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Commentary by Patrick Brown

## **The changing game in Afghanistan**

German historian Karl Von Clausewitz said that war is diplomacy by another means; the reverse (attributed to Chou En-Lai) may also be true. Less cynically, Greg Mortenson has found a third way—helping build schools (see also ‘The Importance of Three Cups of Tea’ on page 6).

And it looks as if Mortenson and the armed forces in Afghanistan may now be going in the same direction. And there lies hope for a sea-change in the apparently endless clash of high-tech armies and low-tech ambush in this fractured nation. Canadians may be the first to catch the new wave.

### **Game 1: The Pursuit of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan**

A very brief history: after the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers in New York on 9/11/01, the first US thought was pursuit and destruction of a then unknown movement called al-Qaeda, which was led by an expatriate Saudi, Osama bin Laden, who turned out to be based in Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan. So the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (‘Operation Enduring Freedom’) was widely supported, both in the US and in other nations, Canada among them.

### **Avoiding Iraq, But Supporting the US**

Two years later, the US invaded Iraq (for the second time) with ‘shock and awe,’ ostensibly to remove Saddam Hussein and his purported weapons of mass destruction, and to halt Iraq’s ‘support for terrorists’. In Britain an enquiry has just begun into this war, since weapons of mass destruction turned out to have been a convenient myth.

Canada, which had completed its involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002, avoided participating in the Iraq War but agreed to NATO requests to return to Afghanistan in 2003 as part of a multinational force (International Security Assistance Force or ISAF) under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This move into Afghanistan was supported by a UN resolution.

### **Game #2: Fighting the Taliban**

Initially, the new assignment appeared to be conventional infantry warfare, with air support from the US.

Since the end of the abortive Russian invasion in 1989,

Afghanistan, always a fractured, tribal country, had been ruled by local ‘warlords’—so called because they had earned their power through their success in repelling the Russians. The Afghans’ history with the Russians in the nineties had taught them well how to counter conventional infantry warfare with guerilla-style tactics.

The southern part of the country was dominated by the Taliban organization, which had been suspected of hiding and protecting al-Qaeda. So which was the enemy? And where was it?

The Taliban, however, were quite clear on enemies. They viewed the US, UN, and NATO invasions in the same way as Afghans had viewed a wide variety of foreign incursions into Afghanistan over the last hundred years, and, for them, ISAF were its enemy.

### **Game 3: Defence, Democracy, Development**

The next objective was no longer the pursuit of al-Qaeda, but building a peaceful, democratic, stable and economically viable nation. This was more consistent with Canada’s strengths over the past thirty years of peace-keeping; a combination of defence, democracy, and development.

In 2005, Canada took on what was probably the most difficult part of the country—Kandahar province. Security had to take first place. Because of increasing Taliban attacks, continued military action was necessary to provide safe ground for development.

The Canadian government placed emphasis on the military, led by the influential General Rick Hillier. Work on peace and governance, led by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and development, led by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was carried on in the shadow of continuing warfare, and received much less attention. NGO personnel did not feel safe in Kandahar.

### **Game 4: Making The Taliban Irrelevant**

An alternative approach was illustrated by the Dutch, who were carrying out the same role in Uruzgan province, north of Kandahar, with about the same number of troops. ‘We’re not

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here to fight the Taliban...we're here to make the Taliban irrelevant,' said their commander, Hans van Griensven.

Following Dutch government policy, troops avoided combat, and but were eventually to find that their development efforts were also severely hampered by Taliban attacks—the Taliban was not avoiding them. However, they did suffer far fewer casualties than the Canadians.

### Back to Game 3

Canada may have been the first of the many nations in Afghanistan to realize that it was far from a conventional battlefield. The objectives were unclear; the enemy was elusive; the nearby Pakistan border provided not only a safe haven for the enemy but also a never-ending supply of foreign fighters; the Afghan government was widely regarded as not legitimate, and its army and police forces were corrupt and ineffective; and the landscape and its climate were inhospitable.

It was, in fact, almost impossible to gain ground and hold it. Canadian forces were reduced to maintaining a heavily fortified base in Kandahar and patrolling the surrounding countryside in heavily armoured vehicles. And the Taliban's mining of roads with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) made even that a dangerous operation.

A further complication was that, as casualties mounted, political support for the 'mission' waned in Canada.

### Game 5: Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build Schools

Nevertheless, by 2009 Canada has expanded or repaired some 50 schools in Kandahar, trained teachers, and done much to rebuild the damage of many years of warfare. A 'model village', Deh-e-bagh, defended with some success by Afghans, was praised by the incoming US General Stanley McChrystal in 2009.

And the Canadians were learning. First, that there was no point in clearing a village of Taliban during the day, and returning to the Kandahar base at night; the Taliban simply returned and threatened the population with savage reprisals for co-operating with the Canadians. So Canadian soldiers now live fulltime out in the villages, among the locals.

Second, it became clear that projects built with significant involvement of the local population were defended by the local population. For example, a road built by local hand labourers (for which they were paid) lasted far longer than a road built (probably in much less time) by Canadian heavy equipment.

The new Canadian approach is now 'shape, clear, hold, and build'—still in military language but recognizing that the military must work among the people, and facilitate a civilian solution with help from both DFAIT and CIDA. This is the only way to succeed in Afghanistan.

### Mortenson's Game

Readers of Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* or his new book *Stones into Schools* would recognise the current approach. Mortenson's game is simple: listen more, build relationships, and empower the elders in a community.

Mortenson has now spent seventeen years founding schools in the most remote areas of north-west Pakistan and north-east Afghanistan: 131 schools, providing education to nearly 58,000 students. With a motley group of about a dozen remarkable individuals from that part of the world, funded by his Central Asia Institute (CAI), these schools are built by local people from materials provided largely by the CAI. In Taliban areas, they seem to be immune from attack.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, in 2009 nearly eight-and-a-half million children attended school, ten times as many as at the turn of the millennium. Forty percent of students are girls.

Mortenson is fond of saying, 'If you educate a boy, you educate an individual, but if you educate a girl, you educate a community.' Teach a girl to read, he says, and she will teach her mother. Her mother, in turn, will be far less likely to encourage her sons to fight for the Taliban, and far more likely to pursue her rights to land ownership—a key development in a country where widows number in the millions.

Infant mortality drops; the population explosion is curbed, and the overall quality of health improves.

He sees schools as 'promoting peace with books, not bombs'.

### Convergence

The evolving Canadian strategy in Afghanistan and the Mortenson approach are now converging. His first book, *Three Cups of Tea*, is now required reading for several branches of the US military, and has been a bestseller in the US for three years. *Stones into Schools* describes its effect, both in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and on the US military.

A fancy word for Mortenson's successful technique would be 'cultural sensitivity'. A less fancy, but more direct, word would be 'respect'. Respect for individuals, for communities, for their elders, and for their children. Good manners.

The western saying is 'The pen is mightier than the sword.' The Koran says: 'The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr.' 