The government must be frank with Canadians: the mission in Afghanistan will continue to be a tough slog, but success, however unlikely, is still possible.

On the release of his latest review of the Afghan War, President Barack Obama delivered the message most people expected: that the new strategy is “on track” but that progress is “fragile and reversible.”

Don’t fret if you feel a sense of déjà vu. Amid growing frustration over the grinding progress of the war, now the longest in American history, the Obama administration has clearly calculated that constructive ambiguity is the way to go. This logic extended to the review itself, which was wryly described by one longtime U.S. defence analyst as “slightly longer than the average fortune cookie.” Unfortunately, this has been one of the hallmarks of the international community’s nine-year engagement in Afghanistan: a failure of NATO governments to adequately communicate the goals and status of the war to domestic publics.

One of the principal findings of the only major review of Canada’s mission in Afghanistan, the 2008 Manley report, was that the government had to do a better job communicating the mission to the Canadian public. On this score, the government deserves a “C” grade at best. The Conservative government and particularly the Prime Minister’s Office continue to send mixed messages on
Canada’s engagement in Afghanistan.

Take the recent announcement of the government’s decision to deploy almost 1,000 military and police trainers to Afghanistan. In remarks to a group of journalists at a briefing in Toronto in September 2010, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated very clearly that Canada’s mission in Afghanistan would end in 2011 and only a small number of troops would remain in technical capacities and to protect the embassy. The following month – in an about-face due in no small part to significant pressure from the U.S. and other NATO partners – the government announced the new mission. The new deployment, however, would have one significant caveat: Canadian troops would be far from the frontlines, serving “behind the wire” largely in a classroom capacity.

The problem with this condition is that Afghanistan doesn’t need classroom trainers in places like the National Military Training Center in Kabul, where Afghan trainers have already taken over much of the training burden. What is in desperately short supply are mentors and in-service trainers embedded with Afghan units operating in the field, who can help the Afghans apply their classroom training. Not all of those mentors will be needed at the frontlines, but many will. Instead of coming back to the Canadian people in six months or a year to explain, in a rather predictable and disingenuous manner, that circumstances have changed and that Canadian trainers may be put in harm’s way after all, the government should be frank about this now.

The Harper government can make a strong case that training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) remains a key to the exit strategy for the international community, and the more support we can provide for this process now, the sooner we will get out of Afghanistan while preserving some of the hard-earned gains that have been made. The time for wishful thinking and ambiguity is over; the government must tell Canadians that it will be a tough slog ahead, but that success, however unlikely, is still possible.

We may be in a difficult spot now, but the consequences of failure – a likely return to civil war that could claim the lives of thousands of civilians and destabilize a strategically important and already volatile region – are even more frightening. It is better to acknowledge this situation and try to work with existing realities than to invent or imagine different ones, whether for the sake of public consumption or political partisanship.

The path to success in Afghanistan demands some particular things: some sort of peace agreement with the Taliban, continued progress in training and equipping the ANSF, a forceful focus on good governance, and renewed diplomatic efforts to find common ground and a genuine commitment to non-interference among Afghanistan’s neighbours. The path is narrow and the margin for error slim, but the Canadian and U.S. governments must assure their publics that success is attainable and plan their strategies accordingly. Failure to do so means the war will be lost in Canada and the U.S. before it reaches a head in Afghanistan.

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If there really was a training mission when they made the announcement, then it would be behind the wire as was announced. A claim that the need is elsewhere is in effect an admission that there was no mission, as described.

That amounts to either incompetence or a lie. Simple.

If these 1,000 soldiers were other than a cover for extending a failed mission, then there would be something for them to do. The Afghan classroom trainers could spend 3 years in the field with their soldiers, if the two assignments were really interchangeable. Our soldiers would be in the classroom.

You would think that the language problem would be less critical in classroom conditions. How could a Canadian soldiers direct soldiers in the field when none of them speak English to the level that is critical in battle conditions? Do any of our soldiers speak Pashtun?

Being frank about the mission would mean admitting it make no sense.

Not much chance of that.

And speaking of the Manley whitewash, er, I mean, report, it is interesting that it stated that 1,000 Canadian soldiers would be sufficient for the mission in Kandahar.

Three years later Obama sent in 30,000.

And the mission in Kandahar is still a failure.

The only successful part of the Manley report was the discovery of the magic number 1,000. Pulled out of thin air - their is absolutely no justification for it in the report - this number survives to this day as the new magic number of trainers we will need for the new mission.

It is clear that this is all just guesswork. A number made up in the hopes that it is first, acceptable to the Canadian people - the voters. Second, to the US president. Third, to the NATO generals. The actual mission, if there is one, is not a factor.

It is all Public Relations.

How to be frank about that and not look like a complete idiot?
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