

# Looking for a Mirage in Azerbaijan



SCOTT TAYLOR

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Last October, when it was first announced that the United Arab Emirates was turfing the Canadian Forces from the Camp Mirage air base in Dubai, I had predicted this would be a serious setback to our operations in Afghanistan.

Not so, claimed the Harper Conservatives who had triggered the diplomatic crisis by refusing to grant the UAE additional flights and landing rights for their national Emirates airline.

Sure, we had used the Camp Mirage facilities for over nine years rent-free, and the UAE even reportedly provided vital medical care for many of our wounded at no charge to Canadians, including flying several home, first-class, on Emirates airlines.

But in the opinion of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the very notion that we should provide commercial air access in exchange for all this made the UAE “bad allies.”

To be fair, it must be noted that Defence Minister Peter MacKay understood how vital Mirage was to maintain our battle group in Kandahar. However, Harper chose to ignore MacKay and instead accepted the counsel of then-transport minister John Baird. Rather than resigning in protest and confronting Baird in an open forum, MacKay

chose to express his displeasure by quietly wearing a “Fly Emirates” baseball cap to the next Conservative Party caucus meeting.

In an attempt to convince the public that this whole affair was no big deal, the Harper faithful spread the word that Canada had plenty of short-term alternate options available to relocate Mirage. One was the German air base in Termez, Uzbekistan, the other the US transit center in Manas, Kyrgyzstan.

A closer examination of the circumstances surrounding these two airfields makes it clear that neither is a likely long-term solution. For one thing, the Germans are only barely clinging to their landing privileges and facilities in Uzbekistan.

In 2005, a furious President Karimov kicked the Americans out of their leased base in Khanabad and subsequently denied the US Air Force—and most NATO countries—the use of Uzbek airspace.

The German military presence in Termez remains a closely guarded media secret within Uzbekistan as President Karimov continues to publicly vow the expulsion of all “foreign rabble-rousers.” Only the payment of tens of millions of Euros and a low profile have enabled the Germans to keep operating out of Termez.

Coincidentally, some media pundits in Germany have commented on the irony of paying large sums of money to prop up the despotic rule in Uzbekistan in order to combat despotic insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan.

As for the US transit centre in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, this former Soviet air base was, ironically, the major staging facility for operations in Afghanistan during the latter’s occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Dubbed the “Gateway to Hell” by Soviet soldiers, the moniker has been retained by the tens of thousands of American personnel who have transited through en route to combat posts in Afghanistan.

Since February 2009, the Kyrgyzstan government has threatened the Americans with expulsion from Manas. The political pressure from Kyrgyzstan has had the short-term impact of more than tripling the rental price to a whopping US\$63 million annually.

In addition, the base was recently renamed a transit center as a cosmetic face-



Canada faces slim pickings in alternate military staging bases, but one option might be Baku.

saving gesture to enable the Kyrgyz government to fulfil its public pledge of ridding the country of American bases. Again, this does not exactly seem like the sort of warm and welcoming campground in which Canada should be looking to pitch a tent.

That said, I hereby nominate Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, as the most suitable regional location for us to establish our next logistical staging area.

Although not a member of NATO, Azerbaijan has troops in Afghanistan and has been a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace program since 1994. While not entirely without corruption, this oil-rich former Soviet republic is politically stable and eager to increase trade and development with the West.

Other NATO air forces are staging cargo flights through Azerbaijan, as evidenced by

the Luftwaffe crews I saw eating breakfast in my hotel during a recent visit to Baku.

Of course, it might mean Canada has to open up a small, reciprocal diplomatic mission in Azerbaijan (the Azerbaijanis established an embassy in Ottawa in September 2004, but Canada still conducts its diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan from Ankara, Turkey, some 1,400 kilometres from Baku).

There is also the possibility that, as a “good ally,” we might offer to pay the Azerbaijanis some rent for their facilities. Even so, it would be a small price to pay compared to the current ludicrously expensive stop-gap measure of renting civilian airport use in Cyprus and having our soldiers stay in hotels.

Scott Taylor is editor and publisher of *Esprit de Corps* magazine.  
editor@embassymag.ca

# Afghanistan and the regional blindspot

DAVID CARMENT

A recent issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* has taken up the challenge of explaining the impact that India, Pakistan and Iran are having on Canada’s mission in Afghanistan, a topic that until recently was rarely discussed by Canadian policymakers.

Various contributors to the issue tackle the regional dimensions from a variety of perspectives. Several authors argue that so far, Pakistan has shown resilience, but economic collapse and civil war are real possibilities. Others show that India’s foreign policy goals and objectives remain largely misunderstood in the West, while one author demonstrates that Iran’s presence in the region is for the most part ignored by virtue of our unwillingness to properly engage the country.

For Canada and its allies understanding the regional dimensions are essential to bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan.

In particular, Pakistan’s influence on Afghanistan has been all but ignored. In all aspects of policy making, from strategic analysis to public debate and intergovernmental co-operation, Canada appears to have had no significant internal evaluation of and policy on the region until it introduced a rather undersized and somewhat superficial Canada Border Services Agency-led border training program in 2008 and initiated and

supported the Dubai Peace process around the same time. The Canadian government also supports the proposed development of a Pakistan-Afghanistan super highway. To be sure, a 2009 CSIS report on Pakistan indicated that Canada was at least analytically “on top of things,” but the situation had unravelled long before.

Several years ago, a series of very clear warnings, including one from the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and another in the *Economist* noted that Pakistan had quickly become the world’s “most dangerous country.” Similarly detailed reports, commissioned by the Canadian government, tracking the historical risks Pakistan posed to itself and its neighbors, were also made available to policy makers.

There is, unfortunately, no evidence that any of this information informed the Manley Report released in 2008. In fact the Manley Report devoted just a few short sentences to Pakistan. Conversely, USAID, the FCO, the State Department, Rand and DfID were long aware of Pakistan’s destabilizing influence. A conference organized in 2003 in Berlin by the Marshall Foundation and the Carnegie Endowment brought together experts from these organizations to examine the impact Pakistan was having on the region. Canadian representatives, apart from one academic, were notably absent.

So how does one explain the blindspot in Canadian policy? There are several possibilities. One is that Canada’s representatives “on the ground” knew all along that

Pakistan mattered but their views did not impact the policy process back in Ottawa. This could have been because parliamentarians themselves were only partially or ill-informed. A 2007 report produced by Gordon Smith of Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute did reference the effects that Pakistan was having on stability in Afghanistan, but these views also had no immediate impact on policy.

I believe the policy blindspot is actually a function of more fundamental problems. The first is that military operations were neither equipped nor mandated for a regional approach to stabilizing Afghanistan and were, as a result, slow to adapt to changing regional dynamics.

Our original mission’s goals were focused on a “small footprint” support operation to the government in Kabul. In terms of a mission statement, there is no evidence to indicate that our original strategy was analytically or otherwise equipped to incorporate or adapt to changing regional influences. Nor were our policymakers prepared to explain to Canadians how and why a key ally in the Global War on Terror could in fact be working against our interests.

Second, the key Canadian party responsible for assessing the regional aspects of the conflict and working through policy options would be the Department of Foreign Affairs and as one of the three legs in the 3D approach to “rebuilding states,” DFAIT played its hand only in the later stages of the game. We should

not expect CIDA, for example, to have a comprehensive appreciation for regional dynamics since its operations and focus are primarily internal to Afghanistan. By the same token, the military mindset was primarily focused on winning the “war” in Afghanistan.

To be sure, DFAIT’s recognition of the problem and its answer in the form of the Dubai process may well bear fruit. One must ask, however, where the broader regional diplomatic effort was from 2001-2008? Where was the strategic assessment prior to the Manley report? Where was the guiding hand? The overarching strategic analysis? The preventive foresight?

This takes me to my third and most controversial point. If one reviews how much and where Canada commits to supporting Pakistan’s stability (democracy promotion, education and human rights) it becomes quickly apparent that our leverage with the country’s leaders and its peoples is quite minimal. Even if one were to raise the idea that Pakistan was a dangerous influence, there is likely little that Canada could (on its own) do to influence it. What we have here through inaction is a tacit understanding of how overwhelming the prospects of fixing a complex failed state is. But that indeed is the task we now face.

David Carment is editor of the *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* and a CDFAI fellow. Readers can access various risk analyses on Pakistan, Afghanistan and the region at [www.carleton.ca/cifp](http://www.carleton.ca/cifp).

editor@embassymag.ca