter-productive the bombing of innocent parties is, angering the local population, presenting free propaganda for insurgent groups and making the counter-insurgents’ jobs more difficult.

Finally, a key challenge for counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan is



MATIÈRE À RÉFLEXION :

« ON ESTIME QUE LES ÉMISSIONS
DE GAZ À EFFET DE SERRE RÉSULTANT
DE LA DÉFORESTATION CORRESPONDENT
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TOTALES DE GES. »

Rapport Stern sur les changements climatiques, octobre 2006

Compte tenu d'un taux de déforestation virtuellement nul et de plus de forêts vierges, de forêts certifiées et de forêts protégées que tout autre pays, le Canada est un chef de file de l'aménagement forestier durable depuis un certain temps déjà. L'industrie canadienne des produits forestiers s'engage à l'amélioration continue et elle souscrit à cette déclaration du Groupe d'experts intergouvernemental sur l'évolution du climat : « À long terme, la stratégie d'aménagement forestier durable qui vise le maintien ou l'augmentation des stocks de carbone en forêt, tout en assurant un rendement annuel soutenu en bois, sera la plus avantageuse en termes d'atténuation continue. »

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that ISAF is not engaged in a traditional counter-insurgency operation. Classical COIN doctrine envisions three sets of actors: groups of insurgents seeking to weaken (although not necessarily overthrow) the state, the government targeted by the insurgents and the counter-insurgent forces, who may belong either to the local government or to a third party intervening on the government's behalf. Either way, implicit in the literature is the assumption that there is a state for the insurgents to resist. In Afghanistan, however, the national government exists more on paper than in practice; counter-insurgent forces aren't just protecting the state, they must build it too. State capacity is both marred by widespread corruption and severely undeveloped, with local warlords exerting considerable control throughout much of the country and the Karzai government's strength mostly limited to the largest cities.

Thus, although much of the foreign and economic aid in Afghanistan has been channelled through the national government, considerable development needs to take place at local levels, since it is in remote vil-

lages where government capacity is weakest that the insurgency will be won or lost.

It is too soon to tell what military historians will write when they look back at NATO's mission in Afghanistan. What is clear, though, is that even if Canadian casualty rates have been slowing down, the insurgency as a whole has been heating up. Viewing the engagement through the prism of counter-insurgency strategy helps clarify the integrated nature of the mission and suggests both the continuity and the change present in Canadian grand strategy. Politicians and pundits alike have muddied the conversation about Afghanistan — both by failing to connect the mission with counter-insurgency strategy and by invoking COIN tactically rather than strategically. It has become common to speak of counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan as being limited to fighting the Taliban, and therefore as distinct from — and perhaps in competition with — the reconstruction and humanitarian efforts taking place. For COIN scholars, however, the PRTs are as cen-

tral to counterinsurgency strategy as the firefights, and both civil and military responses need to be understood as connected, not as alternatives.

COIN strategy does not come without its own set of problems. Successful COIN operations are few and far between, are resource intensive, and tend to degenerate in practice into more traditional military operations. The Afghan mission currently suffers from a lack of troops, a paucity of economic assistance and a dearth of attention by the international community. Without further investments in all three of these areas, it is unlikely that the successes incurred over the past seven years — whether in training the Afghan National Army, in capturing Taliban or in building roads and hospitals — will outlast the next seven.

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