

## COMMENTARY

# Give peacekeeping a chance in Afghanistan

AS BARACK OBAMA CONTEMPLATES the future role of US and, by extension, Western forces in Afghanistan, he would do well to consider an option that is apparently not yet on the table.

The options currently being examined in Washington are variations of a “counter-insurgency” campaign designed to defeat the Taliban by winning Afghan hearts and minds and a “war-fighting” approach featuring special forces and drones to attack al-Qaeda and ill-defined “allied” groups. The first is essentially an evolution of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, while the second can be thought of as a beefed-up version of Operation Enduring Force (OEF), the US-led mission that toppled the Taliban government in 2001 and now operates in parallel with ISAF.

Unfortunately, neither of these approaches holds out much hope for any kind of “victory” or sustainable peace in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. A third option worth considering is the establishment of a UN peacekeeping force to operate, initially at least, with the other missions.

There is already a small UN “good-offices” mission, called the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), mandated to support democratization and reconciliation in Afghanistan. But a true peacekeeping mission—call it UNAMA II—would require a much larger military and police component, numbering in the tens of thousands. It would have to be deployed with the consent of the belligerent parties, including the Afghan government, NATO, the US, and the main insurgent groups. That all the parties would accept such a deployment cannot be taken for granted, but it cannot be dismissed either. As the fighting continues with no end in

sight, the prospects for a UN peacekeeping force are likely to increase.

The initial goal of a UNAMA II mission would be to bring a modicum of peace to Afghanistan. Reducing and then ending the conflict will probably require making compromises with some unsavoury Taliban leaders, which would pose difficult ethical challenges. But continuing a war that kills thousands of people a year with little or no

“Could such a mission succeed in Afghanistan?”



hope of victory poses even greater ethical problems.

Ideally, the UN mission would include a large number of troops from Muslim nations to help establish local legitimacy and to avoid the perception of being part of a Western occupying force. It would need to be impartial and clearly distinct from the US/NATO missions in the country. The force would adopt a defensive posture, using its limited combat power only when necessary, as a last resort. It would therefore be implicated in many fewer civilian fatalities and would likely be more popular with the local population.

Could such a mission succeed in Afghanistan? Almost certainly not on its own. In the absence of ISAF/OEF forces, the Taliban would probably push the UN force aside. But if the mission began while ISAF/OEF forces were still in Afghanistan, the Taliban would not have the option of simply imposing their rule.

As the peace process gained strength, the counter-terrorism (OEF) and counter-insurgency (ISAF) efforts would be able to decrease, while the peacekeeping mission could increase in size and influence. Such a force might be especially attractive to Western governments, as it could become part of the exit strategy for the coalition forces now in Afghanistan.

In fact, the UNAMA II mandate could be seen as complementary to that of ISAF, although not identical. UNAMA II would foster peace not war. It would contribute mediation, negotiation, and facilitation, relying on a strong sense of the indigenous traditions of Afghan reconciliation. It would be a robust protection force, but it would not adopt an enemy-centred mentality. The envisioned mission would place much greater emphasis on support and participation of the local populations. It would identify a broad range of appropriate interlocutors for the peace negotiations and help implement local and regional cease-fires. In the end some form of peace agreement would be put in place.

As was the case in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge, this strategy could splinter the insurgents and bring more of them to the negotiating table. NATO and US forces would indirectly help this process by continuing to deny the prospect of an easy victory of the Taliban over the Afghan government. As in peacekeeping more generally, the UN strategy would be

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less offensive; the method less aggressive; and the approach more inclusive.

Most civil wars of the past century have ended in some form of negotiated settlement. The United Nations has gained tremendous experience helping settle internal conflicts through negotiations and peacekeeping. Its track record since the end of the Cold War is impressive, with successful missions to help end civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte D'Ivoire, Nepal, and East Timor. Some other missions (notably Somalia and Rwanda) have been less successful, even failures. But the UN learned a lot from those difficult experiences, and it continues to build its peacekeeping and peacebuilding capacity.

As an erstwhile leader in UN peace operations and a current combatant in Afghanistan, Canada should strongly encourage the US and other countries now considering their future in Afghanistan to give the United Nations a strong role in that war-torn land. The war-fighting role has shown its limitations; now it is time to give peacekeeping a chance. 🍁

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