

Round-table meeting on Afghanistan
Afghanistan's Domestic Political Development since
2001: Burdens of the Past and Challenges Ahead
Final Report

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Presentation of the event

With Afghanistan on top of Ottawa's foreign policy agenda, public and academic attention are increasingly focusing on Canada's military and humanitarian role in the country. To a great extent, the future of Canada's involvement depends on the fate of Afghanistan's domestic political consolidation. Any decision on this outstanding policy issue, therefore, calls for a sober discussion of the achievements made towards the establishment of accountable political institutions and the stabilization of the volatile security situation. If anything, it is the unexpected return of the Taliban and the bloody insurgency they lead in the south and east of the country against the government and its Western allies that reminds us of the urgency to discuss the interrelated nature of foreign engagement and domestic politics. Notwithstanding the polemics surrounding the POW issue, this debate is unfortunately almost wholly absent from current examinations of Canada's present and future role in Afghanistan. The round-table meeting held at Université Laval the 14th of February 2008 sought to fill this gap. To this end a panel of experts with intimate knowledge of the country, its history and recent political development was convened under the chairmanship of Professor Jean-Pierre Derriennic. In order to allow a frank and open discussion on this sensitive issue, the event took place under the Chatham House rule.

A number of important aspects regarding the international community's policies and their complex interaction with the specific situation on the ground were addressed throughout the introductory statements made by the panelists and the ensuing Q&A session. Two interrelated problem-sets stood out: First, the problem of knowing and interpreting what precisely happens in the country due to the at least disputable quality of available data and, second, the uneasy interaction between Afghanistan's complex domestic politics, on the one hand, and the divergent policy priorities and interests of the Western powers, on the other. However, drawing on the lessons learned the panelists provided for several policy suggestions that might help Canada to attain its foreign policy goal of contributing to a peaceful, secure, and prosper future for Afghanistan.



Aspects discussed during the round-table meeting

1) Knowing and interpreting what is going on

Addressing the debate surrounding NATO's strategy and more particularly Canada's objectives in Afghanistan, one of the panellists criticized the publicly held perceptions of the ongoing counterinsurgency operations as too pessimistic and largely ignorant of the hard facts. Not only is the increasing number of incidences by no means implying that the insurgency is gaining momentum, but also the oft-cited growth in the poppy production conceals important positive trends. Indeed, the number of enemy contacts reflects before anything else the more proactive stance taken by ISAF and the Afghan security forces in the counterinsurgency operations, while the increase in the total output of poppy is limited to a few provinces in the south, not yet completely controlled by the government.

Others on the panel however draw a far gloomier picture of the situation on the ground. Adopting a broader perspective, they warned that a return of the Taliban in the near future had become a possible scenario. What happened in the past few years in Afghanistan is that a culture of violence and insecurity got established. Amidst the rampant instability, the Taliban has installed parallel governance structures in many parts of the South with a judiciary, police force, and governor positions and thus consolidated its grip on power in several districts. In the face of the government's failure to provide for tangible improvements in people's daily lives, the Taliban has at least managed to deliver on the promise for justice and an end of impunity. In fact, people in the regions under Taliban control often seem satisfied with their presence. This is all the more alarming considering that the Taliban has proved that its resilience can make it win the struggle on the long run. This raises the spectre of revenge against those who dare collaborating with the government or foreign troops.

In sum, while some of the available data can be interpreted in a way that highlights some positive trends in the recent past, a global view on the political developments that take into account the country's history beyond 2001 should make us worry about the future of the ambitious state-building project under way.



2) Facing the Taliban: Foreign engagement and Afghanistan's domestic politics

In order to devise better policies for the near future it is crucial to assess the mistakes of the past. Since the Taliban nowadays appear to be the most imminent security threat, the question of the causes of their return has to be addressed carefully. Three points seem to have led to this evolution. First, the incomplete victory over the Taliban, second, the cultural distance between the Kabul government and the Westerners on the one hand and the rural populations on the other, and, third, misguided policies that did not adequately respond to the expectations of the population.

One panellist pointed out that the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) mission that toppled the Taliban regime in 2001 had just pushed the Taliban back into the tribal areas along the border with Pakistan or let them reintegrate the villages they originated from. Thus, the Taliban was not destroyed and its leadership remained intact - a situation that could be characterized as "strategic survival". According to this assessment, the USA have left behind a job half done as they moved effective further to Iraq while the ISAF mission did not expand rapidly enough to fill the power vacuum in many parts of the country.

Regarding the second aspect, the audience was told that the Taliban present themselves as a popular movement of resistance against the infidel invaders and their "puppet government" in Kabul who sells out Afghanistan's prestige, honour, and religion. These claims unfortunately have been vindicated all too often by the lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of the Western troops whose behaviour is perceived by many Afghans as violating local cultural norms, especially in the Pashtun tribal societies of the South where they are of utter importance. The Afghan population sees itself subjected to aggressive and intimidating house and body searches that clash with local conceptions of honour and dignity. Also the growing number of civilian deaths that resulted particularly from indiscriminate aerial bombardments has led many to switch to a tacit allegiance to the Taliban. The corruption of government officials who more than once have been almost literally parachuted to fill out government positions in provinces where they lack popular support has compounded this problem. This has led to passive opposition to the foreigners, all perceived as "Americans". Although short of open revolt this lack of trust undermines the efforts to counter the Taliban threat.



Regarding the failure to deliver on earlier promises panellists remarked that almost seven years after the toppling of the Taliban regime, the majority of the population still waits to see an improvement in their living conditions. Hopes for better access to health care, schools, and basic commodities did not materialize, while corruption in the local government structure is rampant. This is all the more frustrating since Canada has made important financial contribution to Afghanistan's reconstruction. As the aid is channelled through World Bank and UN-administered projects, there seems to be not enough follow up. Also money is put in the hands of the Afghan government but it appears difficult to know in the end how effectively it is eventually spent.

Put otherwise, it is the defunct nature of the newly created governance structures that paved the way for the worrying developments we witness these days. One panellist went as far as to claim that it was the presence in the government of many of the infamous warlords – many of them accused of war crimes committed during the civil war and corruption – that constituted the biggest problem for the government's consolidation today. Meanwhile the international community had too long been “Kabul-centred” and “Karzai-centric” rarely venturing out in search for a dialogue with ordinary people and listening to their legitimate grievances towards the newly created institutions.



3) Perspectives: Where to go from here?

In view of the manifold challenges, what are the perspectives? What should be done to improve the situation on the ground? What policy prescriptions can be derived from the analysis of the recent political developments?

In line with the insights gained from past experiences in counterinsurgency struggles, the crucial issue in Afghanistan today is the support of the people. The mere perception that the Taliban resistance is gaining momentum is dangerous as it alienates the moderate majority while diminishing the legitimacy of the government and the international presence as a whole. Once people start to believe that the resistance will prevail no amount of military power will be able to turn the tide. What are the possible solutions under these circumstances? Three points were suggested.

First, the policy focus should be taken away from military solutions and shifted towards questions of governance and development. There is currently an imbalance between military and humanitarian aspects of Western engagement with an emphasis on military means. This has to be changed. In particular, a viable solution to the problem of the poppy cultures and the opium production has to be found. However, this is not to advocate a troop pullout. NATO forces can accomplish two key functions. On the one hand, they can provide for stability through their deterrence capacity and, on the other, should actively defend the capital and the regional centres. The panellists agreed that the country-specific caveats should be lifted in order to allow for better coordination and effectiveness of ISAF. By contrast, the necessity of additional troop deployments did not achieve consensus.

Second, a clear focus on governance issues is crucial. Nowadays, the government is not seen as a provider of public services. The administrators in Kabul are out of touch with what is going on at the local level if they are not preying on the local populations. Particularly the appointment of notoriously corrupt “old fellows” to senior government post that put them into lucrative “predator positions” poses problems. Whatever the reasons for this practice, it was argued that the focus of the international engagement should lie with the people and not merely with the bureaucracy and its intricacies. In this respect, two dilemmas were however detected. On the one hand, Karzai’s role in this process is controversial. The opinion among the panellists diverged on how far the international community should push him towards more



accountability and whether or not he had the necessary leeway and willingness to implement drastic policy changes. The second and related problem that was mentioned is that fair elections do not seem possible under the current circumstances. People simply will not vote and harassment by Taliban can be expected in the areas under their control. The international community as well as the Afghan population thus has to cope with the current government as a democratic transition of power is out of sight.

Third, the train and equip program for the Afghan security forces has to be shored up. It is beyond doubt that the country's stability in the future will depend on the capacity of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). Next to the numerous militias, ISAF is the main security provider today but many Afghans perceive it not as a force to protect them but just as a support for the ones in power. Given the prospect of the progressive pull-out of NATO, well organized, adequately equipped and accountable security forces under civilian control are required in order to prevent the fragmentation of the Afghan territory into fiefdoms controlled by warlords and Taliban groups. In short, a dramatic change in the international community's policy is needed to bring Afghanistan back to the road to peace, stability, and security.



List of participants

Panelists of the round-table meeting on Afghanistan :

Almas Bawar-Zakhilwal, Canadian Director of the Senlis Council.

Janan Mosazai, Graduate Student, Carleton University.

Richard Garon, Doctorant en Science Politique, Université Laval.

Eileen Olexiuk, Former Deputy Head of Mission, Canadian Embassy, Kabul.

Chair :

Jean-Pierre Derriennic, Professeur au Département de science politique, Université Laval.