TALIBAN GOVERNANCE: CAN CANADA COMPETE?

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The war in Afghanistan is a test of wills between the insurgents and the government, with the population as the battlefield. One question in that competition is who can govern the population more effectively, or at least cater to its needs. The Taliban approach to governance has evolved during the course of the war and is starting to have some effect — how will Canada counter it? Can Canada counter it?

La guerre en Afghanistan est une épreuve de force entre les insurgés et le gouvernement, avec un peuple qui leur sert de champ de bataille. Laquelle des deux parties saura le mieux gouverner la population, ou à tout le moins répondre à ses besoins ? C'est l'un des enjeux clés de cette épreuve. D'autant que l'approche des talibans a évolué et commence à porter fruit. Comment le Canada combattra-t-il cette approche et, surtout, est-il en mesure de le faire ?

I first met Sitara Achakzai in December 2005. We were present for a "confidence in government" presentation by Michael Callan of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) at the governor's guest house in Kandahar City at the start of the Taliban campaign using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in suicide attacks. Sitara was one of three women on the Provincial Council, a body that was new and tentative as to where it fit into the provincial power structure. At the end of the presentation, I heard her speaking German, so I said "*Guten Abend*" and introduced myself *auf Deutsch*. We had a productive and interesting discussion on the events of the day. Over the course of the next three years we met from time to time whenever I was sitting in on a council meeting and we talked about the evolution of the situation in the province. In April 2009 Sitara was gunned down in an act of Taliban governance.

For the Taliban Sitara was the perfect target, and her killing would generate multiple negative effects. Killing Sitara would send the message "Don't get involved in politics" to other Afghan women. It could then be turned into an information operations weapon in the rural areas, designed to cater to those illiterate male community power brokers who fear a loss of power to women imposed by the infidel. Her tribe would lose a voice on the council — which could cause infighting as other tribes sought to fill the vacancy. The Karzai government would look impotent: "If only the security forces had been better/less corrupt, this wouldn't have happened." Western donors, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), now have an excuse not to participate in provincial reconstruction, citing how bad the security situation is.

The coalition effort in southern Afghanistan has no retaliatory capability to balance out the death of Sitara Achakzai. There is no single target that coalition forces can strike that would have the same impact on the Taliban's ability to govern disputed areas. Coalition forces can take out enemy military leadership — and do frequently, with measurable effect on enemy operations. We do not have the ability to do the same in order to attenuate Taliban governance efforts. Why is that the case? How, exactly, do the Taliban govern the disputed areas in Kandahar and in Afghanistan? And what can we do about it? In effect, we have to revise how we are viewing the conflict in southern Afghanistan. We have to understand how the Taliban have changed their governance methodology and develop an approach to confront it.

During the Cold War, numerous theories emerged to explain the revolutionary insurgency phenomenon that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The basis of any insurgency during those years was the need to shift the population's perception of the legitimacy of the state to the insurgent apparatus, which then achieved power and could go about consolidating control of the country. For counter-insurgents, their job was to maintain the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the population using a variety of lethal and non-lethal means — and at the same time discredit the insurgent forces so that the population then assisted in hunting down the insurgents, thus eliminating the threat to the state. Let's call this tension "competitive governance."

In Afghanistan, this model doesn't completely hold true, but it is a basis for discussion. When the Taliban took control over portions of Afghanistan between 1994 and 1996 they used

what theorists call a "foco" approach, so named after a Latin American phenomenon. A small group of heavily armed and well-organized men gathered local support, declared that the regional leadership was corrupt and marched on the city. As the "foco" moved closer to the city, more people joined it, creating a physical and psychological momentum. In time, commanders of various tribal factions defending the city were at odds with each other. Some chose to side with the insurgent force and turned on their tribal rivals, thus handing over the city to the Taliban. This is what happened to Kandahar City, and the pattern repeated itself during the Taliban's 1994-95 drive north.

The Taliban were funded by merchants in Quetta who were having problems moving goods into central Asia through civil-war-plagued Afghanistan. The Taliban were not intended to be a revolution per se by their original patrons. This changed as elements in Pakistan saw how the Taliban could be used to further their strategic and commercial purposes. Others saw the Taliban as a shield for their global activities related to the Salafist Wahhabist jihad and poured into the country to train.

Still, Mullah Omar and his leaders had to govern the areas they controlled. They turned the calendar back to the seventh century as much as they could while still retaining military technology to fight its enemies. The methods used to control the population were nothing short of those employed by a medieval theocracy. Sharia law became the only law and it was enforced by randomly appointed "religious police" utilizing extreme violence. There were rudimentary *shuras* (community meetings) for larger issues in Kandahar and Kabul, but very little "middle management." Fear of retribution legitimized by a fundamentalist interpretation of a seventh-century text was the basis of Taliban governance.

Did the subjugated population view the Taliban as legitimate at this point? In some cases, yes. The Taliban established order where it had been lacking during the War of the Commanders. They appeared to have a rudimentary legal system that appealed to the rural communities and certain tribal leaders. They had a monopoly on the use of force. However, the population, particularly those in the cities, wasn't represented in any governance structure higher than the community *shura*. The existing bureaucracy, damaged after years of war, collapsed and was replaced with the fatalistic doctrine "Allah will provide." Tribal chieftains who had been co-opted by the Taliban retained their tribal allegiances. Tribal chieftains who had not still retained legitimacy from their members too.

It is important to note here that prior to the Soviet invasion there was an extensive and functional governance system in Afghanistan. Twenty-five years of war destroyed it. There was a basis of political legitimacy in living memory among the aging survivors of that period — but less so with younger people who grew up in an environment where tribe and community achieved ascendency in the wake of the collapse of the existing governance system. Recall that Afghanistan was relatively peaceful and free of tribal and ethnic violence from the 1920s to the early 1970s.

Fast-forward to 2001-05. When the Taliban regime was removed from power, it was through another "foco" — a Durrani tribal confederation supported by US Special Forces and airpower moved up Highway 4 from Takhtapol and Spin Boldak to Kandahar City. Tribal elements inside the city changed sides when they saw that the tide was turning — and the city fell to the coalition forces and their tribal allies. The Taliban dispersed. The Canadian-led Interntional Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Kabul in 2003 prevented another War of the Commanders, which gave the emergent federal government the legitimacy it needed to get reconstruction money to flow from international sources. In 2004, the Karzai government was elected, and in 2005 provincial elections were held — without significant Taliban interference.

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These victories were then challenged by 2006. The Taliban attempted their version of the "foco" against Kandahar City, this time from the Zharey and Panjwayi districts. Canadian and allied forces repeatedly defeated the Taliban's attempt to gain momentum in those districts.

It would be simplistic to suggest that the Taliban and allies shifted from terrorism to guerrilla action in 2003-05, then to near-conventional operations in 2006-07, and then back to guerilla operations by 2008. The Taliban approach has always had a political dimension to it. While the insurgents were throwing themselves against Canadian forces in Zharey and Panjwayi, and blowing themselves up in the city, the Taliban have constantly influenced the rural population since 2005, and probably before that. What we are seeing now are more systematic attempts to develop a governance system with the intent of shifting the allegiance of the population.

How has this state of affairs evolved? Many methods are employed simultaneously by the insurgency but in varying degrees and sometimes without consistency. It is difficult to detect exactly what a shift in approach looks like. Some have been emphasized more than others at certain times. Some techniques even have multiple audiences, which produces some confusion.

Courtesy Sean M. Maloney

Compensation for battle damage by coalition and Afghan forces blocks the Taliban's attempts to exploit grievances for their governance purposes.

The 2002-05 period is best characterized by the goal of survival. The movement had to demonstrate that it was viable. Those audiences included pro-jihadists from the Gulf states and elements in Pakistan who provided weapons and safe haven. The other audiences were the Afghan people. Most Taliban activity during this period was demonstrative — essentially the message was "We continue to exist and fight the infidels."

The movement had to exaggerate its capabilities. The best way to do this was to generate an omnipotent milieu in the rural areas. "Night letters" (messages nailed to mosque doors) coupled with acts of nocturnal intimidation kept many rural areas in a state of agitation. With the lack of government presence in those areas, it was essentially a form of control. The fear that the Taliban might show up at night was enough to keep elements of the rural populations from actively siding with the government or from accepting government aid. On occasion, an NGO or aid worker would be killed or kidnapped to thwart the reconstruction effort, but this was not systematic. At the same time, Taliban allies like Hezb-i Gulbiddin and Haqqani Tribal Network conducted increasingly violent and sophisticated suicide attacks in the cities, mostly Kabul.

The shift from survival mode to more active engagement occurred in 2005. "Negative governance" is one way we can describe these activities. During that year, the intimidation methodology employed by the Taliban became more integrated and systematic. These new methods were, however, overlooked by Western coalition forces because they did not understand that in Islam religion and politics are the same thing. Many Westerners viewed the mosque as a church and the mullah just as a religious figure. The reality was that the mosque and the mullah were integral aspects of the rural and urban population's lives in ways incomprehensible to the secularized and even atheistic Westerners involved in Afghanistan reconstruction.

Taliban religious engagement took several forms. The first was the "wandering mullah." Unarmed proselytizers trained in Pakistan infiltrated Afghanistan and moved about the rural areas, living with local illiterate mullahs and passing on an "educated" but Talibanized version of Islam. In other areas, they paid cash to unpaid local mullahs to pass on the Taliban message. They played on xenophobic and misogynistic fears of loss of control.

These activities had their urban counterparts, but when the moderate Kandahar Ulema Shura (KUS, a scholarly religious body) actively disagreed with

the "messaging," their members were targeted by Taliban operatives and killed or intimidated into silence in what amounted to an assassination campaign that continues today. In 2005-06 alone 12 prominent members of the KUS were assassinated. The effect on the rural mullahs, who looked to the KUS for educated guidance, was profound — and unmeasured and unnoticed by coalition forces.

The War of the Schools was another important tactic employed throughout 2005. The destruction of schools and the killing and intimidation of teachers were clearly designed to prevent the rural populations from achieving a level of education that would permit questioning of the Taliban's belief system over the long term. The short-term benefits included the discreditation of the government at the local level — this amounted, essentially, to more negative governance.

The Taliban were, by 2005, systematically targeting the health care system as it struggled to expand into the rural areas. The Taliban's approach to this was much more insidious than it was with the educational and religious authorities. The Taliban were able to employ two methods alongside each other. One track was to force the medical system to declare itself to the coalition as a neutral entity — in this they were supported by "neutral" NGOs like the Red Cross. The second was to kill medical professionals, burn clinics and ambush ambulances. The Afghan health care system, paid for with Western aid money, administered by the Afghan government, was in some areas co-opted by the Taliban and used to heal and evacuate their wounded. The population still got medical care, but at the sufferance of the Taliban — and government workers disavowed their own government in the disputed rural areas.

Without viable security forces, the ability of the pro-government forces to project power in these rural areas was limited. The fledgling army and the unprofessional police, which had barely transitioned from being disarmed chieftain's militias, were in no position to create a secure environment so that students could learn, medical problems could be taken care of and moderate religion practised outside of a climate of fear.

The new Taliban methodology was, however, put to use to support the increased emphasis on conventional and near-conventional actions that were prepared for 2006. Exerting control over the rural population was geared more toward exerting control over key geographical areas that could act as support bases for operations against Kandahar City. This is quite different from mounting a broad-based campaign to control the population in every rural district and then shifting legitimacy. In this case, there was no governance structure to shift to.

Why? There are two possible answers. First, if the Taliban were following an "Allah will provide" doctrine, a formal hierarchical apparatus for the village- and district-level control isn't necessary — it is enough to intimidate the population, or use "negative governance" to gain compliance. Second, it is possible that the Taliban were still banking on the "foco" method in taking Kandahar City, which would result in the withdrawal of coalition forces and collapse of the government effort in the south. They could then go about governing the population as they had in the 1990s using the same methods. A formal structure wasn't really needed either in this scenario.

Once the Taliban failed to gain momentum in 2006-07, however, the movement had to reassess its approach. From that period to today we have seen a progressive shift from "negative governance" to "competitive governance" in certain rural areas. It is important to understand that this shift has occurred because of coalition and Afghan successes — the enemy has been forced to respond to our initiatives and not the other way around.

In Kandahar province in 2007 and early 2008, the situation in Zharey and Panjwayi districts became a competitive system between the coalition and the Taliban and their allies. That stasis resulted in enemy attempts to seize control of Arghandab district to outflank the stalemated area and generate yet another "foco" momentum in a bid to seize Kandahar City. That assault was thwarted by coalition and Afghan forces under Canadian command not once but twice. Stasis then set in on the Arghandab front. The insurgency had been constantly frustrated. Whether this contributed to a new approach, or whether that existed earlier, is hard to determine.

What is clear is that from early 2007 on, Kandahar province (like others) has been subjected to a systematic assassination and intimidation campaign designed to kill educated Afghans among the police, the bureaucracy and the mullahs. This campaign is also designed to deliberately attenuate the aid and reconstruction community's efforts to support government initiatives in the rural areas. The purpose of the campaign is not only to reduce the ability of the government to connect with the people — it is designed to generate space for the Taliban's fledgling efforts at competitive governance.

The elements of that campaign include the following:

Prior to the Soviet invasion there was an extensive and functional governance system in Afghanistan. Twenty-five years of war destroyed it. There was a basis of political legitimacy in living memory among the aging survivors of that period — but less so with younger people who grew up in an environment where tribe and community achieved ascendancy in the wake of the collapse of the existing governance system.

Co-opting aid and development: Kidnapping tends to be a criminal enterprise but the insurgents sometimes "buy" victims and imply through their propaganda methods that they were behind the events. The kidnapping of American NGO worker Cyd Mizell in January 2008 is instructive. Originally taken by criminals, Mizell was apparently transferred to Taliban custody and later killed. The effect of this singular event on the NGO and UN aid community in Kandahar was profound; it even affected CIDA activities at the Provincial Reconstruction Team. The kidnapping shocked the aid community to the point where they did not want to go "outside the wire," with obvious effects on program delivery and validation.

As in the health care delivery situation, however, the insurgents generally have changed their views since 2005-06 and rarely assassinate aid workers. They co-opt them instead. In disputed areas where aid workers are carrying out activities, Taliban-inspired mullahs and other agitators take credit for aid and development. The government, which has no presence in those areas and has no direct connection to the supposedly "neutral" aid groups, cannot take any credit for the projects. The Taliban get what amounts to "free" development, which assists them in building rapport with the rural populations. Aid activities are portrayed to the locals either as Taliban aid activities, or as activities that the Taliban "permits" to continue on their sufferance. Note that the insurgents have not targeted the polio eradication program. Why? They benefit from it because it is not perceived to be linked to the Afghan government (or Canada for that matter) by the population.

Counter-police: The police are normally a target during any insurgency, but the pattern of activity directed at the emergent Afghan National Police is more than the sporadic raiding of police stations to acquire arms or the overrunning of rural police posts for local information operations effect, which occurs with some frequency. In 2008, however, the police commander in charge of the administration of police in Kandahar province was shot and killed after getting a haircut. A number of other mid-level police officers in Kandahar City were also killed, and an attempt was made on Matulla Achakzai, the chief of police, with a donkey-borne IED. Then in September 2008 the Afghan National Police headquarters in Kandahar was attacked by suicide bombers, killing two and injuring 30.

The assassination of the Afghan National Police "poster girl," Lt Col Malalal Kakar, in September 2008, was, like the killing of Sitara Achakzai, an attack on several planes. Out in Panjwayi district, the Canadian police mentors have been deliberately targeted by insurgent cells there in order to "kill the teacher" so the students won't learn. All of these enemy efforts are designed to undermine the Afghan government's ability to provide security and extend governance.

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Religious intimidation: The assassinations of moderate mullahs from the Kandahar Ulema Shura also started to spike again in late 2008 and has started to reach 2005-06 levels. Five members were killed, plus another moderate mullah from Spin Boldak. This can be interpreted only as an insurgent method to shape the religious environment in southern Afghanistan — and possibly even the National Ulema Shura in Kabul, which draws members from the Kandahar Ulema Shura. These assassinations stave off attempts by the government and the religious authorities to expand into the rural areas and urban mosques in order to maintain government legitimacy and counter the insurgent messaging.

Counter-governance: There has also been a notable upsurge in direct attacks against the provincial governance structures since the killing of Safia Ama Jan from the Ministry of Women's Affairs in September 2006. The Provincial Council and organs of power have received increased insurgent scrutiny. In October 2008, Dost Mohommad Arghestani, the head of the Labour and Social Affairs Department, was gunned down. An insurgent suicide "spectacular" attack was directed at the Provincial Council itself on April 1, 2009, killing 17 people including the director of health services and the director of education. Zahir Jan, the official in charge of the transportation system in southern Afghanistan, was also murdered in April 2009.

Counter-development: Examples of enemy "counter-development" have also occurred. First, there is direct action against Canadian projects. An example of this is the Construction Management Organization's road paving project in Panjwayi district. It has been subjected to mortar fire, small arms fire and IED attack. Second, there are Taliban attempts to provide projects in areas they influence. In a reversal from the War of Schools, the Taliban have taken control of government-built schools in certain areas and are using them to promulgate their own curriculum, which includes the provision of textbooks. The Taliban have even initiated a road construction project of their own in Zharey district using conscripted labour. In Mushan, the Taliban

constructed a bazaar and convinced the population to use it instead of the traditional bazaar in the area. The Taliban provided security checkpoints and presumably took a slice of the financial actions as "taxes."

The Taliban "Hitler Youth": A disturbing development that has emerged in the past six months is the expanded use of youths in the insurgent effort. As the insurgents gained knowledge of coalition rules of engagement, they started to use unarmed youths for spotting, reconnaissance and early-warning tasks on the peripheries of disputed areas. The insurgency was also exploiting Western forces' unwillingness to kill children, even if they were engaged in military activity. There is some evidence that co-opted youth are being used as part of the Taliban's governance apparatus. Pairs of youths attend local *shuras* conducted between manouevring coalition troops and local elders. These youths are not local — and the elders are intimidated by them. It is evident that these teams are being used as the Taliban's "social" eyes and ears to identify and intimidate pro-government people.

Parallel legal system: One of the most important Taliban evolutions is their expansion into the realm of dispute resolution. In most rural areas in Afghanistan, the matter of who owns water access rights and cultivatable land is contentious at best. The destruction of land registry papers and the reliance in some areas on oral tribal traditions and similar means of determining ownership have produced significant local grievances. When the Afghan government cannot mediate those grievances, somebody else will. In this case the insurgents have started to employ their own judges to mediate in areas that they influence. This is a relatively new phenomenon. This activity usurps one of the prime functions of government. There are numerous anecdotal stories of Taliban kangaroo courts, but more recent rumours of the local mullahs being co-opted into the so-called "process" are disturbing.

A number of attributes of the insurgent campaign fall out of this discussion. The population control strategy is based on manipulating the population's perceptions as to who is in charge by playing to illiteracy and religious ignorance, and backing it up with several varieties of coercion. Locals are increasingly co-opted into the Taliban program as much as they are coerced. Measures taken by the Afghan government to extend programs to the rural population are countered on a number of levels, locally and increasingly at the heart of the governance process in Kandahar City through direct targeting. The police especially are seen by the insurgents to be a primary target in this effort. It appears as though the enemy is attempting "competitive governance" and has abandoned "negative governance."

This enemy campaign generally remains unrecognized by the coalition. On the whole, these events are seen not as a comprehensive enemy approach but only as data points that don't have a discernable pattern. They are just something the insurgency "does" rather than something that is profoundly dangerous in the long-term. One problem is the military-tactical focus on the "main force" insurgents, the "red icons" and the counter-leadership campaign. These organizations and individuals are easier to target and to show productive results against.

Similarly, emphasis on the cabinet-mandated "signature projects" is a distraction from the real nature of the insurgency in the approaches to Kandahar City. Building schools does not counter these threats, nor does polio eradication, let alone the Kajaki Dam project. Those are long-term projects and dependent on a positive security environment, which in turn is based on positive control of the rural districts peripheral to Kandahar City and the city itself. Indeed, Foreign Affairs and CIDA have insisted that development and governance is their bailiwick, and jealously guard their turf. However, CIDA and Foreign Affairs are conceptually disabled from understanding the nature of this threat — and apparently incapable of harnessing Canadian or coalition military power to confront enemy development and governance when it is appropriate to do so. Projects alone will not counter Taliban governance: they have to be linked to Afghan governance. A specialized campaign to target the insurgent "competitive governance" capacity needs to be established, and it must be a whole-of-government approach. Canada needs to stifle enemy efforts in this realm as quickly as possible. Destruction of this enemy program at source before it goes further will have a lasting effect on the stability of Kandahar province and southern Afghanistan. The security and Afghan National Security Forces capacity-building lines of operations remain the critical line in Kandahar province, not development. No security, no development.

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