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In Afghanistan, our rivalries conspire to make a great nation small

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On Monday, the Globe and Mail broke the story of interdepartmental conflict threatening Canada's Strategic Advisory Team (SAT) in Kabul, arguably the most influential contribution that Canada has made to Afghanistan. What a shame that limited vision and bureaucratic pettiness have apparently conspired to jeopardize this contribution.

The Achilles heel to good governance in Afghanistan is the limitations of the Afghan civil service savaged by circumstance from being efficient and incorrupt. Chief of the Defence Staff Rick Hillier saw this in 2004 and dispatched strategic planners to pass on to Afghan officials the best practices that we, in Canada, take for granted. It was hoped that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would rise to the challenge itself, but, if not, President Hamid Karzai requested that Gen. Hillier, whom the President affectionately calls "my general," might help.

Former ambassador Chris Alexander, along with his key staff and high-ranking NATO officials whom I met to confirm Mr. Karzai's request, were unequivocal in endorsing the plan. Yet, even then, they cautioned that this team would become a lightning rod of envy for those who did not comprehend it or felt threatened by it. That warning sadly proved true, as ready access to the President's office, to important ministries and the unprecedented freedom that went with it, challenged the bureaucratic status quo. On one occasion, David Sproule, who succeeded Mr. Alexander as ambassador, had to send one of his staff back to Canada as this person objected to SAT members using the embassy swimming pool, not understanding that we are all Canadians in a foreign land.

Mr. Alexander and Mr. Sproule understood that the SAT did not diminish their position as Canada's chief representative in Kabul — it only enhanced their stature. Other countries could not even hope for such influence. Colonel Mike Capstick, the team's first commander (now retired), went to the landmark Afghanistan Compact discussions in London as an Afghan delegate, and the whole SAT was more of an adjunct to, or seconded to, the Afghan civil service than Canadians working in their government. It is a subtle difference, but that nuance means everything.

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But such troubles are not entirely new. Reporting to the chief of the defence staff, instead of to the ambassador, was somehow seen as sinister, ignoring the motivation that sought to preserve this team's independence. Gen. Hillier fervently wished that other government departments would join in to make it, as he calls it, "a true Team Canada affair" — yet only the Canadian International Development Agency took up the offer (albeit reluctantly and beset by doubts). The strongest testament to the SAT's worth is that every CIDA person who has worked with it has become a convincing advocate. It represents the absolute best in Pearsonian diplomacy, which we wistfully memorialize — independent, absent of partisan agenda, with Canada's name heralded in consequence.

As I was present at the birth of this team, I was also privileged to be present in the last days of the first rotation. During a farewell party in Kabul, I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection from members of non-governmental organizations that were also working in the capital, from key embassy staff and, most importantly, from Afghan ministers and lower-level civil servants. On his last night in Kabul, I saw Andy Tamas, the CIDA representative on SAT, eyes watering with intense pride as he said farewell, expressing his profound gratitude for having been able to serve Afghans with his military colleagues. I was so intensely proud of the Canadian flag on my shoulder that day.

Critics of Canada's military mission casually label it a combat mission, conveniently ignoring the roads, irrigation ditches, bridges, causeways, schools and orphanages that Canadian soldiers have built, not to mention the strategic advice the SAT has provided. Canadian values of humility and assistance, which are emblematic of the SAT team, might very well be sacrificed on the altar of vanity,

envy and perceived competition. It is no wonder that our allies sometimes raise an eyebrow with respect to Canada. It is equally wondrous that we permit such rivalries to make a great nation small.

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