

What Canadians Should Know About Afghanistan

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The frequently asked question “What is Canada doing in Afghanistan?” can be, depending on which word is emphasized, as many as five questions, all of which need to be answered. There is, however, an equally commonly asked question among an interested public, “Where can I find out about the Afghanistan mission?”

As one who has been engaging interested public audiences and media on defence and security topics for over 20 years both formally and informally, poorly informed audiences are not surprising. However, what has been surprising over the last three years is a consistent lack of understanding of the Afghanistan mission, particularly among audiences normally well informed on such matters. After two visits to Afghanistan over the last twenty months, the last one being this past April, it is also clear that much of what is going on is not well understood or even heard by the public as it either does not get reported or is even misconstrued, leading to misinformation. Democracy assumes the involvement of an informed public - as a means to informing politicians on policy positions. In the absence of such an informed public - or worse, misinformed public- there could arise a conflict between public awareness and understanding and the realities that lead to Government’s reactions to international conditions affecting the nation’s interests.

Media coverage of the mission has placed great emphasis on combat and, in particular, the casualties and the circumstances surrounding their occurrence. Other commentary appears to concentrate on the negatives – things that are not going right or well, such as the recent prison break in Kandahar, or the lack of apparent progress in major areas such as how to handle the vexing problem of poppy cultivation. What appears to be lacking is an understanding within the media, in particular, but also in some parts of government, of a number of larger issues

that are interconnected and thus need to be addressed as a system of issues rather than simply a list of things to be done. So, what should Canadians know about Afghanistan?

First, anyone interested in Afghanistan should look at a world map. Afghanistan is a land-locked country roughly the size of Manitoba but with the population of Canada. It is situated in Southwest Asia – a region stretching from the Nile to the Indus that contains most of the world’s petroleum resources and is an arc of instabilities to which Canada has deployed UN Observers, UN Peacekeeping forces and coalition intervention forces over 20 times since the end of the second World War. Afghanistan is bordered by Iran, China and Pakistan, including the contested state (with India) of Kashmir, plus three former Soviet states -Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. China, Pakistan and India are all nuclear states, Iran is expected to become so, and Israel, another regional power, is assumed to be so. Without a lot of explanation, it should be clear that Canada has and has had a significant interest in contributing to the stability of this region over the last 60 years – and we are doing so again.

Second, the devastation wrought on Afghanistan is unimaginable as the result of almost 30 years of war starting with the Soviet invasion and occupation of 1979, followed by a vicious civil war after the Soviet departure in 1989 and a resultant assumption of power in 1995 by a ruthless Islamist Taliban government. This government permitted the fostering of the jihadist terrorist organization – Al Qaeda – that undertook a number of major terrorist attacks against United States interests and assets, culminating in the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks of September 11, 2001, resulting in the death of thousands of American citizens and 23 Canadians. The United States led a UN- and NATO-sanctioned intervention to remove the Taliban from power. Not only was the country left as little more than a pile of rubble, it was effectively without any infrastructure or the normal institutions of government, education or commerce.

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The UN- directed Afghanistan Compact and Afghanistan National Development Strategy of 2005 to which Canada was a signatory – but three years ago – paved the way for elections and political, economic and social reconstruction in an environment of continuing insecurity. Expectations over the rate at which recovery, reconstitution of government, reconstruction of infrastructure and institutions, resettlement of millions of refugees - all within a complex multi-ethnic and traditional tribal society with widespread illiteracy and while continuing to deal with security issues - must be tempered by recognition and understanding of these realities. What has been accomplished over the last three years is truly amazing, and *that* is the story as opposed to criticism over lack of progress - continuing challenges and difficulties notwithstanding.

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The activities of Canada's contribution of a battle group, headquarters and various support elements has received coverage from embedded reporters, but the successes of the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team(PRT) and the Kabul-based Strategic Advisory Team (SAT) are not as well reported or understood.

The conditions that will ultimately contribute to a free and independent Afghanistan go beyond simply military security – although that remains a necessary condition. A locally sustainable economy based in local resources will depend on certain infrastructure – mainly roads and transportation – to get marketable goods to a market site, in addition to the capability to produce those goods in the first place.

Attempting to supplant the illicit cash crop of poppies when there is no means to get an alternative crop to a market – indeed where maybe there is no market, assumes pre-conditions of not only the transportation infrastructure but also some education, seed supply, perhaps processing resources etc. So, the construction of an eight- kilometre paved road (Route Fosters –Brown) in Panjway-Zhari districts financed by the PRT and supervised by Canadian military engineers employs some 300-500 Afghans, who are paid \$6-10 per day and learn traditional Afghan road construction methods. The road provides additional security from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), a transit route to nearby towns and Kandahar and hence markets. Funding has been approved for a 14-kilometre extension. In addition, a new and nearby Canada-financed causeway provides a short-cut reducing

travel time to markets from other areas. The villages in the area now have active markets, some 10-15,000 refugees have returned and there is the semblance of an economy developing – also reflecting a perception of security and hope in the future. The road construction not only provides employment and income, but also represents an alternative to joining the Taliban for a night or two with an AK-47 to obtain some income for one's family.

These projects provide opportunities to consult with the people and elders to understand their needs and to identify other activities that Canadians may support. This is NOT negotiating with the Taliban - as it was represented in one report, reflecting a lack of understanding of the whole system served by these projects.

The support for the training and mentoring of the Afghan National Police has been overshadowed by reports of corruption leading to unpaid and restive police men and women. At the PRT in Kandahar, RCMP and municipal police officers from Canada, including a woman from Corrections Canada, have established a police training centre which, among other professional policing subjects, addresses the matters of detainee treatment.

The issue of pay being siphoned off by senior officers has been resolved by depositing individual police officers' pay in a bank and a card being given to each officer coded for the amount of his or her pay. Further, Canadian Military Police – both men and women - mentor Afghan National Police in more remote, primitive and insecure police substations where they live for months at a time on 'hard rations' in very basic conditions. Here they set examples in both professional and social terms of Canadian values, including the attitudes toward and the capabilities of women in the Canadian Forces.

Similar mentoring of the Afghan National Army(ANA) has demonstrated the exceptional progress the ANA has made in the past 18 months and their rapidly increasing capability to assume more responsibility for local security. Although this has contributed to a substantial increase in local respect for the ANA, a recent news report concentrated on finding a local who would say that the ANA was weak and dependent on Canadians – their demonstrated capability and performance in combat notwithstanding. The Afghan National Army Academy will soon graduate its first class of officers following a rigorous three-year education on the US West Point military academy lines. The attitude toward this profession is reflected in the some 1700 qualified applicants for the 300 slots in the new class. Where are the articles on the role of Canadians and NATO troops in building an indigenous army, police and security capability? It appears that reporters do not understand the system at work in these cases.

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Finally, there is the Kabul-based Strategic Assistance Team. This 19-member group of military officers and a few civilians have for over three one-year deployments provided a unique Canada-Afghanistan bilateral advisory capability. They have served as senior advisors in various Afghan Government Ministries, educating new and inexperienced public servants on how to develop, plan and execute policies and programs; in other words, real capacity-building. The Ministers themselves have different and wide-ranging experience and skills, and starting a democratic government from ‘scratch’ has been challenging, to say the least. Inter-departmental jealousies in Canada appear to have led to the cancellation of this program. The Canadian Forces produces officers with strategic planning and program implementation skills as a matter of normal professional development – in contradistinction to the Federal Public

Service. Their utility and effectiveness has not been lost on President Karzai, but how and by whom this team will be replaced will be interesting to watch. However, over its three years, the work of this unique and effective team has been the subject of only a couple of small articles and one television news feature, which appeared to miss the point entirely!

These are but a few examples. There are others, including some involving the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Foreign Affairs Canada.

While some commentators continue to rail at Government because they claim it has failed to explain why Canada is in Afghanistan and what we are doing. The various departmental websites, however, are rich sources of information for those who know where and how to find them.

Perhaps the failure is within the media because very few appear to clearly understand the strategic context and operational interdependencies of Canadian activities in Afghanistan. Canadian media, reporters, journalists, editors and publishers should examine their own capacities and their responsibilities for a poorly informed or misinformed public. ©