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Canada and the war in Afghanistan: NATO's odd man out steps forward

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At the Cold War's close, Canada was NATO's 'odd man out', contributing relatively little to western defence. Today, Canada is the third-largest contributor of combat forces to NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. Canada got into Afghanistan partly as an alternative to getting into Iraq. But fighting the Taliban also serves the Canadian national interest in combating terrorism and has dovetailed well with recent efforts to 'transform' the Canadian military and use it more effectively in overseas development efforts. However, the Canadian commitment to Afghanistan beyond the current February 2009 deadline is in doubt. Public support for the combat dimension of the Afghanistan operations remains weak.

Keywords: Canada; defence; foreign policy; Afghanistan; NATO

The NATO Alliance has agreed to increase defence spending in real terms, three per cent per year, but three per cent of nothing is nothing. Canada is below three per cent as a percentage of gross national product ... We were gratified to see an increase in Canadian defence spending in the November budget of eighteen per cent in each of the next two years. There is even more to be done.

So, in all frankness, there is a great deal to be done to guarantee your own sovereignty as well as to meet our joint requirement of defending the North American continent.

No one is pointing an accusing finger at Canadians or Canada. It's just that we want to try to help wake up the Canadian people to the seriousness of the defence situation today. When we think of Canada's part in world history we think of Ypres, the Somme, the Vimy Ridge, the North Atlantic, Dieppe and Normandy. We know we can count on Canada when the chips are down. We just say that you must become more fully aware that this situation exists.

Paul H. Robinson, US Ambassador to Canada 25 February 1982¹

If this is a litmus test for the new NATO, the results aren't impressive. Some NATO allies (other than the U.S., the U.K. and the Netherlands) have shown themselves to be unwilling to serve on the battlefield in Afghanistan ... The current contingent doesn't have enough troops to go toe-to-toe with the Taliban ... Since NATO countries like Germany and France don't want to engage in battle ... Some of our allies are doing a lot of saluting, but not much marching.

The Government of Canada should announce that while it understands that Canada's involvement in Afghanistan is long term, it will be forced to reconsider its commitment unless NATO, within the next 12 months, puts into place in Kandahar a significantly larger and fully-engaged stability force.

Canadian Troops in Afghanistan: Taking a Hard Look at a Hard Mission, February 2007, Report of the Canadian Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, February 2007²

Induction: odd man's odyssey³

At Cold War's close, Canada had been NATO's 'odd man out' for several decades, remaining in the alliance, joining in its deliberations, but contributing little to the defence of the West against the Soviet Union. Today, in contrast, with the war on terror still at its onset, Canada has stepped forward to play a prominent role both militarily and politically within the Western alliance, above all with its efforts in Afghanistan. Ottawa has gone from being criticised and exhorted by its allies to the one doing the criticising and exhorting. How did this happen? And will it endure?

The term 'odd man out' was first affixed to Canada by the noted Canadian scholar and former diplomat John W. Holmes in a paper commissioned by the Brookings Institution that he published in 1976 under the title, 'Odd Man Out in the Atlantic Community'. As Holmes observed, 'Having no longer a serious role to play in European or North American defence, Canada finds itself increasingly in a position of . . . functional neutralism'. It was not that Canadians no longer believed in collective security, Holmes said, but the 'lack of a clear military role', along with 'fundamental strategic realities', and a belief in détente, had persuaded them that they had 'little to contribute beside their bare presence'.⁴

That bare presence contributed by Canada was provided by a badly underfunded, badly under-manned and badly equipped Canadian military. Canadian defence spending fell to the lowest percentage of GNP of any NATO member except tiny Luxembourg and Iceland, which had no armed forces. Among the many cuts the government of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau meted out to the military, the most important was the one in 1969 that reduced the Canadian military presence in NATO Europe to that of a mere token force in Germany consisting of an army brigade of 3200 personnel with 77 tanks and an air group with 54 fighter aircraft.

Although the Trudeau government reversed some its policies and new equipment was acquired in the late seventies and early 1980s, the marked reduction of Canada's military capability came in for a certain amount of ineffectual public criticism. A couple of journalists railed. Canada was 'in retreat' said one in a book on Canadian defence policy; it had become the 'true north *not* strong and free' said another and more prominent one in another book.⁵ An academic or two clucked. The Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington published a study by two young and obscure ones arguing that because Canadians and their government had not summoned up the will to reverse the decline in the Canadian military, NATO should summarily tell Ottawa either to shape up or stop sending representatives to NATO meetings.⁶ No one took the idea seriously. Some politicians bellowed. Brian Mulroney, leader of the Progressive Conservative opposition charged on the campaign trail during the election of 1984 that 'Pierre Trudeau and his Liberal pals have done the ultimate disservice to Canada by running down our armed forces'.⁷ Mulroney won that election, as well as the next one. But when he left prime ministerial office nine years later, the Canadian military was in scarcely better shape.

NATO officials and officials of other NATO countries, for their part, almost never commented on Canada's lacklustre efforts in public. There were exceptions from time to time, including the US ambassador in Ottawa during the early 1980s who took to criticising the Trudeau government on defence spending and in turn was lambasted in the press as an overbearing, pushy American. Generally, Canada's allies criticised it behind closed doors. The annual NATO performance reviews provided the occasion, as did various summits and bilateral encounters where western politicians and bureaucrats tried to lean on their Canadian counterparts, usually to no avail.

Today, Canada is the third-largest contributor of forces to the combat roles in Afghanistan under the aegis of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Over 70 Canadians have died there, 63 in the last two years. Canada's allies have been reluctant to make similar contributions to combat roles there, with the notable exception of the US, UK and the Netherlands. Canadians, now that they are in the forefront of a NATO operation, are not always showing the same circumspection for the allies that officials of those governments usually showed Canada in decades past. A February 2007 Canadian Senate Defence Committee report recommended that Canada rethink its role in Afghanistan within a year unless NATO countries did more there.⁸ Several honourable senators on the committee were equally blunt in their individual comments. 'We're doing the heavy lifting and now it's time to share it,' said the Conservative Senator, Michael Meighen. His Liberal colleague, Colin Kenny, said that he expected 'our allies to step up. They must know that if they don't step up, we're going to take another look at the situation. It's an alliance. We're expected to be shoulder to shoulder.'⁹

Stepping forward into the War on Terror

During the Cold War, the Canadian military had one important defence task at home: the air force stood ready, in cooperation with the US and after 1957 under the aegis of the bilateral NORAD to detect Soviet bombers attacking North America and if possible, shoot them down. Most of the Canadian military, however, had been structured, trained and equipped not to fight at home, but in Europe and on the North Atlantic. From time to time, Canada also contributed forces to peacekeeping operations, usually under UN auspices. Although these contributions were little more than a sideline to the armed forces' principal combat-related tasks, they grew increasingly popular at home. All this meant that while the Canadian Forces at Cold War's end may not have been in great shape overall, they nonetheless were oriented towards deployment overseas, roughly similar in nature although certainly not scale to those of the US and quite unlike those of most of the other NATO allies, which were postured to defend their own European homelands. The Canadian bases in Germany were closed in the early 1990s and the Canadian government found itself with excess capability on its hands to deploy combat forces elsewhere in the world. Ottawa availed itself.

Canada's military involvement in post-Cold War international security began fairly dramatically with the 1991 Gulf War. The country's small contribution to the allied coalition consisted of 26 fighter aircraft, three ships and a field hospital. The army was not involved, except for some infantry, which provided security at the Canadian positions and some army gunners used to bolster the air defences of the

Canadian warships. The Mulroney government appears to have declined to commit an army brigade for fear of the public's response to possible Canadian casualties. Harald von Riekhoff of Carleton University later commented that 'Canada's military contribution was entirely respectable and was no doubt, appreciated by the other coalition members. But given its limited size and cautious deployment in order to minimise the risk of involvement in direct combat, it was hardly sufficient to support the claim of Principal Power status.'¹⁰

There had been plenty of warnings that if Canada joined the 1991 coalition against Saddam Hussein, it would be disqualified in the eyes of the world from being able to participate in future UN operations. These claims were swiftly discredited; in subsequent years, the Canadian Forces were involved in an astonishing number of other multilateral operations, most of them under the auspices of the UN as Ottawa eagerly sought to involve itself in meeting the post-Cold War international challenges. Not all were under UN auspices, though, the most important exception being the 1999 Kosovo War which was fought under the aegis of NATO without a UN mandate.

In 1994 the recently-elected Liberal government of Jean Chrétien, after a review of post-Cold War defence policy, reached the key decision that Canada would retain its capability to deploy combat forces overseas. A White Paper issued that year, arguing that it was only 'prudent to plan for a world characterised in the long term by instability', announced what it called a 'flexible, realistic and affordable defence policy, one that provides the means to apply military force when Canadians consider it necessary to uphold essential Canadian values and vital security interests, at home and abroad'.¹¹ It sketched out a plan for what it called 'multi-purpose, combat capable armed forces' entailing the capability to deploy and sustain overseas indefinitely several ships, a small army battle group, an infantry battalion group, a squadron of fighter aircraft and a flight of transport aircraft. If all deployed simultaneously, they would entail a commitment of about 4000 personnel. With much greater effort, according to the White Paper, the armed forces would be capable of deploying and temporarily sustaining a naval task group, a brigade group plus an infantry battalion group, a wing of fighter aircraft, and a squadron of transport aircraft, for a total commitment of about 10,000. No sooner had the White Paper been released, though, than the government responded in part to its horrendous fiscal situation by applying deep cuts to the defence budget that called into question the military's longer-term retention of these capabilities.

Having missed action in the Gulf War, the Canadian army subsequently bore the brunt of Canada's engagement in international security as the scale of Canadian involvement in overseas operations grew larger during the 1990s. At one time toward the end of the decade there were almost 4000 Canadian military personnel in the former Yugoslavia as the number of Canadians there approached the numbers once stationed in Germany. Over 1200 were in Somalia and more than 750 were in Haiti. Canadian operations also turned more violent in the former Yugoslavia, in contrast to the 1991 Gulf War where the Canadians scarcely fired a shot. This was most evident in the Kosovo War, where Canadian fighter aircraft joined in the bombing of Serbian targets. In peace enforcement operations in Bosnia and Croatia, as well, Canadian soldiers fired and were fired upon.

By the end of the 1990s Canadians were growing somewhat used to seeing their military deployed overseas in robust 'peace enforcement' operations. This is not to

say that all were enthusiastic. The myth that international peacekeeping has been the 'traditional role' of the Canadian military and its real metier has not died in Canada, to this day.¹² Nonetheless, in one real sense joining in the US-led coalition in 2001–2002 to topple the Taliban was no departure for Canada from the nature of its recent defence commitments around the world. Here was still another multilateral 'peace enforcement' operation in a troublesome area of the world, fully blessed in this case by both the UN and NATO, to which Canada would contribute if not decisive, then still welcome forces. Those forces were at hand, as foreseen in the 1994 White Paper. Canada sent six naval vessels, six air aircraft, special service forces and 2000 troops.

Canada had a real and vital interest in destroying the haven and base that Afghanistan had become from which international terrorists could continue to attack the West, including Canada itself. Stepping into Afghanistan after 9/11 was also entirely consistent with the new and increasingly influential 'human security' school of international relations and Canadian foreign policy that largely had been launched by Lloyd Axworthy, who served as Foreign Minister in the Chrétien government from 1996 to 2000. The 'human security' school held that Canada and its military should focus less on the security of states and more on the security of people, including their protection against and relief from tyranny and human rights abuses. Sometimes the use of force would be justified. Axworthy himself had made the principle clear during the Kosovo War in which Canada and its NATO allies sought to put an end to Serbian atrocities. 'When other means of addressing the threats have been exhausted, robust measures (including military action) may be needed to defend human security,' he said.¹³ The atrocities committed by the Taliban against their own people were as great, if not greater.

The same was also true of course, of Saddam Hussein. Until close to the last moment in 2003 the Chrétien government held open the option of joining the US in toppling the Iraqi dictator. 'To say the least, the Canadian government was hedging its bets and ducking the hard question until the very last minutes.'¹⁴ While Ottawa waffled in public, and Canadian diplomats worked desperately at the UN trying to encourage a compromise resolution on Iraq among the major players, the Canadian military, working with US Central Command, planned for and told the Americans that Canada could contribute a battle group of 600–800 troops to fight in Iraq. Meanwhile, US officials were left with the impression that Ottawa was moving towards a positive decision. Paul Cellucci, who was at the time US ambassador to Canada, noted in his memoir of the period, 'despite the obvious hesitations about the prospects of an invasion, we believed that Canada would be with us even without a second UN resolution on Iraq'.¹⁵

That came to an end on 17 March 2003 when the Prime Minister announced in the House of Commons that Canada would be staying out of the fight. Chrétien had taken a dislike to Washington's talk of regime change in Iraq. Moreover, the opposition of Germany and France and the lack of not only a UN resolution but formal NATO support as well posed an obstacle for the multilaterally minded Canadian government. This was reinforced by the opposition of Mexico and Chile, countries in a region of increasing importance at the time to Canada. In his address Chrétien emphasised the lack of a UN mandate, never mentioning, of course, that he had sent the Canadian military to war four years earlier against Serbia without such a mandate.

There were two deeper and much more longstanding Canadian realities that also kept Canada out of the war against Saddam Hussein's regime, namely Québec and anti-Americanism. Washington's stance was also unpopular in Québec, which was in the midst of an election wherein the separatist Parti Québécois was attempting to use opposition to the Iraq war to boost its popularity. Were Ottawa to back the war, the PQ's chances for victory would increase and separatism might become increasingly popular, an outcome Chrétien had worked tirelessly to counteract since becoming prime minister.

With the Cold War over, Quebecers were reverting to the pacifist, isolationist ways they had shown during the First and Second World Wars; they could not be talked into supporting one in Iraq.

Chrétien had also enjoyed playing the anti-American card in Canadian politics, as he once boasted to an allied colleague, not knowing that the microphone in front of him was 'hot'. Since January 2001 he had especially enjoyed trying to distance himself from President Bush. It worked well with many Canadians, especially those in Chrétien's own Liberal caucus. Most Canadians would vote for the US Democratic Party if they were American. Moreover, Bush had become in Canada the symbol of US opposition to foreign policy initiatives that were popular among Canadians, namely the International Criminal Court, the Landmines Treaty and the Kyoto environmental accord. Many Canadians seemed to forget that Bush wasn't even president when Washington had rejected the latter two. The Prime Minister's announcement in the House of Commons was met with cheers by Liberal MPs and those of the left-wing New Democratic Party. Canada would stay out of George Bush's war.

A month before the Chrétien 'no', the minister of national defence had announced that about 1000 Canadian military personnel would be sent to join the new ISAF in Afghanistan. This meant, the US government was told, that Canadian ground force units simply would not be available to fight in Iraq if Canada decided to join in. Afghanistan was becoming a substitute for Iraq in Canadian planning. Even without significant ground forces, there would have been other ways for Canada readily to contribute to removing Saddam Hussein from power, just as Canada had contributed to the coalition in the Gulf War without sending many soldiers. In fact, after the 2003 war had broken out, it was soon noted in Canada that with 31 personnel serving on exchange with US and UK forces in Iraq, and with ships in the Persian Gulf continuing to support UN sanctions against Iraq, Canada had a greater military engagement against Iraq than some of the members of the multilateral coalition that was formally prosecuting the war.

Washington signalled its unhappiness over not so much the Canadian decision not to participate, but the way it was delivered amongst cheers in the House of Commons and catching the US government by surprise. Ambassador Cellucci spoke out and President Bush cancelled his long-planned visit to Canada where he was to address Parliament. To emphasise the point, while he was to have been hosted by the Canadian Prime Minister in Ottawa, the President hosted at his Texas ranch the Australian PM, whose country has contributed troops to the war. With Prime Minister Chrétien having announced his departure from office at the end of the year, the US government made no secret of the fact that it was looking forward to regime change in Ottawa, too.

Many Canadians worried that a full-blown crisis in the Canadian–American relationship was at hand, potentially striking at economic relations within North America. Ottawa took short-term measures to avoid further angering Washington. Despite calls for their removal, the Canadian ships and personnel in the Gulf were left on duty during the Iraq war. Rhetorically, Ottawa de-emphasised its opposition to the war, emphasising instead that it was just staying out and that it really had no objection to Saddam Hussein’s going. When he had been deposed, Ottawa sent the RCMP to help train Iraqi police and Elections Canada to help run the voting there. It also participated in the NATO Training Mission in Iraq.

Fears of a full-blown crisis, it soon became evident, were exaggerated. To be sure, some Canadian military personnel serving in the US felt a chill. But the Bush Administration showed no desire to punish Canada, and even if it had wanted to, the Canada–US relationship provides Washington with almost no tools with which to strike Canadian interests, without damaging US ones as well. Nonetheless, since the refusal to participate in the attack on Saddam Hussein the Canadian government under Chrétien and his two successors, the Liberal Paul Martin and the Conservative Stephen Harper, has continued to seek to demonstrate to Washington that notwithstanding the recent disagreement over Iraq, Canada has been a good ally. Some steps have been trivial, including putting posters up in the Washington metro to assure commuters that whatever they may have read or seen on Fox TV, Canada was engaged in the War on Terror. But others have been serious, such as increasing defence spending and beginning to expand the Canadian military.

Just as important has been the growing Canadian commitment to Afghanistan. In the past, when crises have created problems in the Canada–US relationship, Ottawa’s response has been to take steps to assuage American concerns, not necessarily by agreeing with Washington on the specific issue in question, but by taking measures in other areas that are meant to demonstrate that, notwithstanding any disagreements on a matter, Canada is a good ally. The Canadian presence in Afghanistan fits squarely into this tradition. In 2005, the short-lived Martin government re-committed Canada militarily to Afghanistan, agreeing to play a significant role in the dangerous southern part of the country that was once again under threat from the Taliban. The Harper government, that took office after beating the Liberals in January 2006 general election, fully embraced the commitment.

If Canada got into Afghanistan solely to stay out of Iraq, it was a very bad trade-off. Most of the countries in the coalition that supported the US in Iraq either had very few, or even no forces on the ground, and if they did, those forces left Iraq after a matter of months. Meanwhile, Canada is locked for now into war in Afghanistan.

It must be emphasised, though that Canada is not in Afghanistan only as an Iraq substitute and to please the Americans. Recent Canadian governments and many Canadians have continued to see terrorism that arises from radical Islam as a threat to Canada and believe that Canada has a significant national interest in stopping it from retaking Afghanistan. ‘We are at war,’ the distinguished Canadian historian J.L. Granatstein recently wrote. ‘Ultimately the war against Islamist terrorism is our war.’¹⁶ As the Martin government put it in its 2005 formal statement on defence policy, ‘An increasingly interdependent world has tightened the links between international and domestic security and developments abroad can affect the safety of

Canadians in unprecedented ways. Today's front lines stretch from the streets of Kabul to the rail lines of Madrid to our own Canadian cities.'¹⁷

When measured against the size of armed forces in the Cold War, the Canadian presence in Afghanistan today of some 2500 military personnel is not especially large; it is smaller than the limited force Canada once maintained in Europe. Seen solely in that light it is not a strain on the country's resources, especially, now that the conflicts in the Balkans having come to an end, Canada has no other major military commitment overseas. The Canadian economy has been humming along recently, thanks in part to the tough fiscal measures that the Chrétien government applied, and the percentage of GDP that Canada devotes to defence – the target of much allied complaint in the past – has not risen greatly. Canada can readily afford the contribution it is making to the War on Terror.

Still, for the compact Canadian Forces (army, navy, and air force) of about 60,000 personnel, it is a substantial burden. Canadian defence officials have made it clear that the country can undertake no major operations elsewhere as long as it is in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the commitment of 2500 stacks up well when compared, in rough numbers, with other allied forces in Afghanistan. Above all, though, the Canadians, unlike the Italians or the Germans, are committed to combat and, as already noted, Canada provides the third largest combat force. On this score, Canadians have every right to castigate their European allies. Though Canada may be contributing less to the War on Terror and international security in terms of raw numbers, the CF is deployed where they can make the most difference and are the most needed. When measured qualitatively rather than quantitatively, therefore, Canada's ranking as an ally is high.

The Canadians are not just committed to combat, though. Afghanistan has been the proving ground of the new Canadian military doctrine of the 'three-block war', the concept originally having been developed by General Charles Krulak of the US marines. It holds that the military must be prepared for a spectrum of challenges and may be called upon in a given conflict, sometimes simultaneously, to fight, to peace-keep and to provide humanitarian relief. The Canadian version of the three-block approach has its roots largely in the international security operations in failed states, in which the Canadian military was involved between the end of the Cold War and the start of the War on Terror; during these conflicts Canadian troops often were called upon to play a variety of roles. It is also rooted in the Axworthian 'human security' school. Indeed, defenders of Canada's three-block role in Afghanistan often sound uncannily like the former foreign minister when they cite the need to bring democracy, women's rights and development as the reason to keep Canadian forces there. Canadian Axworthians have not been eager, for their part, to recognise that 'human security' dovetailed very nicely with the arguments of the Bush Administration and US neo-conservatives that terrorism can best be fought by encouraging democracy in the Middle East.

Canada's war in Afghanistan is also closely linked to what is being called the 'transformation' of the Canadian military, the personally initiated project of the energetic Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, who was appointed to the position in 2005 after having served as head of the army and ISAF commander. He has had unprecedented leeway and influence as chief and indeed has seized the moment by using the war in Afghanistan and the government's commitment there as the occasion to press for major changes and acquisitions which in normal

circumstances would have been both delayed and/or scaled back by the political leadership. Hillier's 'transformation agenda' for the Canadian armed forces has included more personnel and equipment, improved infrastructure and changes to training and the command structure. He has not ignored the role of the military at home, either. This was especially evident in his creation of a 'Canada Command' that will take charge of military operations within Canada. The main thrust, though, of Hillier's 'transformation agenda', is to allow the Canadian military, especially the army, to deploy more effectively overseas, largely in cooperation with the US in places like Afghanistan. He has been a tireless and publicly highly visible advocate for the Canadian mission there. This in turn has helped give the Canadian Forces a tremendous boost in terms of morale, esprit de corps and pride in itself as a world-class fighting force.

For all the historic and contemporarily valid reasons why Canada stepped forward in Afghanistan and notwithstanding the new pride and prowess demonstrated by the Canadian Forces there, as Janice Stein and Eugene Lang argue in their important recent work, *The Unexpected War*,¹⁸ neither the politicians nor the military expected a conflict the duration, intensity and cost of which in lives and resources Canada is now confronted with. With 'eyes firmly fixed on Washington', the Chrétien government had expected an 'early in, early out' deployment to help stabilise a post-Taliban government while the Martin and Harper governments did not anticipate the level of armed resistance the Canadian forces would face when they committed the CF to more of a combat role. Even General Hillier is quoted as saying that 'Nobody predicated the resurgence of the Taliban ... It came as a complete surprise.'¹⁹ What also seems to have come as an unpleasant surprise to Ottawa is the fact that, as Stein and Lang also argue, 'the burden of the fighting is not distributed fairly. This mission is the first important "out-of-area" operation for NATO and it is not a happy story.' Although Ottawa had worked with Washington to have NATO take over the ISAF mission, save for the UK and the Netherlands, no other NATO ally was prepared to step forward as far as Canada in support of the US. It is this situation that appears to be giving NATO's former odd man out additional pause for thought as it contemplates whether to stay in or get out of its current role in Afghanistan.

After 2009: will it last?

Despite the senatorial admonitions to Canada's allies to do more in Afghanistan and the highly public support of both the government and the military for the war, Canada's own longer-term commitment is not as steady as it may appear. In May 2006, the House of Commons voted to support the commitment of Canadian forces to Afghanistan until February 2009. About a year later, the Commons rejected a motion introduced by the Liberal opposition to fix February 2009 as the firm date of withdrawal. However, the Conservatives under Prime Minister Harper were only able to prevail with the support of the New Democratic Party, which opposed the Liberal motion because it was against waiting until 2009 and wanted an *immediate* withdrawal from combat roles in Afghanistan.

In June 2007 with Canadian military casualties reaching 60 and growing evidence of public unease with the mission (though not with supporting the troops), the Harper government began to hedge a bit on its previous steadfastness. First, the

Prime Minister raised the possibility that if Canada did remain in Afghanistan after 2009, it might focus on less dangerous missions (the very missions which it has criticised its allies for selecting). Second, he pledged that any decision on future roles in Afghanistan would be taken after consultation with Canadians and the opposition parties and the approval of the House of Commons would again be necessary. Mr Harper told a news conference that 'This mission will end in February 2009. Should Canada be involved militarily after that date, we've been clear that would have to be approved by the Canadian Parliament ... I would want to see some degree of consensus around that. I don't want to send people into a mission if the opposition is going to, at home, undercut the dangerous work that they are doing in the field ...'²⁰ The opposition Liberals were not mollified by the Prime Minister's apparent softening of his prior stance. Their leader, Stéphane Dion, contended that Mr Harper was 'creating ambiguity, declaring that if he were truly "responsible", the PM would simply inform NATO and the Afghanistan government that Canada would be withdrawing. Mr Dion did not rule out 'another, safer role for troops in Afghanistan, such as training the army or police' but he did say that the Harper government needed to make it 'very clear ... that the combat mission in Kandahar ends in February 2009'.²¹

It is very hard to say what will happen. There are a number of factors, some international and some domestic, that could determine the future of the Canadian commitment in Afghanistan in February 2009 and beyond.

A US defeat in Iraq could very well sour the Americans on the military side of the war against terrorism, including the fight in Afghanistan. After such a defeat the Democrats in the US might not re-focus militarily on Afghanistan, as they often have said they would. Instead, they might lead the west into a general retreat from the War on Terror. The West might then have to accept the re-emergence of the Taliban and just try to contain it as it tried before 9/11 with special operations and counter-terrorism. If the US moves in this direction, Canada will not be far behind.

A failure to make steady and visible progress in southern Afghanistan will also have an obvious impact. In other words, should there be no foreseeable end to the Afghanistan mission in sight and with the number of casualties steadily increasing, the Canadian government, along with its American and NATO allies, could well be faced with the decision to reprioritise goals and redefine success on the ground. In this situation, considerations of human security and democracy will give way to calculations based more squarely on traditional Realpolitik.

An American move toward withdrawal from Afghanistan could also come about if the US stays in Iraq but other NATO allies do not ante up in Afghanistan. This may be especially the case given that, despite pledges at the November 2006 NATO summit in Riga, allies are becoming increasingly reluctant to provide more troops for combat operations. 'There were worrisome hints ... that some NATO members may be unwilling to sustain their commitments to ISAF.'²² This, of course, helped prompt the strong words of the Canadian senators in early 2007. Should the allies remain unable or unwilling to provide more combat forces for counter-insurgency operations, the situation there will become more difficult, especially given the continued high demand for US forces in Iraq. This in turn could also persuade Washington to settle for stability and less emphasis on democracy and human rights in Afghanistan. Ottawa would then also have to adjust downward its more ambitious objectives.

Alternatively, a US victory in Iraq, even if it entails just settling for stability over democracy there, could also provide renewed justification and support for the long war in Afghanistan. Canada probably would be asked to continue and perhaps increase its efforts there. Here it is important not to inflate the significance of Canada's contribution in Afghanistan in the overall context of United States efforts in the struggle against terrorism and thus the impact on bilateral security relations. From the American perspective, the problem is that few of its allies, including Canada, have been prepared to maintain the level of military spending and the willingness to commit combat forces that would provide the US with deeply substantive military assistance in the War on Terrorism. As Renée de Nevers has recently argued, while the NATO allies can make and have made significant contributions to the war on terrorism, the Alliance 'plays a largely supportive role' with individual members doing so on a bilateral basis with the emphasis on intelligence cooperation and non-military (particularly) non-combat operations that involve law enforcement agencies rather than their militaries.²³ Notwithstanding the quantitative and qualitative improvements in Canada's forces and its willingness, along with the UK and the Dutch to undertake more offensive operations, 'The lead role in counterterrorism in Afghanistan continues to be played by US special forces . . . not NATO and US troops are the largest contingent in ISAF.'²⁴ As Nevers concludes, in light of the relatively small and in some cases declining contributions of all NATO allies to both Iraq and Afghanistan, 'NATO's military value as a partner to the United States in the war against terrorism . . . remains in question.' Thus while Ottawa may now be echoing Washington's demands for other NATO allies to do more in Afghanistan, Canada may still be called upon to spend more and do more itself. Yet there may be disagreements with Washington over such things as the use of military force and how to deal with the opium problem which could place Ottawa in a difficult position should it elect to continue the effort in Afghanistan.

The US Democrats could turn out to be a lot tougher on terror than they usually sounded during the early primary season in 2007, when the party's base had to be appeased. They could remain committed to the fight in Afghanistan, even after a US defeat in Iraq, just as they have said they would. Ironically, this would mean that another factor favouring a continued Canadian commitment beyond 2009 is the likelihood of the Democrats taking the Presidency in 2008, along with retaining control of the US Congress. As the legendary Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie recorded in his diary in December 1963, looking back over his years as Canada's Ambassador in Washington, 'The cast of thought in Washington is absolutist. It is true that there are a number of incompatible Absolutists, often in embattled struggle with each other, but all are Absolute for America . . .'²⁵ This applies to the Democrats, as well as to Republicans and thus despite Canada's strong support for the United States in the war on terrorism, especially in Afghanistan, it would be a mistake to conclude 'regime change' in Washington will fundamentally alter the bilateral security relationship. It may well be the case, as noted above, that the US will have to redefine success in Afghanistan. But once the primaries are over as the 2008 American Presidential elections approach closely, the Democratic Party may once again stress Afghanistan to show that they are serious about fighting terrorism and defence in general. To this extent, they will also be looking to allies to do more. Thus Ottawa may find that a continued Canadian commitment could be necessary in order to solidify ties with a Democratic Congress and Presidency.

The Democrats are likely to adopt a more conciliatory tone when it comes to dealing with allies. They probably will not abandon the emphasis on security that is so much apart of the American political culture in the post-9/11 world. But in order to secure allied support, the Democrats may well return to a Clintonian 'unilateralism with a smile' approach as opposed to the Bush approach, the with us or against us 'unilateralism with a vengeance' that has caused the Canadian, and other allied governments, so much difficulty when it comes to domestic public opinion.²⁶ In this sense, a Democratic President and Congress would make it easier for the Harper government, assuming it is re-elected, to sustain public support in Canada for Ottawa's contributions to Afghanistan. In this case, it is possible then as John-Andrew Pankiw Petty has suggested 'the Canadian right might be saved by the US left'.²⁷

Harper and the Conservatives might not be re-elected, of course, in the elections that are expected before early 2009, in which case a government would be formed by the Liberals who, having taken Canada into Afghanistan, have grown so cool towards the commitment there. Dion could find it a lot more difficult to say 'no' to a President Hillary Clinton than Jean Chrétien ever did to George Bush simply because she is a Democrat – and not George Bush. Meanwhile, the two smaller parties in the House of Commons, the New Democrats and the Bloc Québécois whose bases are, respectively, English-speaking left-wingers and Quebeckers, can be counted on to oppose the continuation of any combat roles.

The political complexion of legislatures and governments in Ottawa and Washington notwithstanding, as the long war continues in Afghanistan, should Canadian casualties mount and more resources be required, support in Canada for the war may continue to decline. It is impossible to predict where the breaking-point for public support might be, especially in English-speaking Canada. 'Canadians aren't quitters', the columnist Lawrence Martin recently claimed in a piece on Afghanistan.²⁸ They have never fought a counterinsurgency war before, though. By 2007 the public in electorally important Québec was in fact already prepared to quit, as various public polls showed.

Then again, success in the field militarily combined with progress in reconstruction in Afghanistan would help sustain domestic support in Canada. Such progress along with a new sprit of multilateral cooperation on the part of an American government which does manage to rally renewed NATO support for Afghanistan would further reinforce public acceptance of the mission and the sacrifices in blood and treasure.

The eventual departure of General Hillier may give the Canadian military a head less vigorous in support of the war and shift influence back to politicians (including the Minister of National Defence) and civilian bureaucrats. If there are continuing setbacks in the field and a lack of progress in reconstructing Afghanistan, politicians may no longer accept the idea that the only way fully to support the troops is by fully supporting the war. Opponents of the war are not, in the main, calling for Canada to withdraw its forces from overseas activities. As Mr Dion has put it Canada 'has a role to play around the world'.²⁹ As noted, some might accept a continuing role in Afghanistan, but not in the current combat-oriented mission. The problem for others is this particular war, notably its close association with the US, especially with the Bush Administration. In addition, opponents of the present mission object to the fact that the Conservative government has used the Canadian military's combat

commitment as a reason for not sending troops elsewhere. Michael Byers of the University of British Columbia, for example, even worries that, 'the turn away from peacekeeping – and toward US warfighting – will soon become irreversible' if Canada does not 'change track'.³⁰

Indeed, some who advocate withdrawal from Afghanistan would like to see a renewed commitment, including militarily, to the so-called traditional Canadian role in supporting United National peacekeeping. Especially if there is to be a long war, Canada, perhaps under a Liberal government, may seek to reduce the Canada's military footprint in Afghanistan in favour of UN operations elsewhere. Even though it is difficult to see how the mission could involve any less combat or be any less dangerous, there are those in Canada who would say they would prefer to see the Canadian military in Darfur rather than Kandahar. Byers contends that, in 2006, the Harper government declined participation in peacekeeping missions in Lebanon and Darfur apparently on the advice of General Hillier who argued that the Canadian forces were 'fully committed in Afghanistan'. This, according to Byers, 'broke a promise' made to Prime Minister Martin in 2005 that participation in Afghanistan would not prevent deployment of forces to 'UN missions elsewhere'. In October 2006, Martin, by then former Prime Minister, confirmed that he had indeed had such an agreement with General Hillier.³¹

Finally, in the past when Canada deployed forces overseas, the government tended to decide on the level of the commitment not by asking, 'how much is enough' to accomplish the mission based upon military advice, but rather by trying to determine 'how much was just enough'. What is the minimum level of commitment needed to satisfy allies, avoid domestic opposition and make a useful contribution within budgetary limits? This approach, which has long-been a key component of 'realism' when it came to Canadian national security policy,³² was resented by the military who felt that politicians and civilian defence bureaucrats were making military decisions based upon political expediency while ignoring the dangers faced by the troops and the difficulty of the missions. In part due to General Hillier's strong and open style wherein he has publicly demanded greater support, this has not been the case in Afghanistan. And his troops have appreciated it and the government has benefited from this. However, although Hillier has done wonders to heighten the morale of the Canadian forces, especially through the mission in Afghanistan, international and domestic difficulties may dampen some of the enthusiasm amongst politicians for the current combat-oriented emphasis of Canadian operations in Afghanistan and thereby reduce the influence of Hillier and the military. This is not to argue that the government and civilian bureaucracy will turn against a continued Canadian role in Afghanistan. It is, though, simply to suggest that the government will listen more attentively to civilian advisers in the Privy Council (cabinet) Office, political advisers in the Prime Minister's Office and even bureaucrats at the defence and foreign ministries, including a new Deputy Minister of National Defence appointed from outside the department, who might counsel a reduced combat role and an increased development and training role for Canada in Afghanistan after 2009.

Thus, while Mr Harper's declaration that he will consult Parliament on the future of the Canadian commitment to Afghanistan after February 2009, is welcome, the historically (and perhaps cynically minded), may recall Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's reported response to a British inquiry about possible assistance

during the Turkish Chanak Crisis of 1922. Infuriated that London made the request public and determined not to be drawn into an imperial conflict of little interest to Canada, King is said to have proclaimed that 'Parliament will decide'.³³ Traditionally, when Prime Ministers have wanted to deploy overseas, they have done everything but let Parliament decide. Thus Harper's pledge to consult Parliament may, for some, be seen as a signal that the government wishes to keep its options open. An even stronger signal was delivered by the Prime Minister when he turned to Ottawa's traditional method of holding options open while fending off all criticism in the interim, namely the appointment of a special commission. In October 2007, Mr Harper announced the appointment of a commission on Canada's options in Afghanistan under the chairmanship of John Manley, a Liberal and former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. The Manley commission, which is composed entirely of former political figures and thus has no current or former senior military members, is to report in February 2008.

Conclusion: the trouble with stepping forward

Canada, once the odd man out, stepped into and up to the top in the NATO effort in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. Having done so, however, the Government of Canada now finds itself fully immersed in a complex and high stakes undertaking both on a foreign battlefield and in the rough and tumble arena of Canadian domestic politics. In coming months, amid what are likely to be changing and uncertain circumstances, involving the outcome of the military campaign, the reconstruction effort and political decisions taken in allied capitals, Canada will be faced with deciding whether and how to continue its new-found, and not a little surprising, role as one of NATO's most committed allies in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding Ottawa's present strong political, military and financial support for the mission, these will not be easy or automatic decisions.

That is the trouble with stepping forward after being odd man out and in having the Canadian military do such an outstanding job. You cannot easily step back, while going further may be too much of a departure, especially on the home front. And even trying to sustain current commitments may no longer be enough for allies who have welcomed your return and are only too anxious to have 'more Canada' in Afghanistan. During a recent visit to Canada which coincided with the departure of the famed (and Québec-based) Royal 22nd Regiment to Afghanistan, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer 'make a direct appeal for Ottawa to remain in Afghanistan after the 2009 deadline'. Pulling upon heart strings of Canadian history, sentiment and self-image, 'he said, Canada's task in Afghanistan is as important as the role Canadians played in liberating Europe, including his own native country, the Netherlands.' 'NATO is defending certain values, which young Canadians defended in my country during the Second World War. The values are the same . . .'³⁴ Thus NATO's odd-man of the 1980s, who started to return to the allied fold with the ever more robust peacekeeping and peace enforcement of the 1990s and a commitment to human security, may find it very difficult to stay out of what is increasingly looking like a long war on terrorism in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Notes

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5. Gerald Porter, In Retreat: *The Canadian Forces in the Trudeau Years* (Ottawa: Deneau & Greenberg, 1979); Peter C. Newman, *True North, Not Strong and Free: Defending the Peaceable Kingdom in the Nuclear Age* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983).
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10. Harald von Riekhoff, 'Canada and Collective Security', in David B. Dewitt and David Leyton Brown, eds, *Canada's International Security Policy* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada, 1995), 242.
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20. Bruce Campion-Smith, 'Harper Softens His Tone on War', *The Toronto Star*, 23 June 2007.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Renée de Nevers, 'NATO'S International Security Role in the Terrorist Era', *International Security* 31 (Spring 2007) 50, 55.
23. *Ibid.*, 63.
24. *Ibid.*, 64.
25. Charles Ritchie, *Storm Signals: More Undiplomatic Diaries, 1963–1971* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1983), 75.
26. Joel J. Sokolsky, 'The Power of Values or the Value of Power? American and Europe in a Post 9/11 World', *Columbia International Affairs On-Line*, www.ciaonet.org (August 2003).
27. John-Andrew Pankiw Petty, 'From Pearson to Harper: Canadian Realism Comes Out of the Closet', Honours Thesis, Queen's University, April 2006.

28. Lawrence Martin, 'It's about Time Mr Harper Listened to the People', *Globe and Mail*, 25 June 2007.
29. Champion-Smith, 'Harper Softens His Tone on War.'
30. Michael Byers, *Intent for a Nation: A Relentlessly Optimistic Manifesto for Canada's Role in the World* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & Martin, 2007), 182.
31. *Ibid.*, 182–3.
32. See Joel J. Sokolsky, 'Realism Canadian Style: National Security and the Chrétien Legacy', *Policy Matters* 5 (June 2004).
33. Of course, having made up his mind to resist this challenge to Canadian autonomy, King 'had no intention of asking Parliament to send a contingent'. See Kenneth W. MacNaught and Ramsay Cook, *Canada and the United States: A Modern Study* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1963), 456. This was no doubt because bringing the matter to Parliament would have afforded the pro-Empire Conservative leader Authur Meighen, who supported the British on Chanak, the opportunity to attack the Liberals as being disloyal and call for the deployment of Canadian forces.
34. Champion-Smith, 'Harper Softens His Tone on War'.

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