

# "Victory" in Afghanistan?

In an informative video conference hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa last fall, J. Alexander Thier, Senior Rule of Law Advisor with the United States Institute of Peace, opined that it would be a blow to NATO's credibility if the Alliance left Afghanistan without a clear victory. He wasn't the first to say that NATO's failure to achieve a decisive victory against the Taliban insurgency would be to its detriment.

Brigadier-General Denis Thompson, the previous Canadian commander in Kandahar province, recently offered a more realistic perspective. Taliban insurgents, he believes, need to be marginalized, leaving them with no choice but to become engaged in the political process, and subject their philosophies and vision to the judgement of Afghan voters.

Despite his credentials, Thier betrays a fundamental unawareness of the changes in the nature of modern conflict since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of client states. Interstate conflict is being replaced by intrastate conflict – fighting between two or more factions within a state. Afghanistan's state of affairs shares some similarities with the nature of conflict in Bosnia Herzegovina, Somalia and Rwanda. At its most basic, intrastate fighting is between belligerents who share the same nationality – neighbours.

The history of Afghanistan is of a tribalized region whose entities resisted the establishment of a central government. It has been the crossroads of military adventurism since 530 BCE, when Persian King Cyrus died in his bid for conquest. Would-be conquerors included Arabs, Indians, Russians, British and the Soviets, yet Alexander the Great was Afghanistan's only successful conqueror (329 BCE).

In 1809, British diplomat Mountstuart Elphinstone led Britain's first fact-finding mission to Afghanistan where he found a region of combative, independent factions. He wrote of a tribal elder with whom he had spoken about the benefits offered by an effective central government. He was rebuffed. "We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood. But we would never be content with a master," was the reply.

In *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, Winston Churchill wrote, during his time

in the North West Frontier Province in 1897: "a continued state of feud and strife prevails throughout the land. Tribe wars with tribe. The people of one valley fight with those of the next. To the quarrels of communities are added the combats of individuals. Khan assails Khan, each supported by his retainers. Every tribesman has a blood feud with his neighbours. Every man's hand is against the other, and all against the stranger."

About the Afghan way of war, Churchill added, "To the ferocity of the Zulu are added the craft of the [American Indian] and the marksmanship of the Boer."

Many of Afghanistan's contemporary challenges flow from Mortimer Durand's strict instructions for the border between Afghanistan and British India. The British Government had directed him to draw the border so that specific strategic points (the Khyber and Khojak Passes and the cities of Peshawar and Quetta) were on the pre-partition Indian side of the border. Prior to the *Durand Line*, Afghanistan included the modern-day northwest Pakistan region.

With Pakistan's establishment in 1947, its government designated the border region as "tribal territories" and considered them outside its jurisdiction, and called the remainder of its Pashtun region the "North-West Frontier Province." There are 25 million people on the Pakistani side of the border who are religiously, culturally and ethnically Afghan.

The Soviet military's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 with 115,000 troops, found Afghanistan a military, political and social conundrum. By the time the Soviet military withdrew in February 1989, some 33,000 people had been killed, 15,000 of them Soviets.

Following the Soviet departure, the Pashtun fundamentalist

Taliban rose to political primacy in the continuously fractious country, until they were toppled in 2001 by allied military operations in response to their support and sheltering of Al Qaeda. Since then, Canadian involvement has risen to 2,800 troops. Canada's area of responsibility, Kandahar Province, is one of the most dangerous of Afghanistan's volatile southern region. Our forces are slated to remain until 2011.

The concept of victory in Afghanistan is not commonly-shared. Alexander Thier asserts that NATO's credibility will suffer if it leaves Afghanistan without a clear victory – victory that has evaded Genghis Khan's Mongols, Great Britain and the Soviet Union.

Rather than "victory" (an elusive situation which requires the unlikely capitulation of the Taliban insurgents), we should focus on a definition of "success," or "end-state." Such a refocus would permit the Alliance to exit, with routine security competently left in Afghan hands. As confirmed by Prime Minister Harper to CNN's Fareed Zakaria, the success of the mission in Afghanistan will be measured by our ability to eventually hand over enforcement duties to a reliable Afghan force.

This would be a complex condition, but vastly more achievable than "victory." The desired "end-state" is that the Pashtun, the Taliban, and all other Afghans must, at the end of the day, be able to live next door to each other in peace, and to reconcile their differences through the nation's political and legal processes.

Those who contend that we will never defeat Afghanistan need to be reminded that we are not attempting to defeat Afghanistan. Alliance operations in this beleaguered country have created the conditions in which Afghans have voted, have participated in nation-building and development projects and programs, and are shaping the political and social environment. We are helping to provide the Afghan people the building blocks to nationhood and membership in the global community. ■

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