

It's Time to Promote Peace in Afghanistan

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In Canada the debate on Afghanistan has had a very narrow focus. The primary concern has been the role of the Canadian Forces in the counter-insurgency war. How many more Canadians will be killed? How long will our forces be in Kandahar province? What will the U.S. government think if Canada withdraws from the southern zone of conflict? If Canada pulls its forces out of Afghanistan, will there be chaos?

It is time for Canadians to consider what the Afghan people want. At the top of the list would certainly be an end to the death, destruction and despair, the other 3-D policy. A variety of surveys show at least 70% of Afghans do not want to see a return of the dreaded Taliban. Yet an even larger percentage supports a negotiated settlement with the Taliban to end the war. The U.S.-NATO policy, supported by recent Canadian governments, perpetuates the war.

Outside of Canada there is widespread understanding that the counter insurgency war is not working. This past year was the most destructive since the U.S. invasion, with at least 6200 Afghans killed, a 24% increase in roadside bombs, and a dramatic increase in suicide bombs. The United Nations, as well as U.S. and U.K. military leaders, report that the zone of operation of the insurgents is spreading. Attacks are now up to 550 per month.

There is an opportunity for a new approach to the Afghanistan problem. The NATO countries will be meeting in Bucharest, Romania from April 2 to 4, and the key issue on the agenda is the war. For the first time in history Russia has been invited to attend. Russia will be representing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The Russians and their allies in the two organizations are proposing a joint NATO-CSTO agreement for the settlement of the Afghan conflict. This proposal appears to have the support of the governments of France and Germany and several other European NATO countries. The new governments in Pakistan are supporting a negotiated settlement to the Afghan war. This is an opportunity for the Canadian government to take the initiative and promote this new peace initiative.

This is not a new development. The annual meeting of the SCO at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in August 2007 focused on Afghanistan. The organization declared that they are willing to participate in the resolution of the problems in Afghanistan and improve the work of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. The SCO was jointly created with China and includes several countries which border on Afghanistan. Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan have applied for membership. The SCO has expressed concern about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the region and the expansion of the drug industry and trade. They have offered to provide political, military and economic assistance to Afghanistan. The

government of Hamid Karzai, which has official observer status at the SCO, is supportive of such a development.

The Russian and Chinese governments believe that the United Nations should be taking the lead in reaching a consensus position and finding a political solution. They argue that the expansion of the resistance in Afghanistan is due to the fact that the counterinsurgency war and the development strategy have been directed by the U.S. government with the support of its NATO allies. A successful settlement of the conflict has to be a U.N.-supported regional agreement.

This is not out of the question. It brings to mind the Six-Plus-Two negotiations held in Berlin between March and July 2001 where the United States and Russia, and the six countries bordering on Afghanistan, held negotiations, sponsored by the United Nations. The goal was to get the Taliban government to agree to a broad government of national unity. If this was achieved, the countries involved pledged economic assistance. The main goal of the Bush Administration at the time was to provide a stable Afghan government which would permit the building of the oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea.

Since September 14, 2001 Canadian policy on Afghanistan has been to always support U.S. policy. Now is the time for our government to stand up and take a lead in peacemaking. It is time to back the people of Afghanistan who want an end to this war. Canada's reputation around the world is not our ability to fight with the United States in counterinsurgency wars. We are known for peacemaking and peacekeeping. Let us cash in on that reputation.

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