

CANADA IN AFGHANISTAN: CONTINUITY AND CLARITY

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The deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, doubled by the loss of Canadian soldiers in combat, has raised serious questions about the change of tactics and strategies in Canada's policy in war on terrorism in that country. The Conservative minority government has been branded as disingenuous and has been accused of misinformation, lacking clarity and conducting a foreign policy oriented to the service of American policy interests in Afghanistan. In this article we shall separate myth from the reality, and perception and confusion from policy and political facts.

What policy?

It took the Canadian Government a few years to digest the shock of 9/11 and its aftermath, and to produce a National Security Policy document that Prime Minister Paul Martin presented as 'Canada's first-ever comprehensive statement of our National Security Policy'.¹ One of six key strategic areas in the National Security Policy document is international security. The document states that the Government is committed to ensuring that the Canadian Forces are flexible, responsive and combat-capable for a wide range of operations, and are able to work with our allies. Canada will leverage its experience in building peace, order and good government to help developing, failed and

¹ Canada, Privy Council Office, *Securing an Open Society: Canada's National Security Policy*, 2004.

failing states. Canada will continue to play an important role in countering international terrorism, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and defusing key intra- and interstate conflicts.² The document reiterates the role of Canada in Afghanistan as a helper to restore peace, stabilize the country, and rebuild democratic institutions. Afghanistan receives Canada's single largest bilateral aid program ever.

Canada made the American war on terror in Afghanistan its most important security preoccupation and put its military at the service of this cause. She was the first coalition nation after the U.S. to deploy a naval task group into the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, which stretches from the Horn of Africa to Central Asia. At its peak in January 2002, the Canadian Naval Task Group was comprised of six warships and about 1,500 Navy personnel. In 2003-04, Canada provided the largest contingent to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This composite policy reflects Canada's increasingly integrated approach to defence, diplomacy, and development (the "3Ds").³

Shortly after the PCO document was issued, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade published in 2005 a more elaborate review of Canadian foreign policy, entitled *Canada's International Policy Statement. A Role of Pride and Influence in the World*.⁴ In his Foreword to the *Statement*, Prime Minister Paul Martin invoked the expansion of the Canadian Forces (CF) as a measure to enhance their ability in allowing Canada to play a leading and lasting role in peace support operations. He presented the direction of a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar as a sign of Canadian leadership. The document recalled Canada's willingness to collaborate with the U.S. on

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ For an on-line copy of the *Statement* see: www.international.gc.ca, www.acdi-cida.gc.ca and www.forces.gc.ca

the many international issues where both countries have common objectives.⁵ It recognized a deterioration in the international security environment, in which the CF should familiarize itself with the notion of a “three-block-war.” This is a context in which the Canadian military could be engaged in combat against well-armed militia in one city block, in stabilization operations in the next block, and in humanitarian relief and reconstruction work two blocks over. Transition from one type of task to the other could happen in the blink of an eye. The changing nature of international relations forces Canada’s defence and security policy to change. Challenged by global security concerns, the Government of Canada will seek to make a difference in three main areas: countering global terrorism; stabilizing failed and fragile states; and combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the *Statement* says.⁶ In this security setting, Afghanistan is an integrated component of Canadian security.

In his introduction to a separate document on the defence section of Canada’s *International Policy Statement*, Bill Graham, then Minister of National Defence, confirmed Canadian vulnerability to the threat of terrorism and the spill over effects from failed and failing states.⁷ The document sees Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Haiti as failed and failing states, which pose a dual challenge for Canada. In the first instance, the suffering that these situations create is an affront to Canadian values. Beyond this, they also plant the seeds of threats to regional and global security. They generate refugee flows that threaten the stability of their neighbours, and create new political problems for their regions. More ominously, the impotence of their governing structures

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ Canada, Minister of Foreign Affairs, *Canada’s International Policy Statement. A Role of Pride and Influence in the World Defence*. Available also on-line:

www.international.gc.ca and www.forces.gc.ca

makes them potential breeding grounds or safe havens for terrorism and organized crime.⁸ Canada tried but failed to play a significant role in the Darfur crisis in Sudan when the Khartoum government denied such a role to the CF. Somalia is a desperate situation with horrible memories for Canadians. Canada's contribution to stabilizing Haiti is positive.

Afghanistan poses the most serious challenge to Canada and the CF. In spite of discussion of the combat role for the CF in Afghanistan, the *Statement* is written in a context far from the reality confronted by the Canadian military since their deployment in Kandahar. What is important, however, is the Liberal government's solid engagement in the Afghanistan campaign with the Americans and NATO. However, Prime Ministers Chrétien, Martin and Harper did not differ much on what the CF deployed in Afghanistan were expected to accomplish.

Change in policy?

Canada's involvement in the US campaign in Afghanistan goes back to 7 October 2001, when then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien put the Canadian forces on full alert. He offered the United States "military, humanitarian, diplomatic, financial, legislative and domestic security initiatives."⁹ The Prime Minister's announcement sheds serious doubt on the assertion that links the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan to the Liberal Government's refusal to assist the Americans in their invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

One day later, Jean Chrétien ordered Defence Minister Art Eggleton to announce that Canada was sending six naval ships, six air force planes, special forces soldiers,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁹ *CTV.ca News* Updated 7 August 2006. The chronology used in this paper comes from *CTV.ca News* and Canada, Department of National Defence, www.forces.gc.ca

and more than 2,000 troops in a mission named *Operation Apollo*. To implement its pledge, Canada dispatched in December 2001 forty members of its elite anti-terrorist group, Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2), to the Kandahar region. A second deployment in mid-January 2002 was followed by the re-establishment of Canada-Afghanistan diplomatic relations after the dark years of Red Army occupation and the Mujahedin fratricidal infighting.

The change of guard in Ottawa did not affect its engagement in Afghanistan. On February 12, 2003 John McCallum, the new Minister of National Defence, presented to the House of Commons an 'integrated approach' as a vehicle that articulated Canadian 'primary objectives' in Afghanistan. He then added: "Canada has been approached by the international community for assistance in maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan for the UN-mandated mission in Kabul. Canada is willing to serve with a battalion group and a brigade headquarters for a period of one year, starting late this summer. We are currently in discussion with a number of potential partners." The Minister's declaration was consistent with Canada's traditional attachment to UN and NATO, cornerstones of its foreign and defence policy.

During the spring of 2003, Canada reinforced its presence in Afghanistan by dispatching a Theatre Activation Team (TAT) for *Operation Athena*. The TAT established the necessary in-theatre support infrastructure for *Op Athena* by facilitating the reception, staging and onward movement of materiel, advance parties, and the main body of TFK. Canada's involvement in the Afghan campaign was deepened when, in July 2003, Brigadier-General Peter Devlin of Canada took over the command of 3,600 soldiers of the Kabul Multi-National Brigade for six months. On 24 January 2004 Brigadier-General

Jocelyn Lacroix replaced his compatriot as commander of the 5,500 soldiers of KMNBB for six months. Lt.-Gen. Rick Hillier culminated Canadian progress in the military hierarchy when he took command of ISAF in February 2004.

Canada's contribution was not always easy to explain to the Canadian public. Pressed by persistent questions on 'Why Afghanistan? Why Canada?', John McCallum provided the following answer on 12 September 2003: "The bottom line is that the world cannot afford another September 11th. Therefore, the world's militaries have no choice but to be in Afghanistan for some time to come." The not-too-convincing Ministerial response was substantiated by Chris Alexander, Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan: "The stability and security of Afghanistan is vital for the security of the world. Our vision of the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRT's, is that it reflects the Afghans' great achievement and great hope for continued success. An Afghanistan that is peaceful, pluralist and prosperous."

Canada's losses started rising in October 2003, when two of its soldiers were killed and three others were injured in an explosion near Kabul. They would be followed by many others with the intensification of combat in Kandahar region. This would be a very difficult time for Canada and Canadians.

Under the Liberal Governments of Chrétien and Martin, the 3D Approach became the foundation of Canadian foreign and defence policy. More importantly, their slogan, "Protecting Canadians, Rebuilding Afghanistan", leaves no doubt about the organic link between vital Canadian interests and Afghan prosperity. Intervening in Afghanistan should also be seen as a clear sign of Canada's determination to reclaim its lost diplomatic lustre. "Canada is making important diplomatic, defence, and develop-

ment contributions to the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Our objectives are threefold: to defend our national interests, ensure Canadian leadership in world affairs, and help Afghanistan rebuild into a free, democratic and peaceful country"¹⁰, as the Government stated. No government will dispute these objectives, despite difficulties in realizing them. A minority government is even more susceptible to pursue this policy.

On 14 April 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin announced that Canada would keep about 600 troops and 200 air force personnel in Afghanistan to play a reconnaissance role until 2005. This was supposed to be a less dangerous mission for the CF. On 5 August 2004, the Canadian forces left the relative safety of Kabul for the hotbed of Kandahar. The move took place despite the military ombudsman's claim about the troops' exhaustion and overwork due to the government's decision to slash the number of troops deployed to Afghanistan by almost two-thirds.

The NATO decision on 10 February 2005 to expand its mission in Afghanistan beyond Kabul's limits was a major development that would affect the Canadian forces, like other members of the Alliance, for years to come. In June 2005, Canadian soldiers established a base for the PRT team. It was a true application of the 3D theoretical Approach. Contrary to the expectation created by Prime Minister Martin's announcement in April 2004 on the force reduction, Canada dispatched JTF-2 soldiers to fight al-Qaeda in July 2005. Shortly after the JTF-2 deployment more Canadian forces left for Kandahar, a "dangerous but necessary" mission, as portrayed by Canada's Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Rick Hillier.

Criticized for endangering troops by sending them into a very harsh environment, a defiant Prime Minister reminded Canadians that fighting terrorism is the government's

¹⁰ <http://www.canada-afghanistan.gc.ca/menu-en.asp>

responsibility. The Liberal minority government, however, did not remain in power to see the ongoing result of this fight against terror.

The Conservatives and Afghanistan

As for the policy change, the new Conservative government is pursuing the policy established by Liberals. In January 2006, Stephen Harper became Prime Minister of a minority government, ending the short life of the Martin Liberal minority government. The change of government did not mean a change of policy in regard to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. Two fundamental reasons explain the new Prime Minister's determination in pursuit of the Afghanistan mission. They are: 1) A sense of mission and the Prime Minister's affinity with U.S. President George W. Bush; 2) A determined and "vibrant new military leadership with innovative ideas rooted in recent operational experience"¹¹ focused on the mission and unmoved by Taliban.

In his address to the UN General Assembly Prime Minister Harper insisted on Canada's engagement in Afghanistan in the same terms as the Liberals when they described Canada's role in that country. He maintained the 3D Approach as a rational and deliberate vehicle for an integrated foreign and defence policy: "Canadian defence personnel, diplomats, and development officers are on the front lines of the fight for the future of Afghanistan. Canadians feel tremendous pride in the leadership role they have assumed and we share equal grief for the casualties they have taken."¹² In his UN speech Stephen Harper was categorical. He believes there is only one option in Afghanistan: "(...) if we fail the Afghan people, we will be failing ourselves. For this is the

¹¹ Bill Graham, Minister of National Defence, *Canada's International Policy Statement. Defence, op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹² Canadian Press, *Text of Harper's speech*, 21 Sept 2006.

United Nations' strongest mission and, therefore, our greatest test. Our collective will and credibility are being judged. We cannot afford to fail. We will succeed.”

February 2006 is a significant month for Canada's military role in Afghanistan. On 24 February, Canadian troops officially started taking over from their American allies on the front lines of Kandahar province. On February 26, Brig.-Gen. David Fraser took charge of a new multinational force, including 2,200 Canadians, that will patrol six provinces in the southern part of Afghanistan. Responsibility accompanies the role. On March 8, 2006, Canadian troops in Afghanistan launched their biggest mission yet to root out Taliban insurgents from rural areas around Kandahar.

The new Foreign Affairs Minister, Peter MacKay, is in total agreement with the Prime Minister's and Martin government on the Afghanistan mission. On 26 June 2006, MacKay explained Canada's commitment in terms of interests and values: our interests are to help rebuild Afghanistan; to protect Canadians and people around the world from the threat of terrorism; and to demonstrate Canadian leadership on the world stage.

Polls, however, show a disconnection between the Prime Minister's and Foreign Affairs Minister's enthusiasm and public scepticism over the Canadian mission in Afghanistan. A poll conducted by Decima Research on 10 April 2006 shows that 46 per cent of Canadians thought the mission was a bad idea, compared to 45 per cent who felt the opposite was true. Another poll, conducted by The Strategic Counsel for CTV and The Globe and Mail on 6 May 2006, found 54 per cent of Canadians were against the deployment of troops. Of those, 23 per cent were strongly opposed.

The rise in the number of Canadian fatalities in Afghanistan has also created disillusionment among federal politicians. In a debate at the House of Commons on 15 No-

vember 2005, Bill Blaikie (NDP) discovered that the mission in Afghanistan was not peacekeeping, may be peace building, but it is more like war fighting, a significant change in the role of the Canadian military in Afghanistan.¹³ He did not call for a force withdrawal from this mission. A second debate in the House to extend Canada's mission in Afghanistan by two years was concluded in May 2006. Gilles Duceppe, of the Bloc Québécois, told the House of Commons that his party opposes extending the mission in Afghanistan because it is unpopular in Quebec. He also raised the prospect of going to the polls over the issue. The NDP was also against the extension. The situation was fuzzier in the Liberal party, where the Opposition Leader and former Defence Minister, Bill Graham, said his party supported the troops and the mission in Afghanistan, but the MPs would be voting by conscience.¹⁴ The motion was passed by a narrow margin of 149-145.

The confusion in Parliament had its echo in society. A 9 June 2006 poll by the Strategic Counsel found total support for sending troops to be at 48% while 44% opposed the idea. Another poll by the same Counsel, published on 19 July 2006, found a net surge in popular opposition (56%) to the decision to send Canadian troops to Afghanistan. Only 39% of respondents were in favour of the decision.

Two concerns contributed to the popular disenchantment. On July 31st, NATO troops took command of military operations in southern Afghanistan, with their first priority being to suppress the aggressive Taliban attacks that caused disruption, destruction, and death among Afghans and coalition forces. The perception that the Conservative

¹³ http://www.billblaikie.ca/ndp.php/SEC4203a2e60c208/Canadas_military_mis

¹⁴ CBC, "PM would go with one-year extension in Afghanistan", www.cbc.ca/news/credit.html, 17 May 2006.

government pursues a pro-American policy explains the second reason for popular discontent.

An assessment of Canadian action

Canada is taking an integrated approach that is focussed on three primary objectives in Afghanistan: to help stabilise the country; to strengthen governance; and to improve the lives of Afghans.

A quick review of news, including the NATO Secretary General's and other officials' assessments, reveals that the security situation in some provinces is rapidly deteriorating in spite of Canadian and NATO efforts. NATO's intervention elevated Afghanistan to the level of a major concern for the Western collective security. As a member of the Alliance, Canada's policy will be affected by decisions made in Brussels, where the US has the upper hand. One measure to assess security erosion in Afghanistan is the number of Taliban/ criminals/insurgent attacks on Afghans and international forces. For many observers Iraq became American Vietnam; for many others Afghanistan is becoming a new Iraq.

The origin of this deterioration resides in the US policy and its conduct of the 'war on terror'. Washington committed two major strategic mistakes:

- a) A flawed assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and the course of actions that followed. The fall of the Taliban was viewed as definitive and total. No serious analyst gave a real chance to the Taliban resisting the formidable American military machine in October 2001. The speed of victory over an archaic govern-

ment created an illusion in Washington that everything was possible. The same error was repeated in Iraq in March 2003.

b) The invasion of Iraq shortly after that of Afghanistan proved to be Washington's second strategic miscalculation. It derailed the campaign in Afghanistan by creating a vital window for the Taliban to regroup and enhance their resistance.

The US war planners should handle the so-called 'warlords' differently by dismissing them, not creating more space for them. Those planners are doing the opposite of their failed action in Iraq, where they dismissed all associates of the Ba'athist regime. Afghanis, Canadians, and other NATO soldiers are paying heavily for the miscalculation by Washington.

The Government's policy in Afghanistan is fast losing popular support. There are 6 reasons explaining this development:

- a) Lack of transparency and communication: Ottawa needs to improve drastically its public relations programme;
- b) Popular perception of the change in the nature of the mission from peace-keeping and reconstruction to combat;
- c) The Conservative government's association with US imperialistic behaviour and its war in Iraq;
- d) Loss of life of Canadian soldiers. Canadians have forgotten about the nature of war and the possibility of casualties;
- e) Recent crisis in the Middle East and Prime Minister Harper's position on the Hezbollah-Israel war in favour of Israel;

f) A divided House of Commons: the NDP and the Bloc Québécois have serious questions about the mission, and some Liberals see the mission under the new government as a sell-out to US.

News from Afghanistan is not positive. Western media, including the Canadian media, are full of negativity related to the 'poppy industry'. Afghanistan's rank as the leading country in the production of opium has generalised corruption, and blind violence has reached epidemic proportion. UN officials periodically implicate members of the Afghani government in drug activities and related corruption. The international community assists in open animosity between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the issue of international borders control. The NATO Secretary General recognises serious difficulties in conducting the war against the Taliban, and the Canadian Defence Minister confirms the impossibility of defeating militarily the Taliban. As a result, public opinion doubts the value of the Canadian Forces' presence and their achievement in Afghanistan.

This bleak picture does not invite public support for the campaign in Afghanistan. The Canadian public, like the rest of the world, is not aware of positive events in Afghanistan. All of its attention is focused on Kandahar and Helmand, where an 'Anglo-Saxon' force is combating Taliban. The perception of a white, Christian force fighting a Muslim Taliban does not invite much sympathy. There is a need to change this perception, by implicating the UN, Afghanistan's neighbours, and regional organizations like the Organization of the Islamic Conference. It is necessary to pursue an aggressive, comprehensive and coherent development programme. There should be a real inte-

grated strategy in place to fight the Taliban, develop Afghanistan, and reach out to all the nations involved in this issue.