

Analyst says current strategy making matters worse

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Peggy Mason says it's backfiring.

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Much like in Iraq, the post-conflict security situation in Afghanistan has been badly mishandled with combat operations aimed at rooting out terrorists undermining — rather than building — the security of ordinary Afghans and foreign forces alike.

In modern complex peace operations, the essence of the military mission is to find the proper balance between persuasion and coercion — between consent and the use of force.

It may now be too late to properly apply the lessons learned at such high cost in the evolution of modern complex peace operations from Somalia, through the Balkans, to Sierra Leone, East Timor, to the Democratic Republic of Congo — the list is a long one.

But with Canadian forces daily facing catastrophic injury and death in a mission most Canadians just do not understand, we will not find our way out of the Afghanistan quagmire unless we get back to the fundamentals of modern complex peace operations.

Consent and coercion in modern complex peace operations

The insistence of the international community on a peace process as the starting point for any post-conflict peacekeeping effort is a very pragmatic one. The aim is not to go to war with the parties — however well-armed the international force may be — but to help them build the democratic institutions and processes that will enable them to manage societal conflicts in a non-violent way. A robust force can deter violations of the peace agreement, and effectively address them when they occur and thus build confidence in the peace process.

But this presumes that all or most of the key players want peace more than war, so that individual spoilers can be effectively isolated and dealt with, under the Chapter VII mandate.

Viewed from this perspective, the role of the military component of modern peace operations can be seen as quite analogous to classic military counterinsurgency efforts where the aim is to win over the locals so as to deny the terrorists a base of support. The re-establishment of effective governance, in political, military and law and order terms — a key aim of complex peace implementation processes — will also have the effect of denying, or at least inhibiting, terrorist operations.

The US, peace operations and the global war on terror

The American approach to fighting terrorism conflates three distinct types of activities — war-fighting, peacekeeping and anti-terrorist police operations, arguably to the detriment of all three.

In Afghanistan, rather than a war-fighting phase followed by a post-conflict stabilization phase, the U.S.-led war-fighting, anti-terrorist coalition, dubbed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), continued in the countryside while the NATO-led peace support operation — ISAF — was deployed to Kabul. The American component of the war-fighters operated on the basis of overwhelming force, made deals with local warlords as they saw fit and paid scant heed in the process to international rules on the treatment of prisoners.

Their objective — the elimination of the Taliban and al-Qaeda — proceeded according to a military plan intended primarily to serve the perceived security interests of the United States and its allies.

Only the NATO-led force had a mandate from the UN Security Council and it was to help the fledgling Afghan government build a safe and secure environment for the Afghan people, initially in and around Kabul and then further afield, as resources permitted.

But war-fighting and peace-support operations are fundamentally incompatible. The inevitable result of combining the two is to fatally undermine the ability of the security assistance component to actually support the peace process by gradually building the foundation of security on which virtually everything else depends.

Equally problematic, war-fighting is a lousy way to win the most essential battle in the fight against terrorism — the battle for local support, without which terrorists simply cannot function. This is because combat operations — especially American-led ones — often undermine the security of innocent locals — who all too easily become collateral damage in a war not of their choosing. The result is the worst of both worlds — more terrorists and less security for locals and foreign forces alike.

It all comes back to the conceptual basis for modern complex, post-conflict peace operations — that the process is fundamentally a political one requiring a comprehensive political solution. That means bringing as many factions into the peace process as possible, not *a priori* ruling out entire groups because they are on the wrong side of the "war on terror."

This is surely the most fundamental lesson to be gleaned from the British experience in Northern Ireland, followed closely by the need to respect basic precepts of international law on due process and the use of force if local "hearts and minds" are to be won over, not hopelessly alienated.

The UN believes that the vast majority of Taliban supporters want a negotiated settlement. The Americans seem to have at least partially come around to this way of thinking, with Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld openly musing last summer about the need to negotiate with at least some of the Taliban, while at the same time pushing for stepped-up efforts to get NATO to expand into the southern provinces, to allow for a reduction in the number of American coalition forces.

The Canadian response

Against this backdrop of failed American-led efforts to pacify through war, of expanding NATO-led ISAF efforts to build local security and a stated intention of the UN to bring about new negotiations with the Taliban, here comes Canada, a country whose highly competent

military has a well-deserved reputation for pursuing a peace support mandate with vigor, competence and fairness.

And what does Canada do?

Whatever the real intention, the course of action adopted by the former Martin government on the advice of the Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Rick Hillier seems certain to ensure that ordinary Afghans — just like ordinary Canadians — will find it almost impossible to distinguish between the war-fighters and the peacebuilding forces.

We send a new contingent of special forces (JTF2) to fight alongside the Americans. We take over command of the multinational brigade portion of the American-led, war-fighting coalition, Operation Enduring Freedom.

And we situate our humanitarian assistance effort — the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team — under the OEF. We are told this is all a precursor to the OEF multinational brigade transferring (at some as yet undisclosed time) to NATO command, as if new ISAF shoulder patches were going to erase all local memories of past activities by the coalition forces.

And, incredibly, the independent American component of the coalition will not be transitioning to NATO command, so there will still be two different, conflicting, military mandates even after Canadian and other soldiers from the multinational brigade transfer to the NATO force.

Had the international community seized the window of opportunity afforded by the initial rout of the Taliban four years ago and thrown its weight behind a comprehensive peace negotiation, backed up by the promise of a country-wide NATO stabilization force, the task of bringing security to Afghanistan would still have been monumental, given the warlords, the dependence on opium production and the long history of factionalism.

But four years on, with the security situation on the ground in Southern Afghanistan getting worse by the day, as the tactics of suicide bombers that were honed in Iraq are now increasingly being used to devastating effect in Afghanistan, the stabilization task is immeasurably more difficult.

The dangers now inherent in any effort to win over the locals was illustrated in dramatic fashion by the hatchet attack Saturday against one of a group of Canadian soldiers attending a traditional community meeting with the local elders called a *shura*.

The Canadian tactics of removing their helmets and laying down their weapons to show good faith are part and parcel of a necessary confidence-building process. But such actions leave the Canadians incredibly vulnerable to the terrorists whose aim is to head off any possibility of a rapprochement between the Canadians and the locals by making it too dangerous for Canada — and the incoming NATO forces — to use these "soft" methods of building local support.

If Canada wants to be part of the solution, instead of just another country caught in the quagmire, we need to do some hard thinking about what an achievable mandate should look like.

This is a debate that is long overdue in NATO, in part because of the continuing reluctance of Foreign Ministers, still raw from the Iraq debate, to question the American tactics, but equally because of the sheer numbers of forces that would likely be required to deploy a credible security assistance force country-wide.