

RI President Peggy Mason presentation to the Webinar “Afghanistan 360 Degrees... So What Now? (23 September 2021), moderated by Prof Nipa Banerjee and also featuring Ambassador Omar Samad

Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in this most timely discussion on Afghanistan. Nipa Banerjee and I first met at a parliamentary committee looking into UN peacekeeping and it was an online Globe and Mail question and answer session in 2006 that first brought Ambassador Samad and I together.

I have been preoccupied with Afghanistan since the September 11th twin tower and Pentagon attacks, when I began speaking out in the media and writing about the need for a rule of law, policing-led solution to those terrible terrorist attacks, as well as attention to underlying grievances that violent extremists exploit for their own ends. This approach was unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council at the time in two resolutions - passed on 28 September and 12 November, 2001 respectively- but, as we all know, this was not the route that the United States followed, choosing war instead.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, I consistently argued for a comprehensive, UN-facilitated peace process, encompassing not only all the internal Afghan parties to the conflict including the Taliban but the regional and other actors implicated in the conflict, as the only way to address all outstanding issues including in particular Pakistan’s support for militant extremists, driven as it was by its own security concerns with India.

From 2006 to 2013 I was involved in multiple training exercises with NATO forces readying to deploy to Afghanistan and saw up close what Commanders really thought of how NATO’s counter-insurgency campaign was going. Yet the information provided to the public continued to paint a false picture that things were getting better, not worse.

I testified before the Manley Commission in 2008 as follows:

The Canadian mantra is no development without security and no security without development. Yet the truth is that there can be neither security nor development without an end to the war and that cannot happen by military means. The only solution is a negotiated settlement.

Celebrated Canadian peace researcher, international security policy expert and Order of Canada member Ernie Regehr, in his 2015 book: *Disarming Conflict: Why Peace Cannot be Won on the Battlefield*, wrote and I quote:

Wars fought over the past quarter century have been a spectacular failure. The overwhelming majority end in military stalemate and are settled at the negotiating table, with the grievances that led to the war still unresolved. Force cannot simply override or transcend the social, political, and economic realities of conflict.

And elsewhere in the book he notes that, of the minority of conflicts ostensibly ended on the battlefield, the insurgents are just as likely to prevail as the government they are fighting.

Yet the USA and its NATO allies steadfastly refused, no matter how much the situation deteriorated, to countenance a diplomatic peacemaking approach.

Let us consider the [2008 Manley Report](#), the only attempt to date by the Canadian government to assess the merits of the western intervention strategy in Afghanistan. Its refreshing honesty about the worsening security situation and its grudging acknowledgement of the need for “an eventual political reconciliation” seemed promising, as was its analysis of the “complicated regional geopolitics” and role of regional actors in perpetuating the conflict.

But incredibly, the only solution offered was better coordination of the *existing* failing military-centric strategy, greater diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to end its Taliban support (without any effort to address the concerns driving its actions) and an increase of 1000 additional soldiers from other NATO countries as the key determinants for continued Canadian participation in the quagmire, as we did with Parliament’s blessing.

(The only Canadian political leader who championed negotiations was NDP Leader Jack Layton and then PM Harper labelled him “Taliban Jack” for his efforts. Harper also stated that those who opposed the strategy were undermining the brave Canadian military forces in Afghanistan, a vivid example of the person most responsible for Canada participating in the quagmire using the Canadian forces as a shield for his bad judgment.)

My most direct involvement with civil society in Afghanistan was as Senior Advisor to the [*Afghanistan Pathways to Peace project*](#), which undertook research with the University of Kabul in every Afghan province and worked with civil society organizations in Afghanistan on promoting a comprehensive peace process, including the holding of two conferences in Kabul in 2010, the first of which I attended. (A medical emergency prevented me from attending the second.)

We engaged with a huge range of Afghans from all around the country and the most frequent question posed to us was why the international community was backing a government that included infamous warlords, like Adbul Rashid Dostum, with decades of innocent blood on their hands. More on that in a moment.

Afghanistan was not my first experience with promoting negotiations over warfighting. One of my main areas of focus throughout my career has been UN facilitated conflict resolution negotiation processes and the role that UN peacekeeping plays in the implementation of peace agreements. The UN has made many mistakes in these efforts but has steadily learned from them with the result that UN peacekeeping offers war afflicted countries the best chance at building a sustainable peace.

The USA and NATO in Afghanistan made no effort to benefit from these lessons but, instead, proceeded to repeat every possible mistake and more. To run down a few:

- There was no peace process at all, let alone an inclusive Afghan-led, and UN facilitated, comprehensive negotiation process
- The UN's role was restricted to humanitarian assistance and then broadened to include elections, with vital institution building roles parceled out to individual so-called "lead nations" who were utterly unequipped for these tasks; (the UK took the lead on poppy eradication, Germany on police training, Italy on reform of the judiciary, and Japan on disarmament of ex-combatants; all of these countries had something to contribute in these areas but none had the UN institutional capacity and experience to *lead* the effort).
- An absurdly centralized constitutional arrangement (drafted in Washington) was imposed on one of the world's most decentralized countries.
- Unforgivably aid was militarized through the creation of US-inspired Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which polluted aid and development plans

with counterinsurgency campaigns to “win hearts and minds”, undermining good governance efforts and putting at risk the aid workers and ordinary Afghans alike.

And the subordination of good government to the counterinsurgency campaign was of course the reason why the western-backed Afghan governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani included notorious warlords (and their oh-so-useful militias).

I have structured my opening remarks this way, not only to give an indication of my work in relation to Afghanistan but also to vividly demonstrate that where we find ourselves now *need not have been so*. Afghanistan is not a failure of genuine post-conflict peacebuilding (or nation-building to use the American term that is the polar opposite of what they actually did). *It is a manifest failure of trying to build the peace on the battlefield.*

Our webinar title asks – So Now What?

Before we can begin to answer that very difficult question, we need to honestly face up to the state of Afghanistan after 20 years of U.S.-led intervention.

Consider these sobering facts:

- After 20 years of Western-led intervention, Afghanistan is one of the most foreign aid dependent countries in the world, amounting to 40% of its GDP and [75% of its pre-Taliban takeover budget](#) .
- After 20 years of Western-led intervention, almost [50% of the Afghan](#) population lives in poverty.
- Before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was on in the midst of multiple humanitarian crises brought on by drought, the pandemic and displacement due to conflict; all of which have now been [greatly exacerbated](#) by the freezing of foreign assets and withholding of IMF and World Bank funds, as well as development funds from major donors like the EU.
- The international community is rightly demanding that the Taliban should establish an inclusive government. But this was precisely what the international community denied Afghanistan in the Bonn Agreement of

2001, [excluding as it did representatives of the then defeated Taliban](#), part of the largest Afghan ethnic and tribal group, the Pashtuns.

- A word about the important gains made by women in Afghanistan. Yes, extremely important advances in education, labour rights and participation in Afghan society generally were made but, for the vast majority of Afghan women in rural areas, where the counterinsurgency raged, their reality was a daily struggle simply to survive.

Against this grim backdrop, the West should bring a large degree of *humility* to its efforts to develop what the EU now calls “[operational engagement](#)” with the Taliban. **The primary objective must surely be the prevention of even greater suffering for the Afghan people.**

First and foremost, that means meeting immediate, urgent humanitarian and refugee agency needs and Canada seems to be stepping up in that regard as is the international community more broadly in response to the UN’s latest flash appeal. However, the World Bank also needs to immediately unfreeze funds for projects, many of them hospitals, that are administered by NGO’s, not the government of Afghanistan.

Beyond this we come to the hard part - the *politics*, the fundamental issue of the terms of engagement with the Taliban and, in particular, as the [ICG has recently](#) put it, **whether there is any set of policies and practices the Taliban might plausibly implement that could meet conditions for recognition, sanctions lifting and potential support from donors and international institutions, bearing in mind – and this is the kicker - the potential consequences of a deeply impoverished and isolated Taliban-run state, starved of external resources and recognition, and struggling to provide basic services.**

In addition to the Taliban honouring their pledge to prevent Afghanistan becoming a haven for terrorism, two key demand, now being put forward by the international community (and in respect of which the Taliban *political* leadership has made promises, yet to be fulfilled) are an inclusive government and respect for fundamental rights including the right of women and girls to education and participation in the labour force.

The USA, not having included these conditions in the negotiations on its withdrawal of troops and having withdrawn those troops, has now championed these demands as deal breakers.

The G7 has pledged to hold the Taliban “accountable” for their actions in preventing terrorism, upholding human rights and pursuing an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan.

Canada has sent a former Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan as special envoy to Doha to engage with regional allies and partners and to participate in the ongoing Qatari-facilitated political talks, with which Ambassador Samad has been directly involved and hopefully will tell us more!

But the critical question remains – how to hold the Taliban accountable without harming further the Afghan people and increasing, not decreasing, instability in the country to the benefit *only* of terrorist groups?

This question is doubly difficult if one considers the make-up of the Taliban itself which can, broadly speaking, be divided between a sophisticated political leadership on the one hand and the military commanders and rank and file fighters, in control on the ground, on the other. What differences in intention might there be between the two groups and is the leadership willing, and if willing, is it *able* to overcome those differences, particularly in relation to an inclusive government and the rights of women – where the repeated leadership promises are daily undercut by reports of serious human rights abuses outside Kabul.

Here at home, the Canadian government (and all Opposition parties) have a key role to play in muting the fevered anti-Taliban rhetoric we saw during the frantic Kabul airport evacuation process. The government needs to articulate that our objectives must be helping the Afghanistan people and preventing a destabilized Afghanistan and that in turn means working with the international community to find a constructive basis for engaging with the Taliban, on the basis of realistic demands, and timelines, however difficult that might be.

Certainly, none of this will be easy. We need smart, patient diplomacy that is clear-eyed about the goal of helping the Afghan people to the maximum extent possible

and avoiding a worst-case scenario of a tyrannical, isolated Islamist state that is a haven for terrorists and within which not just the Taliban government but the Afghan people are even more impoverished than they are now.

I will end where I started: a comprehensive peace process. Qatar is trying to bring in as many regional players as possible, because the regional dimension remains as complicated as ever and as vital to a stable, workable Afghanistan going forward.

And that also means the UN oversight and peace facilitation role needs to be strengthened.

Thank you.