

An upbeat view beyond the battlefields

The most influential Canadian in Afghanistan finds hope in the country's 'incremental' improvements

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FROM MONDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JULY 28, 2008 AT 4:16 AM EDT

KABUL — Chris Alexander will readily admit that Afghanistan is suffering a crisis. He rhymes off the grim indicators that have captured so much attention recently: More insurgents roaming the countryside, more bombings, more violence of all kinds.

But the most influential Canadian in Afghanistan says none of those signs point toward failure. He remains hopeful, and a bit amused that his upbeat view has turned him into a contrarian among the worried observers of the war.

The former Canadian ambassador, now a United Nations envoy to Afghanistan, hardly looks as though he has spent five years living in Kabul, with its electricity blackouts, dust storms and other daily annoyances. He still has the same affable manner, the same boyish energy he displayed a few years ago when he was pushing for the deployment of Canadian troops to Kandahar.

Only his sense of humour seems to have darkened.

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He finds a way to chuckle at the unpleasant facts of the conflict, but then gets deadly serious.

"Lives have been lost," he says. "Thousands of Afghan lives a year, hundreds of foreign soldiers."

He answered his own question in encyclopedic detail over the course of three interviews in recent days. Arguably no other Canadian is better qualified to make a case for the Afghan mission, and few senior officials in Kabul speak as passionately about the purpose of the foreign intervention.

Deeply involved in shaping policy, Mr. Alexander is the sort of person who will interrupt a leisurely evening on his garden patio to take a phone call from a friend, laughing and chatting, and later explain that the caller was Afghanistan's defence minister.

From his well-connected position, Mr. Alexander says the country's prospects don't look nearly as bleak as they might on the battlefield. The insurgency has grown, he says, but Afghanistan's government and its foreign supporters have also gained important footholds. While acknowledging that the near future may hold further increases in violence, he argues that life has improved for ordinary Afghans.

"We live in a crisis environment here. You and I can sit any day and write a long story about a terrible tragedy that has happened in Afghanistan. ... But we lose sight of more subtle, more incremental, but ultimately more meaningful trends."

Positive signs

Mr. Alexander defines progress more broadly than the Canadian government's assertions of military gains in Kandahar. He talks about how clean water, education and a growing economy are laying the groundwork for a new generation of Afghans who might break their country's historical dependence on foreign aid.

A brighter future may be hidden under the barren landscape as well, he says, because Afghans are already learning how to profit from their deposits of copper, iron, coal and precious metals.

Mr. Alexander cites an unpublished UN study that suggests public servants, such as doctors and teachers, now enjoy greater access to rural districts than they did a year ago, despite increasing Taliban activity. That may indicate signs of détente between government and insurgent figures at the lowest levels.

In some cases, the survey found, Afghan government officials can drive without armed escorts into districts where a visit by Canadian troops routinely provokes a firefight.

The fact that government employees are ranging farther into districts heavily influenced by the Taliban shows that some Afghans are finding pragmatic ways to live alongside the insurgents, he says. But it's also a sign that government institutions are growing stronger and gaining support from villagers who want services.

Such changes in attitude may also have caused this year's decline in the number of schools destroyed by insurgents, he says, as the Taliban learn that many rural Afghans want their children to have an education.

"It's a conflict between the shape of the future, between the drive of Afghans to have better lives and the challenge of those who have an entirely different vision of the society and this region."

Measuring success

The country's complicated terrain, culture and politics make it difficult to quantify success and failure in the short term, Mr. Alexander argues. Seeing statistics about violence or the retreat of aid agencies from combat zones, many analysts have concluded that the war is going badly, but Mr. Alexander says insurgencies aren't usually defeated in steady increments.

Instead, he says, it's often a matter of a government showing enough determination that the insurgency finally, dramatically, reaches a breaking point.

"We won't have success every day, or even every year. There's just no simple way of describing it, either the challenge or the achievements, the progress. Except to say that it's one of the causes, one of the projects of our time."

Canada should not measure only the gains or losses in Kandahar, he adds. By tackling a difficult province in the Taliban heartland, Canadian troops have served as an important bulwark against the insurgency for the rest of Afghanistan, he says.

"It's the place where, arguably, the insurgency is still playing out with the greatest intensity. And the rest of the country is moving forward in some ways, thanks to the work that's being done in Kandahar, to prevent the spread from becoming greater than it already is."

Despite his hopeful assessment, Mr. Alexander does not call himself an optimist. The best-case scenarios for Afghanistan are not likely, he says.

But he argues forcefully that foreign donors must avoid the nightmare scenarios that could follow a withdrawal of international support. Afghanistan could return to the terrible civil wars of the early 1990s, and the forces of radical militancy could seize the country. "If we walked away from it, we have to realize that the challenge would return in [an] even more menacing form."

Nearly all experts on Afghanistan agree that a pullout would cause a bloody calamity. But Western electorates often ignore that consensus, Mr. Alexander says, partly because they have little tolerance for progress that doesn't follow a straight line.

"My worry sometimes is that people in their comfortable pews in editorial rooms, or parliaments, or living rooms, in donor countries, might lose sight of their own obligations and the stakes.

"If we fail, everyone suffers, but the Afghans first and foremost. If we succeed, we not only make Afghan institutions stronger but international ones stronger. And we learn something about how international peace and security can be put on firmer foundations."

Not if, but how

The debate in Western countries should shift from whether to continue in Afghanistan and focus instead on how to do it, Mr. Alexander says.

People in the region have watched foreign patronage and military forces come and go repeatedly over the centuries, he notes, leaving many of them skeptical about whether the latest flush of attention will last.

He snaps his fingers, indicating how quickly fortunes can change in Afghanistan.

"We have in the past five or six months started to retake the initiative from the crisis, from that sense of disorder - some might even call it chaos - which occasionally surfaces here.

"Everything depends on remaining focused on our plans and priorities, come what may."

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