

Doing Good Well in Afghanistan, by Paul Heinbecker¹, as published by The Hill Times, March 27, 2006 issue.

Whatever the ultimate outcome of the debate about having a Debate on Canada's role in Afghanistan, it will be very important that the government be clear in its own mind about what we are doing there and why we are doing it, and communicate its purposes persuasively to Canadians. Otherwise, like the Martin administration and the sponsorship scandal, the Harper government could end up being defined by an issue it inherited, however tight its focus on other priorities.

It appears that we are in Afghanistan for essentially two good reasons, both entirely defensible: human solidarity and national security. At the human level, we are trying to help Afghans rebuild their government institutions, develop a legitimate economy to provide for their basic needs and restore protection of human rights, not least the basic health and education rights of millions of Afghan women. Second, we are part of a larger effort that is trying to help the Afghan authorities re-establish at least a minimum of authority over their territory so that international terrorists cannot again be incubated in the remoter reaches of the country. We, also, have an interest in bringing a greater measure of stability to a country that borders on three actual nuclear weapons states and one nascent one.

At the same time, we are spending billions of dollars in our aid and military efforts in Afghanistan, which is for Canada a major commitment that is not sustainable indefinitely. While it is bound to take a generation or two for the Afghan people to create the minimum conditions of a decent life for themselves, it does not follow that Canada must stay there for the duration. Other countries can and should contribute, including military forces, when we decide we have done our share. Further, other conflicts, not least Darfur, cry out for the kind of high value military and humanitarian contribution Canada can make.

The government, also, needs to reject firmly other reasons for being in Afghanistan. Whatever the original rationale of the mission and however much our presence in Afghanistan may be welcome in Washington, public support for this mission is unlikely to endure if our effort comes to be regarded as essentially substituting Canadian soldiers for American soldiers to curry US favour. What we do in Kandahar and how we do it sends signals that are read well beyond Afghanistan, the more so as long as we operate under US and not NATO or UN auspices. The government needs to continue to take pains to make it clear to Canadians, and to everyone else, that we are in Afghanistan for Canadian and Afghan reasons, not as instruments of US policy.

The US has an agenda in Central Asia that in important respects may not necessarily square with Canadian interests or values. The US strategy of allying with the "Stans" to

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counter Russia or aligning Delhi with Washington to contain China may prove counterproductive and dangerous. There are considerable doubts even in the US about the wisdom of Washington's recent agreement with India, which would seek to carve out an exemption for that country from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while denying similar standing for Pakistan and trying to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Further, in indicating effectively that it is acceptable for some countries to have nuclear weapons and others not, Washington is shifting the argument from the dangers inherent in nuclear weapons to the nature of the regimes that would wield them, a variant of the infamous National Rifle Association dictum. This approach is very likely to undermine the NPT which has largely succeeded in containing the spread of nuclear weapons these past nearly 40 years, a major Canadian interest.

US foreign policy has undermined US leadership around the world. The war on terror, which most others have regarded as a metaphor, is seen by some in Washington as legitimating evasion of the Geneva Conventions and the Torture Convention and even, apparently, qualifying the US Constitution. Washington's conflation of 9/11, the invasion of Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian issue, has created a major obstacle to American success in the Middle East. Alignment with the US in Central Asia and the Middle East, as well as at the UN, would send unmistakable signals that would do the new government and ordinary Canadians no service

The government will have to tread a fine line between responding to Washington's legitimate expectations of Canada as a neighbour and ally and risking Canada's reputation for independent constructive engagement in the rest of the world. It would be counterproductive for Canada and dangerous for Canadian citizens for Canada to become identified as a deputy sheriff. Were that to happen, our credibility and therefore our utility to ourselves and to the Americans would be diminished and the security of Canadians would be jeopardized. One glance at the extensive security measures in place around US and British Embassies abroad is enough to understand that their foreign policies put their own citizens at risk. The recent release of a kidnapped aid worker in Gaza when his captors learned that he was a Canadian is one illustration of how our national reputation does have its benefits. That is not always going to be the case, as the kidnappings in Iraq sadly illustrate, but the quality of Canada's reputation does shield Canadians in many circumstances and its significance should not be underestimated..

Foreign policy is not rocket science but, as successive governments have learned, it is more difficult than it looks. It is important, therefore, that the government continue to make it very clear what its objectives are in Afghanistan, and what they are not, and that it maintain an independent posture for the sake of all Canadians, including the troops. That means not shrinking from agreeing with our neighbours when we think they are right as we originally did vis-à-vis Afghanistan and, equally, not shrinking from disagreeing with them when we think they are wrong, as in Iraq. Afghanistan is not Iraq; we are right to be there and not to fold at the first signs of trouble. But, there are good Canadian reasons for doing it our way. Not to mention political dangers for any government that does it otherwise.