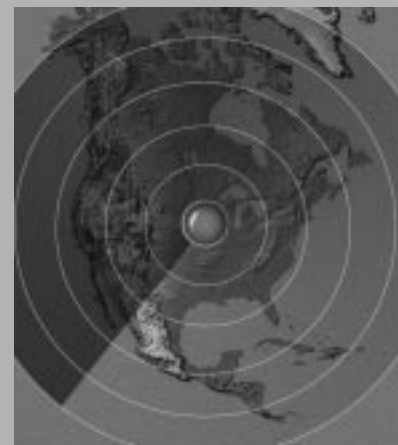


# FROM KABUL TO KONDUZ: LESSONS FOR CANADIAN RECONSTRUCTION OF AFGHANISTAN

Sean M. Maloney

Canadian forces in Afghanistan have been based at Camp Julien, and their mission as part of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been to enhance security and stability in the capital, Kabul, where the government, as Sean Maloney writes, "has evolved over three years from a transitional government, to an interim government, to an elected government." However, the Canadian deployment is now shifting from the capital to the provinces, and provincial capitals such as Konduz, where provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) have a much more dangerous assignment in the remote areas of the country. "There is nothing mystical about PRTs" writes Maloney, a professor at Royal Military College, "but there is a lot of mythology and wishful thinking in the current discussion of them." From a recent tour of the area, he offers a ground-level view.

Les forces canadiennes en Afghanistan étaient basées à Camp Julien et leur mission au sein de la Force internationale d'assistance à la sécurité de l'OTAN consistait à renforcer la sécurité et la stabilité de Kaboul, capitale du pays, où l'on est passé, en trois ans, d'un gouvernement de transition à un gouvernement par intérim, puis à un gouvernement élu, observe Sean Maloney. Mais nos forces se déploient maintenant vers les provinces afghanes éloignées et leurs capitales, notamment Kunduz, où les équipes de reconstruction provinciales (EPR) ont une mission beaucoup plus périlleuse à remplir. « Les EPR n'ont rien de mystique, mais il y a beaucoup de mythologie et d'illusion dans les propos dont elles font l'objet », écrit l'auteur, qui revient d'un séjour dans la région et dresse un portrait de la situation sur le terrain.



Until now, the focus of Canada's military deployment in Afghanistan has centred on the capital, Kabul, where Canadian forces based at Camp Julien have focused their efforts on a charm offensive, winning the hearts and minds of the local population with their highly visible light patrols, which have resulted in light casualties. Canada's initial commitment of 2,000 troops at the time of the Iraq War in 2003 was a significant one in terms of its overall troop strength. A Canadian general officer, Rick Hillier, was the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2004, and his steady hand on the wheel earned him a fourth star as chief of the defence staff in 2005.

However, the Canadian deployment is about to shift from the capital to the provinces, from Kabul to provincial capitals such as Konduz. These are not light patrols, and this is not peacekeeping, but a very dangerous business, as I learned first-hand during a recent tour of the area.

The NATO effort in northeastern Afghanistan, centred on the city of Konduz, is a prime example of an ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Team, or "PRT." PRTs are designed to assist the Afghan central government in Kabul extend its power to the remote areas of the country. Given the lack of serviceable or even existing infrastructure, 90 percent of Afghanistan should be classified as "remote." There are a great number of misconceptions vis-à-vis PRTs: indeed, in the Canadian national security analytic community, PRTs are now a sort of cottage industry after Canada announced it would commit to taking control of one. Large amounts of ink are being spilled attempting to define, determine, deploy, or discourage certain types of Canadian involvement in Afghanistan PRTs. Who is in? Who is not? What do we wish to accomplish? It is possible that this is the largest bureaucratic effort ever mounted to examine the deployment of Canadian soldiers.

There is nothing mystical about PRTs, but there is a lot of mythology and wishful thinking in the current discussion on them. Nothing, so far, has emerged in the Canadian literature to explain the evolution of the PRT concept as it was originally defined in 2002 or how that concept has become over-bureaucratized and has mutated since then. There is nothing in the public

domain that explains how acceptance of a PRT will contribute to Canadian regional objectives, nor are those objectives systematically defined by Foreign Affairs Canada or the national security policy organs in Ottawa. To drill into the strata of the PRT story, it is necessary first to explain the convoluted nature of the international effort in Afghanistan: Canadian policy practitioners in Afghanistan understand these matters, but the bureaucratic systems in Ottawa exhibit little understanding of them. Some even continue to frame the situation within the obsolete parameters of the discredited “soft power” policies of the 1990s.

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The Konduz PRT, under German command, is a NATO ISAF PRT, not an American-led coalition PRT. Operation Enduring Freedom, or “OEF,” the American-led coalition that intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, toppled the Taliban regime which was shielding the Al Qaeda base structure in the country. OEF then proceeded to hunt down the Al Qaeda formations, units and “high value targets” (high profile individual commanders), with the assistance of what the media pejoratively call “warlords,” who were the leaders of the anti-Taliban insurgency.

In time, the warfighting effort directed against the Taliban evolved into a stabilization effort. In essence, the Taliban government forces and their Al Qaeda supporters were reduced to fighting an insurgency against the new Afghan government, led by Hamid Karzai. In this role reversal, OEF now works with the Afghan government fighting the insurgency and stabilizing

a country that has not known a central government since the Soviet era, if ever. Canada was a part of this effort and deployed combat forces to do so.

The rocket arced in and struck the be-flagged headquarters building on the second floor. The occupants of the Konduz Provincial Reconstruction Team ops room were sprayed with a combination of shrapnel, plaster, glass, and stone; five were seriously wounded. Grey, Maltese-cross-marked German CH-53 helicopters (only large machines like this can operate at this altitude) swept in to take the casualties to an ISAF military hospital in Uzbekistan. This particular rocket attack actually consisted of two firings: the first rocket dropped short, missing the PRT base, and in seconds, after adjustment, a second rocket was fired. A “second round hit” using unguided rockets fired from makeshift stands is not merely lucky: it demonstrates a level of professional competence on a par with NATO’s best mortarman or artilleryman.

Within weeks, there were other incidents, equally deadly. A German Mercedes Wolf jeep, slowing down to hit every pothole in the decayed main service route from Konduz Airport to the city, was targeted by a

roadside bomb, or, using American terminology, an “IED” (improvised explosive device). Placed surreptitiously at night, the IED was command-detonated as the Wolf and its four-man crew passed over it. Fortunately for the occupants, the moment of the blast coincided with the microsecond the chassis transitioned from the central part of the frame to the rear wheel well. This deflected the blast away from the crew compartment. Once again, the CH-53s were called in to evacuate the casualties.

ISAF HQ in Kabul was, of course, informed of these developments so that a pattern could be extrapolated based on data on enemy activity. In addition to these incidents, there had been two near misses of IEDs directed against German ISAF vehicles. No ISAF casualties resulted, but four civilians from Konduz were mutilated and killed by these blasts. German night patrols using Wiesel mini-tanks equipped with night vision and 20 mm cannon, in addition to sniper teams, were mounted in an effort to deter insurgent activity, despite the derisive assertions by Canadian ISAF personnel to visitors in Kabul that “the Germans don’t patrol at night.” Incorrectly referred to as a peacekeeping mission, the PRTs operating in remote areas of Afghanistan are not designed to hand out teddy bears to orphans. They are integral tools in the stabilization effort against the insurgents in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban’s rout.

ISAF started off as an uncoordinated, European-led attempt to replace OEF after the warfighting phase was over. At this point ISAF was non-NATO, limited to operating in Kabul, and proved to be unable to significantly assist in the stabilization of the country because of its limited mandate and capabilities, particularly when those were compared to the high level of coercive firepower that could be brought to bear by the chieftains and their forces in the Kabul

area. By 2003, however, NATO members agreed to take over control of ISAF and eventually committed to expand the force outside Kabul into the provinces. Canada was part of the ISAF effort in Kabul and deployed combat forces to stabilize the capital.

It is tempting to simplistically look at the OEF-ISAF dichotomy (as many do) and label one as “warfighting” (US, bad) and the other as “peacekeeping” (European, good). This sort of labelling distorts the reality of the situation and generates significant confusion. ISAF has never been a peacekeeping force, is not mandated or structured to peacekeep, and does not wear blue berets. OEF, on the other hand, is not a pure hunter-killer force and its mandate ranges far beyond the mere elimination of Al Qaeda high-value targets in the region.

The obvious question is, why do we have two overlapping international forces in Afghanistan? Why not have a strictly NATO “AFOR,” like SFOR in Bosnia or KFOR in Afghanistan? Ideally, all parties would like to move toward an AFOR, but the dichotomy is a reflection of French-American command-and-control problems dating back to the 1960s. This is the latest version of “who commands what national forces.” The French believe they should command international forces on a par with the United States. The United States will not permit certain capabilities to be commanded by the French (in the 1960s, it was nuclear forces, today it is special operations forces); the fissure in American-French relations over Iraq in 2002-03 only reinforced this state of affairs. Consequently, having an AFOR under a non-American commander means that special operations forces hunting Al Qaeda would either have to go home (unrealistic) or have a separate command structure outside AFOR. The AFOR command issue remains under some scrutiny now in 2005.

OEF and ISAF, of course, do not operate alone: they have a complex relationship with the Afghan government. The Afghan government has evolved over three years from a transitional government, to an interim government, to an elected government. The tools to project central government power throughout Afghanistan have been slow to arrive, but then police and military forces cannot be created overnight. The Afghan National Army (ANA), a multiethnic force, was eventually deployed piecemeal on operations in 2003 and, by 2004, conducted battalion-level actions. Police force development has proceeded slowly, but highway police and border police units have appeared with greater frequency in late 2004. OEF and ISAF operations are now closely coordinated with Afghan defence operations to a significant degree.

It is critical that we distinguish between the ANA and the chieftains’ armed forces. The latter are collectively called the Afghan Militia Forces, but are not under the command of the central government. Some of these AMF units constituted the Northern Alliance during the anti-Taliban days. The AMF were not

of the north and ringed with mountains, it commands the north-south trade routes to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It sits astride the main east-west trade route in the northern part of the country and boasts a major airport. The collapse of Taliban forces in the region and the subsequent filling of the void with the Northern Alliance AMF, who spilled out of their mountain citadel situated to the east in Feyzabad, made Konduz an area of special concern to OEF in 2002. There were other areas like Konduz: Mazar-e-Sharif, to the west, Gardez, south of Kabul, and Kandahar, in the southeast. OEF was not a massive force and was not structured for occupation missions in the wake of the rout of the Taliban: OEF’s mission was to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The collapse of the Taliban regime occurred ahead of schedule and the follow-on OEF stabilization plan was still under development. With an accelerated timetable and an ineffective (non-NATO) ISAF, the greatest concern was that the AMF forces would fight among them-

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some rag-tag guerilla army: the AMF forces operating around Konduz were equipped with substantial numbers of mechanized infantry combat vehicles, tubed and rocket artillery, and helicopters. Conditioned by a 1980s perception of Afghan warfare during the mujihideen era, German forces in and around Konduz were stunned to find the remains of tank battles that had been fought between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. Konduz is currently home to both an ANA unit and AMF forces.

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selfes, with a subsequent return to the destructive civil war of 1993 to 1996, the period that led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place. The central government was embryonic and subject to coercion by the AMFs, since there was no national army. Something had to be deployed in the early days of the conflict by OEF to buy time for the establishment of a stronger central government; the Taliban could not be permitted to consolidate and retake or otherwise interfere with the population centres and infrastructure that was now under the control of the AMFs. At the same time, somebody had to keep an eye on the AMF forces.

In early 2002, OEF transitioned from a comparatively conventional fight to a counterinsurgency mission (with the Al Qaeda hunt overlapping both). Information was critical to cue the special operations forces' response in the anti-Al Qaeda mission, and the best means to get it was to lay a web of human sensors all over the country. Simultaneously, the immense cumulative damage caused by 25 years of war was an obstacle to both movement and providing the population with immediate aid. OEF civil affairs needed to assess the situation in the country and address those immediate concerns. The combination of these tasks was the conceptual basis for what was originally called a Regional Team. The process was not so linear, however. Two American colonels in OEF actually came up with the core concept in 2002 before the specifics of OEF reconstruction policy in Afghanistan were even defined or any timelines from aid to reconstruction established. This concept was grafted onto the existing Special Forces deployment map (they served as the primary liaison with the AMF forces) and emergent OEF operational tasks. It was styled as a Joint Reconstruction Team, or JRT. Force development was definitely a "cart before the horse" situation.

Again, there is plenty of room for confusion here: there is a difference between immediate humanitarian needs and reconstruction requirements, even though on the surface the basics of the Maslowian hierarchy of needs and road construction applies in both. One is short term, the other is long term. The military civil affairs (CA: American terminology), or civil-military cooperation (CIMIC: Canadian terminology), is focused on the short term. It is a force protection measure designed to elicit good will from the local population and ultimately information that can aid the military forces in defeating the insurgency.

These are not new concepts, even for the Canadian army, which employed something like CIMIC during the Second World War. The intention of the JRTs was not long-term reconstruction. Vague notions about handover to non-governmental organizations for reconstruction existed, but these were not systematized in 2002-03. There was no central government to establish a reconstruction plan yet.

The JRT concept was tested in Gardez, Konduz and Bamian during late 2002. These teams were structured to collect information of all types, liaise with the AMF forces, and coordinate the non-governmental organization relief efforts with the OEF civil affairs efforts. Early JRTs, like the one

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in Konduz, were as small as 12 to 30 personnel, mostly special forces and civil affairs troops. Security was provided by local AMF forces, with American A-10 fighter-bomber and Dutch or Norwegian F-16 fighter-bombers on call for air support. Special operations forces engaged in hunting Al Qaeda used JRTs as bases when necessary in their ongoing mission. Over the course of 2002-03, however, the insurgency was more and more localized in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Afghanistan, as the Taliban and Al Qaeda were driven back to the Pakistani border.

JRTs located outside of these areas turned more and more to aid coordination, but numerous non-governmental organizations were put off by the fact that the military was coordinating aid efforts. After numerous NGO personnel were murdered by insurgents or bandits, the NGOs screamed for security but didn't trust the AMF forces. Contract security personnel was one solution but overly moralistic attitudes about "mercenaries" abounded in the NGO bureaucracies. The unrealistic expectations of the NGOs, who naively believed they could or should operate with impunity, offended local AMF leaders, some of whom thought there were too many unrestrained Europeans, particularly women, wandering around "their" territory. Coordination efforts became more and more problematic, so the United States expanded their civilian participation in the JRTs to include State department and US AID personnel. In time, the JRTs were renamed Provincial Reconstruction Teams: there were nine OEF-led (one British, one New Zealand, the remainder American) PRTs by January 2004 throughout the country, coordinated by the primary American military headquarters in Afghanistan.

Calls to expand the NATO "peacekeeping" mission to replace the "warfighters" of OEF emerged in 2003 in the humanitarian aid analytic community and then spread during the anti-American attitudinal shift in the lead up to the Iraq War of 2003. The general tenor of the arguments presented by these pundits centred on several mistaken beliefs; the largest was the belief that the "CIA-led drug warlords" were out of control and destabilizing Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban's collapse, which, in the pundits' view, would lead to a Taliban resurgence.

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The AMF forces held very real power and could not just be removed. And why should they? They had, after all, fought for the liberation of Afghanistan and many had local popular support. Again, moralistic Western analysis from the human rights community arrogantly demanded that there should now be war crimes trials for AMF chieftains. In the early days, the AMF forces were the only form of control in the newly liberated areas. Any form of Western engagement had to be discrete and small, while retaining effectiveness. Afghan solutions to Afghan problems was and remains a key operating principle.

The Konduz PRT, originally an OEF organization, adhered to these principles. Its small base was situated in Konduz city hall, where the small unit had immediate contact with the local population. The dominant AMF commanders established their command organizations in Konduz and quartered the bulk of their forces in and around the city. The Konduz airport, originally a huge Soviet base, was secured by the AMF. Insurgent activity was sporadic: Konduz, after all, had been under Taliban control, and there were still

adherents to the system buried in the substantial population base.

OEF had, in 2003, attempted to get NATO members to join OEF and take control of PRTs on a national basis. The Iraq situation interfered with this planning, and the PRT handover was

stalled. The NATO expansion plan, established after the Istanbul Summit in June 2004, divided Afghanistan into four zones: north, west, east, and south. OEF already had PRTs in all four zones. In principle, NATO ISAF was to replace OEF in the northern sector and, over



Frank Hudec, Canadian Forces

A Canadian soldier guards an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) convoy as it makes its way through the streets of Kabul, the Afghan capital. Quite a different, and possibly more dangerous mission, awaits Canadian forces when they deploy to regional capitals such as Konduz.

time and in a counterclockwise fashion, progressively replace the OEF PRTs with NATO ISAF PRTs. Consequently, the Konduz PRT became a test case as to how NATO would handle the hand-over. Germany volunteered to take Konduz at the end of 2003.

Regional norms dictate the pace of negotiation and consensus-building. One cannot impose European or North American time frames on the Afghans. To accelerate these matters would be disruptive and, to a certain extent, arrogant and rude. The fact that the central government has created and is starting to implement a national reconstruction plan two years after it was formed is a miracle.

**A**id organizations in Kabul initially tried to dictate how reconstruction monies should be distributed. This offended the Konduz governor and local leaders. The German PRT leadership was able to soften the emotionally driven aid community stance by setting up committees that allowed local leaders to establish the aid priorities. This in turn led to central government participation when the national reconstruction plan was established. Consequently, the central government was able to gain influence in provincial leadership circles. This influence was expanded slowly in other areas, particularly in policing the highways, and then the municipalities. The deployment of an ANA unit to Konduz increased the central government's presence even further, but again, in an incremental way.

And then there were the Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration and the Heavy Weapons Cantonment programs, which were set up to demobilize the AMF forces and secure their heavy weapons. These programs were under the ostensible control of the UN, but the spectre of UN civilian personnel arriving in Konduz to disarm a victorious army was enough to force ISAF to look at other means. The Konduz PRT team became responsible for monitoring a heavy weapons cantonment site and attempt-

ing to convince recalcitrant AMF commanders that they did not need their BMP fighting vehicles or T-55 tanks. Likewise the demobilization program: it was almost based on a "40 acres and a mule" policy. The UN's initial attitude was "Please turn in your AK-47 and travel through inhospitable areas subject to banditry to get home with the seeds, money and clothing we have provided you with." Some modifications had to be made to this policy.

When combined with the ANA, police, and reconstruction coordination, the AMF power base was slowly eroded, thus far with little or no violence between the AMF forces and the central government forces. There are suspicions that attacks against ISAF forces in Konduz may in fact be disgruntled AMF members and not by Taliban insurgents. However, the return of ethnically Pashtun refugees from Pakistan has led to suspicions in the intelligence apparatus that Al Qaeda-trained Taliban infiltrators are among this population. The leaders of the Tajiks and Uzbeks, who form the bulk of the AMF forces, may be inclined to label all Pashtuns as "Taliban," and get ISAF to focus resources on them to distract ISAF from AMF or ancillary narcotics-oriented activities. The game continues.

**A**nd then there is the narcotics problem. German ISAF units are forbidden by their national caveats from conducting counter-narcotics operations. The Konduz PRT has a German-commanded sub-PRT in Feyzabad city to the east in Badkashan province. This nearly inaccessible mountain region boasts the largest poppy fields in Afghanistan. Konduz now acts as a trans-shipment point. Indeed, during the wars of the 1980s and 1990s, poppy cultivation was used to fund the anti-Soviet and, to an even greater extent, the anti-Taliban war effort. How, exactly, can the central government mount a counter-narcotics campaign in Kuduz province if the logistic support elements of the AMF and their commanders were

involved in the narcotics trade for the past 10 years? What happens if outright removal is, as we have seen, not an option? How does the PRT leadership deal with this in its day-to-day discussions with the local leadership?

These are only some of the many challenges faced by the ISAF PRT staff in Konduz. Complex challenges like these will face Canadians when they re-deploy to Afghanistan in 2005 to serve in a PRT. One difference will be that Canada will commit to an OEF PRT in a "hot" area, one closer in proximity to the Taliban insurgency. The security situation in Konduz is comparatively benign, but the types of situations encountered by the Germans in Konduz have their counterparts everywhere. It would do Canadians and their policy-makers well to understand that PRTs are not peacekeeping missions: they exist to extend central government influence throughout a nearly post-apocalyptic feudal land and combat insurgency using a variety of lethal and non-lethal tools.

The Konduz situation has been further complicated by the activities of a NATO member country that used a strike force to raid drug processing facilities and seize people involved in the trade. Neither the German PRT leadership, let alone the provincial governor, were informed, and there was no apparent coordination. Locals were upset and thought ISAF did the job: They cannot and do not distinguish between ISAF military forces and the forces that conducted these operations. The German psychological operations team in Konduz produced leaflets and flyers depicting ISAF nations' uniforms, insignia, and vehicles. Although one could argue this is transparency in action, it provides an opposing force with a lot of information on ISAF capabilities in Konduz.

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