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# Our Kandahar operation is missing opportunities

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RICK SALUTIN With the current rotation of Canadian troops in Afghanistan, I'd like to grab the chance to carp on some neglected issues.

"Our" side is the only one where foreigners run the show: What do Afghan farmers see as fighters move in and out of their areas? On one side, there are the Canadians and others, who first attacked, then invaded and now occupy their country. They profess noble motives and make some positive changes. On the other side, they see people who look like themselves and speak their language. This is not a question of who has better intentions or who can do more for you; it's about who you are and where you recognize yourself.

This may be particularly poignant in Afghanistan. John C. Griffiths, in his most recent book on Afghanistan, says any Afghan "resents one thing more than internal tyranny – and that is a foreign invasion . . . as the Russians found . . . and the Americans are also likely to . . . Afghans of all races will oppose . . . any foreign invader . . . and reject any 'Afghan Solution' imposed from outside." But I don't think it's primitive or unique, it's universal. Consider even Canada. We've had generations of our elites tell us that foreigners know better. In the recent past, we had free-trade propaganda and the self-hatred of the National Post in its early years. Now, editorials tell us not to worry if all our big companies are sold elsewhere.

Yet surveys consistently show that Canadians care anyway; they don't just want to be Canadian, they want to control their country. It's not anti-Americanism; it's anti-American control. The Taliban advantage has nothing to do with fundamentalism, which may be a liability.

Nationality works for them. They're at home. This is what probably makes the Canadian mission unachievable. Think of it this way: Their army doesn't seem to need Canadian trainers.

Aid and security do not – repeat, not – go together: I am really tired of hearing this one. Ask the South Korean missionaries being held hostage. When your aid team is co-ordinated with and under the protection of an occupying army, you are perceived as part of the occupation. You become a piece in the plan to win hearts and minds, an essentially cynical, calculated strategy. And the locals know it, even as they accept the goodies. "There's a fine line between effective aid and making a local population look like lackeys to a foreign army," Paul Koring wrote in The Globe recently.

I don't think the line is fine; I think it's unmissable. NGOs succeed by separating themselves from political and military agendas.

It may take a lot longer, but it has the benefit of working. You want your aid to succeed? Withdraw the troops; if not, withdraw the aid.

The Taliban are not the problem; they're part of the solution: If that sounds shocking, it's what most players, including President Hamid Karzai's government, have said. A foreign solution cannot be imposed; it has already failed. The Taliban, like most political movements, are split. You can always find someone to talk to. It's the past rhetoric and demonization that get in the way. It doesn't help when your own generals did a lot of the demonizing.

Endnote: I'll finish by mentioning a "missed opportunity" in Afghanistan that Mr. Griffiths says was there right after 9/11.

He says the Taliban were imploding and had lost much of their internal and external support. Then, by invading, the United States did the one thing that could "ease the Taliban's internal stresses and unite behind them the great majority of Afghans." The alternative would have been not war, but an intense international police action against the individuals responsible for 9/11 – in the manner that Britain's Gordon Brown, in Washington this week, called terrorism a crime rather than a cause. Imagine the difference to the world in which we now shudder.

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