

3-D and the Kandahar RPT: Blurred Vision

Presentation By A. John:

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I. INTRO

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure to be here today to engage with you over this timely and vital topic about Canada's military role in supporting peace in Afghanistan.

I represent CARE Canada, the Canadian arm of a large development and humanitarian organization active in more than 70 countries, including Afghanistan. We are especially proud of our commitment to Afghanistan, which dates back to 1961 – through some very difficult periods, including the chaos after the Soviet withdrawal; the Taliban period; right up to today's complex and troubled times. In Afghanistan today, CARE employs more than 900 staff – more than 99% of them Afghan; is active in 11 provinces with 13 projects valued at more than 20 million dollars.

I tell you this not to boast, but because I feel compelled to convey to you the seriousness and depth of CARE's commitment and engagement with Afghanistan.

What I say about PRTs will be from this perspective: from the point of view of an NGO that has been active for more than 50 years in many contexts of strife and trouble.

We have little time today, but I hope some of the comments that follow will help us arrive at a common understanding of an appropriate role for the Canadian PRT in Afghanistan: what added value it can bring to the situation, what areas of focus it might emphasize, some suggested limits of operations, and some criteria for success.

I do have serious reservations about the entire concept of PRTs and the so-called 3-D approach, but I am not here to dwell on these today. Canada is already committed, and without much choice if it wants to send troops to Afghanistan as the PRT form of military deployment has become the basis of all ISAF expansion in that country. I hope at least that my comments can be seen as constructive in addressing some of the critical issues that should be taken into account in setting up the Kandahar PRT.

II. THE FOCUS: SECURITY SECURITY SECURITY

In defining its focus, the Canadian PRT has 19 already functioning models to learn from. This is not necessarily an advantage, however. There is general agreement about the three general areas of activity appropriate to a PRT: reconstruction, central government support, and stability. Across the 19 models now in existence, however, there is little agreement on the relative importance of these roles, or how they should be operationalized, or the degree to which PRTs should engage in other activities such as intelligence gathering or distributing relief. It has become clear, also, that official roles do not always match the activities PRTs actually do carry out,

do they remain consistent from one rotation of personnel to the next. The different views about PRTs depend partly on operating conditions, of course, but mostly, we know, on the military doctrines of the forces involved concerning peace support.

It seems almost too obvious to say this, but the primary core function of any PRT in Afghanistan today must be SECURITY. This is the mandate of ISAF – to help bring stability to Afghanistan. This is the value-added of ISAF, operating as a peace enforcement force under Chapter VII of the UN charter.

Let us look briefly at the sources of instability and violence in Afghanistan. They can be summarized as four major threats.

- 1) anti US/ anti Afghan government attacks
- 2) hostility and fighting between warlords
- 3) increased general lawlessness and banditry
- 4) violence associated with narcotics production and trade

None of these sources of violence are minor. All of them involve major violence of a military or pseudo military type. They cannot be addressed by ‘normal’ methods of civilian policing, even if these existed in Afghanistan today. They are not going to go away on their own. They affect everything else, including the prospects for democracy and prosperity. They can only be dealt with by a concerted robust and largely military response.

CARE, like everyone else in Afghanistan, is affected every day by these sources of violence. They infect the entire environment. Where they are bad, we simply cannot work; we cannot travel, we cannot move supplies, we

cannot do assessments, we cannot reach populations who need help. For NGOs like CARE, access is key. If ISAF can stabilize the environment in the Kandahar region and expand this kind of access, it will have achieved a major success.

CARE is not naïve or utopian about its expectations for the Kandahar PRT or any others. We know there are no magic wands to bring peace. We know PRTs are a compromise, a thinly spread deployment mechanism that often lacks robust capability to address major outbreaks of insurgency or other violence. We also know that PRTs are not going to protect CARE staff, anymore than they can protect other individuals in that conflicted land.

Still, by its very presence, ISAF can make a difference. The same difference, peace-keepers in Bosnia have made: by being there, moving about, deterring trouble, giving confidence to the ‘normal’ movements and processes of daily life. A PRT can also, as a credible interlocutor, mediate with armed elements; it can help cantonment and disarmament processes, it can help train and professionalize ANA components, it can anticipate trouble, deflate it, and warn others to stay out of the way.

There is a tendency in some quarters to think that organizations like CARE are casual or helpless when it comes to protecting themselves or working in insecure environments. When we say we need the military, it is not because we abnegate all responsibility for our own safety in these difficult circumstances. On the contrary, like other NGOs, CARE works in many troubled environments quite successfully.

The way we do this is important to this discussion, because it leads to a second point I want to make about the PRTs. That point is not only about what it does, but how it does it.

Like other NGOs, CARE has three priorities in terms of security: to keep our staff, our beneficiaries, and our assets safe – pretty much in that order. Of course NGOs do not protect themselves the way militaries do. They do not carry weapons, travel in armoured cars (usually), with armed escorts and ambulances at the ready. Our security strategy does and must focus primarily on acceptance of our presence in the local context.

What we and other professional Humanitarian NGO's do is both simple and complicated, and involves formal and informal measures and attitudes that have been developed over 50 and more years of working in conflict zones by the standards or the issue of security. This is not the case. Some may think we are casual about force protection. We are deliberate. We have learned from more than 50 years of experience. We have manuals, guidelines, internal and external protocols. We have principles and guidelines to help us (independence, neutrality, impartiality), but essentially our approach is practical.

First of all, NGOs try to stay out of trouble. They try to keep away physically from the locations of violent outbreak, out of the line of fire, from wherever it is coming from. They duck behind the wall, as it were.

They stay out of the fray in other ways too: by endeavouring to show in every aspect of their behaviour that they are not taking sides, that the quarrel

is not theirs, that they are not a threat. In this way they appeal to the innate humanity in the worst perpetrators of violence to say: “we are here to relieve the suffering of ordinary people, the elderly, the young, the women, the non-combatants, the vulnerable.” You would be amazed how this can work: even with the most hardened monsters of crime in places like the former Yugoslavia, where we worked in the territories of all three sides, each knowing we were also working in the others. Basically we work with the consent and assent of the people; we are not threatening to them in an environment that is impregnated with risk and danger to them in many other ways. In Afghanistan, we worked through the Taliban years – supporting schools and learning for 20,000 girls, in direct contradiction of Taliban doctrine. We were able to do this, not by going head-to-head with the Taliban leadership, and not by ‘sneaking round’ or lying about what we were up to. We did it with the assent and consent of the communities involved. They judged the risks and managed them, having decided a) on the importance of the schools to them and b) that they could trust our relationship with them. Much of our security comes from establishing this type of delicate and fragile relationship, which depends not only on the reality of our activities – but also on people’s perceptions of us, on our profile as neutral or independent or impartial.

That profile is life to us, and losing it is death, sometimes literally. In Iraq, the profile was lost, and Margaret Hassan, our director, was taken hostage and killed. She got caught in the middle of forces far beyond our control, in a situation where every foreigner is now fair game, an ‘enemy’ target, or a pawn in the fight to be used by one side against the other. The result is we have lost Margaret, and because we have had to close down our entire

operation in Iraq (that ironically had survived under Saddam Hussein) and lay off hundreds of staff, we have also lost all the good works that we were doing and hoped to do to help the people of Iraq.

You can imagine in the context of Afghanistan how difficult it is for us to stay out of this fray. How dangerous it is for us to be seen to take sides. How easily we can get sucked in.

In Afghanistan, I am sure Canadian troops would be horrified to be viewed as belligerents and combatants. But in truth it is going to be difficult for them to build up an appropriate profile that is on the one hand tough and aggressive enough to dampen and deter the sources of violence mentioned earlier, and on the other, that is 'gentle' enough to be non-threatening, and that can convey a profile that is neutral in the sense of being above local rivalries and acting in the interests of the general good of all Afghans.

This is going to be difficult, partly because of the Chapter VII mandate, which asks them to be more than passive intermediaries or guarantors of a fragile peace. It is also going to be difficult because to date there is no clear demarcation of roles and identity between the US-led Coalition combat troops (fighting unapologetically a 'war on terror'), ISAF enforcement operations around Kabul, and PRT reconstruction/stabilization efforts. The demarcation of mandate and operations between these is tenuous at best, and unlikely to be clarified under NATO command, when the same core countries are sponsoring all three forms of deployment.

This challenge will be highlighted in Kandahar, where the Canadians are taking over from a US-led, ie a Coalition Force PRT. The Canadian PRT will no doubt be associated, at least for a while, with the ‘robust’ tactics as well as the goals the CF has been using in the past. It will no doubt also inherit intelligence info, analysis, and relationships established by the US PRT. Some of these factors may be helpful, but some will have to be ‘overcome’ if the Canadians hope to make a positive difference to the fractious security environment of this area.

US-led PRTs have generally taken a ‘robust’ approach that emphasizes force protection. Patrols are large, heavily armed, and quick to ‘knock out’ forces or activities deemed to be hostile to CF and Afghan government authority. Their reconstruction efforts have focused on quick impact projects designed to win local support and trust – ‘hearts and minds’. But they have been criticized for grossly overselling their achievements, security and otherwise, for poorly understanding local needs, for undermining humanitarian organizations, and for general clumsiness in their relations with local players, belligerent and otherwise. PRTs have reportedly handed out antibiotics ‘like candy,’ been used as leverage to threaten communities to provide information about el Qaeda¹, and have used projects and activities to gather intelligence.

For the humanitarian community, the British model – which focuses on security and tries, at least in theory, to clearly separate itself from NGO activities – is a better model. We think it’s better because the emphasis is

¹ There are several documented cases where leaflets were distributed threatening the withdrawal of aid unless information was forthcoming from local populations.

placed squarely on the elements where ISAF brings value-added: the stabilization activities. These include:

- Providing a ‘stabilizing’ international military presence as part of ISAF , thereby extending ISAF’s reach into the countryside beyond Kabul;
- Dampening and defusing intra and inter-regional conflict by monitoring local power plays, illegitimate military or paramilitary activities, and then mediating disputes before they escalate into major conflagrations;
- Assisting in DDR and ANA rebuilding;
- Providing secure (armed) escorts for the civilian visitors of troop contributing nations (in Kandahar, this would be Canadian FAC and CIDA and possible other ministries or agencies);
- Providing similar escorts for some Afghan officials of senior rank;
- Focusing reconstruction efforts on small well defined projects that are not of interest to NGOs (repairing Af. Government buildings and assets, providing equipment, etc.)

Whatever the Canadian PRT does, we as NGOs need to be separate. We need a line of demarcation. If we are too close to ISAF, if we take sides with it, we are taking sides. This is dangerous to us. We need to be separate: not because we do not respect what ISAF is doing. Our views on this are practical. We need to stay out of the way. We need to distinguish ourselves from military activities for the fundamental reasons of security explained above.

III. HOW CAN WE DISTINGUISH OURSELVES

When I say demarcate and distinguish, I do not mean we should cut off all relations between NGOs and PRTs or maintain adversarial attitudes to each other. In fact, we need to carefully cultivate mutually respectful and complimentary relations. Relations that will be closer, less strained, less conflicted because they address our real security concerns, and yours too.

There are different ways to demarcate:

- 1) By choice of activity and location.

In choosing ‘reconstruction’ activities, we suggest that the Canadian PRT select those that are clearly of no interest to NGOs, or that are carried out in places where clearly NGOs cannot or do not want to operate. In fact, the current US-led PRT in Kandahar has been criticized for doing just the opposite—carrying out ‘hearts & minds’ projects similar to those of NGOs within or near the town where a) it is not clear they add value, b) where their blurry methods may be actually undermining to local development, c) where the confusion of purpose is highly dangerous to NGOs.

- 2) With protocols that enable NGOs to stay out of ISAF’s way when it needs to punch hard in a military way

Among other measures, CARE is keen to work with the UN and ISAF and the CF to create an NGO safety protocol, to formalize a mechanism through which ISAF and the CF can pass on specific threat warnings to PRTs and by which NGOs can give their GPS coordinates to military forces if they wish. This is stalled for now because of a recent turn-over of ISAF and CF

personnel. We think it is a good idea, because it would help us ‘stay out of the fray’ and avoid being targeted in error by any of the parties, or caught in a cross-fire.

3) By avoiding NGO-like behaviours and disguises

NGOs object to military units taking on humanitarian roles for two reasons.

a) These activities blur the demarcation that is important to us, as explained above. B) Quite frankly, militaries do not do this work very well, and risk undermining the many standards and good practices that have been worked out over decades.

Again I am not making a blanket statement – there are situations, especially involving large transport assets, for instance – when the military has been very effective in delivering supplies in emergency situations to people in need. I am talking about the ‘hearts and minds’ projects that all too often have ulterior political and military motives. Where project activities are part of a strategy meant to reward loyalty and local cooperation with gifts of relief, monitor groups whose loyalty is uncertain, and where these are present, take advantage of the community-based knowledge that NGOs have acquired about local needs, circumstances, and people.

4) With good consultation and coordination.

This has to be done locally and regionally and nationally. It involves communications in two or more directions. In our experience, we find that sometimes military units think that a) the onus is on us to tell them what we are doing; but b) they have no responsibility to share information with us, even about reconstruction projects that by their own description they want to

define as ‘non-military.’ Local coordination is key for deconflicting, mutual learning and understanding, and for building the positive relationships we all crave.

In this vein, CARE is focusing on a number of small, discrete advocacy issues about PRTs. For example, it has taken part in efforts to talk to the military about a recent incident where PRTs took over NGO facilities and distributed medicines (including antibiotics) without proper patient consultations (basically giving antibiotics away like candy). Out of this NGOs have arranged a meeting with the CF to discuss their medical guidelines, and to push for an end to this sort of drug give-away.

CARE is continuing to engage in civil-military affairs at the national level too, mostly through the NGO Civil-Military Working Group, which brings together NGO reps, the UN, and reps from ISAF and CF in twice monthly meetings. The Working Group serves three functions: it creates neutral space for dialogue, especially on coordination issues; it provides a mechanism through which we can educate the military about NGOs and vice-versa; it provides some scope for advocacy.

5)By cultivating and building a peace-keeping profile

The more the Canadian PRT can build and maintain a profile that is like a peace-keeping force, rather than a combat force, the more comfortable NGOs can be in approaching it, coordinating with it, and sharing information. That is why the UK-led PRTs have less strained relations with

the NGOs in their areas: their own profile is less ‘combative,’ and the demarcation of roles is clearer.

V. CRITERIA for SUCCESS

One last point. One of the reasons PRTs continue to be a locus of controversy is the lack of clear honest evaluations concerning them. We need some criteria to measure the achievements of PRTs in a real way – that is not the hype of propaganda and public relations.

The truth is there have been no independent comprehensive or systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of PRTs – to evaluate their achievements in any of their stated goals in security, governance, or reconstruction.

This is clearly an urgent need. The challenge is before us. If we are serious about “new force structures” and “new roles” for the Canadian and other militaries, it is time to look at these issues with the same scrutiny that we have focused on other types of international assistance. We need some real criteria by which to measure success. Some real costs. Some real standards. Some real indicators.

Measures of Effectiveness are used extensively by military forces in designing weapons systems, assessing capabilities, and structuring military forces. To date, there does not appear to have been any attempt by US/Coalition forces to define and implement such MoEs to gauge ‘mission accomplishment’ in Afghanistan.

I'd like to leave this thought with you. What would those indicators look like for Afghanistan. Can Canada help develop them?